



the foundation
of POETRY

*an interview with charles p. ries
by brian morrisey*

CHARLES P. RIES LIVES IN MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN. HIS NARRATIVE POEMS, SHORT STORIES, INTERVIEWS AND POETRY REVIEWS HAVE APPEARED IN OVER ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY PRINT AND ELECTRONIC PUBLICATIONS. He has received three Pushcart Prize nominations for his writing and most recently read his poetry on *National Public Radio's Theme and Variations*, a program that is broadcast over seventy NPR affiliates. He is the author of *The Fathers We Find*, a novel based on memory. Ries is also the author of five books of poetry - the most recent entitled, *The Last Time* which was released by The Moon Press in Tucson, Arizona. He is the poetry editor for Word Riot (www.wordriot.org) and on the board of the Woodland Pattern Bookstore in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Most recently he has been appointed to the Wisconsin Poet Laureate Commission. You may find additional samples of his work by going to: <http://www.literarti.net/Ries/>.

I wanted to interview you because I feel you have been a staple of the small press now for quite some time. Your name pops up everywhere. Your poetry is more than interesting and speaks the voice of the small press, the true and authentic one, without the distraction of an Oxford vocabulary. One of the reasons I find poetry is not active in the lifestyles of Americans is because it is not immediate enough for the average reader to grasp any satisfaction. I am not saying that we should cater to the downfall of society's deteriorating attention span, but I wish there was a way we could put the right books into classrooms and prevail poetry as an interesting and exciting expression. The only time poetry gains media attention is if a poet dies or a tiny non-profit organization devoted to poetry inherits hundreds of millions of dollars, like the Poetry Foundation did three years ago. The Poetry Foundation could do a lot of good in promoting groundbreaking poetry that could be brought into the schools as required reading. They have a "large-scale plan," I noticed you have seen some flaws in their plan to bring poetry back into the mainstream. Can you elaborate on that anymore?

I AGREE BRIAN. I HAVE A DIVERSE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS. When I give them a copy of my chapbooks or invite them to attend a reading, some will resist with the same reaction many have about poetry; it's dull, ponderous, inaccessible and rhymes. I am sure their dislike was planted in grade school and high school when all of us had to read a lot of poetry by stiff, dead folks. It didn't live, and certainly wasn't written in the language of this time. The Poetry Foundation has been given a rare opportunity with the transformative gift by Ms. Ruth Lilly. My concern is that the Board of Directors of the Poetry Foundation who set policy and strategic direction before Ms. Lilly laid her \$100+ million golden egg on them is no longer the board to lead them into the future. Things have changed. A gift of this size changes things.

In John Barr's, President of the Poetry Foundation, open letter posted to their web site (find link below) he says, "One way to expand the presence of good poetry in our culture is to place more of it in the mainstream media." And again later in his letter he says, "Speaking of children, our initiatives in education includes a multi-pronged plan to place good poetry before children and young adults." Bravo! But did you notice in both these excerpts he uses the words good poetry. Hmmm? Now what kind of poetry do you suppose he's talking about? Could it be the same sleepy, overstuffed writing they publish each month in their magazine? Could it be the same kind of poetry their board, which is made up of at least one-third academics, now favors? I think so. It's not surprising that a board primarily filled by academics would like academic poetry. But we all agree that we want to promote good poetry. It's just that we might come to some different conclusions about what good is.

I didn't get to read what guidance Ms. Lilly gave the Foundation when she made her gift to them, but I'll bet she wanted her gift to support her people. That's us, HER people. We, the lost tribe who wander listlessly in the valley of the small press, coffee shops, high school writing classes - the great unwashed poetry nation. Included in this tribe we are happy to include academics, scholars and historians. After all this is a big tent; lots of room in here for everyone who loves poetry.

The central responsibility of any non-profit governing board is to advance and safe guard the mission of the organization they have been invited to lead. To do this, the board must constantly ask itself, "Are we properly structured to accomplish our mission?" I believe that with the Lilly gift they no longer need corporate heavyweights who now represent another one-third of their board. They no longer need members who can give or get them money. Generally non-profit boards want directors who

can give them time, talent, and treasury, but things have changed. A \$100 million endowment will do that. The Poetry Foundation has a stated goal of wanting to bring "good poetry" to the masses, yet their board lacks voices from that very market. I am not suggesting they put a bunch of crazed street poets on the board, but how about some small press editors, how about a high school English teacher, what about a few 20-somethings or a few minorities? Come on; let's get some diversity on this board.

While I wasn't able to get specific information about how the Poetry Foundation is composed, I did find out from Anne Halsay, Media Coordinator at the The Poetry Foundation (via an e-mail exchange) that approximately one-third of their board members are scholars or writers, and one-third are from the business sector. The remaining third is comprised of individuals from a wide array of professions including architecture, public policy, arts and cultural administration, law and philanthropy.

I asked her about minority and youth representation, and she told me that since the establishment of the Foundation in 2003, there have been two openings on the Board of Directors. Of those openings, one is now occupied by a woman of color. She told me that the Foundation has developed multiple programs intended to engage young people with poetry; there are, however, no recent college graduates serving on the Board of Directors.

I have worked in the non-profit sector as a fundraiser and management consultant for over twenty-five years. I have worked with over two hundred non-profit boards; many of them cultural organizations. That said, most non-profit boards, like the Poetry Foundation will change very slowly, and they may never change. I just hope they would be open to looking at themselves and how they are composed. In this regard, I would ask the Foundation to consider these two recommendations:

1. Hire a non-profit management consultant to perform a board audit to determine if the current board is properly composed to serve the mission they seek to achieve.
2. Create an advisory board that reflects the market they wish to serve and have at least two to three of those advisory members have a seat on the governing board.

If Chris Wiman, Editor of Poetry Magazine, wants to publish good poets, great. But I'd like to see him publish some other good poets. In a taste test conducted at my local Pic'n'Save Store, I'll bet more shoppers will relate to my good poetry more than Mr. Wiman's good poetry. There is a lot of good poetry out there - I just don't see it being championed by the Poetry Foundation - yet.

Interesting... Back to what you first said about Barr's comment about "One way to expand the presence of good poetry in our culture is to place more of it in the mainstream media." It seems to me that this statement might be passing the buck off to the media as the culprit as the reason why American poetry is ignored in our culture. There is so much energy and passion in the small press. Maybe out of all this bureaucracy of governing and advisory boards they could actually do something about this detrimental fact and take action with allocating some of this money toward hiring a media specialist to do some active Public Relations work. The board could choose some of the biggest names in the small press and give them the extra exposure to boost them out of the small press and up there to swim with the larger academic sharks. They should back these individuals with support and enough funding to gain the exposure needed for this elevation to the masses. The problem with small press poets making waves in society is that most of us cannot compete with the academics. Think about it, The Poetry Foundation could reach out to your neighborhood garbage-man who just so happens to write brilliant and

exciting poetry, but doesn't know the right people in the major magazines to connect with or cannot afford to send out his manuscripts to the major publishing houses. A guided fellowship could change the face of poetry in society. I wonder what The Poetry Foundation has in mind for grants and fellowships?

ACTUALLY BRIAN, I THINK SMALL PRESS POETS DO SUCCESSFULLY COMPETE WITH ACADEMICS in terms of what Barr calls "good poetry," or later in his letter, what he characterizes as, "the best poetry." Where the Foundation has not succeeded is in its stated promise to "place it [good poetry] before the largest possible audience."

There are barriers to enter on both sides (academic and small press). These barriers are not so much about what Barr calls "good poetry" but rather tribal loyalties. I am not an academic, and I don't know many writers who are. If I were an academic I am sure many of my writing friends would be too. It shouldn't surprise anyone that the vast majority of work appearing in academically funded journals is by MFA students and/or established academic writers. We can call it cronyism, or like-minded people like the same stuff. I believe two things are at play here. First, academics are trained to write in generally the same style; usually one that uses heightened language which loses contact with the ground and common expression. As a result, most casual readers of poetry find such work irrelevant and inaccessible — say boring. Second, the editors of most Academic Journals are English Professors and/or the students they teach. So what would you expect their editorial tastes to be? I agree with you Brian, the Poetry Foundation could and should help establish a balance and a dialogue between the small press and the academic press. There are many more aspects to the poetry machine than just these two sectors, but for the sake of this discussion, let's just stay focused on closing this yawning divide.

From what I can gather the Poetry Foundation has hired Barr, a former Wall Street Executive who was a Managing Director at Morgan Stanley, and a published poet, to implement a strategic vision. In the January 5, 2006, Boston Globe article entitled Poets, Inc. (find link below) Barr says, "We believe that the golden age for any art happens when that art is written for and derives its energy from the general audience of its time." He goes on to say, "And if and when an art form becomes a more closeted and insular affair, it's going to lose some of that energy." Right on John! We all agree and remain flabbergasted that you and the board you lead allow Chris Wiman to publish a magazine that puts the vast majority of people who read and write poetry to sleep.

The Foundation deserves credit for hiring John Barr; someone who didn't grow up in the middle of a college literature department. This should give all of us hope that he will see what we see; a need for a broader and more representative governing board. A Board that resembles the market they say they want to awaken to good poetry.

Finally, you mention funding. Funding isn't on the table. Here is another quote from Barr's letter, "Nor will the Foundation be primarily a grant-making or check-writing organization. As an operating Foundation it will inaugurate and manage its own

programs." I don't argue with the Foundation not wanting the headaches and administrative costs of also becoming a grant making organization, but I also view this decision as a tactic which further advances the interests of their board and its present ideology around what's good. If you take a look at what they are funding (find link below) you will quickly see it's more of the same. No outsiders here. They are all members of the academic tribe. Where are the great small press publications or poets in this list of funding priorities? Nowhere. Where is the outsider who honed his or her writing in the small press? Nowhere. Again, this imbalance will not change unless the board that governs the Foundation is altered to reflect the market they say they want to reach.

I don't care if it is a headache to pick five influential poets and five influential publications to give grants to and create an unsolicited annual application process. They don't want to become a check-writing company... Why not? They have the money to allocate these responsibilities and support the poetic endeavors the NEA and state art councils can no longer afford to grant. I admire the efforts and goals stated in the open letter, I just want every poet, publication or organization to be given the chance to reach out for help and explain their situation or reasons why funding their efforts will change the face of poetry. The letter states they don't have all the answers on how to allocate this money... So why not

"academics are trained to write in generally the same style; one that uses heightened language which loses contact with the ground and common expression. As a result, most casual readers of poetry find such work irrelevant and inaccessible — say boring."

accept unsolicited applications from all over America? It might broaden their palette as to what classifies as "good poetry." The letter also states in so many words how poets feed off of being down in the dirt. Yes, poets will still grow without your help and we know that your goal is to change the readership of poetry. The Foundation has a unique opportunity to change the readership of poetry, but yet, they aren't reaching for too many different herbs in the garden of poetry. We would like to ask John Barr for an interview based on the development of an open application process for the awards and fellowships listed on their website.

I see you Charles, as a connoisseur of poetry. You have written countless reviews, published hundreds of poems, and really taken the art to heart. This interview was originally inspired by your interest in the Poetry Foundation and your open letter to POETRY. You are a crusader of poetry. How do you find the time to juggle everything? What do you find are some of your personal struggles with succeeding as a poet? A lot of poets go to Europe where poetry is taken more seriously and you can actually live off being a poet. I wonder how America could reach this state? I wonder if it would take more than the Poetry Foundation's manpower and \$100 million budget to significantly change the face of poetry.

THAT'S WHY IT'S CALLED THE GOLDEN RULE BRIAN, those who have the gold rule. Everyone who loves poetry and is active in it shares your sentiments, but most will remain on the sideline and keep their opinions to themselves. Poets are a pretty passive bunch. As for our academic and serious overachieving brothers and sisters, they don't want to bite the hand that may feed them a publication credit. It's a pity, and I hope this interview, the Boston Globe article (find link below), Michael Kriesel's recent editorial in Small Press Review, and other voices will slowly encourage the Poetry Foundation to come out of its shell. Hey Brian, I'll even buy John Barr and a few of his buddies a free lunch in Chicago. It's just down the road from Milwaukee; we'd have a great time.

Our efforts to get Poetry Foundation's attention will take time. They will not adjust their programmatic outreach to our world quickly. Nor will Mr. Wiman's editorial tastes migrate to more diverse voices overnight. Non-profit boards are slow moving bodies of deliberation. But such boards must eventually bend to the will of the clients they serve. So if we really do love poetry - good poetry - then we must take action. If there is a contact sport for poets (other than submitting work) then this is it. I encourage everyone who reads this interview to send or e-mail John Barr a letter. I know he'd love to hear from all of us who are active and devoted to poetry:

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As for me making a living off being a poet? I guess that would mean I'd have to start teaching at a University. I think I'll pass on that. Besides, it might have a debilitating effect on my writing. Brian, it has never paid to be a poet. We don't do it for the money. We do it because we have to. And if we work hard, and we're good and lucky - maybe our ship will come in. But I don't spend much time thinking much about that. I just try to write as much as I can: reviews, short stories, poems, interviews, essays; even an open letter to the Poetry Foundation when I have to. I just completed my second novel while commemorating my 140th rejection letter by a literary agent. It's all part of the work, and for me, the privilege of having found true love. What a break! I just woke up eight years ago and discovered writing. I have never looked back. I juggle my writing like we all do. I fit it in between work and sleep, between taking my daughters to school and running errands, between grocery shopping and doing my laundry. I jam as much writing into the time I have been given to put words on paper.

We will continue our quest to work with the Poetry Foundation to begin to look at the relevance of becoming an unbiased foreman in the revolution to bring poetry into mainstream American culture. Your poems are interesting and well crafted. Do you have any advice for aspiring poets? What works best for you when approaching the poem? How do you know when you've nailed the poem? For me it is a deep internal feeling so strong, it knocks the pen out of my hand.

BRIAN, I THINK THIS IS AN EFFORT WORTH EVERYONE'S TIME; especially in the small press where most don't have university budgets to rely on. There are so many active, talented poets, editors and publishers in our small press world; we all need to send a short note to Mr. Barr and the Poetry Foundation Board, and vote with our pen. But it is equally important this not be a one-and-done gesture. Check their web site. Take an interest in how their board is composed. Hold them accountable to the objectives they have stated they want to achieve. Add their e-mail address (mail@poetryfoundation.org) to your list serves so they can become part of our poetry community. So much is happening in the small press. They need to know about it. I am sure they are well informed about what's going on within the academic side of poetry. We need to help them find their way to our small town.

My poetry! Right, that too. It's a little hard for me to switch from fighting the good fight to talking about my creative writing. So I'll keep this short because I want to keep this interview focused on helping the Poetry Foundation do the right thing.

For me, it is themes. They are the creative triggers for my poetry. I have a list of them in my notebook. I view poetry as compressed story telling. Since my work is largely narrative, I want to be clear what it is I am trying to say. So when I'm ready to write poetry, I review my themes and go for it. I usually draft three to four poems in one sitting and very quickly; I then rework them over a few weeks until the poems

tell me they are done. I find it interesting, and informative that a poem I love can receive a poor response from editors, while a poem I thought wasn't quite there can be accepted all over the place. The market is one way to measure the quality of our work. The market loves you and punishes you, but it always informs you.

As to my advice to aspiring poets; well Brian, I hate to disappoint you, but I am an aspiring poet. Remember, I've only been at this for eight years. I have a feeling I will never feel like anything but an aspiring poet. Writing is so complex, so endless, how does one ever really master it? Nevertheless, I would say there are two sides to this game: talent and persistence. You must actively develop both. Become good at the forms and good at advancing your career. Not much will be given to you. Just write and write and write, and submit. And thank every editor, publisher and poet who lends you a hand of support. Treat everyone with respect knowing they are part of your growing writing family. Do this because it's the right thing to do, and because at some point the break you've been waiting for will be an act of kindness returned. To me, poetry is both an art and a game. For it to remain fun, I must view it this way. Great writing counts, publication credits count, and having fun counts too.

Thank you for sharing with us your concern for necessary future collaboration between academia and street poets. We can only make a change if we unite and use our power to bring poetry to every coffee table in America. If we lose this dream, we lose our sole purpose of roaming this earth.

BRIAN THIS IS NOT AN ACADEMIC POET VS. STREET POET ISSUE; this is only about getting "good poetry" before the largest audience possible. We all want good poetry to flourish. We agree The Poetry Foundation should use the Lilly Endowment to accomplish this end and light a flame across all socio-economic sectors. I know we enjoy tossing word-bombs over the imaginary fence that separates the academic tribe from ours, but the fact is, we all love the same thing — poetry. I have read academic poets whose work I like and street poets who I greatly enjoy. What I cannot figure out is why the Poetry Foundation has not been willing to advocate for both? I hope they will decide to invite us all into their big tent; not just as readers and writers, but as representatives on their governing board. Representation is the only way this balance can be created and maintained. When this happens, then we might have a chance of putting good poetry on every coffee table in America.

To Read the full Boston.com article, Poets, Inc.
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/01/08/poets_inc/?page=2

To Read John Barr's Open Letter
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/release_letter.html

To Read about what the Poetry Foundation funds
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/awards.html>

