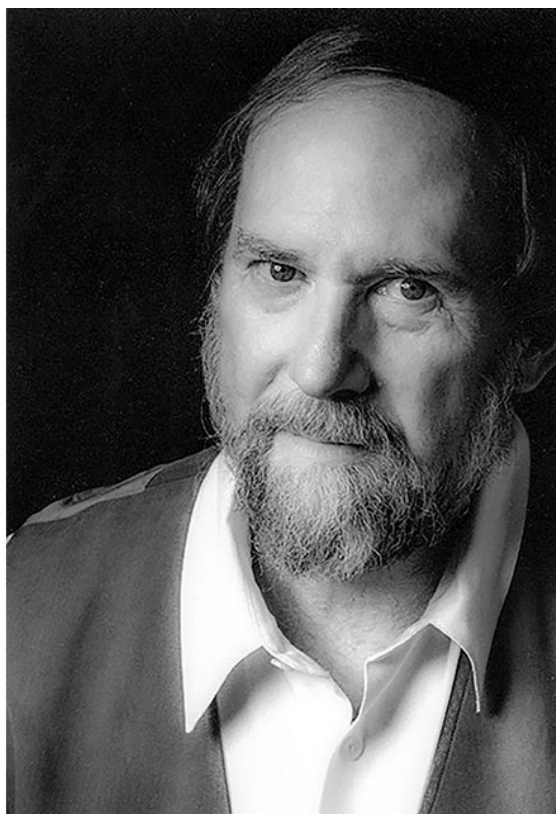


Stephen Dunn, poet who celebrated the ordinary, dies at 82



Poet Stephen Dunn in 1999. Dunn, whose plain-spoken poems about the small things in life and the bigger things within them filled numerous collections, one of which, "Different Hours," won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, died on Thursday, June 24, 2021, his 82nd birthday, at his home in Frostburg, Md. His daughter Susanne Dunn said the cause was complications of Parkinson's disease. Bernard Meyers via The New York Times.
by Neil Genzlinger

NEW YORK (NYT NEWS SERVICE).- Stephen Dunn, whose plain-spoken poems about the small things in life and the bigger things within them filled numerous collections, one of which, "Different Hours," won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, died on Thursday, his 82nd birthday, at his home in Frostburg, Maryland.

His daughter Susanne Dunn said the cause was complications of Parkinson's disease.

Beginning with his first full-length collection, "Looking for Holes in the Ceiling," in 1974, Dunn specialized in poems about surviving, coping with and looking for meaning in the ordinary passages of life, or at least of the middle-class life he was familiar with. He wrote of marriages under stress, the vicissitudes of aging, a hawk that smashed into his window but then flew again.

Some poems were fanciful. A sequence of them in his 2003 collection, "Local Visitations," imagined writers from the past in the towns of New Jersey, where Dunn lived for many years while teaching at what is now Stockton University near Atlantic City — "Jane Austen in Egg Harbor," "Flaubert in Smithville," "Chekhov in Port Republic."

More often, though, his subject matter was of a sort that might draw a sigh or smile of familiarity from the reader. There was, for instance, "Aerial in the Pines" (1986), which found profundity in the everyday concern of television reception. It began this way:

To cut off the top branches

of the majestic pine

(once unthinkable for us)

was a bit of nature traded

for clear reception,

for what was fundamental now.

The tree looked foolish, like someone

well-dressed

with a bad haircut, but the television

had become what to do

with difficult time,
important, an antidote to speaking
if need be, company when our nerves
couldn't bear the silence
of a printed page.

In an article written for the Pulitzer website, Dunn said he had been most influenced by three poets: Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and Theodore Roethke, all themselves Pulitzer winners.

“In a nutshell, Frost for his strategies of composition and his quotidian yet philosophical investigations,” Dunn wrote. “Stevens for teaching me that, if the music was right, I could love poems I didn't understand. Roethke for his sensual playfulness, but finally for his lyrical meditations, and his phrasing; yes, Roethke most of all.”

The critic Emily Nussbaum reviewed Dunn's prizewinning book in The New York Times Book Review several months after the award was announced.

“Dunn's Pulitzer Prize-winning 11th collection, ‘Different Hours,’” she wrote, “is largely grounded in the present day — several poems refer to the millennium and news events such as the Oklahoma City bombing — but it also has an out-of-time quality, like a conversation with your smartest friend during a long-distance road trip.”

Dunn continued to publish new work regularly. His final book, “The Not Yet Fallen World,” is to be published in 2022.

“A typical Dunn poem,” Joel Brouwer wrote in reviewing “What Goes On: Selected and New Poems, 1995-2009” in The Times Book Review in 2009, “opens up a basic human trouble — a body souring with age, a marriage souring with regret, a believer souring with doubt — meditates on it with equal parts seriousness and good humor, and finally offers not quite consolation but acceptance, a sense of having gained some measure of dignity simply by looking life in the eye.”

Whether writing about matters small or large, Dunn said in a 2010 episode of The Cortland Review's video series "Poets in Person," the key was to find the meaning beneath the experience.

"Even your most serious problem," he said, "very few people are going to be interested in unless you yourself, in the act of writing the poem, make some discoveries about it."

Stephen Elliot Dunn was born on June 24, 1939, in Forest Hills, Queens, to Charles and Ellen (Fleishman) Dunn.

He first came to public attention not as a poet but as a basketball player. He was a star at Forest Hills High School, from which he graduated in 1957, and then played guard at Hofstra University, including on the team that went 23-1 in the 1959-60 season. After graduating from Hofstra in 1962 with a history degree, he played professionally for one season with the Williamsport Billies of the Eastern Basketball Association.

Though he wasn't able to make a career out of basketball, Dunn did sometimes see connections between the sport and the lot of the poet, something he wrote about in an essay called "Basketball and Poetry."

"One of the points that I make in the essay," he told NPR's "Weekend Edition" in 2014, "is the similarity between poetry and basketball, is a chance to be better than yourself, to transcend yourself, if you're hot that day. And that happens in writing in our best moments, where we find ourselves saying what we didn't know we knew or couldn't have said in any other circumstance. Those are the moments in poetry I live for now."

Even with a Pulitzer, Dunn told The Times in 2001, being a poet was not, financially speaking, the same as that other career he had flirted with.

"I suppose now I will get some more money in speaking fees," he said, "but, let's be real, I will be teaching again in the fall. This is not pro basketball."

Some of his poems touched on sports. "Grace," published in The Iowa Review in 1994, reflected on the 1993 World Series, which ended dramatically when a home run by Joe Carter of the Toronto Blue Jays defeated the Philadelphia Phillies, a team with many fans in Dunn's part of New Jersey. And, of course, basketball turned up now and then.

At a reunion of that 23-1 Hofstra team in 2000, Dunn, who had continued to enjoy playing basketball for years after his collegiate prime, read his poem "Losing Steps," which ends this way:

you're walking to a schoolyard

where kids are playing full-court,
telling yourself
the value of the experience, a worn down
basketball under your arm,
your legs hanging from your waist
like misplaced sloths in a country
known for its cheetahs and its sunsets.

After his time playing for the Billies, Dunn made a start in advertising. But at 26 he abandoned it and went to Spain to try to write a novel; he did, he said, but threw it away. Returning to the United States, he enrolled in the creative writing program at Syracuse University, at 29 an outlier among younger classmates.

“All the 22-year-olds in the creative writing program at Syracuse were more advanced in their reading than I was,” he wrote in his article for the Pulitzer site. “My advantage was that the talk about poems and poetry was all new to me. I had an amateur’s wonderment.”

He received his master’s degree there in 1970 and began to take writing poetry seriously. He started teaching at Stockton in 1974 and stayed for some 30 years, even after the Pulitzer brought him offers from bigger-name institutions.

“I felt lucky to live in a place and teach at a school that was in the process of becoming, lucky not to be living in Paris or Manhattan,” he told The Press of Atlantic City in 2011.

“Stockton and South Jersey,” he added, “proved to be very good for me and my work.”

Dunn married Lois Kelly in 1964; they divorced in 2001. After marrying the writer Barbara Hurd in 2002, he relocated to Frostburg. In addition to Hurd and his daughter Susanne, who is from his first marriage, he is survived by another daughter from that marriage, Andrea Dunn; a stepdaughter, Tara Perry; a stepson, Adam Wilson; two grandchildren; and four step-grandchildren.

Dunn turned 60 in 1999, with a new century beckoning. He wrote a poem to mark the occasion, “Sixty,” which was included in his Pulitzer-winning collection. It ends this way:

The millennium,

my dear, is sure to disappoint us.

I think I’ll keep on describing things

to ensure that they really happened.

This article originally appeared in [The New York Times](#).