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Diaz Wins Brittingham Prize in Poetry

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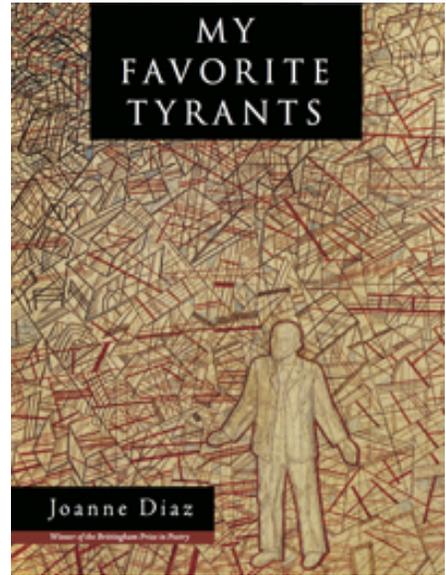
BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— A collection of poems by Illinois Wesleyan University Assistant Professor of English **Joanne Diaz** is the winner of the 2014 Brittingham Prize in Poetry.

My Favorite Tyrants (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) has been awarded The Brittingham Prize in Poetry for the best book-length manuscript of original poetry. Guest judge Naomi Shihab Nye, a Pushcart Prize-winning poet and novelist, selected Diaz's book out of approximately 600 submissions, calling the work "rich with smart, deft scenes — places you may not have been before, exactly, but feel strangely at home in."

The word "tyrant" reminds one of political figures such as Lenin, Stalin, Franco and Castro — some of whom make appearances in the poems — but Diaz is equally interested in personal forms of tyranny.

"These tyrants emerge in familial relationships, in erotic relationships, the way we demand things of each other, and the way we try to control each other," said Diaz. "I also try to examine how the speaker of the poems can be a kind of tyrant, too."

She explained that the structure of the poems in *My Favorite Tyrants* differs from her first collection of poems, *The Lessons*, the recipient of the Gerald Cable Book Award in 2009. She characterizes the poems in *Tyrants* as "more voluminous and conversational." Some reviewers said these poems read more like essays with line breaks, a description that pleases Diaz.



Joanne Diaz

"We get the word 'essay' from the Old French *assai*, which means 'to attempt' and so I like thinking of these poems as attempts to understand, negotiate, or argue with something," she explained. "In some of the poems, I'll connect a familial problem to something that's happening politically."

In "a la Turka," for example, the speaker of the poem is celebrating her husband's birthday in a Turkish restaurant when she spies a painting of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern-day Turkey, and begins ruminating on despots and tyranny:

"Don't get me wrong — I have my favorite tyrants," reads an excerpt from "a la Turka. When the boots are shiny/and the hair neatly combed, it means that a group of people, however misguided, lusty, or downright hateful, have collectively agreed to make a fuss, be modern, and, if not handsome, at least clean. And that cleanliness/has always counted for a lot in a world where its promise is a kind of food.

After tackling her Boston upbringing, the histories of various diseases and their cures, political despots and tyranny in her first two books, Diaz is writing a series of poems on electricity for her next collection.

"It's nice to be writing new material," said Diaz. Over the past year, she has, with Ian Morris, been co-editing a book titled *The Little Magazine in America: A*

Contemporary Guide, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press. Diaz joined the **English** faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 2008 after earning a doctorate in English literature from Northwestern University. Her poetry has appeared in *AGNI*, *The*

American Poetry Review and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. She is also a past recipient of writing fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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