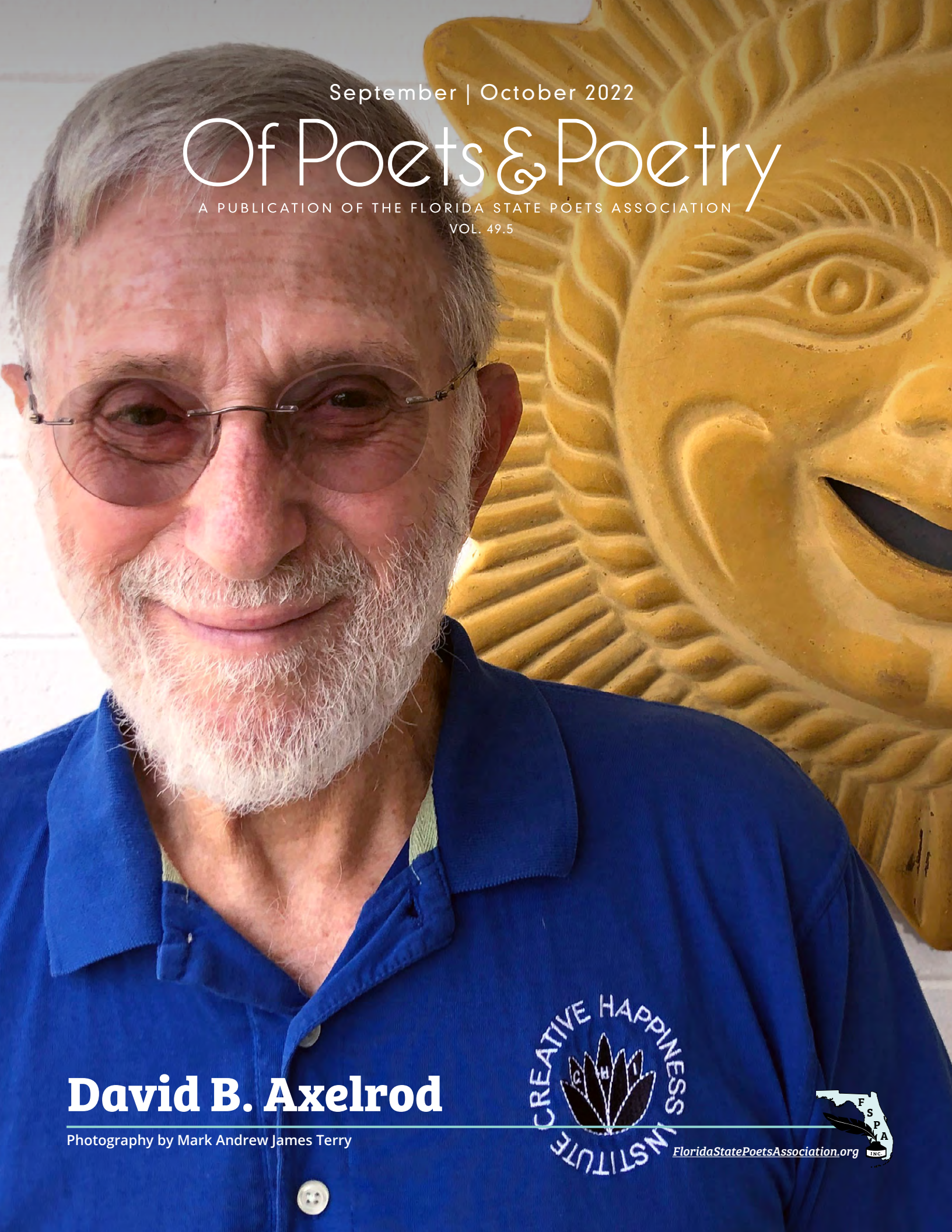


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David B. Axelrod

Photography by Mark Andrew James Terry



FloridaStatePoetsAssociation.org



Dr. David B. Axelrod

Photography by Mark Andrew James Terry

A candid convo with Al Rocheleau and Dr. David B. Axelrod

Al: While such questions are a well-traveled path for interviews, in your case you hinted that asking you about where you grew up and how you became a writer, a poet and a teacher would also explain about your poetics. Tell me about the regional importance of your hometown, and your childhood poetry models and teachers.

David: Growing up in Beverly, Massachusetts, though we lived not even twenty miles north of Boston, I was a world away from the big city. Mine was a very conservative and formal small town and school system. But going to public school was increasingly like going to a fine private school.

I can tell you that my third grade teacher kept three books on a little shelf over her chair behind her desk: Louis Untermeyer's *Golden Treasury of Verse*; *The King James Bible*; and a book of poems by Robert Frost. Except for Frost, it seemed as if, to be adjudged worthy of study, the only good poet was a dead poet.

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Axelrod holding a photographic printing plate with an image of him as a young man, printed in a daily newspaper in Sciliy in 1979 where he was on a grant to perform poetry.

Of course, we read Tennyson, Longfellow, and even as a little kid, I found and enjoyed Poe, whose was the first book of poetry I bought myself. By the time I was in high school, my English teacher turned me onto *The Iliad*, *and Odyssey*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Inferno*, and expanded my horizons to convince me that poets could excel “playing tennis without a net.” I became a great lover of T.S. Eliot, and I could recite “Prufrock” by heart. As I matured toward college, I was a Beatnik and loved Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, that gang, and of course, they also fostered an element of rebellion in content not just style (great point of pride, if I can brag, I actually published a book of his, an arts edition of his poem, “The Director of Alienation.”) Growing up where I did made a poet of me.

Al: You’ve called yourself a “populist poet.” You write clearly, employ figurative aspects subtly. Your subject matter is universal. I think this comes from believing readership should be universal, and I agree.

David: I wanted to be an engineer, having gone through my early education with the great rush to catch up to Russia and their Sputnik. But I was already writing poetry and getting it published in the local paper. This is the first poem I had published—in the *Beverly Times*.

Things up here in Heaven
aren’t so good right now
because those nasty, noisy
Sputniks are causing quite a row.
They break up chorus practice.
The wake us from our sleep.
If we could only find a way
to stop their beep beep beep.



Archive photo: Russian Sputnik launch, 4 October 1957



Construct sculpture in Axelrod's meditation garden
he created of Shiva with a Bhudaha head

I'd say having a poem in your local newspaper is pretty "populist," but the word has more recently fallen into political disrepute. And poets as often think serious poetry must be academic or at least difficult to understand—with some deep, hidden meaning that only a professor could understand. As if there has to be one correct meaning for a poem, and only a professor knows it, and to pass a test, you have to regurgitate what you have been told.

When I was completing my M.F.A, at the University of Iowa, a dean told me I had scored the highest math aptitude score the Writing Workshops had ever recorded among their poetry graduates. I think I would like to be known as much as a "Renaissance" poet to the extent that I can do math, understand the workings of automobiles (and wrote the only book certified by NASCAR as exclusively about growing up with cars and auto racing). I also take pride in doing carpentry, wiring and plumbing—a jack of all trades.

I actually have had problems with snobby, academic, obscure poets. Actually, they have a problem with me because they think anyone who doesn't write the way they do isn't a good poet.

Al: Since I've often taken pains to express, as you also do, the importance of all the arts in fulfilling our lives and inspiring our work, can you name some particular visual artists and music composers who have influenced you?

David: My mother was a gifted artist who favored portraits but also trained with the Rockport school of seaside and landscape painters. She also enrolled me in piano lessons from the age of five and I was classically trained. I grew up appreciative of classical painting and music. I'm more moved by Rembrandt and Renoir than de Kooning and Warhol. I am more inclined to love Bach and Beethoven than heavy metal or progressive jazz. But as a populist, I appreciate folk culture, crafts, even "primitive" artists, and I love all kinds of music, particularly each country's or culture's native/ethnic music.

Al: How has teaching changed over the decades? If not in subject matter (but that *too*), then the process of connecting with students, of engaging and making writers? Do you find, like me, that many students of poetry do not wish to work hard enough at their craft to ever get to the point of transcending the rote, the clichéd ordinary in their work, that their quest for a nifty rhyme or a "great line" sinks a poem that is otherwise not worked (or edited) to its possible *completion*?

In other words, "being a poet" to them does not necessarily imply doing the work of one?

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Axelrod in his home-office in Daytona Beach

“Nothing by accident.
Everything tested
and considered.”

David: I like to think I retired from teaching just in time—while I still liked my students. I don’t ascribe to the notion that “Our students are ‘All Stars.’” That was what the mural said when I entered a public school to teach poetry to little kids. No they aren’t all stars. Some of them are nasty little trouble makers. Some just aren’t that “starful.” Worse, by the time I was getting them in college, they knew they weren’t so smart but also knew they had been lied to for years about such things and they expected to be coddled. They often thought whatever they wrote was just wonderful. “I like the way I write. That’s how it came out. Why should I change it?” And they expected a grade of “A.” Not even a “B.” Doing a good job requires work. Excellence is rare.

I have many poets who pay to take workshops with me and then tell me they won’t change a word because they like how it is first draft. Hello? Why take a workshop? I don’t want students to write the way I do, or even as I tell them. I want them to write the best poetry they can. Often that requires revising. And lazy? Maybe it will take several tries, and a long(er) time. Why settle for easy rhymes or even one wrong word? A good poem is a poem that gets the effect the poet desires—but have they tested whether they used just the right words to get the exact effect? Want some watchwords? “Nothing by accident. Everything tested and considered.”



Axelrod in his library

Al: There is a diverse use of poetic forms in *All Vows*, and the collection includes a multitude of accessible themes. Accordingly, and with much generosity, you have made the book available to students of the county’s school system, complete with a lesson plan for teachers. How is this project going?

David: Luckily, I was given a grant to prepare the book for classroom use, and so it was printed with an instruction book, keyed to my own poems as examples to discuss how to understand and write poems. (Big ego? Sure, but I can teach best what I do best.) The book was given out fairly widely and the trade edition sold out (but hasn’t been reprinted). Success. But I’d like to ask folks, which would you prefer, to write a good poem following a form, or to write an even better poem? So I try to coach teachers to allow even the “non-honor” students to write about what they find interesting—uncensored, even without concern for grammar and punctuation. Even—and particularly—the “poor students,” if they trust us, have plenty to say. It doesn’t have to follow form. It certainly doesn’t have to be “appropriate,” and only when they have created something that matters to them might they then wish to correct it so others can better read and understand it.

And by the way, above, you asked me about how I came to be a teacher. Let me respond to that with an answer that I feel strongly about as a poet. I am a poet who has taught. I am not a teacher who just

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writes poetry. People say we do things for love or money. In fact, I have made my living and my life by being a poet. Not born wealthy, not born in an age where I could be a court poet or live under the care of a patron, I have done what is needed to make a living—as a writer and teacher of poetry. In fact, if work is having to be somewhere, mostly I have never had to work. I would prefer to write, teach and perform poetry than working. In that way, teaching—teaching poetry in particular—truly beats work. They pretended to pay me and I pretended to work. All these years, that has worked out very well.

But more practically, I can explain how I came to teaching. I was wait-listed for Tufts, offered a work-study scholarship for Northeastern; but University of Massachusetts offered me scholarship money outright, so I went. And lucky for that. My sophomore year, took a class with the poet, Dr. Martin Tucker, who was just then starting the *Massachusetts Review*, he told me the children of baby boomers were heading off to college in droves. “Be a poet like me and you can certainly get a job and teach College.”



With poetry slam winners at Bethune-Cookman University where CHI donated prizes and Dr. Axelrod was a judge.

They pretended to pay me and I pretended to work.

His colleagues were poets and lovers of poetry and he and Joseph Langland had both gone to the University of Iowa—which would play greatly into my education and career as a poet. At UMass, I got to hear, meet and even attend a soiree or go to dinner with: T.S. Eliot; W.C. Williams; e.e. cummings. With my poetry professor’s recommendation, I even was allowed to take a poetry workshop with Robert Frost at Amherst College. Going to UMass positioned me to enter poetry at a very high tier.

AI: You have been Poet Laureate for both Long Island (NY) and Volusia County (FL). Were the processes of selecting a regional laureate different in the two areas? And once named, were your objectives significantly different for time, place, and situation?

David: Actually, this is more a question about the politics of poetry. Which poets are “selected,” get published, win contests? Who succeeds? I know wonderful, talented poets who were never recognized sufficiently for their gifts. I know poets who are okay at best, but have been given lots of attention. I have the ego of a poet. I’m as likely to love attention as anyone and often, I have gotten it. But as it said in the theme song for *Malcolm in the Middle*, “Life is unfair.”

Like my good friend, Dr. Edmund Skellings (Florida’s third Poet Laureate, and the last to serve in a lifetime post), I had to engage in the right activities and make the right friends. It helped that Ed was a tremendous innovator in poetry and performance. It certainly didn’t have to do with his being a Florida fellow. Ed was born in Massachusetts, got his degrees from the University of Massachusetts and Iowa,

and before moving to Florida, he was the director of the University of Alaska's writing program. He also wrote well enough to attract acclaim as a poet. But up in Alaska, Ed also worked for the right politician who, in gratitude, asked Ed what would make Ed happy. Of course, Senator Gravel was told, "Get me out of this damn cold!"

So Gravel helped Ed move to Florida, and got him an endowed chair as a Professor at Florida International University. Ed was able to cull together the political clout to be appointed a Florida Poet Laureate. Learning from, sharing with him, I've twice become at least a County Poet Laureate. Few people consider that on the way to being a Suffolk County Poet Laureate, I was essentially the mayor of my Village of North Shore Beach. I also established a non-profit literary/cultural service, Writers Unlimited Agency, that sponsored the entire Hamptons Writers Festival.

My fellow poets will decide the merits or demerits of my writing. I believe I do, sincerely, serve my community well enough to be a poet laureate—a post that furthers poetry, the writing arts, literacy and even the greater community.

Al: You were instrumental in the re-kindling and ultimate establishment (by statute) of the State Poet Laureate in Florida. As you allude in your poem regarding this process in your collection *All Vows*, it makes an interesting story. Can you share?

David: Actually, it was my friendship with Ed Skellings that brought me to working to revise and revitalize the post of Florida Poet Laureate. Ed and I knew each other back to the early 1960s when he came back to UMass like a conquering hero—with his Iowa MFA, directing a new program in Alaska. But when I last visited him in Melbourne, Florida, he was disabled by serious medical occurrences, and he made me promise I would help change the law so a state laureate would no longer be a lifetime post. He said we should be careful not to allow it to become some snobby academic sinecure or just some ingroup picking their friends, or worse, a group of politicians who didn't care about poetry giving a bone to a buddy. I contacted a wonderful woman, Senator Dorothy Hukill, who represented me in Volusia County, and she was willing to spend three years working to revise and pass a new law enabling the appointment of the new laureate. Because I had already researched laureates around the nation, I helped with the wording for the new law. Because Ed trusted me to not let "those folks up in Tallahassee monopolize things and just appoint some poet they knew up there, he named two people he thought should be the next laureates. I won't mention the two people but their initials were Peter Meinke and Lola Haskins.

We have lost Senator Hukill, but we passed the new law. In 2015, Peter became the first 4-year laureate whose term expired in 2019. It's wonderful that he has been willing to continue to do the work of the laureate, but a law is only as good as the people willing to follow it. So far, those who selected the next

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David playfully beating an african drum in his home



Axelrod, winner of Gold Medal Florida Book Awards

potential laureate have not been able to persuade the state to name the next laureate so the post is legally unfilled. Pity, because Florida deserves good poets and good poetry.

Al: Do you think there are definable differences between a Northeast writer (at least one born and bred there) and a writer from the South? Like me, you've had decades being both, and interacting with both.

David: Above, I mentioned that laureates in Florida, and in most locations I studied, are not that often born or even raised in the location where they serve as the laureate. Certainly, there are regional schools of poetry as surely as there are regional cultures and dialects. I edited and found a publisher for the first Long Island Poets anthology, *Starting from Paumanok*—the first published since Walt Whitman himself had used the Native American name for the region, “Paumanok,” meaning “Long Island.” We felt there was a separate sensibility for poets who grew up and wrote in the geographical region east of New York City. In fact, I included myself among the five poets, but only because the oldest towns on eastern Long Island, like Southampton, were settled by people from Salem, Massachusetts, and I grew up with the same seaside disposition as poets from Down East.

But I rebel about those who use their origins to divide or worse discriminate against others. The New York school of poets that I knew/know think only their language poetry and a New York, urbane temperament makes good poetry. They exclude other poetry. And those who call themselves “Confederate” poets or insist on celebrating their Confederate heritage seem to forget they lost. They want to elevate racist sentiment as heroism. Sorry, at least in Germany it is against the law to celebrate atrocities. I don't understand cultivating the good old days when we could own and whup the slaves.

How about doing away with all “schools” and simply trying to write better poetry, not regional poetry.

Al: For many years you have headed The Creative Happiness Institute, which has served the arts community and the greater community of Volusia County and beyond. Can you outline its mission and some of its many achievements?

David: You also asked me about the “idea and application of *poetry as therapy*, both personal and otherwise,” and in what way the “precepts of Eastern philosophy provide a strong underpinning to the Institute's work and enter my poetry and other writings.”

I have been a student of comparative religion since my teens, studying in the university, and with various masters, for instance when I lived a year in China. I am also an honorary Daoist Priest, named so by the Wu Dang Daoist Temple in Mainland China, and I am an Elder on the board of DaoUSA, a church based in Estes Park, Colorado. I think of myself as a philosophical Daoist, not a formally religious person. The name, **Creative Happiness Institute**, when I incorporated it in Florida, has the acronym **CHI**.



Axelrod with his four children at a poetry reading where they all read at the Walt Whitman Birthplace in Huntington, NY

Chi is something I ascribe to if not “believe in.” I think there is a universal energy, Chi, which some may say manifests as a godhead. I’m content to learn to live harmoniously—bringing my inner chi into balance with the greater, universal energy.

It amazed me how hostile, or at least incredulous the grant committee was when I first applied for a regional grant. They even refused to “understand” how poetry or even creative writing could heal people or be a healthful activity. I moved here in 2010, and the Atlantic Center for the Arts—a terrific organization that does get big grants—had not begun to emphasize their healing-arts programs. I believe I was ahead of them in trying to do poetry therapy in our region. Of course, the minute they offered such programs, they were funded and now they do a wonderful job. (Sorry, welcome to my world. Duh, David, always innovating, seldom accepted, but that’s my ego and my constant whine.)

The homepage www.creativehappiness.org, still reflects our objective, “Be creative, be well.” The graphics displayed at the website quote famous people who say the secret to a happy life is to help others. The book I published, *Another Way: Poems Derived from the Dao de Qing*, was written with a sense of humor. The Wu Dang Temple acknowledge that the book shows a measure of understanding. Other high Daoists were happy with it. I continue to try to bring creativity and poetry into my community. That means I’m doing the work of a poet, an administrator, a Laureate.



Axelrod with Volusia County Poets Laureate George Wallace & Tammy Nuzo-Morgan, and the sea-captain poet Alan Planz.

AI: Is a conscious pursuit of aesthetics and art in any form, simple or complex, as a maker or receiver, the best path away from dull routine, a path for happiness in our lives? Do even the artists themselves understand this, yet sometimes forget the why of their own doing?

David: My own kids used to say, “I’m bored.” Hell no, how can anyone be bored? There really isn’t a dull routine unless you chose to live that way. Why would anyone say, “I have writers’ block,” or even need prompts to find something to write about (except to trigger all you already have to write about)? Of course, I also ought to learn to complain less about some of the other people who want to be one up, or are ever so sure how things must be done. By now, I shouldn’t be uptight about how others proceed. That would be contradicting what I know about living harmoniously. I still need to learn more so that I am less of a “whine connoisseur.” It sometimes bothers me how people pretend they don’t get what I am doing, or want to take all the credit for it, or make a contest of it. Balance, harmony, purer energy: how hard is that? Then again, I didn’t write *Another Way* until I’d been reading the Dao for fifty years and knew “The Dao that you can speak is not the true Dao.”

AI: And the future? Anything planned, or are you, arms wide, reaching out and letting each day tell you?

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Axelrod with a framed poem that was part of a series of calligraphy done to accompany a poetry series in 1963 at Amherst Library, Amherst, MA—Dr. Axelrod's first paid, professional reading cosponsored by the library and the University of Massachusetts' English Department.



Axelrod with Nepali poet YuYutsu Sharma

David: I've had such a good life, a great career, I can say, honestly—and this requires a measure of thought—I have no real anger, no regrets. Both emotions are a great waste of time. Yes, you can piss me off. But rather deterministically, everything that has happened has brought me to this moment, so why should I complain?

My father had as his primary-care doctor, his godson, a kid my own age with whom I grew up. Ricky, being a medical doctor, did think of himself as not just a very important man, but apparently, a seer.

My father called and told me, "Ricky said I won't live as long as my father." My dad was devastated, hoping he might outlive his own father who made it to 94.

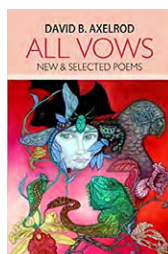
I was furious. Did Ricky (who by then insisted his name was Doctor Erick Lastname) have a crystal ball? Who gave the man permission to impart such a negative message? Dad did make it to 88 and died when he was ready to. And I have had intimations that I won't live forever but I believe I am immortal and will believe that until the day I die.

I still have so much to enjoy—thanks to my family, my friends and my companion. I certainly want to keep enjoying, but I have taken an interest in what are recorded or reported as people's last words. Some are quite well known and even quoted. But a super poet—Mara Levine—whose books I published with Writers Ink Press—wrote her own poem about a favorite aunt of hers at whose death bed she sat. Mara told me, here aunty had been relatively unresponsive at the end until she sat up in her bed and pointed out toward something:

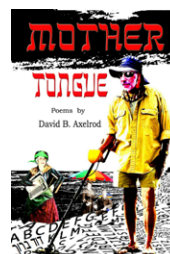
*What was Auntie Sarah's cue
for this same word, the final word
she cried rising wide-eyed, rapt,
from the depths of a hospital bed?
Wow, she said, Wow, I said, Wow!*

I hope for that wonder. I hope it can be that good in the end for you and me.

SOME BOOKS BY DR. DAVID B. AXELROD



[Link](#)



[Link](#)

You may email Dr. David B. Axelrod at axelrod@poetrydoctor.org, if you would like one of his books, give him the title (and he will check his own shelves. If he has any extra personal copies, he will gladly correspond with you and give you a price. Dr. Axelrod donates any proceeds from the sale of his books to the charity, Creative Happiness Institute — www.creativehappiness.org.

AXELROD: OF CARS, FAMILY AND POETRY



Top photo: Axelrod with 1970 Opel GT Mini Corvette. **Bottom left:** David (age 10) with his father Sam who has a claim for inventing the first Go Cart. Look it up and it says someone in 1956. The picture was printed in the Beverly Times in 1953. **Bottom center:** Photo of Axelrod reading T.S. Elliot on the ferry to Martha's Vionyard in 1966. **Bottom right:** Photo of David with his daughter, Emily Elisabeth (named for the poet) at age five.

DAVID B. AXELROD

POEMS BY

WEAPON OF CHOICE

I admire guns
their finality;
the vociferation
of a blade, too long;
the bludgeon's
argument diffuse.
A gun, point
not to be argued.

I admire the bullet
proof that less is
more; not
the perturbation
of poison, nor
vagaries of accidents.
A bullet, end
of story.

But most, I admire
the target;
predestination
a question; the gods
aloof; concentric
circles truth.

Pulitzer Prize Winner, Louis Simpson, was the editor of my book, Random Beauty, and asked me to leave this poem out because he said, "You don't want people to know you for this poem." He was a strict task master and told me he wouldn't put his endorsement on the back cover of the book unless I left the poem out. Later, it appeared in a large book of mine, Deciduous Poems: New and Selected Poems. I suppose that explains a lot about the "progress" of my career!

WATCHING YOU

I spent till sunrise
watching you, your
restless breaths,
your high-boned face,
your nakedness
defined in blue-gray
light of quarter moon.
You sighed and turned
and still I stared,
the thick curled knot
of jet-black hair
tied up to bare
a soft, strong neck,
supple shoulders,
the outline
of small breasts.

Until you turned
again toward me,
eyes flickering
in half-surprise.
I spent till sunrise
watching you,
protector of your
dreams and sighs.

First published in The Passaic Review, and then in my own favorite book of my poetry, a chapbook, entitled Love in the Keys. I admit, as evidenced in this poem, I am a sucker for romance.

DAVID B. AXELROD

POEMS BY

THE VANDAL

He creeps to the edge of the hedges
on the darkest night, his beebee gun
beneath a surplus army jacket.
This is where he went to school.
He's older now and knows the rules
and how to break them. Raising
the polished butt beside his chin
he fires, pointing at the room
where he was kept—one quick
report of well-pumped air—
and runs for it. The pellet
punctures 3/8ths inch glass,
a burst of silver petals through
the other side, one violent glass
flower for the teacher.

First place, in an Academy of American Poets contest, the award presented by Richard Wilbur at a ceremony at C.W. Post College, Long Island University, which then asked me to teach young-poets' workshops. It was first published in Zephyr, and later included in the book All Vows: New & Selected Poems.

FOR HIS SON WHO TOTALED THE CAR AGAIN

He calls at 5:23 a.m. from Hancock not saying which state. "Dad, I totaled the car." Good news, bad news. He is, after all, speaking. "Closed my eyes a moment on a curve."

Only two years before, that beautiful old Lincoln totaled—an impact so fierce the frame bent in a V. He also walked away with only bruises, even partied later.

They say trouble comes in threes. Cats have nine lives. Men aren't friends until they've fought over money and women. What is the wisdom for fathers? Apples, falling?

If he survives the next crash, let him not call me. Rather, bring his bruised body home, which I will prodigally hug, being an errant son myself and clearly a major role model.

First Place, Oberon Magazine poetry award, later published in numerous periodicals and books, it is a benchmark in my always wanting to include my children in my writing and performances.

DAVID B. AXELROD

POEMS BY

ONCE IN A WHILE A PROTEST POEM

Over and over again the papers print
the dried out tit of an African woman
holding her starving child. Over
and over, cropping it each time to one
prominent, withered tit, the feeble
infant face. Over and over to toughen
us, teach us to ignore the foam turned
dusty powder on the infant's lips,
the mother's sunken face (is cropped)
and filthy dress. The tit remains;
the tit held out for everyone to see,
reminding us only that we are not so hungry
ogling the tit, admiring it and in our
living rooms, making it a symbol of starving
millions; our sympathy as real as silicone.

Voted "Most-Used Poem" in a Little, Brown survey, included in X. J. Kennedy's Introduction to Literature, and included in four editions of his anthology which was also the most-used literature book in American colleges and universities. This poem has been included in numerous teaching platforms, printed and online, including a lesson on the device of repetition. Might that be because the often-labeled obscene word, "tit" occurs five times in the poem?. This poem also illustrates the hypocrisy of making lists of words we shouldn't say.

THE LAST TIME MY FATHER BEAT ME

He was eighty-eight. He'd hit it
straight, one hundred twenty yards
to the green of his short course.
Not that he owned it but sociable
as he was, the Starter greeted him
like a long lost friend and everybody
knew him. I'd spray one left
or blow one well beyond.
His one sure putt, accomplished
without squatting to align.

When I was twelve, he called to me
from the couch, "You should have
done that homework long ago."
I threw my pen at him. The chase
was short, into my bedroom where
he swung his leather belt.

Hole after hole, for all my careful
strivings, he was beating me again.
The same advice, "Look at the lie.
Plan." How he could smile, squinting
into a golden sunset, and stiff as he was,
still enjoy it all. I'd never been so glad
to see him swing that arm.

First Prize, Rogue Scholars Press, then in Deciduous, published by Ahadada Books.

DAVID B. AXELROD

POEMS BY

Here is a new poem, published for the first time, reflecting Axelrod's more recent emphasis on the need for poets to engage with the prevailing politics.

FOR AMY CONEY BARRETT

(Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you. Jean-Paul Sartre)

The truth lies like a lioness on a rock,
extending and retracting her claws.
On any given afternoon she could hunt,
but it is already 3 o'clock. For some, it is
too late to start. For others, the hunt has
just begun. If a lioness is so inclined,
there could be blood. For now,
the afternoon foments: causes arise.
People suffer, particularly the poor.
The truth is, even her own cubs
don't matter. She is no fierce defender.
Litters ago, women may have chased
and preyed. Now, she prays. She
need only stay warm atop her rock
and concur, unless an old lion drifts by
and takes what he wants from behind.

THE SUFFERING GOES BOTH WAYS

(a "Swastika Poem" for William Heyen)

The German-American boy of six,
 what could he understand of war or pain?
 His father, scraping the swastikas off
 where they'd been smeared on the front door—
 the boy was only six. His immigrant father
 worked in a defense plant on Long Island
 riveting the fuselage of Douglas DC-3's.
 What could a boy know of Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald?
 When the news came that Roosevelt was dead
 he cried because he couldn't go to the picture
 show his mother promised. But Hitler,
 hidden deep within the bunkers
 beneath Berlin, stamped and screamed
 the gods had sent a sign his Reich
 would rise again from ashes and bombed-
 out cities.

When the boy was twenty-three
 he visited Germany and the family
 who'd stayed behind. One older aunt
 served tea and strudel which he savored,
 but he had to ask her, what was she doing
 during the war? How could it have happened?
 It was then she dropped the smile—
 the fond expression for this brother's son—
 and in a voice like testimony at a trial,
 she explained:

Your Uncle Max and I, we had
 a camera store. He was alive then.
 We had a family and our business.
 So I would walk to work, past the train
 tracks and the depot and I would hear
 some voices moaning and once I think I saw
 a hand sticking out of a boxcar.
 But it was the war. That wasn't
 anybody's business. What could I
 do? Only once . . . once I was walking
 home and the smoke—you know, the
 smoke—I smelled it and I shouldn't
 say this. It was late, supper time
 you know, and I couldn't help myself
 from thinking it smelled
 like pot-roast cooking.

So very human her response, he finally understood.

*Included in Charles Fishman's anthology:
 Blood to Remember: American Poets on
 the Holocaust, this poem probably shows
 my post-traumatic stress when I must deal
 with the Holocaust. I was raised in my
 Yiddish-speaking grandmother's house and
 my earliest memories were of how she had
 to cope with the news that the family she
 left in the old country had undeniably been
 murdered during the war.*

DAVID B. AXELROD

POEMS BY

For several years, I have been sponsoring and participating as a judge in poetry slams, including a series that has been held at Bethune-Cookman University. My interest in slam stems from my belief that poetry is both a populist and performance artform. Slam also brings me into contact with talented, new poets as part of my Volusia County Young Poets Mentoring Program. This previously unpublished poem is what I would perform as a slam poem—knowing I'd have to cut it down to three minutes.

THIS COULD JUST BE

This could just be another poem or this could be the time I tell the truth. I could entertain you and just write you the usual poems. I was a professor for forty years. What does a professor do? For forty years, I stood in front of students and professed. But was it a profession of truth? Actually, I was a poet who taught, not a teacher who wrote poetry, and so some people said I was dangerous because I was passionate. But not just passionate about poetry. I loved logic.

What I used to do was ask my students, "Do you have a right to your opinion?" I'm asking you, "Do you have a right to your opinion?" I'm asking you. I'm asking you. And my students would cry out, "Yes, Yes. This is America, and I have a right to my opinion." And I would ask my students, "Are all opinions equally right?" And they would cry out, "Yes. yes, all opinions are equally right."

Fact: The average American adult reads at an eighth-grade level. A third of us are functionally illiterate, barely at third grade.

Those students had never learned to tell the difference between facts and opinions. They didn't know facts must be verified—not just whatever a person believes or feels. Logic begins where beliefs leave off. Even if a person is giving blood, what we mean by facts aren't feelings from the heart. I taught how to find facts. Facts derived from good sources. They didn't know how to form opinions based on solid facts.

So I would spend all semester teaching the difference between facts and opinions. All semester asking them to open their mind to facts and verify the facts. I could spend this entire poem begging you to keep an open mind and consider poets should also be allowed to present listeners with facts. This could be just another poem, but I would rather spend my time asking you to be logical and to keep an open mind. But those listening might grow angry when I tell them facts. I shouldn't be afraid.

Fact: Your imposition of a ban on abortion because it is against your religion is de facto religious discrimination—not based on fact.

Why am I afraid that you will just shout, "That's just your opinion?" This could be just another poem you are reading, or I could make poetry count, and speak truth to those who prefer bland poetry. Don't you cringe about all the popular lies and bullshit that is passed off as fact? I know a lot of lovely people, pious people, pretty people, good people who are more worried about not hearing controversial words than hearing poetry that might make things better.

Fact: Lenny Bruce said, "Take away the right to say 'Fuck' and you take away the right to say 'Fuck the government.'" And he's dead.

I'm told people should speak truth to power. But on any given day people prefer pretty words. Better kill truth than speak truth to power.

(continued on the next page)

DAVID B. AXELROD

POEMS BY

This could be just another poem. But don't worry, poetry is hardly ever taken seriously. There's no one from the press assigned to report on poetry readings or even poetry. The press, by the way, isn't the enemy. Not the way some people paint it. The press has been bought out by conglomerate corporations that have fired their news staff and now print filler around whatever ads they sell. Some daily newspapers actually have a policy to never print poetry. They make it a self-fulfilling prophecy that people don't read or take poetry seriously. Politicians don't tend to attend poetry readings.

Fact: When I was appointed the first Volusia County, Florida Poet Laureate, the County Chairman said, out loud, on microphone, "I don't know why we need a poet laureate. What would he do?"

In 7½ years, as a Laureate, I haven't been asked to do anything official. So this could be just another poem where I look pretty and cater to public inertia, but maybe I could offer you truth. The truth is I think poetry is important. The truth is I care about you even though some of you may not know how to tell a fact from an opinion. I care about you even though you may be a fan of Florida Governor The Satan, who recently said, "We are proud to be able to make a stand for freedom," as he signed legislation to help prevent COVID vaccinations. I could just cheer on State Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo, who said, "vaccine mandates are spiritual warfare. ... It's your body. God gave it you."

Fact: The Governor of Florida, contrary to good science, has been campaigning for anti-gay, anti-abortion legislation.
Opinion: The Governor acts like The Satan. If he speaks evil and does evil he is evil.

This could be just another poem or, instead, this could be a poem that slams home the fact that poetry can and should save you. Remember, if poets are not willing to express some outrage, maybe the poets just aren't paying attention.

So, I have a question for you. I have a serious question for you? Should I spend the my remaining time as Volusia County Poet Laureate just babbling poetry? Should I even be a poet at all? If poetry is the language of feeling, I'm feeling sick of the usual niceties. I want to write facts and tell truth to power, and teach the public and teach those politicians what real poetry can do?

Fact: Socrates spoke truth to power and it didn't end well for him.
Opinion: What do I know? I'm a poet, not a philosopher.



DR. DAVID B. AXELROD After his success at the renowned Sunset Poetry Series of the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C., a review in the *Charleston Citypaper*, noted that “David B. Axelrod [brings] more than just poetry readings to the audience. Axelrod is a remarkably funny man, and took every opportunity to crack a joke.” For some poets, that kind of review might be the kiss of death. Humor in poetry is not only not taken seriously, it may lead to dismissing an otherwise serious, literary poet. However, Axelrod, who believes in poetry as a populist art, is proud of his literary accomplishments and reputation.

Axelrod was Suffolk County, Long Island’s Poet Laureate, and is now Volusia County, Florida, Poet Laureate. Dr. Axelrod has published in hundreds of magazines and anthologies, as well as twenty-three books of poetry, the newest of which is *Mother Tongue*, published by North Sea Poetry Press in 2021. His full credentials are at <https://www.poetrydoctor.org/curriculum-vita/>.

He is the recipient of three Fulbright Awards including his being the first official Fulbright Poet-in-Residence in the People’s Republic of China. He has performed at the United Nations and for the American Library Association and shared the stage in performance with such notables as Louis Simpson, Allen Ginsberg, William Stafford, Robert Bly, X. J. Kennedy and Galway Kinnell. His poetry has been translated into fifteen languages, and he continues to publish and perform internationally, featured in London and Vienna, teaching poetry in Ireland. He is the composer of the lyrics for the official Daytona Beach March and performed the piece at a concert with the Daytona Concert Band at The Bandshell at Ocean Walk in Daytona Beach—the first poet on record to ever feature on stage at the Bandshell.

In addition to his poetry, he has written for, won awards and sold work for stage and television, freelance journalism, stories and memoirs. His critical biography, *Merlin Stone Remembered*, won a Gold Medal for nonfiction from the Florida Book Awards, and a national Coalition of Visionary Resources (COVR) Award for best biography. He holds a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts; an M.A. from The Johns Hopkins University; an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, and a Ph.D. from Union Institute.

Dr. Axelrod is founder and director of Creative Happiness Institute (CHI), Inc., a not-for-profit cultural enrichment organization, and is founder and publisher of Writers Ink Press. He lives in Daytona Beach, where he has been honored by the Daytona Writers Guild for his work with the Volusia County Poet Laureate Young Poets Mentoring Program. For more information about him, consult his websites: www.poetrydoctor.org and www.creativehappiness.org.



AL ROCHELEAU Al Rocheleau is the author of *On Writing Poetry*, 2010 (in bookauthority.org’s list of “the top 75 poetry writing books of all time”); *Falling River: Collected Poems*, 1976-2016; over 200 poems and translations published in more than a hundred journals in six countries. He is also founder and director, Twelve Chairs Advanced Poetry Course (180 Hours) and the Twelve Chairs Short Course, both accredited by the Florida State Poets Association; lecturer, University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, Emerson College, University of Florida, Oak Hammock Institute for Learning in Retirement, Florida State Poets Association, and Florida Writers Association; recipient, Thomas Burnett Swann Award, 2004; nominee, Forward Poetry Prize, U.K., 2018; participant in joint music-and-poetry compositions and public performances with Florida composers Keith Lay (2014), Benoit Glazer (2018), and Stan Cording (2021); immediate past president, Florida State Poets Association.