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Professor's Book Introduces Element of Poetic Surprise

March 12, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University Assistant Professor of English Michael Theune will speak at a faculty colloquium regarding his new book, *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*, on Friday, March 30 at 4 p.m. in the Center for Natural Science Learning and Research, room C101 (201 E. Beecher St., Bloomington). A reception will follow the talk at the President's house (1201 N. Park St., Bloomington).

"The goal of the book is to popularize structure and for writers to be more informed readers," Theune said. "Poetic practice doesn't have to be foreign and strange. It's much more familiar than that."

Any student who has taken a poetry class with Theune is aware of his mantra: "Poems do not *flow*, they *turn*." The idea of the poetic "turn" is defined as a major shift in the rhetorical progress of the poem—the point that leads the reader to an ultimate surprise at its end. In his book, Theune makes a fundamental distinction in poetry between structure and form: Form is defined as the meter, rhyme and sound of the poem, and structure is defined as the pattern of the turn.

Said Edward Hirsch, poet and president of the Guggenheim Foundation, which provides fellowships for advanced professionals in all fields, "Theune's idea is both very old and very new. He has enlisted a group of talented poets to guide us through the many challenging ways of envisioning and writing poems. The result is an immensely helpful book of turns and illuminations, a book on structure that is full of surprises."

The book is divided into three sections: First, an introduction to the different structures, with chapters by eight young poets who have been published and have received awards for their work. Theune contributes a chapter on the "emblem poem" structure in this section. The second section features 14 poets' commentary on different poems and how they employ the structures outlined in the first section. "There is a very different and diverse range of poets represented in this section," Theune said, as the poets' backgrounds range from academic poetry to slam, and even comedic stand-up. Finally, the third section provides inspiration guides and exercises to direct writers to put the structures into practice.

Said poet and former United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins, "This is a smart collection of takes on poetry's most essential maneuvers—those swivelings, swervings, and veerings that send poems off in unexpected directions."

Theune cited his studies of Romantic literature as an inspiration in writing the book, noting in particular the ironic structure of poets Byron and Keats and the descriptive meditative structure of poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. "I started seeing structure everywhere and began to understand the importance of increasing the quality of engagement in texts," he said.

Theune will also be presenting a panel on the topic at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference this weekend, as well as at the 2007 Marist College Summer Writing Institute, where his book will be used as one of the conference's main texts.

"While the book has a great deal to say about structure," Theune said, "it is not the final word, but more rather, the beginning of a conversation."

For additional information, contact Theune at mtheune@iwu.edu.



Michael Theune