

NEBRASKA HUMANITIES

2007

Volume XI



An anonymous girl in an outdoor classroom in a village near Asadabad, Afghanistan.
Photo by Jonas Dovydenas, from an exhibition, "Afghanistan: War and Peace,"
funded by a grant from the Nebraska Humanities Council.

featuring

The 11th Annual Governor's Lecture in the Humanities
"Reading *Lolita* in Tehran," by Azar Nafisi

and including

The 2006 NHC Annual Report



When we ask who we are and what our lives ought to mean, we are using the humanities. The Nebraska Humanities Council enhances the quality of life in communities across our state through programs that study the human race, its achievements, its creations, its dreams and aspirations, its failures and triumphs. The NHC promotes a better understanding of Nebraska—who we are and where we have been—to build a better future.

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Contents

Volume XI

2007

LITERATURE, IMAGINATION, THOUGHT ARE TOOLS OF HUMANITIES by Don Pederson	2
READING "LOLITA" IN TEHRAN by Azar Nafisi	3
SOWER AWARD WINNER GRATEFUL FOR PEOPLE AND PLACES by Ted Kooser	11
GOVERNOR'S LECTURE BENEFIT PHOTOGRAPHS by Tom Slocum	12
ON CENSORSHIP, HERE AND IN IRAN by Keith Blackledge	14
NEBRASKA HUMANITIES COUNCIL 2006 ANNUAL REPORT by Jane Renner Hood	15
2006 FINANCIAL OVERVIEW	17
DONORS TO THE NEBRASKA HUMANITIES COUNCIL IN 2006	18

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Photo and Art Credits:

The cover photo of students in Afghanistan is by award-winning photographer Jonas Dovydenas. The students were taking a break as American soldiers distributed school supplies donated by friends and relatives in the United States. It is one of 70 photos in an exhibition shown last year at the Red Cloud Opera House Gallery in Red Cloud, Neb. The photos of Afghan people and U.S. troops were taken from 1985-2005. The photo of Gov. Dave Heineman on page 3, the photos of Azar Nafisi on pages 6 and 10, the photo of Sower Award winner Ted Kooser and NHC Chairman Don Pederson on page 11, and the photos of the NHC benefit on pages 12-13 are by Tom Slocum. The photo of children and families dressed as literary characters at the 2006 Nebraska Book Festival on page 15 is by Leta Powell Drake.

Literature, imagination, thought are tools of the humanities

By Don Pederson, Chair, Nebraska Humanities Council

One of the enriching events in Nebraska each year is the Governor's Lecture in the Humanities. It is held alternately at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha and at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln. Those who have access to these lectures have been able to see and hear great speakers. This year was no exception. Azar Nafisi shared with the audience her thoughts on the world's scene and her best-selling book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Her lecture was presented to a full house at the Lied Center and was shared by way of live video-feed to viewers in Omaha, North Platte and Scottsbluff, the first time for such expanded coverage. The Nebraska Humanities Council presents these opportunities to as many citizens as possible.

As Nafisi noted, we are in a "polarized and politicized world." On TV we see images of men and women being beheaded. We see children being shot to death and such occurrences are becoming part of our everyday lives. Nafisi used to teach in her native Iran and now teaches at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. She notes that Washington is a wonderful city where once the colors orange and red reminded us of autumn and flowers, but now tell us the degree of danger in the country.

Until the 1979 revolution, Iranian women were active in all facets of their society. A once-progressive country suddenly became oppressive. Women's rights were severely limited and they became the primary target of the extremist government. The veil was made mandatory, which Nafisi rejected, resulting in dismissal from her teaching job.

There were dramatic restrictions on the basic right to interpret or to imagine. This was the background

for reading *Lolita*. Her students met at her home in secret to read, interpret and imagine. She chose *Lolita* for this activity, a bold and dangerous act.

Think how lucky we are to be able to read what we wish, when we wish. We can imagine without fear. As Nafisi noted, this is what makes our country great. There was no road map for our founding fathers to develop our Constitution. Well-read, these men created it from their rich backgrounds and fertile imaginations.

Lolita is about a seducer. It would certainly not be on the fundamentalist best-seller list, but it has a lesson. "Beware of the seducers," Nafisi said, "because the monsters don't come to this world with writing on their foreheads saying 'we are monsters, beware of us.' They come in the garb of charismatic leaders, even as men of God, and if we do not use our powers of imagination, if we do not use our powers of thought, if we do not pause, then we can easily be seduced." Literature, imagination and thought, the tools of the humanities, awaken us.

This was a powerful endorsement for the importance of the humanities. I am proud to serve on the humanities council. I am very proud of the many dedicated council and foundation members who contribute their time and talent (and money) to encourage the humanities in our state.

I recently attended a national meeting of humanities leaders. In many ways, I saw how the Nebraska Humanities Council and its programs continue to lead on the national scene.



Reading *Lolita* in Tehran

Azar Nafisi delivered the 11th Annual Governor's Lecture in the Humanities September 20 at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln. Her comments follow, in edited form.

By Azar Nafisi

I feel so honored to be here when our former Poet Laureate Ted Kooser is being honored. I met him at a meeting of the National Council of the Teachers of English. They told me he was the only Poet Laureate who called them and said he wanted to participate in their meeting. And they were absolutely amazed and delighted!



Governor Dave Heineman introduces Azar Nafisi.

I think everybody should be asking me, "What do you mean reading *Lolita* in Tehran?" I mean, what is the relevance of *Lolita* in Tehran in this day and age? How many of you when you think of Tehran think of *Lolita*? What are the main images that come to your mind when you think of a country like Iran?

Most probably, nowadays, the Iranian president Mr. Ahmadienejad, someone who has taken the place of George Clooney on the cover of Time magazine, on every television station in this country, who usually appears with this sort of a naughty boy smirk on his face as if he has just broken the neighbor's window and gotten away with it! People would say when they think of Iran, they think of extremism. When they think of Iran, they think of stoning women to death or forcing women into wearing the mandatory clothing.

That is one of the topics that I want to talk about: a polarized and politicized world. It is in a sense a terrible world when you turn on the television the images of men and women being beheaded, children being shot to death, all of these images are now becoming part of our everyday lives. We eat and drink and talk while we have those images in the background.

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Continued from page 3

In the city that now I call my home, Washington, D.C., a wonderful, beautiful city, the colors orange and red are no more the colors that would remind you of autumn and of flowers. They are codes that tell you what the degree of the danger is. And even in this wonderful, amazing country there is so much polarization. When we think of political discussions, unfortunately, we think of Dixie Chicks and Ann Coulter, and this is the level of our political debate. It reduces everything to politics—reducing other cultures, other nationalities, other people, as well as yourselves.

The other thing that I hope to share with you tonight is why I think an event like this, a celebration of the humanities, today is more than ever important. I want to talk about that issue because we also live in a culture where there is a leveling of all topics. One moment you hear about another bomb going off in Iraq and right next to it the next news flash is a picture of baby Suri. Her pictures appear and we all wonder does she look more like Tom Cruise or Katie Holmes? Of course, I think she looks more like Katie Holmes. I don't think that Tom Cruise would appreciate that, but most probably he doesn't appreciate much of what I say anyway!

But the whole point here is not that we should not be thinking about baby Suri or we should not wonder when Brad and Angelina will tie the knot—I think that there is a place for that, you know. That is why we have People magazine and E! Entertainment Channel. But when we don't know which one of these issues is more important or which one of these issues should take up our time, then, I think, we are in trouble and we need to read *Lolita* not just in Tehran but also in Washington, D.C., and, of course, in Lincoln, Nebraska.

This is the issue that I want to talk about: the importance of imagination. Some people, including much of our academia, think that when we have important urgent issues, business and

politics, then humanities, works of imagination, should be dropped. We cut the budget for humanities. We teach our children that they should go to colleges to get a degree in order to make a good living. This is coming from a country that was based on a vision, that was based on people imagining what did not exist and trying to actualize that. And I'm here to talk about why it is that without the subversive power of imagination we will not have the vision.

We would not have the context to be either good policy makers or genuinely creative business people. Imaginative knowledge is a form of perceiving the world, relating and connecting to the world, and changing the world. If you take that aspect of human endeavor out of the equation then something will be missing. Your life will be mutilated. Your life will be unfinished. It is like getting up one morning and saying, "I don't need my hands." Every organ is needed to be independent of the others and at the same time to interact with the others.

I wanted my book to be a celebration of not just writing, and not just writers, but also of readers. I wanted to open every talk that I give about my book with a quotation from Vladimir Nabakov, who used to say to his students, "Readers are born free and they ought to remain free." Writers, at least, are still celebrated. They are still taught, and if their rights are taken away in Iran or Cuba or even the United States, there are people who would talk and support and defend their freedom of expression.

I would like to address millions of readers, and I would like to ask what would happen if the rights of those millions are taken away from reading what they want to read and from having a public debate about those books that they read, about those issues that relate to thought and to imagination. Books and great works of imagination are like hothouse flowers. They just simply wither and die if we do not have, constantly, people from different ages, from differ-

Imaginative knowledge is a form of perceiving the world, relating and connecting to the world, and changing the world. If you take that aspect of human endeavor out of the equation, then something will be missing. Your life will be mutilated. Your life will be unfinished.

ent parts of the world, from different perspectives, reading them and reinterpreting them and, in one sense, resurrecting them. I think that at the basis what links a good reader to a good writer is this amazingly insatiable urge, curiosity, the desire to know. It is almost a sensual feeling, that desire to investigate.

If you are a good reader, like the best reader of all, a little girl named Alice, you will run after that white rabbit without asking any questions about whether the white rabbit will take you to a place that you know and that you recognize. You dare risk. You dare have the courage to go to a place that you have never been. Once you jump down that hole and take that risk, then your reward is wonderland. What a great work of art does, what a great work of imagination does, is not merely question the world, but it makes you question yourself.

If you remember Alice, once she enters the wonderland and goes beyond the looking glass, everything looks like where she used to live but in a different combination. So she constantly questions those creatures in wonderland, and they return the question to her. The caterpillar, when she asks him, "Who are you?" in return questions Alice, saying, "Who are you?" And this is what is at the center of every great work of art—curiosity about those hidden and unknown parts of yourselves and those intimate strangers in the world that through reading become your friends.

Nabakov used to tell his students, "Curiosity is insubordination in its purest form." I tell my students, "You know, don't feel too smug. You think that every four years you go to vote and you've done your duty. Or you go in front of the White House, whether you're pro or con around an issue, you shout and come home and feel OK. We're the good guys, and we demonstrated against the bad guys." You want to be insubordinate? It's an everyday business. It is something that you need to be questioning all the time. That is why we talk about the humanities. That is what we need to do in our academia: a constant questioning, a constant debate, which will create then the context for issues related to politics and to our society. It is only through this curiosity, only through this urge to know, that you will empathize with others who are not like you.

We are living in a world that is becoming increasingly politically correct. We are prepared now to kill because we are insulted. It's a very dangerous trend, this lack of tolerance for any form of criticism or for any form of opposition. Passing laws or censoring people and forcing them not to say or not to do what they want to do is not going to create empathy or make us more progressive.

No amount of political correctness is going to make us empathize with a woman who is taken to a football stadium in Kabul and executed because she did not dress properly. Or with a woman who has lost her son in Iraq, or with a woman who has lost her home and her children in New Orleans, unless, as the narrator in that great book *To Kill a Mockingbird* said, "You put on their shoes and walk around in them for a while." It is through imagination that you can place yourself and locate yourself within the experiences of others who are not like you. Placing yourself within those experiences, and understanding those that are not like you, at least within that space which is the domain of imagination, you find tolerance. The most important thing about these works is not how

Continued next page

Continued from page 5

different we are but it is the shock of recognition. It is how alike a mother in New Orleans is to a mother in Darfur, to a mother in Iraq, to a mother in Iran. The poet was right. If you prick us we do bleed, and we all bleed.

There is this third space, which I would like to call the Republic of Imagination, this third space where there is no passport based on your



Azar Nafisi

nationality, your race, your gender, your class, your religion or ethnicity, where a Persian man called Rumi or Hafez can be accepted side by side with a woman called Willa Cather, with a woman called Jane Austen, with a man called William Faulkner, with a man called Flaubert or Dante or Goethe.

This is the domain where you genuinely believe in the universality of human rights. Within that context I always tell my students, when you go to see a Shakespeare play or when you buy Zora Neale Hurston or William Faulkner, they don't ask you at the book store or at the theater are you a Republican or a Democrat? We won't sell you the ticket if you are a liberal or a conservative. This is the domain that I would like to celebrate with you tonight.

There are two other parts to my talk. I want to become more specific and talk a little bit about the culture that is now known as Islam or Islamism and talk about why we need to be reading *Lolita* in relationship to that culture. I would like to end my talk by coming back to this country and posing the same question in relationship to this country.

I remember Nabakov telling his students you need the passion of the scientist and the preci-

sion of the poet. He would say, "Am I wrong? Should I be saying it the other way around?" and he said, "No, I am right." Because great poetry as well as great works of science embody both passion and precision. They make things specific, unlike bad politics, which generalize everything out of existence. For example, the 1979 revolution in Iran reduced countries to one aspect of their culture and tradition, namely their religion, and we have now reduced that religion to one of its interpretations, namely Islamism or Islamic Fundamentalism. These countries are so amazingly various in terms of their history, in terms of their culture, in terms of their traditions. Think of Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Afghanistan. Think of the hundred million Muslims in India. These people have far less in common than, say, France, Germany, United States and Great Britain, and yet we do not call these countries Christian countries.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution one of the things that happened was that there was a reduction of different facets of Muslim majority countries into one aspect. These countries' specificity, their history, their tradition, their culture were confiscated. I cannot go into each and every one of these countries, but I can talk more specifically about where I come from, namely Iran, and partly also because it was through Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution in Iran that many of the theories regarding what we call Islamism today were formulated and put into practice.

When I was in my own country, people had taken away my identity through violence and through guns, but when I came here I heard that many people would dismiss these countries by saying, "Oh, it's their culture." Or they would look at me and say, "Oh, but you're not really Iranian, you are different, you're Western." According to this view, everything that is good becomes Western. If you are for human rights, if you think that every individual should have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, you're Western. Apparently, women in Kabul don't like to pursue happiness. Ap-

The issue is not whether the veil is good or bad, the issue is the issue of choice. If you force all women of different persuasions, different religions in a country to be dressed uniformly then the veil becomes not a symbol of religion but a symbol of the state. It becomes political.

parently women in Iran for the past 150 years really wanted to be flogged and they had to go for a revolution that would flog them and stone them to death for adultery and prostitution.

Think about this cultural determinism that reduces great cultures like my country, with its 2,500 years of history, half of which was not Islamic. When Islam came to Iran, so much of it was Persianized. The Islam that has been practiced in Iran is very different from the Islam that has been practiced, for example, in Saudi Arabia. There are so many different peoples with different dialects and different languages living in Iran, and different religions, from Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians to Bahai who, unfortunately in today's Iran, are being treated the way Jewish people were in Nazi Germany. There are also Iranians who are agnostics or atheists.

Even Iranian officials admit to Iran's secular and liberal traditions. A few days ago, at one of the Iranian universities, Mr. Ahmadeinejad complained that Iranian academia for 150 years has been under the influence of secularism and liberalism. He told the students that we have done everything that we could, and we could not root them out. He suggested that the students should root out and point out liberal and secular professors and throw them out. This is after 27 years of using all propaganda that they could and all powers and all means of violence to root out what they call liberalism and secularism from academia and culture. That do-

main has remained secular and has not been ideologized.

At the time of the 1979 revolution, Iranian women were active in all walks of life. We had two women ministers, one minister for women's affairs. We had some of the most progressive laws in the world, and this was not because of the Shah. This was because of 150 years of struggle by Iranian women and the progressive forces including the progressive clerics inside the country. When in 1979, people went into the streets, they wanted to change the system that they felt was a system of political dictatorship. They wanted more rights and, instead, the rights that they had were taken away from them.

With a country like this, the first thing that was done when the Islamists took power through violence was to change the laws in regard to women. They tried to make the veil mandatory. I want to mention that the issue of the veil is no more a religious issue because every woman and every man has a right to express themselves in relationship to their religion the way they feel they should. The issue is not whether the veil is good or bad, the issue is the issue of choice. If you force all women of different persuasions, different religions in a country to be dressed uniformly then the veil becomes not a symbol of religion but a symbol of the state. It becomes political. It is like saying America is a Christian majority country and we will all act according to one denomination, let's say Southern Baptist. From tomorrow, every American should be wearing the cross. Would the cross have any meaning?

When you reduce the age of marriage from 18 to 9, you cannot be talking about culture. Not when you make polygamy and temporary marriages law, or when you make a law that says that women are considered as half men, when you defrock women judges because you say that they are weak emotionally and in the head. Imagine someone like the Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, who was one of the first women circuit

Continued next page

Continued from page 7

judges in Tehran. Women like her, when deprived of their rights, did not remain silent. They became, for example, lawyers defending human rights of women and children.

If that is our culture and not our greatest poets and philosophers like Hafez or Rumi or Ibn Sina or Alfarabi or Razi, then burning witches in Salem is the culture of this country and not Emerson and Thoreau; then slavery is the culture of this country and not William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Zora Neale Hurston. If this is our culture, then the Inquisition is the culture of Europe and not St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine. Every nation, every country has something to be ashamed of in its culture and its history. The point is that every nation and every country has the right to change.

It was only in mid-1800s when Harriet Beecher Stowe, an international best seller, went to England and she could not speak in public. Her husband had to read her text for her because women did not speak in public. When British women went to visit Parliament, there was a gallery where the ladies had to see but not be seen. There were people who were saying that the Bible says that women's place is at home. There were people up to the 1960s who thought that the buses should be segregated. It was because people had a dream, because people could imagine things not the way they were but the potential in what those things were, that they could change. In the same manner that half a million British women signed anti-slavery petitions and donated money to the anti-slavery movement—today not the governments, but the people of this country and democracies should support those who are their brothers and sisters in terms of their aspirations for freedom.

The last thing I want to say about this issue is that culture was one of the places where they [Islamic fundamentalists] attacked most. I bring you two or three examples, which I mention in

my book. They cut Desdemona from most scenes in Othello, and they cut Othello's suicide, saying that masses will be depressed if they watch Sir Laurence Olivier commit suicide on screen.

Apparently, they would be depressed watching him commit suicide, but they wouldn't be depressed when they are stoned to death. They say, "Oh, what can we do? It's our culture." I want to remind you that this sort of ideology existed in both Fascist and in Communist times. In Stalin's time, Hemingway and Faulkner and Sartre and Camus were considered decadent. Women were not supposed to wear makeup or have expressions of love in songs and in films. They cut the death of Swan in *Swan Lake* for the same reasons—that masses might be depressed watching the swan die.

There are a lot of similarities between different totalitarian ideologies, and in a country like the Islamic Republic it is not just the rights of Christians and atheists and Buddhists and Zoroastrians and Jews that have been taken away but also the rights of those Muslims who wanted the freedom to interpret their religion and express themselves about their religion the way they wanted that was also taken away. My mother considered herself a Muslim until the day she died. She never wore the veil. My grandmother considered herself a Muslim until the day she died, and she always wore the veil. Who is to say which one of the two was more Muslim? And they both not only tolerated one another, they respected and admired one another.

Ask yourselves, "When people are living under such conditions, why would they turn to *Lolita*?" Why did my student Razieh, when she was in jail and a few days away from being executed, want to talk about Henry James and *The Great Gatsby*? Why was it that in concentration camps people like Primo Levi wanted to remember Dante? Why was it that in Soviet labor camps poets, some of the greatest poets of the 20th century, like Osip Mandelstam, would be writing poetry until the day that he

When you are faced with the worst aspects of humanity, with the most brutal, with the most cruel, with the most violent aspects of what is called human..., the only hope that you have is to return to those achievements of mankind that celebrate individuality, that celebrate the integrity of each and every one of us.

died? Because certainly poetry or Dante or Flaubert or Gatsby or James did not save these people from death.

The lesson that we take away with us from these situations is that when you are faced with the worst aspects of humanity, with the most brutal, with the most cruel, with the most violent aspects of what is called human, when you are so degraded that you lose hope in who you are because every single crime that is committed is committed in the name of all of us; when you lose that hope, the only hope that you have is to return to those achievements of mankind that celebrate individuality, that celebrate the integrity of each and every one of us. That is why you turn to Henry James or to Jane Austen or to *Gatsby* or to *Lolita*. And so this is why we read *Lolita* in Tehran, and today in Tehran my students, former revolutionaries like Akbara Ganji, talk about Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper. They quote Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth, and some of my students in Washington, D.C., don't know who these people are.

This is the gift that we bring you that we remind you of those values, which sometimes are taken so much for granted. In the domain of literature and imagination there are no boundaries between Hafez and Shakespeare, Ferdowsi and Homer. In the same manner that an Iranian girl can enjoy and reinterpret Gatsby, her American counterpart should do the same about

Persian literature. This is how we connect through imagination and thought.

I want to end this talk with *Lolita* and why it is important to read *Lolita* in Lincoln, Nebraska. *Lolita*, as I mentioned in my book, is not about a pedophile's love, a celebration of pedophile's love. In the very first page Humbert Humbert says that Lolita had a precedent in the girl he loved, Annabelle Lee, when he was 13, and that love was never consummated and he remained frozen in his dream. Tyrants are usually people who remain frozen in their dreams. He wanted to impose his image of his lost, dead love upon the living human being that is the 12-year-old girl Lolita. This was his biggest crime.

The biggest crime in fiction is to be blind to other people's reality, to other people's individuality. Always tyrannical mindsets justify themselves by saying, for example, in the case of Humbert, she was vulgar, she tried to seduce me, a 12-year-old girl trying to impress a man whom she thinks looks like a movie star. Putting the blame on her in the same way that in my country women wanting to wear lipstick become vulgar, become imperialist agents and dogs. The lesson of *Lolita* is, first of all, that the highest crime is imposing yourself and your image upon other people. The second is that Lolita is never seduced by Humbert. She always evades him, she tries to escape him, and she tries to regain a sense of integrity when she marries in such dire poverty, her invalid husband.

Those who are seduced by Humbert are we, the readers, whom he time and again calls "ladies and gentlemen of the jury." A great book always puts us in the position of the jury. We are seduced by him because he writes in flowery language. He quotes Flaubert and Dante. He's European. He's sophisticated. Lolita and her mother are full of kitsch and vulgar. This is the great lesson of *Lolita*—beware of the seducers, because monsters don't come to this world with writing on their forehead, "We are monsters, beware of us." They come in the garb

Continued next page

Continued from page 9

of charismatic leaders, even as men of God. If we do not use our powers of imagination, if we do not use our powers of thought, if we do not pause, then we can be easily seduced. That is why we need *Lolita* in this country.

I want to remind you of a great writer who died last year—we did not celebrate his life as much as we should have—Saul Bellow. He used



to worry about what will happen to this country that he loved so much. In some of his books, *More Die of Heartbreak*, *The Dean's December* and *Bellarosa Connection*, he contrasts totalitarian societies with democracies. He poses the question: some of his characters could survive

the ordeal of the Holocaust, but will they survive the ordeal of freedom? He says that in Stalin's Russia, brutality and death are naked and brutal; you can see it, you cannot not notice it. But he said what threatens us in the West is our sleeping consciousness. What threatens us in the West is atrophy of feeling. Literature and imagination, thought, awaken us. They awaken our senses. They renew our emotions and our feelings. They reconnect us to ourselves and to the world. I worry with Saul Bellow, thinking with him that a country that has lost its love for its soul and its poetry is a country that faces death.

I want to end with an image. This I keep doing nowadays because I am stuck with this image. Whenever I think of this country, where still it is so possible to imagine and to actualize what you imagine, I think of a small boy named Huckleberry Finn, who one evening was sitting alone. He was told in Sunday school that if he doesn't give up a runaway slave he'll go to

hell. He was worried about that. He believed it, so he wrote a letter giving Jim up and then in a beautiful passage, he says, "And then I imagined Jim in the morning and then I imagined him in the evening." And he goes through all the times that he spent with Jim realizing that Jim is his true kindred spirit and his true companion and he says, "And then I tore up that piece of paper, and I said 'alright then I go to hell.'"

This is the kind of America that I imagine, that will not be afraid of going to hell but will do the right thing, an America that does not think that winning is all, an America that with Henry James remembers to celebrate and honor its perfectly equipped failures. Senator George McGovern would be a good example of a perfectly equipped failure who we today celebrate and honor once more.

I know that there are book groups in the audience. It's impossible for them not to be here! I think that we need to use our subversive and creative powers to empower ourselves not just politically but by being concerned about being guardians of memory, guardians of our literature and of imagination. Create your subversive book groups in every university and every school. Be more active. Do not let humanities be taken away from you. One morning we wake up and there will be a big gap. I want to end with a slogan, because I hate slogans. Readers of the world unite!



Azar Nafisi is the author of Reading Lolita in Tehran, a compassionate and often harrowing portrait of the Islamic revolution in Iran and how it affected one university professor and her students. She is director of the Dialogue Project at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Sower Award winner grateful for people and places in life

Ted Kooser made the following remarks on receiving the 2006 Sower Award in the Humanities September 20 at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln.

Hans Christian Andersen's autobiography, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, begins with this sentence: "My life is a lovely story, happy and full of incident." I've carried those words with me for many years because I admire them so much. We know that much of Andersen's life was, in fact, miserable. Yet, in old age, he could look back over his years and say that he had had a lucky life and was grateful for it.

Mark Twain once said, "Fortune knocks at every man's door once in a life, but in a good many cases the man is in a neighboring saloon and does not hear her." I haven't had a drink in 20 years and my temperance paid off big time when at six o'clock on August 8, 2004, I happened to be heating up a can of store brand soup at home and the Library of Congress phoned to ask if I'd like to be the next Poet Laureate of the United States. It seems that the rest of the poets in America were in the saloon. And it was a Friday, after all.

I was lucky to be at home that evening and have been extremely lucky to have served the Library of Congress for the past two terms as Poet Laureate. There are hundreds of poets in this country whose poems are just as worthy as any of mine, who work just as hard as I do, but I was the poet fortunate enough to be selected as Poet Laureate, and since to have received a great deal of recognition, and this evening to follow Don Welch and others who have received this fine award.

I have many people to thank and the ones who deserve the most gratitude for my success stepped out upon the Milky Way many

years ago—my father and mother, my grade school, and junior high and high school teachers. Two of my college teachers, Will Jumper at Iowa State and Karl Shapiro of our university here, both of them poets, both also gone now, were of tremendous help to me.

In recent years I've been blessed with kindness and support from many people, including my colleagues in the life insurance business and within the University of Nebraska English Department.

My wife, Kathleen Rutledge, has helped me immeasurably. She is my first and best editor, my counselor and my best friend. In four days we celebrate our 29th anniversary. She has spent more than half of her life with me and I am blessed by that.

Thanks, too, to my friends at the University of Nebraska Press for their faith in my writing. And, of course, I want to thank Jane Hood and the Nebraska Humanities Council for giving me this high honor.

We live in a wonderful place, among wonderful people. Thank you all.



Ted Kooser and Don Pederson, chairman of the Nebraska Humanities Council



Governor's lecture contributors gather at pre-lecture benefit

Supporters of the 11th Governor's Lecture in the Humanities attended a benefit, co-chaired by Lana Flagtwet, Meg Lauerman, Trixie Schmidt and Nana Smith, in honor of lecturer Azar Nafisi. Gathering September 20 at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln, they shared an appreciation for the humanities. *Photos by Tom Slocum.*



*Kathy and Marc LeBaron, J.B. Milliken, Nana Smith,
Gail and Irv Veitzer*



Mike Seacrest, Tom Davies, Rhonda and Jim Seacrest, Linda Hillegass



Diane and Peter Longo



*Sharon Marvin Griffin, Norma Deeb,
Gail Yanney, Tish Druliner*



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Judy and Ross Wilcox



Azar Nafisi, Meg Lauerman, Phyllis Acklie

O n censorship, here and in Iran

By Keith Blackledge

Keith Blackledge was the editor of The North Platte Telegraph for 25 years. He is now a Telegraph contributing editor and freelance writer and helped to coordinate the simulcast and discussion of Azar Nafisi's lecture in North Platte.

How different are we from the repressive society of Iran, where a professor can lose her job for teaching banned western literature and a woman might be punished for allowing a few strands of hair to show from under the veil she is required to wear in public?

Very different, we would assume. Ours is the land of free speech, guaranteed in the Bill of Rights to our Constitution. It is also a country where every woman expects to wear anything or almost nothing if she chooses.

Still, there are underlying similarities. A question from the audience to discussion leader Linda Deeds after the talk by Azar Nafisi Wednesday night at North Platte Community College got me to thinking about this.

Here is the question, paraphrased as best I remember it: "We don't have the official censorship or the severe and direct punishment for dissenting opinion that the author describes in Iran. But I've had people tell me right here they would like to speak out on certain issues but cannot do so because what they had to say would be too controversial. It might cost them their job or their friends or their social position. That sort of repression is more subtle but still real. How should we deal with it?"

The reader will not find an answer here. Only some observations.

I was reminded of a quote from Mark Twain: "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have these three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech; freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them."

Prudence is generally considered a virtue. We have the freedom to say something that would hurt a friend, but usually the prudence and generosity not to do so. It is prudent not to yell "fire" in a crowded theater, and prudent not to say or write things in public or private that would cause people to question your sanity. Still, prudence can be overdone.

Newspaper editors and columnists wrestle with this issue all their working lives. Even the toughest, though they may deny it, tune their opinions to stay within bounds that a fair number of readers can accept. The writer who exercises too much caution is an embarrassment to himself and his newspaper. But the writer who uses no caution soon loses his audience.

Those who choose a career that involves putting their observations and opinions in print deserve their fate. It is a different thing for those who make an honest living in some other occupation. Those people sometimes find themselves with something important to say to the rest of the world, but are uneasy about the consequences if the world objects.

I submit that some degree of self-censorship, through either fear or prudence, is inevitable even in a free society. That is different than censorship by government, which is a sure sign of government gone wrong.

Blackledge continued on page 16

Partnerships: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts

By Jane Renner Hood, Executive Director, Nebraska Humanities Council

The National Endowment for the Humanities has commended the Nebraska Humanities Council as “imaginative, resourceful, and well-managed,” citing our “partnerships with institutions of higher education and other cultural organizations” as critical to our successful statewide presence.

For example, in collaboration with Secretary of State John Gale and with funding from the Cooper Foundation, 25 teachers from 22 high schools across the state participated in *Capitol Forum*. Using a curriculum developed by Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies, more than 1,000 high school students explored America’s role in the world and sent their recommendations for U.S. foreign policy to our elected officials in Congress and the Nebraska Legislature.

With funding from the legislature and many foundations and businesses, the council worked with the Nebraska Library Commission and local public libraries and elementary schools to offer a bilingual *Prime Time Family Reading Time* for low-literacy, low-income families in Columbus, Crete, Gering, Grand Island, Hastings, Lexington, Lincoln, Norfolk, Omaha, and South Sioux City. Museums in Broken Bow, Kimball, Chadron, Atkinson, Madison, and South Omaha brought the Smithsonian’s *Key Ingredients: America by Food* exhibit to audiences totaling more than 10,800.

The *From Sea to Shining Sea* Chautauqua came to Alliance and Albion, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as local foundations. The Alliance Chamber of Commerce and the Albion Area Arts Council with many local organizations and businesses in each commu-



Leta Powell Drake's session at the 2006 Nebraska Book Festival offered children and their families a chance to become the characters in John Steptoe's award-winning children's book, "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters." Photo by Leta Powell Drake.

nity brought William Clark, York, and Sacagawea from the Lewis and Clark Expedition, as well as Dolley Madison, Tecumseh, and John Jacob Astor to audiences totaling more than 4,000 in the Chautauqua tent from June 30 to July 11.

Readers of all ages participated in the Nebraska Book Festival on October 6-7, a partnership of the council, the Nebraska Center for the Book, the Nebraska Library Commission, and Nebraska Wesleyan University. On September 20, an audience of 2,500 heard Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, give an impassioned defense of literature as a bulwark against tyranny at the 11th Annual Governor's Lecture in the Humanities, co-sponsored with the University of Nebraska and the E.N. Thompson Forum on World Issues at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln. More than 250 Nebras-

Hood continued on next page

Hood continued from page 15

kans also participated in video-simulcasts of Nafisi's lecture at Western Community College, Mid-Plains Community College, the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and Wayne State College.

Other staples of Nebraska Humanities Council programming included the Humanities Resource Center with 353 speakers bureau programs in 130 Nebraska communities and new cultural encounter trunks for children pairing old and new immigrant groups in Nebraska done in partnership with the Nebraska Folklife Network and funded by the Peter Kiewit Foundation. The first cultural encounter trunks pairing German and Mexican immigrant cultures has gone to 19 schools and the second pair with Swedish and Vietnamese cultures was announced at the end of the year.

In addition to the cultural encounter trunks and the *Prime Time Family Reading Time* initiatives, the Nebraska Humanities Council funded nine grants in FY2006 in response to its new program emphasis on *Immigrants and Refugees: The New Nebraskans*. Altogether, the council funded 63 mini and major grants in 2006 totaling \$275,686. Illustrative of the diverse topics and geographic spread of those grants are the following: community out-reach

programs for Opera Omaha's *Wakonda's Dream*, McCook Community College's *Wind on the Buffalo Grass Young Writer's Camp*, teacher workshops on the Holocaust for ESU's in Scottsbluff, Neligh, and Kearney; *Your Water: A By-The-People Special* produced by Nebraska Educational Television; a documentary film on Lincoln's *Stories of Home* public art project; and Creighton University's *Literature and Medicine*, designed to put the humanities at the heart of health care.

Critical to the continued funding of these educational programs is the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, a public-private partnership of the Nebraska Humanities Council and the Nebraska Arts Council that is committed to raising a \$5 million endowment for the arts and the humanities to match its state cultural trust. During the past three years, the council's average earnings from the endowment have been \$163,172, all of which have gone to our state-wide programming. Thanks to all of you who have contributed to the endowment, and thanks to all of you who made a gift to the Nebraska Humanities Council. Your continued financial partnership will make our future bright in 2007! To our many partners, we say thank you!



Blackledge continued from page 14

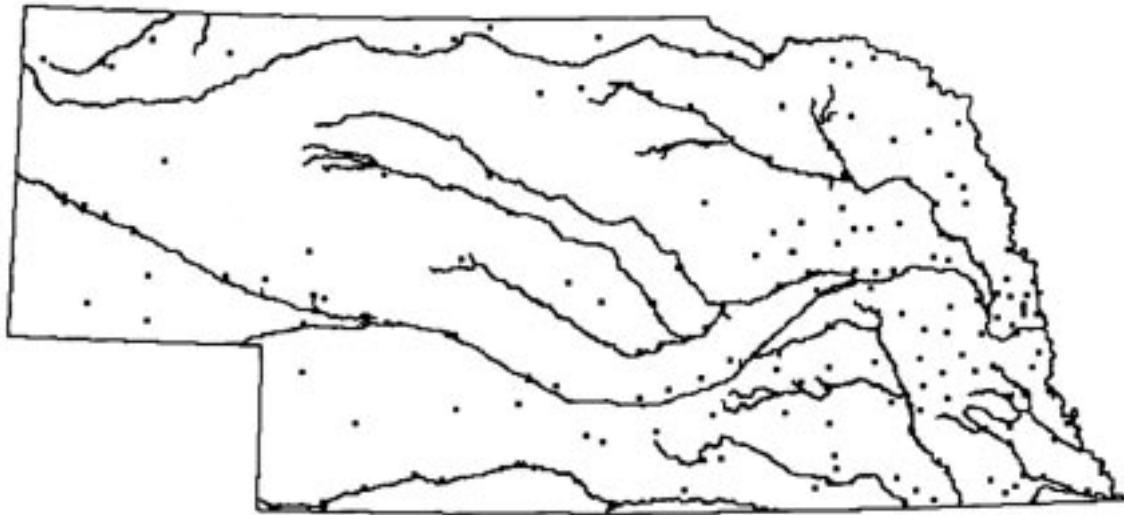
At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that every free citizen ought to be ready to take some risks in speaking out on what is right or wrong about our current condition. If that means loss of the means of making a livelihood, or loss of support for an organization the citizen represents, those factors need to be weighed in the balance against the value of the opinion in changing the world for the better.

Of course the citizen (or columnist) who voices an unpopular opinion will hear about it from those who disagree. It is good to remember that if there were no dangers, there could be no he-

roes; no dragons, no knights. When there are social pressures forcing someone to silence, perhaps all that is needed is an injection of courage.

It does not have to be all or nothing. Azar Nafisi, living in a most repressive and dangerous society, kept her head (literally) not by suicidal acts of rebellion but by modest acts of what she called insubordination. That is not marching in one protest parade and going home, she said. "It is an everyday business."





In 2006, the Nebraska Humanities Council funded programs in the following 130 communities:

Ainsworth, Albion, Alliance, Arlington, Arnold, Ashland, Atkinson, Auburn, Aurora, Axtell, Bancroft, Barneston, Beatrice, Bellevue, Blair, Boys Town, Bridgeport, Broken Bow, Brownville, Burwell, Cambridge, Central City, Chadron, Champion, Chappell, Clay Center, Clearwater, Columbus, Cordova, Cozad, Crawford, Creighton, Crete, Crofton, David City, Denton, Dix, Dorchester, Eagle, Elgin, Elmwood, Elsie, Elsmere, Fairbury, Fremont, Fullerton, Genoa, Gering, Gothenburg, Grand Island, Grant, Gretna, Halsey, Harrisburg, Hartington, Hastings, Hay Springs, Hebron, Hickman, Holbrook, Holdrege, Howells, Humboldt, Kearney, Kimball, Lewellen, Lewiston, Lexington, Lincoln, Louisville, Lynch, Lyons, Macy, Madison, Maxwell, McCook, Minden, Mitchell, Morrill, Murdock, Nebraska City, Neligh, Niobrara, Norfolk, North Bend, North Platte, Ogallala, Omaha, O'Neill, Ord, Oshkosh, Oxford, Paxton, Pender, Peru, Pierce, Plainview, Ponca, Potter, Red Cloud, Schuyler, Scottsbluff, Seward, Sidney, South Sioux City, Spalding, Springfield, St. Paul, Stanton, Sterling, Stromsburg, Stuart, Sumner, Superior, Sutherland, Table Rock, Tekamah, Tilden, Union, Valentine, Wahoo, Wausa, Waverly, Wayne, West Point, Wilber, Wilcox, Wood River, Wynot, Yutan

2006 Financial Overview

Our Dollars Working in Communities Across Nebraska

Support

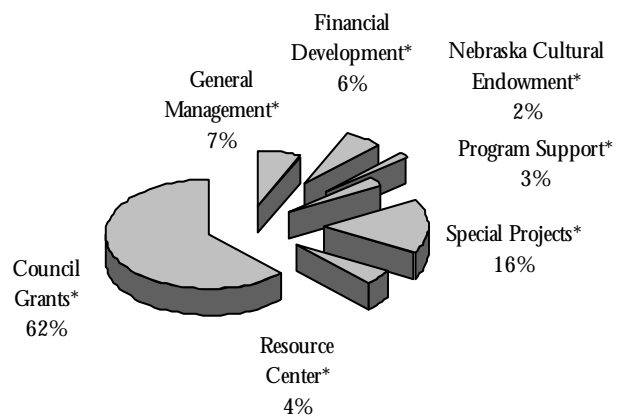
National Endowment for the Humanities Grant.....	\$541,450
Other Federal Grants.....	\$4,945
State Appropriations.....	\$144,842
Nebraska Cultural Endowment.....	\$163,172
Private Cash Contributions.....	\$419,927
Earned Income.....	\$22,635
Miscellaneous Income.....	\$1,653
Interest Income.....	\$25,606
Cost Share, Cash and In-kind.....	\$1,305,600
Total revenue.....	\$2,629,830

Expenses

General Management.....	\$171,814
Financial Development.....	\$149,678
Nebraska Cultural Endowment.....	\$40,916
Program Support.....	\$71,611
Special Projects.....	\$416,989
Resource Center/Speaker Bureau Programs.....	\$111,953
Council Regrants.....	\$275,686
Cost Share by Grantees and Volunteers.....	\$1,305,600
Total expenses.....	\$2,544,247

Excess (deficit) of support and revenue over expenses....\$85,583

Summary of Expenses - 2006



**Includes cost share*

Audited financial statements from Dana F. Cole and Co. are available for inspection at the NHC office.

Contributors January through December 2006

The Nebraska Humanities Council and the Nebraska Foundation for the Humanities thank the following donors for their contributions during the 2006 calendar year. We extend special thanks to those individuals who are members of the Vision Circle (\$1,000 a year), the Gold Sower Club (\$500 a year), the Silver Sower Club (\$250 a year), and the Sower Club (\$100 a year). We also appreciate those who donated \$44 or less to support the NHC in 2006. If we have not reported your gift correctly, please let us know so that we can correct our mistake.

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We invite you to join the Vision Circle of donors to the Nebraska Humanities Council. Your contribution of \$1,000 or more will help nurture a vibrant civic and cultural life in Nebraska and ensure continued statewide access to the humanities now and for future generations.

We are grateful to the following individuals for generously supporting current humanities programs by joining the Vision Circle in 2006:

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