Poetry Society Celebrates Centennial

In the winter of 1910, at New York City’s Ansonia Hotel, a group of poets, editors, and artists gathered for the first planning meeting of the Poetry Society of America (PSA), a fledgling organization that would be “a public forum for the advancement, enjoyment, and understanding of poetry.” On that evening a hundred years ago, the founders, including poet Edwin Markham, painter Leon Dabo, and Current Literature editor Edward J. Wheeler, argued, naturally, over words—would they be a society or a club?—but ultimately chose to follow the model of the Poetry Society of England, which had been founded a year earlier.

The PSA didn’t immediately gain respect from the public—it was even mocked by reporters as “the Poets’ Union.” As inaugural secretary Jessie Belle Rittenhouse recalled in her 1934 memoir, My House of Life, “This was still the period when one had to be apologetic about poetry, when the poet was considered a variant from the normal, while there was still a subconscious feeling in the public mind that he was a weakling.” Within the PSA’s first few years, however, as more famous poets attended meetings (Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats among them) the organization began to win more respect, and more members—growing from forty poets in 1910 to more than twelve hundred today. Now thriving, it is the oldest poetry organization in the country, with a popular awards series, a full schedule of forty to fifty readings and other events each year, and other programming.

Under the direction of Alice Quinn, and with the help of staff members Rob Casper and Brett Fletcher Lauer, the PSA is marking its centennial this year with a number of special events that are being held across the country. Among them are four regional celebrations—Poets of the American Midwest, in Minneapolis on May 14; Poets of New England, in Boston on September 23; Poets of the American South, in Atlanta on October 7; and Poets of the American West, in Los Angeles on November 30—that will feature all-star lineups. For more information about the PSA’s centennial events, visit the Website at www.poetrysociety.org.

—REBECCA KEITH

Small Press Points

In the first few years after the CityLit Project was founded in Baltimore in 2003, the nonprofit was primarily focused on establishing not only an annual literary event (the CityLit Festival takes place every April), but also a series of well-attended writing workshops (Write Here, Write Now) and a youth program (CityLit Teens), in an effort to get the people of Maryland excited about the literary arts and to connect its community of readers and writers. It was only a matter of time before the nonprofit launched a publishing imprint. CityLit Press (www.citylitproject.org) extends the organization’s mission by providing a venue for writers—from the Baltimore area and beyond—who might otherwise be ignored by larger independent or commercial publishers. The press’s first book, published this month, is City Sages: Baltimore, an anthology of short prose by writers who have called the city home, from Edgar Allan Poe to Alice McDermott. CityLit also sponsors two annual poetry chapbook contests—the Clarinda Harriss Poetry Prize; and Black Infinity, the Adele V. Holden Prize for New African American Poets—and publisher Gregg Wilhelm says the press plans to release three stand-alone titles per year. Writers can find submission guidelines, as well as some pretty handy writers resources, on CityLit’s Web site.

—ADRIAN VERSTEEGH