



REPORT FOR ACTION

Appointment of City of Toronto Poet Laureate

Date: March 6, 2019

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to appoint Al Moritz (A.F. Moritz) as the sixth City of Toronto Poet Laureate.

The position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate honours a poet who writes outstanding poetry and has written on themes that are relevant to the people who live in the city. Toronto's Poet Laureate advocates for poetry and the arts, attracts people to the literary world, and uses their unique perspective to create a dialogue on contemporary issues.

Al Moritz is an internationally-recognized poet and teacher based in Toronto. In unanimously recommending Moritz's appointment, the selection panel pointed to his influential body of work that has profoundly shaped Toronto's literary community. They cited his extensive mentorship of young Toronto poets, and their confidence that he would excel as an ambassador for the literary arts across stylistic, geographic and demographic boundaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, recommends that:

1. City Council appoint Al Moritz (A.F. Moritz) to the position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate for a term beginning April 1, 2019 until March 31, 2022, or until a successor is appointed.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The Poet Laureate receives an annual honorarium of \$10,000 included in Economic Development and Culture's Operating Budget.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting, held on July 4, 5 and 6, 2000, City Council directed the Commissioner of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism to develop a plan, in partnership with the League of Canadian Poets and other community stakeholders, for the selection and appointment of a Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto in 2001.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2000/agendas/council/cc/cc000704/edp7rpt/cl016.pdf>

Toronto's fifth Poet Laureate, Anne Michaels, was appointed by Council in December 2015, with her term ending on March 31, 2019.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.ED7.3>

COMMENTS

An advocate for poetry, language and the arts, Toronto's Poet Laureate attends events across the city to promote and attract people to the literary world. The position honours a Toronto poet whose work displays excellence and who has written on themes relevant to Torontonians. The Poet Laureate's mandate also includes the creation of a legacy project that will be unique to the individual. The Poet Laureate is encouraged to shape the role using their own artistic vision, and engage with communities across the city in the literary arts.

Past Poet Laureates have included:

- In May of 2001, the City of Toronto Poet Laureate program was initiated with **Dennis Lee** serving as Canada's first municipal Poet Laureate. Since then several other Canadian cities have embraced the idea including Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Montreal, Halifax and St. John's. As Poet Laureate, Dennis Lee embarked on an ambitious program that saw the 2008 unveiling of a monument to contemporary poet Al Purdy.
- **Pier Giorgio di Cicco** became the second City of Toronto Poet Laureate assuming his position in October of 2004. As Poet Laureate, he has used the role to influence municipal policy in issues that address the urban aesthetic and its relationship to liveable and sustainable cities.

- **Dionne Brand** was the third City of Toronto Poet Laureate assuming the position in September of 2009. As Poet Laureate, she used the role to raise the profile of poetry in the public realm through her legacy project, Poetry is Public is Poetry. A website was developed along with three projects that placed permanent physical representations of poetry in branches of the Toronto Public Library. During her term Ms. Brand was honoured with the 2011 Griffin Poetry Prize for her novel-length narrative poem, *Ossuaries*.
- **George Elliott Clarke** hit the ground running when he was appointed the City of Toronto's fourth Poet Laureate in November 2012. Dr. Clarke quickly established the Poet Laureate's wall outside the City Hall branch of the Toronto Public Library, he had a Poet Laureate medal struck and he kicked off National Poetry Month each year of his term with a recitation of an original poem in the Council chamber. Dr. Clarke worked tirelessly partnering with a variety of institutions including the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Toronto Public Library, the League of Canadian Poets, Gilda's Club, Luminato, Heritage Toronto, Children's Peace Theatre, East End Arts, Canada Blooms, and many more. Dr. Clarke's legacy includes two poetry-related heritage plaques and an original poem inscribed in steel at the Yonge Street entrance to Ramsden Park (completed in 2018).
- **Anne Michaels** assumed her duties as Toronto's fifth Poet Laureate in November 2015 and championed the idea of Toronto as a city of languages. She worked with the Bengali Literary Resource Centre, with young racialized poets at George S. Henry Academy, and she was featured at the Shab-e She'r monthly diversity reading series. Ms Michaels worked tirelessly in her role appearing at Doors Open Toronto, the International Festival of Authors, Toronto Book Awards, IdeaCity at the Bentway, Walk with Excellence, Toronto Public Library, Heliconian Club, McLuhan Centre, The Brick Works, and most notably, at the vigil for victims of the North York van attack.

In keeping with the notion that the position of the Poet Laureate is an honour bestowed rather than a position of employment, poets are not invited to apply for the position. As such, in January 2019, an expert selection committee was assembled from the local literary community to nominate a candidate. Members of the selection committee included:

- Anne Michaels, Toronto's current Poet Laureate.
- Ayesha Chatterjee (Poet, Past President League of Canadian Poets)
- Carmine Starnino (Poetry Editor, *The Walrus*)
- Jeff Kirby (Poet/Book seller [knife/fork/book]); and
- Lesley Fletcher (Executive Director, League of Canadian Poets).

The selection committee relied on its expertise and consultation with the community to select a candidate.

Recommended Appointment of Toronto's Sixth Poet Laureate

Al Moritz (A.F. Moritz) is recommended for appointment as the City of Toronto's sixth Poet Laureate. Moritz has published 20 books of poetry, which have received many national and international honours, including the Griffin Poetry Prize, the Award in Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Guggenheim Fellowship, Poetry Magazine's Bess Hokin Award, selection to the Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets, and three of his books have been finalists for the Governor General's Award. His most recent book is *The Sparrow: Selected Poems* (2018). His poems have appeared regularly in journals such as *Poetry*, *The Hudson Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Malahat Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, *The Partisan Review*, and *The Walrus*, and in many editions of the annual anthologies *The Best Canadian Poetry* and *The Best American Poetry*.

Moritz is presently the Blake C. Goldring Professor of the Arts and Society at Victoria University in the University of Toronto. He has written various nonfiction and scholarly works, some in collaboration with his wife, Professor Theresa Moritz. These include biographies of Stephen Leacock and Emma Goldman, two books on the picturesque and sublime art tradition in nineteenth-century Canada and America, and *The Oxford Illustrated Literary Guide to Canada*. He has also translated books of Spanish and French poetry.

In unanimously recommending Moritz's appointment, the jury pointed to his influential body of work that has profoundly shaped Toronto's literary community. They cited his extensive mentorship of young Toronto poets, and their confidence that he would excel as an ambassador for the literary arts across stylistic, geographic and demographic boundaries.

Toronto has a strong and thriving literary tradition. By continuing the honorary position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate, Council reinforces support for this tradition and the city's literary community as a whole. It is the intention that through this confirmation, the City of Toronto can look forward to dynamic legacy project for the city.

CONTACT

Sally Han, Acting Director, Arts and Culture Services, Economic Development and Culture, Sally.Han@toronto.ca, 416-392-4012

SIGNATURE

Mike Williams
General Manager, Economic Development and Culture