

Midwestern writer explores rural life, has national appeal

By John Payne
Staff Reporter

At two in the morning, when the moon has driven away, leaving the faint taillight of one star at the horizon, a light like moonlight leaks from broken crates that lie fallen along the highway, becoming motels, all-night cafes, and bus stations with greenhouse windows, where lone women sit like overturned flowerpots, crushing the soft, gray petals of old coats.

--"Highway 30," by Ted Kooser

With six published books, and numerous literary awards, Lincoln poet Ted Kooser is among the more acclaimed writers of the Midwest. His work over the past twenty years has had nationwide appeal, conjuring solemn, often mournful images of rural existence.

Born in Ames, Iowa, in 1939, Kooser attended Iowa State, where he first was published in student literary magazines. In 1968 he received his Master's degree in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

His 1980 publication "Sure Signs," a collection of poems, received the Society for Midland Authors' Prize for the best book of poetry by a Midwestern author for that year.

Although much of his poetry concerns the joys and hardships of farm life, Kooser said his work is not directed entirely at local readers.

"Certainly my rural background has influenced my poetry. I mean, you have to write about what you know," he said. "But I'm not writing specifically about Iowa or Nebraska."

For the past 16 years Kooser has worked at Lincoln Benefit Life Company, where he is second vice president in charge of marketing. He frequently is asked to substitute as a visiting professor for UNL poetry classes.

Kooser also has served on the Nebraska Arts Council and as elected president of the Nebraska Literary Heritage Association.

Perhaps his most interesting work is "Hatcher," a book which tells the story of a philandering writer. The fictional Hatcher never is shown or heard from, but Kooser recalls his adventurous life through quotes from those who knew him.

The unusual format of the book was inspired by a relationship Kooser had with a woman in the late '70s.

"It was a classic case of unrequited love," he said. "I was between marriages and infatuated with this woman who paid me no attention whatever. I began sending her postcards with these Victorian drawings, every time a different figure would be saying something to express how I felt."

"Pretty soon, the attraction died, but I started thinking to myself that it might be a good idea for a book,"

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Writer Ted Kooser sits in his tree house; one of the many places on his acreage where he sits and thinks about his writing.

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