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Diplomat-turned-Poet IWU Grad Publishes 2nd Volume of Poetry; "The Blue Balcony" Takes Readers to Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Elsewhere

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Diplomat-turned-poet Gordon Ruben King, a 1943 Illinois Wesleyan University graduate, has published his second collection of verse, "The Blue Balcony--Poems of Places and Times."

The eight groupings of poems largely trace King's wanderlust from his central Illinois boyhood to Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, exotic locales where he was posted by the U.S. State Department over a 27-year diplomatic career, which ended in 1974 when he retired as principal officer and consul general in Lahore, Pakistan. King's poetic journey also takes readers to North Carolina, California, England, and Maine.

Critical Comment

"In reading the works of the author of The Blue Balcony," writes William S. Patten, former publisher/owner of the Camden (Maine) Herald newspaper, "it is impossible to separate the poet from the diplomat . . .

"These poems," Patten continued, "are a humanist's witness to the ceremony and innocence of life . . . King is in some ways, a closet journalist, a contemporary de Tocqueville. His poetry records an inner struggle for balance between the known and the unknown, common sense and tragedy . . ."

Commenting on King's poetry, essayist Barbara Thompson said he "has written narratives and small musical lyrics celebrating eloquently a long well-spent life from a childhood in Illinois, to Pakistan, to a graceful close with poems about the unexpected renewal of late love."

Cover Art

King's artist-wife, Josephine deBeauchamp, created the book's cover art, a painting of two potted amaryllis peering through a glass door at a blue balcony in their house in Camden, Maine.

"If ever the cover of a book of poetry was designed to get the attention of perusers in a bookstore," observed critic Jack Barnes, "it is the cover of The Blue Balcony, the new collection of Gordon King's poetry."

The Blue Balcony contains 54 poems with engaging titles such as Afghan Love, To Anita Killed by the Bandits, The Ballad of California Jack, Wrestling with Angels, and Upon Learning of the Death of Ada.

The Blue Balcony, 118 pages, is published by Snow Drift Press. It costs \$10 softbound.

Autobiographical Poems

Many of King's poems are autobiographical, including The English Doctor, a piece from his Afghan days that recalls a drunken doctor and the birth of the author's first child.

The English Doctor showcases King's use of description--almost narrative like--in his poetry.

For example, his description of diplomats: "Isolated diplomats making the best of things, like prisoners exiled to the edge of a far universe of mountains . . . "

In a November 8, 1998, newspaper column Barnes cited, *The Hunter*, another poem drawn from King's experience in Afghanistan.

"In the poem *The Hunter*, the reader," Barnes wrote, "catches glimpses of spellbinding scenery as the poet stalking a wild mountain goat along a narrow, sinuous trail high in the convoluted Hindu Kush in Afghanistan. He was so enthralled by the scenery at 13,000 feet that he took a false step that nearly cost him his life. Only the following lines are fiction:

"He takes the gun and with a yell

"throws it back down the slope

"and with it the urge to kill."

Earlier versions of many poems contained in *The Blue Balcony* have been published previously in *Envoi Magazine*, *Doors Magazine*, *Asheville Arts Journal*, *Annual Anthology*, and other publications.

King's first collection of poems, *Oh To Be Loved Like This*, was published in 1994 by the *Conservatory of American Letters* in Thomaston, Maine.

King's Background

King, born in 1922, grew up on a central Illinois farm. He entered Illinois Wesleyan in September 1939, within days of the start of World War II. He was able to attend college because of \$600 raised from 300 farmers and townspeople around his hometown of Beason, Ill.

"I have never forgotten this gesture," King told Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine in a 1995 interview. "My priority was to repay them; and I did, every cent of it."

King majored in sociology and minored in history and English. He was president of the International Relations Club, a clue to his future career interests.

In World War II, he was an Army cryptographer in India. Subsequently, King headed to Washington, D.C., and the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, where he earned a master's degree.

Diplomatic Career

King joined the State Department in 1947 on the eve of the Marshall Plan to rebuild postwar Europe and the birth of the Cold War.

His first overseas posting came in 1950, when he was dispatched to the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, a mountainous country near the roof of the world. The adventure of reaching that outpost was recounted in the 1995 IWU Magazine article:

"King carried a diplomatic pouch on the perilous route from Peshawar, Pakistan, to Kabul, which turned out to be an 180-mile adventure through rain and snow, along unpaved, rutted, winding roads and through the Khyber Pass. At an altitude of 10,000 feet, King and his companions found the spot where a truck had plunged off the cliff's edge. As the blizzard intensified, abandoned vehicles littered and blocked the road.

"'The diplomatic pouch had to go through,' King said, so he and one companion 'wrapped ourselves like a pair of Afghan nomads in somebody's spare blankets, left the others in the warm vehicle with plenty of gas reserves, and headed off for the last seven miles to the city

"Toward the end of the trek, King passed three big dogs. His companion reluctantly clarified the

situation, identifying the animals as wolves, who trailed the travelers to the city gates. King later discovered the wolves had killed two policemen that night.

"When King arrived at the embassy, he guzzled warm coffee as a rescue party was assembled to recover his mates still on the road."

After taking Persian studies in Washington and Princeton University in 1952-53, King was stationed in Iran: first the U.S. embassy in Teheran, and later as U.S. consul and principal officer in Isfahan. One of the poems in *The Blue Balcony* is titled, *Infidel in Isfahan*. King arrived in Iran shortly after the deposed Shah regained his throne in a CIA-engineered coup.

In Pakistan, King had assignments as a political officer in Lahore and as the first U.S. consul in Peshawar. Three poems in *The Blue Balcony*--*Nathia*, *Sonnet for a Daughter*, and *Cycle*--focus on Pakistan.

By 1960, King was a commercial officer in the U.S. embassy in Bonn, West Germany, followed by two hectic years as the officer in charge of the State Department's Cyprus desk in Washington. Shortly after King took the Cyprus assignment, the island off the coast of Turkey exploded in a clash between its Greek and Turkish populations.

"For the next two years," King recalled in the 1995 IWU Magazine interview, "I worked seven days a week, 20 hours a day."

Other career stops for King included being loaned to the U.S. Peace Corps and attending the National War College in Washington, D.C., where he studied military affairs and other subjects.

King spent four years in the U.S. embassy in London, where he was the political officer in charge of daily relations with the British Foreign Office on Middle East and South Asia issues, confronting the aftermath of the 1967 Middle East War, a conflict between India and Pakistan, and the emergence of Libyan strongman Muammar Muhammad al-Qadhafi. Fifteen poems in *The Blue Balcony* deal with England.

He wrapped up his diplomatic career as consul general at the U.S. consulate in Lahore. During that assignment, King was involved in U.S. relief operations after Pakistan was devastated by floods.

King moved to Camden, Maine, in 1987. Last spring, he and his wife moved to Godalming, England, to live near their daughter and her English family.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.

The Blue Balcony

Editor's Note: This is the text of the title poem of Gordon King's new collection, The Blue Balcony, published by Snow Drift Press, 117 Fitch Rd., Washington, Maine 04574; 207/845-2476 or email: <snodrift@midcoast.com>. The Blue Balcony is \$10 softcover, ISBN 0-9961678-1-3.

-I-

Here hangs a balcony finished in Delft blue
and boxed with marigolds and scarlet sage
and patio tomatoes and red geraniums,
topped with a feeding bowl to which a gull comes
as a winged reminder that here lies a fringe
of land and ocean. Here, a coniferous few

trees hide a harbor where, in their restlessness,
boats horn a moment already ripe with the cries
of children playing and the sighs of cars
passing on the High Street. Sails and spars,
as seen through a gap in the foliage, advertise
a world beyond this bounded teeming space,

my box seat to the world. The balcony
embraces the moment and yet remembers my past
hidden in house, buried in journal and book,
my cave, my smell. In front of me I look
over the brilliance of sage at a foreign mast
that whispers of a far and haunted sea,

and am caught on an instant. Behind me, the sum
of what made me what I am has thrust me here
into a morning multiple with life. Tomatoes grow
in rich and dusty green because I know
them well, old family friends, and boxes bear
other blooms extravagantly because growths come

as my hands remember. My past is present in me
and marigolds flower. Both house and view
conspire to meet my needs and when I am full
I am fruitful, as happy and mindless as a gull
and geraniums bloom. A balcony in blue
brings back a talent from a distant time

and I play host in a high garden to guests
who multiply. I sit and celebrate
when chickadees, like fancy sparrows, come
in their tuxedos, and finches, frolicsome
in gold and purple. Silently I wait
within the gossamer of all my pasts.

-II-

And all from a blue balcony, polychromes
in a morning candescent with sun, substantives
as primal as sex, my eyes filling the calm
with the brilliance of sage, the cryptogram
of marigolds, the slow dumb transitives
of tomatoes, the gentleness of geraniums.

The world presents me with a pantomime
of richly different scales of individual
entity, on land, on sea, in trees, in air,
each element alone and singular
and totally unique, but all of it, all
in coalescence on a cusp of time

on a blue balcony. Though I have been
to places buried deep in years, and know
what no one else can know why scarlet sage,
on fire beside me in this anchorage,
blows me to rapture, why marigolds
engage my eyes, and why tomatoes seem

like ripe voluptuaries, offering
their swollen flesh to me my innocence
is a farmer's from another age and land
who touches a tiny garden with a hand,
and wonders that all of this makes sense,
man on the earth, birds on the wing.

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