

# SANDRA BEASLEY

## Poetry in Motion

BY RICHELLE PUTNAM

To Sandra Beasley, poetry is like a good scotch in terms of mouth feel. It must have oakiness, peatiness and age.

“When I was ten I would pace the living room of my grandparents’ house, flipping through a battered brown paperback of *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson’s Poems* until I’d memorized the lines,” said Sandra, who ten years later crept into the University of Virginia’s chapel to read Gerard Manley Hopkins at the lectern. “There is nothing I love more than reciting aloud,” she said.

Author of *I Was the Jukebox* and the winner of the 2009 Barnard Women Poets Prize, Sandra’s debut work *Theories of Falling* won the 2007 New Issues Poetry Prize. In 2011, Crown Publishing Group published her memoir *Don’t Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life*, a cultural history of food allergies. Her poems have been featured in numerous periodicals.

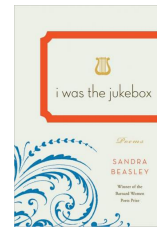
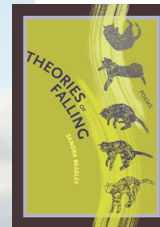
“My poems often begin with a bold premise, adopting the voice of a piano, or a platypus, or the minotaur, without any exit strategy. But the dramatic monologue is a potent mode.” The poet, said Sandra, becomes a dowser, using the crooked branch to locate underground truths.

In 2010, Sandra served as the Summer Poet in Residence at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, where she stayed in the Grisham House, across the street from Rowan Oak (home of William Faulkner). “I fell in love with the community’s book culture, music, and City Grocery (a restaurant on the town square) evenings.”

Sandra often returns to Oxford and has explored Jackson, Vicksburg, and Starkville, Mississippi as well as the Mississippi Delta. “Getting to know Mississippi has really opened my eyes to the way our land is saturated by history and hope. It’s rare for me to be able to write about a place while I’m there, but the experiences always percolate to the page sooner or later.”

When she first arrived in Oxford, Sandra often sat on the Square Books balcony overlooking the Square, and sipped coffee from a mug imprinted with a Eudora Welty quote: “It’s living that makes me want to write, not reading—although it’s reading that makes me love writing.”

In workshops, Sandra emphasizes the musical qualities of a poem: assonance, consonance, spondees, and chiasmus. Seduction lies in sound, she said, so while



drafting she reads through the text again and again and again, tweaking and revising. By reading aloud, the ear catches what the eye cannot. “The neighbors in the apartment next door think I’m crazy.”

Sandra draws from the same well of life material for poetry and memoir, explaining that the overlap in subjects and characters lends itself well to dual-genre readings, or visiting classes to talk about craft. When working

on a poetry manuscript, Sandra admits she obsesses for days, laying pages out of the floor, sometimes getting a generative draft out of seeing a gap between themes. “There’s joy in the process. I’ll take breaks to read aloud, or research a poem, or get up and move those pages to a different order.”

Not a fan of prompts that prescribe particular narratives or vocabulary, Sandra advises students to look for unexpected points of view in a scene. If the predisposition is to write about a fraught relationship with an “I”/“you” dynamic, she suggests rewriting the poem from the stance of the “you.” Even if that’s not the version you choose, you might learn something about the relationships of your characters—such as an otherwise concealed stubbornness. Or, if the central figure is in a moment of solitude, try observing him or her from the perspective of an inanimate object in the room.

This year Sandra is finishing up her third poetry collection, which includes many poems responding to “The Traveler’s Vade Mecum,” a quirky compendium published in 1853 that lists over 8,000 phrases used in telegraph correspondence. “The series looks at how intimacy is both lost and gained over long distances,” said Sandra, adding that some poems from the series have been published in *Virginia Quarterly Review* and are soon to be in *Poetry*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Cave Wall*.

Also, Sandra is working on a second nonfiction book that interweaves personal experience with cultural analysis. And in between she’ll teach in Iowa a month in the fall and then in spring head to Georgia to give a series of readings for the Georgia Poetry Circuit.

“Ah, the life of a writer,” said Sandra, “always on the move.” It’ll take some doing keeping up with Sandra Beasley, but *Southern Writers Magazine* and its readers are certainly going to try! ■