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## Words of joyful power

Missouri Poet Laureate Walter Bargaen crafts work based on a life of observing nature and human nature.

By **ANNIE NELSON** of the Tribune's staff

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*Julia Robinson photo*

Taking inspiration from the natural world, Missouri's first poet laureate, Walter Bargaen, takes a walk at Grindstone Park in Columbia.

Missouri's first poet laureate, Walter Bargaen, arrived in the United States as a boy after crossing the Atlantic on a converted World War II troop ship.

His father was in the Army, and his mother was German. On the journey, the ship was caught in a hurricane, which Bargaen remembers vividly. The children sat with their arms clasped around their knees and waited for the ship to plunge down a steep wave, which would send them sliding across the ship deck to crash into a wall. It was a race.

Bargaen loved living in Heidelberg, Germany, during the post-war recovery era when a boy could find adventure as close by as the Rhine River, where he once discovered a rifle beneath the flowing waters. It was a place where bomb craters quickly filled with rainwater to become stagnant ponds exploding with frogs, and people walked on Sundays with babes in strollers.

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The family settled in Belton, a then small town 20 minutes south of Kansas City, where Bargaen fell in love with the natural world. During his freshman year in high school, he spent his Friday nights in creeks and ponds searching for creatures to capture for a terrarium instead of dating girls.

All of these memories and images influence or appear in Bargaen's substantial body of work, which includes 12 books of poetry and another forthcoming title, "Theban Traffic."

"You get imprinted deeply by that," Bargaen said of his childhood. "That would be a part of why some of the subjects I write about tend to focus on the destructive nature of humankind. Generally speaking, war or conflict is the result of a lack of imagination," whereas "poetry is the playground of imagination."

On Jan. 8, Gov. Matt Blunt named the 59-year-old Ashland resident Missouri's first poet laureate. Bargaen holds the position for two years, and as part of his responsibility to help promote poetry in Missouri, he will be required to make at least six appearances a year at public libraries and schools across the state. The position also requires Bargaen to write an original poem honoring Missouri. The new poem will be unveiled at a later date.

Bargaen said he plans to promote Missouri poetry in two ways. He would like to publish a monthly broadsheet, sent to all state, county and school libraries, which would include poetry, a short biography of a Missouri poet and comments from the poet on his or her work. He also is considering making an audio recording of a presentation that could be sent around the state without him having to make a physical appearance.

The main goal of a poet laureate is to increase interest in poetry in Missouri, and Bargaen's fans, friends and family say he is the man for the job. "I would always call him Missouri's poet laureate ... because we didn't have one," said Kevin Walsh, a local radio host who met Bargaen in the 1970s and often invites him on his show.

"Poetry was almost a mainstream cultural activity when I first moved here, and Walter was always a part of that scene," Walsh said. "Locally, he was taken very seriously, but I never knew if anyone else appreciated him like we did."

His friends used words such as shy, opinionated, odd, sweet and sensitive to describe Bargaen.

When she was growing up, Bargaen's 29-year-old daughter Kale Rose said every morning and weekend when she woke up he would be sitting in a rocking chair writing or reading. "We tend to take trips together," she said. "He was always whipping out his little notebook and pen and taking notes on

## Bargaen's advice for young writers

- Write every day. Bargaen set a goal as a younger writer to produce a poem every day, but it didn't mean it was any good, he said. The point is to exercise your writing like a muscle. It gets flabby without use, he said.
- Don't wait for inspiration, just start writing.
- Surprise yourself. "Generally speaking I don't know what I'm going to write about when I sit down," Bargaen said, and quoted Robert Frost: "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader."
- Read the material you want to write. "Writers read differently than readers. I read to see how other writers handle the same subject matter," he said. "I read to learn."
- Use self-doubt to motivate you. "I'm always trying to write beyond my abilities."
- Keep a notebook on you at all times. "My notebook is a repository of inspiration."
- Let go. "I've abandoned much more that I've finished," Bargaen said. "Even after things are published I would like to make changes, but you just have to let go."
- Visit his Web site at [www.walterbargaen.com](http://www.walterbargaen.com)

## Map to the party

IF you wait, you grow old, nothing more. Traveling light is your only illuminating illusion.  
 Either way you can't remain time and place inseparable.  
 To settle is to amass names: lespedeza, hickory, Providence Road.  
 To accelerate is to compress latitude and longitude, to shoulder wind in every direction, to wear a hole in the already worn cartography.  
 To grow old is to grasp sheer granite faces, to negotiate declivities and eruptions of aspiration, to disbelieve coded legends, to find instead water's divides, to follow the rule of thumb — civilization's always down stream a steaming ruin, a crumbling repository, a flow, a seepage, the final flush to sea level and lower. Buried in the alluvium: Etruscan bronzes, eroding pyramids coral-encrusted hub caps, cracked glass fishing floats. On an oil-blackened spit the aging Archimedian rabble gathers to count the grains again, praying for a mistake.

— Walter Bargaen,  
 from "Water Breathing Air"

everything and anything. I was always

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impressed by how observant he was."

Bargen and his wife also have a son, 33-year-old Cedar Bargen.

Scott Cairns, director of the University of Missouri Creative Writing Program, recently read Bargen's "West of West."

"There's a style of poetry that draws attention to itself as language, a style that draws attention to itself as art and one that tries to insinuate itself as speech, as spontaneous, off-the-cuff," Cairns said. "That's what plain style is, what Walter's style is."

Bargen's book "The Feast" won the 2005 William Rockhill Nelson Award for poetry. It was an experiment in prose, which Merriam-Webster defines as a "literary medium distinguished from poetry, especially its greater irregularity and variety of rhythm and its closer correspondence to the patterns of everyday speech."

Sometimes people will say to Bargen, "Yeah, but your poems don't rhyme," he said. "That's like telling a carpenter he only has one tool - a hammer - to build a house."

He's even tried to coin a phrase for that style of his - povella - a blend of poem and novella, but it didn't take, Bargen said.

Bargen is a little taken aback by the media attention his appointment generated. He wants people focused on poetry, not him. "I'm just giving a face and a body to the poet laureate position," he said, sitting in the living room of the house he built in the woods near Ashland.

Bargen said he discounts those people who keep ringing alarms about the decline in reading. Poetry is different than fiction, different than prose.

"Poetry requires the reader to be much more interactive with the text than prose, which tells you all you need to know," Bargen said. Poetry makes the reader part of the story.

"A really good image or metaphor startles us," he said. "It awakens us to new possibilities and does it so directly and with such speed you feel you've been slapped in the face, not in a hurtful way, a joyful way."

Poetry is like an iceberg, he said, 90 percent of it is below the surface, and its goal should be making contact with all the emotions and truths below the surface of humanity.

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