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## Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet Visits SMC

By Lou Fancher



Gregory Pardlo Photo pbs.org

It's rarely written about, but one fascinating thing about a writer's work is how the reader influences the takeaway. Read a book, essay, collection of poetry or other written words on a blustery day when the world seems thrown against you, a story or expressive phrase feels doom-laden, fatalistic. Read it early in the morning a month or a year later, when eagerness lights the pages or greater maturity has been achieved, the exact same words appear to ring with truth and freedom of thought.

Consider that the poet or author brings that same in-the-moment subjectivity to the composing of his or her work; it's easy to appreciate the fragility and vulnerability of creative expression. Which is why a conversation with 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gregory Pardlo and his upcoming visit Dec. 2 to Saint Mary's College as part of the MFA Creative Writing Program's reading series is special.

Celebrating its 20th year, the lecture series that brings nationally recognized authors of poetry, fiction and nonfiction to the Moraga campus is free and open to the public. More than anything, the diverse roster of guests is a testimony to the cultural richness of contemporary literature – the up-close, in-person encounters make plain the humanity behind the dazzle of Pulitzers or PEN awards or best-selling labels.

Pardlo's first collection of poems, "Totem," earned the APR/ Honickman Prize in 2007. "Digest," (Four Way Books, 2014), won the 46-year-old poet a remarkable second-book Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and was nominated for the 2015 NAACP Image Award. His poems have appeared in American Poetry Review,

Boston Review and The Nation, and in anthologies including the Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry, and two editions of Best American Poetry. Pardlo is a Teaching Fellow in Undergraduate Writing at Columbia University and lives with his wife, Ginger Romero Pardlo, and two daughters in Brooklyn, New York.

"A lot of people read 'Digest' who might not have read my work before the prize," says Pardlo. "That's resulted in people saying to me things I hadn't thought about."

Recognized by reviewers – hailed or criticized, depending on viewpoint – for his astute manipulation of language and often intentionally abstruse academic references, Pardlo's poems are equally concerned with urban environment, with parenting, with everyday 21st century subjects like technology, aging, love and destruction. "I hadn't realized that one of my poems could be understood as a climate anxiety poem, as being about the impact of society on nature. That's a big discovery," he says.

Fatherhood has had a superficial impact, causing him to be more aware of generosity expressed in his poems, but also a more profound reorientation. Instead of his former preoccupation with "my culture, my wisdom," Pardlo's awareness that he is not the center of his kids' universe has caused him to realize he is not even the center of his own universe. "My concern now is for the 'I' character in my books. The speaker (in a poem) can be an (a-----) and it's OK to admit to unflattering impulses. To be accepting of them and not bury them in shame is the point."

Which leads to courage and the honesty of a lyric impulse. If Pardlo sets his task as writing a poem that celebrates his grandmother, for example, failing to write a tribute represents tremendous, personal failure. "That mystery, allowing the poem to go in whatever direction it will, is the most courageous part," he says.

Perhaps the second greatest challenge is winning a prestigious prize relatively early in his career. "Yeah, it's uncommon for someone's second book to win the award," he says. "It's intimidating. What do I do next?"

What Pardlo does next is exactly what he's been doing all along. Every day is an opportunity to find his essential voice, to tear down the poem he's built and reinvent it with added layers, a shift in pattern, less defensiveness and didactic tone, improved balance between statement and abstraction, and more conversation invited with the reader. "I trust that if I listen openly enough, there are patterns that will emerge. There are subconscious sentiments that might move the language around. I've logged hours of therapy and my approach to revision is like therapy. I write, I try to figure out what it is the poem is saying, I get around my ego as much as possible."

As an African American writer, Pardlo prefers the term "cultural identity" instead of the subject-to-interpretation "racial identity" that he calls "functional shorthand in the political realm." His history and inherited sense of belonging in American society permits access not available to majority-culture poets. "It allows me certain kinds of irony, satire. I can make fun of power and my own heritage in ways that a majority-culture poet can't as effectively. I have access to black urban dialogue, black southern dialect, standard American dialect."

Along with access, he admits there are expectations. "Our secular religion in America is race. We believe in it fundamentally. I can be very threatening. I'm telling some readers that things are not the way they think it is. That can be a disappointment to some people. To others, willing to try new ideas and aesthetics, my work can be exciting."

Perhaps the greatest gift in Pardlo's poems is their demand. Asked to step into his world and find out about ourselves, we discover our willingness to change, to engage in conversation, to admit vulnerability, to realign without judgment our relationship to a word, a thought, an experience.

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## Fourth Generation Soldier

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Witalis recalls a 2003 overseas deployment to Ecuador where the stated mission was "to win the hearts and minds of the Ecuadorean people." However, since it was a Medical Specialist Corps unit deployment, medical aid was given. Witalis reached the rank of Lt. Colonel. "I may be the only person with two honorable discharges," Witalis joked.

She continues to find ways to care for soldiers; she has volunteered twice at days-long resource fairs for homeless veterans. Ironically, not one of her family's next generation – three daughters and sons-in-law, a niece and nephew – has served in the military.

"Roger and I are the end of it (family military service)," Witalis said. She finds it shocking that so few serve in the today's armed services, yet acknowledges that "times are dif-

ferent" and California is perhaps "a different part of the country."

"It's not that I like conflict," Witalis explains, "but we need to care for soldiers."

Even today, when she sees a sol-

dier, she can't help but connect. "I introduce myself, give them a 'hooah' and tell them to keep safe."

Four generations in one family – all who have served in the U.S. Army. Hooah, indeed!



Witalis' mother, Lorraine, an Army nurse in World War II



Witalis' father, Charles, a naval aviator

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