



## Samuel Green coming to town

# State poet laureate spreads the word

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT  
Columbian staff writer

Samuel Green wrote his first poem in sixth grade, a love declaration to a girl. The effort failed, but, undaunted, Green continued to hone his craft. In 1970 while in college, Green published his first poem, which were words of love for a woman named Sally. This poem proved more successful, as Sally is now his wife.

Nearly 40 years and 10 published poetry collections later, Green is still writing about love and what he describes as other emotional urgencies. Now he's in a unique position to share his words, as well as those of other Washington poets.

Last year, Washington became the 41st state to establish a poet laureate position. Green, a lifelong Washingtonian, holds the honor of being the Evergreen State's first poet laureate. This week he comes to Vancouver to read from his latest title, "The Grace of Necessity," and yet-to-be-published poems in a public appearance at Clark College.

It's one of many stops on Green's

packed travel itinerary; he's slept away from home more often than not since assuming his poet laureate duties in January.

For Green, the appointment has meant an opportunity to promote poetry across the state, as well as champion the work of the state's poets.

Green is not only a supporter of Washington poets, but he's counted himself among them for decades.

Green, 60, grew up in the fishing and mill town of Anacortes. For the past 25 years, he's lived on remote Waldron Island off the Washington coast in a log house he built himself.

In addition to writing poetry, Green co-edits with Sally Brooding Heron Press, a letterpress focusing on the work of Washington poets.

Poetry education is another of

Green's passions. He's taught in elementary, middle and high school classrooms for more than 30 years, as well as at Southern Utah University and Western Wyoming Community College. In January he'll begin his seventh winter quarter as Distinguished Visiting Northwest Writer at Seattle University. For the past six years, he's taught a summer study-abroad course in Ireland for Seattle University.

Green spoke with The Columbian from his Waldron Island home about his poetry, his duties as poet laureate and the ways the Northwest has influenced his work. Here are his comments, edited for space and clarity:

### How did you get started writing poetry?

In sixth grade I fell in love with a girl. I thought about her all the time. I really didn't know what to do about it because she was distant. Because I was reading a lot of poetry that year, I was reading Edgar Allen Poe, I thought it would be romantic if I

### If you go

■ **What:** The Columbia Writers Series at Clark College welcomes Washington state poet laureate Samuel Green.

■ **When:** Noon Wednesday.

■ **Where:** Penguin Student Lounge at Clark College, 1933 Fort Vancouver Way, Vancouver.

■ **Cost:** Free.

■ **Information:** 360-992-2000, clark.edu.

### On the Web:

More information about Samuel Green is available online at [washingtonpoetlaureate.org](http://washingtonpoetlaureate.org).

GREEN, back page

## GREEN POEM COMMEMORATES VANCOUVER LAND BRIDGE

Washington state poet laureate Samuel Green wrote "What We Carry on the Trail" for the Aug. 23 dedication of the Vancouver Land Bridge. Arching over state Highway 14, the bridge is a 40-foot-wide, earth-covered pedestrian walkway lined with indigenous plants and American Indian basket weavings. It connects historic Fort Vancouver with the Columbia River waterfront.

### 'What We Carry on the Trail'

By Samuel Green

*We know that Lewis saw the hoary aster. He left  
a sketch & kept a sample pressed & dried  
like something in a card sent back  
from holy lands by some devoted uncle.*

*We know how well he kept his watch.  
No doubt he heard the hiss of water  
over sand, of fur sliding through an ocean  
of grass, & knew the difference. All day he cast  
the heavy net of his attention & sorted the  
catch*

*at night: the size & shape of a grizzly's track,  
the raucous calls of geese & ducks. He ground  
ink, mixed colors, & left his mark. At times  
his notebooks seem to fear  
the awful abundance of things.*

*We know he never saw salt cedar,  
Russian olive, the ruthless canes  
of Himalayan blackberry.  
They came, like us, later.*

*We don't know whether he noticed  
a certain lupine. Had it been in bloom  
it would have seemed just one more patch*



Files/The Columbian

Tammie Cook, left, and Jennifer Hausinger walk across the land bridge that crosses over Highway 14 and links Fort Vancouver with the Columbia River on Feb. 15.

*of color on the spread quilt of the day,  
something to remind him  
of his sister's bonnet, his mother's apron,  
or laundry drying on a neighbor's line.*

*He might have picked a stalk to count  
its leaves or tally its tight buds  
the way a man at rest might finger wet stones  
after rain, or pick & chew a stem of grass.  
He might have seen cocoons  
hidden in the leaves. A few weeks more  
& a butterfly, blue as trade beads or prairie*

*sky,  
would have been riding the breeze,  
dependent on this single plant.*

*He could not have known how rare  
that lupine would become,  
how trained dogs would come  
to hunt it by scent, how every year it blooms  
more near the abrupt cliff  
of absence. If wild bees hummed  
prayers, they might contain the names of flow-  
ers*

*in trouble. Air doesn't recall the shape  
of a bird's song. Water can't remember  
the weight of a swimming frog.*

*Like Lewis, like Clark, we have set our feet  
on a bridge into the future, intending to arrive  
with everything we've come to love—including  
the brown pelican, Kincaid's lupine,  
Fender's blue butterfly. We teach our children  
each step is a name that matters.*

*We have traveled a long, long way & are  
traveling  
still. We carry the cost of failure, the lengthen-  
ing list  
of what is gone already, of all that might be  
lost, knowing  
what we have to do, believing that we will.*



# Green:

From Page D1

wrote her a poem. It didn't work, but it was the first time I had encountered an emotional emergency that I couldn't deal with in any other way. I had already discovered that I could go to other poets and they could speak for me, help me understand my feelings, but this was the first time I had thought about using language to work the emotional urgency out myself. It didn't matter that the poem didn't have the effect I wanted it to have on the audience, what mattered was the writing, working it out for myself. Essentially nothing has changed since I was in sixth grade. I'm just more skilled at it. My poems are more sophisticated, but I'm still working out emotional urgencies.

**As a lifelong Washingtonian, how does the Northwest impact your work?**

We have a rich literary tradition of our own. One thing I think is important to find is that writers aren't from another planet, they can be from your own backyard. The fact that someone who lives in the same neighborhood you do, the Pacific Northwest, can write poems makes it somehow easier to believe that you can write poems yourself. I love poets who write from all over the world, but it's been important to me to know that we've had people like Richard Hugo, Theodore Roethke, David Wagoner, Caro-



Files/The Columbian

**Art historian Susan Platt, right, passes a mural on the Vancouver Land Bridge depicting life in the area in 1845. Washington state poet laureate Samuel Green wrote a poem for the dedication of the land bridge.**

lyn Kizer, Madeline DeFrees. These are major Northwest poets. You read their poems and say, "They're writing from and about a place I live. So can I."

The other thing is the landscape itself. It's an amazing place. The physical landscape, the working landscape, the communal landscape. I like poems about work, and we have a long history of logging, fishing and farming. There's a lot material to draw from and people willing to share their stories. There's also the Native American experience that's close to the surface, and the necessity

for understanding how cultures impact one another.

**Where do you look for inspiration?**

I don't look for it so much as it seems to be around. What I'm trying to do as a poet, and as a person, is to be open to what's around me and breathe it in.

**Are there any recurring images, metaphors or themes in your poems?**

The same questions we all struggle with. What does it mean to be alive in the world? Love, death, what we do in the face of death, how to grieve as

an individual and as a community, the nature of work, the whole notion of a spiritual quest, cultural events. My latest book deals with the aftermath of 9/11.

**Do you employ specific rhyme schemes and meters when crafting poetry, or do you write free verse?**

I don't believe in the usefulness of the term "free verse." I write organic form most of the time. I do whatever the poem is asking me to do.

**In 40 years as a serious poet, is there one poem you're particularly proud of and feel best represents**

**who you are as a writer and as a person?**

Not really. Poems are these things you have to get through. I try to bring my best to every poem I write, but I always finish a poem with this feeling that I wish I could have done it better. I'm more interested in the next poem I'm going to write than what I've already done.

**What does it mean to you to be the state's first poet laureate?**

It means that I have a chance to be an advocate for other poets in the state. It's also a responsibility to carry out the mandate of the Legislature. The Legislature has said that poets have a contribution to make to the literacy of the state. And if you think about it, what good is a literacy of the mind without a literacy of the heart?

**As you near the halfway mark of your two-year appointment as poet laureate, what have you accomplished?**

I've traveled around the state giving readings and workshops. I read my own poems as well as those of other Washington poets. I've given close to 70 public readings. I opened the Legislature in January. I read to the House and the Senate, and to a couple government caucus meetings. I read in the Capitol building on Arts Day. I've written poems on request. I wrote a poem for the dedication ceremony of the Vancouver Land Bridge in August called "What We Carry On the Trail." I wrote poems for the inauguration of the new Spokane Art School and for the opening of a park in Anacortes.