Former poet laureate speaks on Acadian culture

By Alex Whittington
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“Early on, you’re going to be playing around with people who are influencing you, but eventually if you keep writing, and you keep believing in what you’re doing, you begin to discover a voice that’s just your voice,” said Bourque.

Bourque’s influences prompted his own poetic form of sonnet: the Italo-Cajun sonnet.

This unique sonnet consists of an opening and closing quartet broken by a sestet, a form which reflects the broken but rich history of the Acadians. In the 1990s, when researching the lives of early Acadians, Bourque began to see the ways in which cultural themes from his childhood sublimated his poetry and found that the Italo-Cajun sonnet was the best way to articulate his feelings about such a rich and historic topic.

“That voice may change from one set of poems to the other, but their resonances are echoes of that voice that stay in all of the variations,” said Bourque. “Trust that if you learn the craft, pay attention to it enough, keep writing and have a respect for engaging in writing — which I think is a sacred thing — that voice emerges. And then there’s a whole different way of being a poet at that particular point.

“You’re not a novice anymore. You’re not just trying things on. You’re developing your own identity.”

This sonnet form appears in Megan’s Guitar and Other Poems From Acadie, and Bourque’s next collection of poems will consist entirely of this sonnet form. Just as Petrarch, Shakespeare and Spenser before him, Bourque has modified the sonnet to imprint upon the tradition a reflection of his identity and culture. Bourque said he would be happy and eager to participate in supporting and working with the poets of the university in whatever way he can.

The first poem I ever wrote was at what was USL at the time,” he said. “It was in British literature class, and we were told to write a imitation of a Wordsworth lyric — I probably was 19 years old at the time — and I didn’t write another poem for maybe 10 years.”

After completing his studies at UL Lafayette, Bourque left Louisiana to begin graduate studies at Florida State University. It was around this time that he began writing poetry again and began to see the possibility of being a poet.

Bourque was born and raised in a rural St. Landry Parish community. He said the history of our local culture has always been an inspiration, but it was actually quite a while before he realized how important it was to his poetry.

He attributed a wide range of authors to his list of early poetic interests — among them Wallace Stevens, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Frost. Sonneteers such as Petrarch and Shakespeare, as well as contemporary writers of sonnets, have been especially influential to Bourque.

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