

**BYRON D. CONEY**

*LAWYER*

1047 BELMONT PLACE EAST  
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98102

TEL. 206-324-6133

FAX 206-329-3401

EMAIL: [bdconey@comcast.net](mailto:bdconey@comcast.net)

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Mr. James J. Kilpatrick  
Writer's Art  
c/o Newsroom  
The Seattle Times  
P.O. Box 70  
Seattle, WA 98111

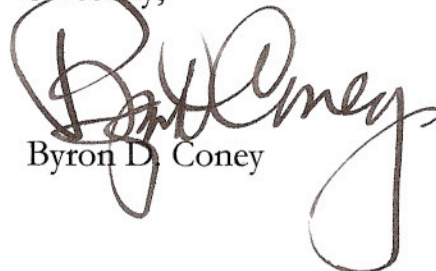
Dear Mr. Kilpatrick:

A few months ago I wrote to you about the mistake you made in your May 14 column in the Seattle Times when you ascribed to Antony the admonition of Cassius to Brutus about the fault lying not in the stars that they were underlings. I may have been overly flippant in pointing this out, but I think you must agree that was pretty sloppy writing.

Now in today's column you have Robert Service cremating Dan McGrew! As every schoolboy knows Dan McGrew was shot and killed by the miner fresh from the creeks, over the lost love of the lady that's known as Lou. It was Sam McGee who was cremated

I'm not so wise as you language guys, but strictly between us two, your failure to check to make sure you're correct will always come back to haunt you.

Sincerely,



Byron D. Coney

There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who toil for gold;  
The Arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold;

The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,  
But the queerest they ever did see  
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge  
I cremated Sam McGee.

ROBERT W. SERVICE

And a woman screamed, and the  
lights went up, and two men lay  
stiff and stark.

Pitched on his head, and pumped  
full of lead, was Dangerous Dan  
McGrew,

While the man from the creeks lay  
clutched to the breast of the lady  
that's known as Lou.

These are the simple facts of the  
case, and I guess you ought to  
know.

They say that the stranger was  
crazed with "hooch," and I'm not  
denying it's so.

I'm not so wise as the lawyer guys,  
but strictly between us two—

The woman that kissed him and—  
pinched his poke—was the lady  
that's known as Lou.

ROBERT W. SERVICE

# HE'S A POET AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IT



## The Writer's Art

James J. Kilpatrick, *Syndicated columnist*

Let me run a few names past you:  
Mona Van Duyn, Mark Strand, Billy Collins, Rita Dove.

Ring any bells? Ever heard of them? No? I will not hold you longer in suspense.

Within the past two decades every one of them has served a two-year term as our country's poet laureate. If you could quote a sonnet, a quatrain, a couplet or a single line from their work, you'd win a cut-glass feather duster. Poets and poetry have fallen on parlous times. I wish it were not so.

These reflections are prompted by an announcement earlier this month. The United States has a new poet laureate. He is Charles Simic of New Hampshire. In the small world of poetry, his name is known quite well. Born in Yugoslavia in 1938, he immigrated to the United States in the 1950s. After a brief period in Chicago, he settled in New England. He has

written 18 books of poetry and half a shelf of other works. He won the Pulitzer for poetry in 1990. This year he won the \$100,000 Wallace Stevens award for poetry.

Until he became our poet laureate earlier this month, I had never heard of the gentleman. And I have loved poetry, and written bad verse, since I first met Mary and her little lamb 80-odd years ago. My own first epic lines dealt with a fourth-grade champion who swept all the marbles: "Lefty took out a steely/All hard and round and bright/And popped it square into the ring/And knocked them left and right."

Yes! In our household we thrived on poetry. My brother and I rode with the light brigade. We stood upon the burning deck. Stevenson! We slept beneath his starry sky. Long-fellow! With honest sweat our

brows were wet. Kipling! With Files-on-Parade we heard the bugles blowin'. With Paul Revere we saddled up. We quoted that stupid raven until our mother drove us from the house.

My older sister leaned toward Dorothy Parker and Don Marquis, but she was game for heavier fare. These were Depression years, but not in our private world. There, Browning's hillside was dew-pearled; his lark was on the wing. For us there was no frigate like a book, just as Miss Dickinson said, to take us lands away.

In our house we quoted two poets incessantly: A.E. Housman and T.S. Eliot. You will understand why, at 17, the Shropshire lad held such appeal:

*Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink*

*For fellows whom it hurts to think.*

*And malt does more than Milton can*

*To justify God's ways to man.*

We grew old with Eliot:

*Shall I part my hair behind?  
Do I dare to eat a peach?*

*I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.*

In those days the major poets were household words.

Many of them perhaps still are. And there were lesser versifiers whom once we quoted constantly: Robert W. Service! He cremated Dan McGrew! Poets wrote lovely light stuff. "Men seldom make passes," regretted Dorothy Parker, "at girls who wear glasses." Philip Larkin recalled that "Sexual intercourse began/In nineteen sixty-three/(Which was rather late for me)/Between the end of the Chatterley ban/And the Beatles' first LP."

What has become of verses that rhyme? Of poems that have a palpable cadence? They've almost vanished — except in the valiant pages of *The Lyric*, that wonderful little treasure of poetry still published quarterly in Jericho Corners, Vt. Founded in 1921, somehow it carries on. In the current issue, 40 unheralded poets have literally contributed 48 poems, all but 10 of them rhymed. The new poet laureate also writes free verse, but these folks are writing my kind of stuff.

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The *Writer's Art* by James J. Kilpatrick appears Monday in *Northwest Life*. Address comments or questions to: *Writer's Art*, c/o Newsroom, The Seattle Times, P.O. Box 70, Seattle, WA 98111.