

Minnesota Now (MPR) | St. Paul poet wins 2022 International Griffin Poetry Prize
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INTERPRETER: This has been a very good month for St. Paul-based poet Douglas Kearney. Kearney, who is also a professor at the University of Minnesota and a McKnight Presidential Fellow, won this year's International Griffin Poetry Prize and \$65,000 for his most recent poetry collection, *Show*. He's on the line with me right now. Welcome, Douglas.

DOUGLAS Hey. How are you?

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: I am great. Thank you. Congratulations on the award. That's amazing.

DOUGLAS Yeah, I know, right? This is wild times.

KEARNEY:

[LAUGHTER]

INTERPRETER: So where were you when you heard?

DOUGLAS Well, I was actually in my office at the U when they made the announcement over social media. They played the

KEARNEY: video. And I just kind of clapped my hands over my mouth. And I might have fallen down. But who knows? That could just be a trick of the imagination.

INTERPRETER: It might be. But I would, if I were you, probably have fallen right off my chair. Say, I have to tell you that your work is beautiful, beautiful.

DOUGLAS Gosh, thank you.

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: Talk about some of your influences. Who or what inspires your work?

DOUGLAS Oh, wow. Well, I would say that the work of Harryette Mullen, who is a poet from Texas but is living in Los

KEARNEY: Angeles now, her work was really foundational for me when I started really seriously writing poetry. And then there's the different music groups that I've grown up listening to, everybody from Public Enemy and De La Soul to Pharcyde and producers like Madlib and J Dilla. Their work oftentimes is less about informing the content of the work and more about informing my approaches to syntax, my approaches to composition, the kinds of things that I will juxtapose.

INTERPRETER: Hmm, mm-hmm. I'm wondering, could you read something from the most recent book, the most recent collection that kind of underscores what you've just mentioned?

DOUGLAS Absolutely. This is a poem called "Every Day I Gets."

KEARNEY:

I play the stone while old river, tugging me, could fret me to grit. No, not fret, but loves me up what they do, what they do on the regular. I'm a lover when I'm fighting, peaceful. Here lately, when I cry, say, he's having river's babies.

And so on the regular, I tend them. I tend to look mad as I find me, more sand now. But no, I'm fitful when I'm sleeping. Wakeful a minute. My ears wet when I get up, like drowning, though I've never.

All my dreams, Chevrolet heavy. This land would swallow me for one damn pearl.

INTERPRETER: For one damn pearl. Where's that pearl coming from?

DOUGLAS Hmm. The idea of being a piece of grit, something that kind of gets in the way of a perception of smoothness or,
KEARNEY: in some eyes, might mar a surface, to be swallowed up by something like that only to be transformed into a
commodity, only to be exchanged for that commodity as an oyster builds nacre around a grain of sand. That act
of being swallowed to be transformed into something that is a value for somebody else but not for yourself is
where that kind of comes from.

INTERPRETER: I understand. In interviews, you've said you want to explore what it means to reckon with instability and
discomfort.

DOUGLAS Absolutely.

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: Many people don't want to do that.

DOUGLAS No, no, no.

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: No. What does that mean to you?

DOUGLAS Well, I think that the project of being in what we'll put in quotations not a snidenss but just to make sure that
KEARNEY: we're kind of recognize this, "modern civilization" is, actually, I think, a project of rolling within living in
discomfort. As think that so many of our problems come because we insist on our own personal comfort as being
paramount.

And there's just things about US American culture that a thing isn't as valuable if everybody else has it. So we
want to be comfortable. We don't want other people to be comfortable. And I don't think that the endpoint of
living in a dynamic society, even living in a dynamic household, is going to be one of constantly being in comfort.

So I want to do something like the Parliament song says. Dance underwater and not get wet. How do we manage
to live in discomfort in such a way that we recognize it as one of the frictions that makes the possible heat which
could make the possible light of being together?

INTERPRETER: I find the greatest growth comes from discomfort, don't you?

DOUGLAS Mm-hmm, absolutely, because, I mean, comfort tells you, chill, stop, you're fine, right? Right?

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: Right. Say, how did you get into this work?

DOUGLAS Wow. Well, I grew up in a household that really loved language, whether it was the books that my mother would
KEARNEY: read with my aunts in various book clubs she had joined or the kind of signifying and trash talk that my father
would do or all the hip-hop that my brother brought into the house. We all were deeply invested in language.

And then you could see that kind of echoing out in other parts of the community, every place from the barbershop to the bus stop on my way to school, whatever. So being very intentionally engaged with language as not just a means to communicate but a source of pleasure in and of itself, it's just such a huge part of the cultural traditions that I've identified with.

And so when I learned that some poems are simply-- and "simply," that's something to put in quotes, simply play with language. But then you come across somebody like Harryette Mullen, who is doing all of this work with double, triple meanings, English that is more double-jointed than broken. And she's playing all these kinds of games. And yet, they're so serious. I call them serious play.

The stakes are so high in that work. And she's also written poems that tell stories. But some of the poems that I've been most interested in with her and what told me, OK, you could do this is the work that feels like it is engaging a question of how we are with each other through this kind of serious play with language. And that's when I knew. I was like, OK, I can do this. I can do this. People might be interested.

INTERPRETER: And yes, they are interested. And you have done it very, very well, my friend. I wish I had more time. And I think I want to have you back on the program. Is that OK?

DOUGLAS I would love that. It would be an honor.

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: I would love that too. Douglas Kearney, thank you. And congratulations again.

DOUGLAS Thank you so much. Have a great day.

KEARNEY:

INTERPRETER: You too. We have been talking to Douglas Kearney. He is a professor at the University of Minnesota, McKnight Presidential Fellow. And he won this year's International Griffin Poetry Prize.