

New York State
Author & Poet Awards

2008-2010



The New York State
Edith Wharton Citation of Merit
for State Author

Mary Gordon



The New York State
Walt Whitman Citation of Merit
for State Poet

Jean Valentine

The New York State
Edith Wharton Citation of Merit

State Author Advisory Panel

Russell Banks
Alice McDermott
Sue Miller

William Kennedy
chair, ex officio

The New York State
Walt Whitman Citation of Merit

State Poet Advisory Panel

John Ashbery
Billy Collins
Maxine Kumin
Franz Wright

Donald Faulkner
chair, ex officio

The Edith Wharton Citation of Merit for Fiction Writers & The Walt Whitman Citation of Merit for Poets

The New York State Writers Institute, the center for the literary arts in New York State, was founded in 1983 by novelist William Kennedy. The following year a legislative mandate was signed into law, fully establishing the Institute as a state-sponsored program. In 1985 the governor and state legislature empowered the Institute to award the Edith Wharton Citation of Merit for Fiction Writers (State Author) and the Walt Whitman Citation of Merit for Poets (State Poet) to authors whose career achievements make them deserving of New York State's highest literary honors. Upon the recommendation of two advisory panels of distinguished writers convened under the aegis of the Institute, the governor awards the citations every two years to one fiction writer and one poet of distinction. Each citation carries an honorarium of ten thousand dollars. Throughout their two-year terms the state laureates promote and encourage fiction writing and poetry throughout New York by giving public readings and talks within the state.

The State Author award is named for Edith Wharton (1862–1937), widely regarded as one of America's great novelists. Born in New York City into wealth and social status, she exposed in her darkly elegant fiction the hypocrisies and pressures of New York's high society, particularly through her examination of the role and conditions of women. Many of Wharton's works, like *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Age of Innocence*, continue to exert a powerful hold on the popular imagination. In a phrase she herself used to describe successful short fiction, her prose is "a shaft driven straight into the heart of experience."

The State Poet award is named for Walt Whitman (1819–1892), the renowned "poet of democracy" born in Huntington, Long Island. More than any American poet of his age, Whitman has had the greatest and most long-lasting influence on American poetry. His masterwork, *Leaves of Grass*, heralded a new age of innovation in poetry, with its absence of rhyme and standard meter and through its abundance of oratorical rhythms. A leading poet of liberal political movements in 19th century Europe, Whitman continues to influence poets around the world.

PAST RECIPIENTS:

State Author

Russell Banks

2004–2007

Kurt Vonnegut

2001–2003

James Salter

1998–2000

Peter Matthiessen

1995–1997

William Gaddis

1993–1995

Norman Mailer

1991–1993

E. L. Doctorow

1989–1991

Grace Paley

1986–1988

State Poet

Billy Collins

2004–2007

John Ashbery

2001–2003

Sharon Olds

1998–2000

Jane Cooper

1995–1997

Richard Howard

1993–1995

Audre Lorde

1991–1993

Robert Creeley

1989–1991

Stanley Kunitz

1986–1988

Mary Gordon, one of America's most admired prose writers, is the author of several bestselling novels, as well as short stories, novellas, memoirs, essays and criticism. Gordon is known for her investigations of Irish-American family life, single motherhood, Catholic spirituality, thwarted love, moral struggle, personal sacrifice, and female identity. She is often praised for her deep insights, lyrical writing, and what *Los Angeles Times* critic Ellen Akins called, "her delicate rendering of the drama of consciousness." Her fiction is strongly rooted in New York places and neighborhoods, a subject she explores more fully in a book of autobiographical essays, *Seeing Through Places: Reflections on Geography and Identity* (2000).

The only child of a passionately Catholic family, Gordon was born in 1949 in Far Rockaway, Queens, New York to David and Anna Gagliano Gordon. Her mother, though a polio victim with limited mobility, supported the family as a legal secretary. Gordon adored her father, a charming, affectionate, would-be writer who died when she was only seven years old. Gordon continues to regard his death as the central event of her childhood—one that, for a multitude of reasons, propelled her to become a writer herself.

Gordon attended Barnard College in the 1960s, working as a secretary and babysitter to support her studies. At Barnard, she also became active in the feminist movement, a cause that has continued to shape her life and work. She received her M.F.A. at Syracuse University in 1973.

Gordon's first novel, *Final Payments* (1978), appeared to widespread critical acclaim. Set in a working class Queens

neighborhood, the novel tells the story of an unmarried woman from a devoutly Catholic home who attempts to embark upon a new life after spending eleven years caring for her disabled father. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Edmund White called *Final Payments* "the most intelligent and convincing first novel I have read in years...."

Her next novel, *In the Company of Women* (1981), follows the fortunes of a rebellious young single mother and her relationship with a variety of older Catholic women—some widowed, some abandoned, and some who never mar-

"One of the reasons why New York has always been important for me is that you're always aware of the larger world. You can never live in New York and believe that you are the whole story."

— Mary Gordon, "New York State of Mind" Panel, New York State Writers Institute, November 13, 2000

ried. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Francine du Plessix Gray said, "If there was any doubt that Mary Gordon was her generation's preeminent novelist of Roman Catholic mores and manners when she published her remarkable first novel, it is dispelled by her new book."

Gordon's other novels have included *Men and Angels* (1985), *The Other Side* (1989), and *Spending: A Utopian Divertimento* (1998). Her most recent novel is *Pearl* (2005), the story of a middle-aged, single mother who sets out to prevent her only daughter, Pearl, from killing herself in a self-imposed hunger strike to protest American foreign policy. In a *New York Times* review, John Leonard said, "Endlessly inquisitive,

utterly fearless.... Gordon gives God the third degree in a demanding and rewarding brainy-brawny novel that complicates our understanding of the world instead of coarsening it...."

Gordon has also written two notable memoirs. In *The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father* (1996), Gordon attempts to piece together the details of her father's life, discovering many troubling secrets in the process. The *New Yorker* said, "This knotty, deeply personal book is irradiated by flashes of lyric brilliance." More recently, Gordon addresses her maternal inheritance in *Circling My Mother* (2007). *Booklist* said, "Gordon writes with blazing candor, pinpoint perception, and cauterizing lyricism about her mother's suffering and her lost world."

A three-time recipient of the O. Henry Award for best short story, Gordon is also a leading artist of the short story form. Her recent story "Eleanor's Music" is featured in *The Best American Short Stories 2007*. A collection, *The Stories of Mary Gordon*, appeared in 2006. Gordon is also the author of an acclaimed book of novellas, *The Rest of Life* (1993), and of an influential collection of critical essays on the depiction of gender in American literature, *Good Boys and Dead Girls* (1992).

Mary Gordon is the past recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Kafka Prize, the Literary Lion Award of the New York Public Library, and the Lila Acheson Wallace/Reader's Digest Writer's Award. Since 1988, she has taught at her alma mater, Barnard College, where she is Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English.

MARY GORDON

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Jean Valentine won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize in 1965 for her debut collection *Dream Barker*, a book that shows what selector Dudley Fitts called “a quirkily singular intelligence, a fusion of wit and tenderness.” In her subsequent ten volumes of poetry, Valentine continues to astonish her readers with her keen perception of human experience, shimmering images, and haunting fragments.

Valentine weaves together the tangible world with a sense of exquisite mystery in her poems. Her precise lyricism is delicately hinged on narrative, moving between a range of perspectives and tones, ever and always taking emotional and linguistic risks. Her fluctuations between voice and silence lend Valentine’s poetry its universalism. Of her work, she says, “I am trying to move into an other, into others; to move out of the private self into an imagination of everyone’s history, into the public world.”

Valentine’s body of work is marked by an attention to the metaphysical, and the use of dreams in her composition process. These leanings point to her concern with the capacity of language to articulate deep images rather than immediate experience. *Library Journal* book review editor Barbara Hoffert writes that Valentine’s “poems are like little drops of pure, unfiltered feeling—often sensuous.”

Valentine’s second and third books *Pilgrims* (1969) and *Ordinary Things* (1974) show her acuity with language, and growing experimentation with the lyric mode. While *The Messenger* (1979) begins with the poems that end *Ordinary Things*, Valentine transcends the ‘ordinary’ to offer meditations on faith through broad vision and muscular verse. Poet Hayden Carruth suggests these poems carry an “urgency great enough to be terror” while being “converted to love.”

Her fifth book *Home Deep Blue: New and Selected Poems* (1989) marked her return to publishing poetry after a break in the 1980s, and won the Beatrice Hawley Award from Alice James Books. Valentine’s *The River at Wolf* (1992), also published by this press, is largely autobiographical. It is based on the tension between falling in love with her future husband, and the death of her mother. Poet David Rivard’s review calls to attention that “the risks taken by the poet must provoke her reader into mak-

“What you always want is to write something your fellow creatures can understand. ... That would be my dream as a poet, to write something as plain as day, and mysterious.”

— Jean Valentine, “An Interview with Jean Valentine.”
The Marlboro Review, Summer/Fall 1998.

ing an equally risky leap of the imagination in responding. Jean Valentine is one of contemporary poetry’s preeminent ring-leaders of the numinous.” Irish poet Seamus Heaney said the poems in *The River at Wolf* are “rapturous, risky, shy of words but desperately true to them.”

In the 1990s Valentine lived part-time in Ireland, becoming involved in its poetry scene. *The Under Voice: Selected Poems* (1995) was published during this phase of her life and before her return to New York in 1996. Her following book, *Growing Darkness, Growing Light* (1997) is a metaphorical play with boundaries and transitions. Valentine was thinking at the time about what she calls the “porousness between the living and the dead.” One reviewer writes “The poems in this book are indeed dreams, but precise dreams of waking: startling junctures of the abstract and the carnal.”

Valentine’s book *The Cradle of the Real Life* (2000) is perhaps her most elegiac, grief-stricken verse. *Library Journal* reviewer Ellen Kaufman calls it a “sparse form imbued with spirituality. Her brief poems demand much yet bless the careful reader.” Valentine followed this work in 2001 as the editor of a volume of essays on the poet Eleanor Ross, *The Lighthouse Keeper*.

Door in the Mountain (2004), Valentine’s collected and new works, begins with new lyric poems brimming with concrete images that also manage to seem ephemeral. Her latest work *Little Boat* (2007) moves between examining memory and questioning the nature of death. Poet Lynn Emanuel calls it “One of Jean Valentine’s most beautiful and moving books in a lifetime of such books.”

Valentine was born in Chicago, and has been a long-time resident of New York City. As she has said, “I had the good sense to move to New York at the age of three.” She graduated from Radcliffe College with a B.A. in 1956, and taught at several institutions including Swarthmore College, Barnard College, Yale University, Bucknell University, the 92nd Street Y, and most importantly Sarah Lawrence College. She has also taught in the graduate writing programs at New York University and Columbia University.

Valentine won the National Book Award in 2004 for *Door in the Mountain*. Previous recognitions include the Shelley Memorial Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Maurice English Prize, and the Sara Teasdale Award. Most recently, in 2006 she received the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Of Jean Valentine’s work poet Franz Wright wrote “A poem by Jean Valentine is not a literary artifact to me but sustenance, warmth, and light.”

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Offering a broad range of literary and cultural programs, **The New York State Writers Institute** is one of America's premier sites for celebrating the art of the written word. Associated with the State University of New York system, and located at the University at Albany, the Institute provides unique opportunities for students and members of the community to engage in a fruitful dialogue with noteworthy writers in a variety of public settings. Designed to encourage the freedom and integrity of the artistic imagination, the Institute's largely free programs include a Classic Film Series, regular community writing workshops taught by distinguished writers-in-residence, and one of the most comprehensive Visiting Writers Series in the United States. More than eight hundred artists and writers of international acclaim have visited the Institute since Saul Bellow's inaugural reading in 1984. Among them they hold eight Nobel Prizes in Literature, 75 Pulitzer Prizes, 87 National Book Awards and numerous Motion Picture Academy Awards in a range of filmmaking categories. The Writers Institute's resources include an extensive audio/video archive of author readings and interviews, its Writing Fellows Program, as well as FENCE Magazine and Fence Books. The Institute's continually growing number of programs has established Albany as an important center for cultural and literary discourse, drawing audiences from New York City, the Northeast, and via the Internet, an international community.

The Writers Institute frequently collaborates with other colleges, universities, and cultural institutions statewide, as well as with community and arts organizations in the greater Albany area, to offer the broadest possible range of outreach initiatives. Such ventures have resulted in unique collaborations between the Institute and the New York State Museum, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the New York Council for the Humanities, the New York State Council on the Arts, Capital Repertory Company, the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the New York State Library, New York University, The New School University, and PEN American Center. As part of its mission to promote the art of literary expression throughout New York State, the Institute regularly organizes regional conferences and symposia on writing. The Institute sponsors a one-month Summer Writers Institute at Skidmore College involving daily writing workshops with more than a dozen writers-in-residence and nightly readings by some of America's most distinguished poets, novelists, dramatists, and nonfiction writers. Every summer it also holds a Young Writers Institute for high school students in collaboration with Skidmore College.

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For a schedule of current and upcoming Institute events, please visit the Institute's Web site
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