



Haiku fans flock to Union College in Schenectady

Haiku North America draws international crowd



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1 of 11



Mary DiMichele of Montreal, left, enjoys the birds calls as she records Ruth Yarrow's presentsentation Haiku with Feathers at the Haiku North America autumn conference on Friday, Oct. 16, 2015, at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. (Cindy Schultz / Times Union)

Cindy Schultz

Schenectady

Haiku devotees

convened at Union Friday.

Poetic sparks flew.

It's tempting to start thinking in haiku, an occupational hazard when one spends a morning with 130 haiku aficionados from Canada, India, Japan, Australia and beyond at Haiku North America, the world's largest and oldest conclave of all things haiku.

They are unrepentant word geeks. Each clutching a tiny notebook. Incessantly jotting down observations.

[Kala Ramesh](#) made her first trip to the United States, 8,000 miles from Pune, India, to share her haiku and learn about the form. She showed a short documentary film, "Haiku WALL India," about her program that replaces graffiti painted on urban walls with haiku written by hundreds of teenagers.

"Haiku has gotten extremely popular in India," said Ramesh, a teacher at [Symbiosis International University](#) in Pune, a city of 3 million near the capital of Mumbai. She's published 500 haiku. Two examples: "Gita chanting.../birds become/the ellipsis." And this: "predawn/wakens/to the sound of OM."

"I'm passionate about haiku because it connects me to my childhood and my father, who was a haiku poet," said [Kathabela Wilson](#), of Padadena, Calif. "Haiku is a tiny gem that contains great power and creates deep awareness."

The five-day [Union College](#) confab, which runs through Sunday, is "a gathering of people who love haiku, everyone from hermit types to affable professors," said [Hilary Tann](#), an organizer of the event and professor and chair of Union's music department. She's written haiku for decades as a brief creative break from the typical six-month immersion of composing a concerto.

"Haiku is one breath with an aha moment and a Zen-like feel," said Tann, who is from Wales and who likens the poetic form to the Welsh word *cerdd*, "to speak."

An example of a Tann haiku: "wintering/their different ways/birch and pine."

Serious practitioners compose in lower-case, à la poet e.e. cummings and gladly correct a newcomer to the form who tries to add an "s" to make haiku plural.

Also, who knew haiku could be such a hoot?

Dozens of attendees squawked like a flock of Canada geese to accompany [Ruth Yarrow](#), of Ithaca, who added the tremolo of a loon, the cascading whistle of a canyon wren and a meadowlark's mesmerizing call to her

presentation, "Haiku with Feathers." An example of her work: "waking on his porch:/sun shimmers the profile/of a mourning dove."

"Haiku can address any issue, even economic equality or global warming," said Yarrow, a 76-year-old peace activist who has published more than 600 haiku over 35 years. She said some come to her in a bolt of inspiration fully formed and others are abandoned after years of on-again, off-again revisions.

Haiku is a traditional Japanese form of poetry that purists define as three lines, with alternating lengths of 5-7-5 syllables.

At the haiku conference, a vestigial undercurrent could be detected of the rift that roiled haiku's waters in years past. The consensus now seems to be that the form should be allowed to evolve, with a relaxation of the rigid syllable counting. The old-school camp is fading away in favor of haiku that captures a moment of insight without forcing it into a 17-syllable box.

[Peter King](#), a [Sports Illustrated](#) writer who concludes his popular weekly Monday Morning Quarterback column with a signature Adieu Haiku, drew a line in the sand when he mentioned the Union event in this week's column. "Haiku! Five-Seven-Five Forever!" he wrote.

King ran a guest haiku from former [Haiku Society](#) president [John Stevenson](#), who was at Union. King asked for a rewrite of the first line of what Stevenson originally submitted to make it conform with the 5-7-5 rule.

Here's how Stevenson's altered haiku appeared in King's column: "a gambling addict/certain a football will bounce/as he imagines."

"There used to be a big split over 5-7-5, but we've moved beyond that," Tann said. "Counting syllables is Western thinking. Haiku comes out of an Eastern spirit of discovery and openness. You can think of it as one breath poetry, with an aha moment that frequently uses seasonal images. It's throwing a stone into a pond and the idea of the haiku ripples out."

A haiku that Tann particularly likes is from [Yu Chang](#), Union emeritus professor of engineering: "bearing down/on a borrowed pen/do not resuscitate."

Tann, Chang and Stevenson, a retired state employee, started the [Route 9 Haiku Group](#) in 2001. They meet monthly for dim sum at Tai Pan restaurant in Clifton Park to share and critique each other's haiku. They publish their best work in Journal Dim Sum.

"Haiku can describe a grain of sand or a constellation of stars, a fleeting moment of observation or awareness," said [Tom Clausen](#), a retired [Cornell University](#) librarian who occasionally joins the Route 9 Haiku Group for dim sum. He published a book of haiku, "Laughing To Myself."

An example of his work: "all the panes broken—/in and out of the mill/pigeons fly."

Union's event included a haiku book fair and exhibit of Ion Codrescu's haiga painting, a Japanese genre that combines painting, haiku and calligraphy.

As they jotted in their notebooks and critiqued each other's haiku — known as protoku, or a poem that needs more revision — they longed for that flash of inspiration that means the haiku gods had smiled on them.

"Sometimes haiku comes perfectly formed," Tann said. "To that, we simply say thank you."