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Diaz's First Book of Poetry Published

March 29, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – “Under water/ leaves are paws, ferns are wings/ and your mother’s skirt is an orange flame/ melting the sap from the pool’s pine edge.” So reads a line from Joanne Diaz’s book of poems, *The Lessons* (Silverfish Review Press, 2011), winner of the 2009 Gerald Cable First Book Award, and listed as one of the Poetry Foundation’s Small Press Distribution February Best Sellers.

Many of Diaz’s poems in her first published collection weave a tale that place the reader in the middle of the narrator’s thoughts, as if capturing a personal moment. “Some of the poems are about family relationships, some about the speaker’s travels, some about the experience of illness, recovery and sometimes death,” she said.

Several of the pieces in the book are inspired directly from her life and Boston upbringing. The title poem “**The Lessons**” recalls childhood swim lessons, complete with the instructor calling the children “*Back to the watah!*” Influences also infuse the poem “**Epigram for the Boston Accent**,” which brings together Diaz’s love of ancient Roman writer Martial and her love of Boston – even playing off playwright Oscar Wilde’s reference to the city as a ‘paradise of prigs.’



Assistant Professor of English Joanne Diaz



Other poems provide a glimpse into the nature of pain and disease, and the desire of scientists to alleviate human suffering. A stark and unnerving imagining of famed botanist Carl Linnaeus’ short-lived work as a physician is revealed in the poem “Linnaeus and the Patient.” Diaz recalled she had a friend going through chemotherapy at the time she wrote it. “I was struck by the paradox of the chemo that poisons body in order to cure the illness,” she said. “I wasn’t ready to write about that at the time, so instead transferred my thoughts to another time, place and voice.”

Joining the Illinois Wesleyan English Department in 2008, Diaz teaches courses in creative writing and literature. She earned a doctorate in English literature from Northwestern University, a bachelor’s degree in 1994 from Tufts University and a master’s degree creative writing in 1999 from New York University, where she was a New York Times fellow.

In her scholarly work, Diaz explores complaint poetry in the English Renaissance. She gives pre-show lectures at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and acknowledges that her reading of Renaissance literature does inform her work. “If you are a student of Renaissance poetry and drama, you cannot help but internalize the power of iambic pentameter,” she said. “If you read Shakespeare, or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, or the

sonnets of the 16th and 17th centuries, so much was written in iambic pentameter that you really begin to see the power of that rhythm in our daily language.”

Though *The Lessons* is her first book, Diaz’s work has been published in various literary journals, including *AGNI*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Missouri Review* and *Quarterly West*, and she was the featured poet in the most recent issue of *The Spoon River Poetry Review*. She can be heard reading her poems on **WGLT’s “Poetry Corner.”**

Diaz's work has been honored with several grants and fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2009, an Arts Fellowship from the Illinois Arts Council in 2005 and a Mellon Fellowship for her research at the Huntington Library in California.

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