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An Appreciation of Ted Kooser

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An Appreciation of Ted Kooser

*Pla Mor Ballroom, Lincoln, Nebraska. Event
sponsored by Friends of the University of Nebraska
Press, June 13, 2003*

Doors open @ 7:00, Events begin @ 7:30

1. Sue—bagpipe piece introduction, 7:25

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2. Ladette Randolph: Welcome, introduce Paul Royster

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3. Paul Royster introducing **Suzanne Wise, Executive Director of the Nebraska Arts Council**: Suzanne and the Council provided critical early support for Ted's book and for others, including Robert Vivian's *Cold Snap as Yearning*. The Nebraska Arts Council provided over \$1.5 million in grants last year to artists, schools, and communities. They calculate the full contribution that the arts make to Nebraska's economy at over \$62 million and 7,500 jobs. We are

immensely appreciative of their support and honored by their presence here tonight.

. . .

4. Paul Royster introducing **Chuck Hassebrook**: Chuck is the University of Nebraska Regent representing District 3. He has served on the Board of Regents since 1994, including terms as Chairman and Vice Chairman. He is the Program Director for the Center for Rural Affairs—a private, non-profit organization, working to strengthen small businesses, family farms and ranches, and rural communities. Chuck live in Lyons, and is a friend of Ted's.

. . .

Friends of UNP pitch

Permit me, if I may, to say a few words about our host group here tonight -- the Friends of the University of Nebraska Press. This is a new separate entity that has just been established: a 501(c)3 not-for-profit charitable and educational organization. Its mission and purpose is to support the good work and enhance the outreach of the University of Nebraska Press. We hope it will include several

hundred or more people who believe in the work we are doing and want to see us carry it on more widely. We want to strengthen our ties to our community and to represent this place, this region, this institution more actively and more directly. We'd like to sponsor more events--readings, discussion groups, book circles, receptions--that will help us reach out and bring together the works we publish with the community we publish them for. What we're looking for tonight is your name, address, phone number, interests, and affiliations. We want to build a support network that we can turn to for advice, referrals, contacts, encouragement, and occasional help and service. We also want your input and ideas on how we can serve the people of Nebraska more effectively and represent the interests of Nebraska more powerfully on the national and international stage. Someday, perhaps, you may receive a call asking for help of some kind--to provide a reference, to host a gathering, to make an introduction, to give a candid opinion. Don't worry; we promise, if we borrow your tools, we'll bring them back in good working order.

As part of the university, there are certain restrictions governing public expenditures that we

are bound to respect. Even though less than 5% of our income comes from the state, all our publishing revenue is considered state money, so we can't do things that commercial publishers and private university presses take for granted-- like take a prospective author to lunch, or host a reading or a reception for the media--unless we pay for them out of another pocket, and we need help occasionally filling up that pocket. We also have many other worthy projects where a modest amount of financial assistance could make a significant difference in the impact a book can have.

But enough about about money; tonight is about friendship.

5. Paul Royster introducing **Charlie Tisdale**. You will be hearing many good things tonight about Ted, but our next speaker has been his friend for 39 years-- so I am anxious to hear what he has to say.

. . .

6. Paul Royster introducing **Laura Casari**. Edging out Charlie by one year is a friend of 40 years' standing, emeritus professor of agricultural leadership,

education, and communication at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

. . .

7. There were over 150,000 new books published last year in the United States. We did our part—we published about 150 of them, so that's .1% of the total. To achieve the kind of recognition and success that Ted's *Local Wonders* has enjoyed takes the committed efforts of a number of people. I'd like to just mention a few of them here: Ladette Randolph, of course, then Acting Director Steve Hilliard, copy editor Sarah Steinke, project editor Beth Ina, series editor Tobias Wolfe, designers Richard Eckersley and Roger Buchholz, production coordinators Allison Rold and Jana Faust, the marketing and sales department, who prefer to be recognized *en masse*, and indeed, the whole staff at the Press, including customer service, shipping, and business departments.

We have some other authors in attendance here tonight, lest you think we only publish one writer, and I'd like to recognize some of them, and apologize to any that I may be overlooking or omitting inadvertently:

Next, I'd like to thank our good friends at **Lee Booksellers**, who have been whole-hearted advocates of *Local Wonders* from the start. They are over here at the book-signing table, and I recommend you stop and visit with them.

Mike Ruth and the **Pla More Ballroom** staff have generously and graciously provided the venue for tonight's celebration. Their major concern seemed to be that everyone have a good time, and we are grateful for their help and support.

Dorothy Slein and **Agnes Poskochil** are the expert cooks and providers of the Bohemian delicacies. We thank them with our hearts and our taste buds.

Our thanks to **Kathy Davis** for the flowers and floral arrangements. Kathy is another friend of Ted's and is our neighbor in the Haymarket.

Now, one friend of Ted's who is not here tonight is **Jim Harrison**. Jim is the author of *Legends of the Fall* and more than 20 other books of poetry and prose. Jim is due at a wedding (someone else's, I suppose) in Wyoming, and he says "It hurts my heart not to

celebrate the teddest Ted ever,” and he faxed us these remarks from his home in Arizona, with the request that we read them here:

Now remember, this is Jim Harrison talking:

“Many years ago before I met him, I thought of Ted Kooser as one of Nebraska’s primary natural resources. As the years passed, I began to think of him as one of America’s three best living poets, along with Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. His only character failing is that he won’t go to ‘The Night Before’ with me and see naked ladies. He prefers them clothed perhaps. All you women there tonight please swarm around Ted and rub against him. We need this warmth.”

I just want to add, ladies, don’t try it, or I’ll call security.

8. Paul Royster introducing **Jonis Agee**. Author of ten books, including the novel *Sweet Eyes*, to be published in paperback this fall as a Bison Book by the University of Nebraska Press. Her most recent collection of new stories is *Acts of Love on Indigo Road*. She is professor of English and Creative

Writing at the UNL and is director of the Nebraska Summer Writers’ Conference to be held this July on UNL campus.

. . .

9. **Ted Kooser** — Remarks and reading from *Local Wonders*

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10. I have here the latest award with which Ted and his book have been honored. It is the ForeWord magazine Book of the Year gold award winner for Autobiography, and it goes to *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

Our own Kathryn Kelly accepted the award, on Ted’s behalf, last Friday, at a ceremony held as part of BookExpo America, the national convention of booksellers, in Los Angeles. Kathryn had to endure the envy of thousands of other publishers and their representatives, and I can say she displayed no surprise—as we have become accustomed, no inured, to the book’s winning ways—but she did express and convey our excitement and our appreciation for the honor. ForeWord’s Book of the

Year Award program is one of the most prestigious honors for independent presses and their authors. Pared down from over a thousand entries, the winners are selected from a pool of 8 to 10 finalists by a jury of booksellers and librarians, based on editorial excellence, professional production, originality of the narrative, and the value the book adds to its genre. The books honored by these awards affirm the notion that the best ideas in written form are coming from the independent press community, and that they will find a broader audience among the reading public.

Local Wonders also won the 2002 Literary Award of the Friends of American Writers–Chicago Association, an award given for over 80 years, with the intent to encourage high standards and to promote literary ideals among American writers. *Local Wonders* was also honored as a finalist for the Society of Midland Authors award for nonfiction. Founded in 1915 to create a sense of place and kindle the flame of literary expression among authors, poets, and playwrights residing in the American Heartland, this is one of the oldest, most prestigious literary societies in the country.

And ultimately, *Local Wonders* was one of three finalists for the Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers award, the first book by any university press to be so honored in the ten years of the competition's history. This award is given by the giant of the bookselling industry, Barnes & Noble, and brings with it not only recognition for the author and premium product placement for the book, but also praise from the panel of judges—authors Verlyn Klinkenborg, Natalie Angier, and Susan Orlean—and prestige and even clout for the lucky and persevering publisher. It's ironic that Ted Kooser should be "discovered" as a "new writer" when he has been practicing his craft for more than a few years. I think it means that the larger public has come to him, or perhaps to Seward County. We'll hold our breath to see if thousands of city folk descend upon you, because you seem like such nice people to have for neighbors.

Nor is it just awards from influential magazines, societies, and booksellers. *Local Wonders* has received outright critical acclaim in the media, including Janet Maslin on *CBS Sunday Morning*, the *Dallas Morning News*, *Newsday*, *Omaha World-Herald*, *Lincoln Journal-Star*, *Seward County*

Independent, Bloomsbury Review, Utne Reader, Bismarck Tribune, North Dakota Quarterly, Nebraska Life, Nebraska Magazine, Poets & Writers magazine, Plains Folk, Speakeasy, and Wapsipinicon Almanac. All this has carried the name of Nebraska and of the University of Nebraska Press to the four winds and the four directions (if I may borrow the words of Black Elk).

I'd like to say a few words about what *Local Wonders* has done for us, the University of Nebraska Press—it has opened doors and given us recognition far beyond any financial or mere commercial effect. The chain buyers and the booksellers regard us differently, they look at our offerings more closely, they respect our judgment more easily and more comfortably. Our other authors ride on Ted's coattails, and we get a hearing and an opportunity to show our list, where before we might have met polite silence or fading interest. The phone rings more often, with authors, and agents, and other publishers wanting to get in on a piece of the action. This is great for us and for our morale, which is literally buoyant when it comes to this book. It's success has come mainly through word-of-mouth, through hand-selling by hundreds of people who

read it and loved it and believed others would love it too. It is the kind of book that everyone wants to publish, and we are delighted to be the publisher holding the exclusive rights.

Finally, I want to point out another thing that makes this book and this author so special to us—that he is one of us, from among us, a local, a Nebraskan, a member of the UNL faculty. The landscape he describes is our landscape; his weather is our weather. We may have driven down that particular gravel road, or eaten at that specific pancake house. It's possible we've met that person, or that dog, or barn swallow, or even that very box elder bug—or one just like him. Ted's genius is in showing us these things in a light that we've never seen before, and making the familiar shine with a wisdom and grace that we only half suspected before, but recognize undeniably once we've seen it through his eyes and his words.

While it's nice when good things happen to people far away, it's much much nicer when they happen to good people close to home. We might have enjoyed such extraordinary success with an author from Florida, or Washington, or California, or even France,

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but we would not be enjoying it near as much as we are with Ted, with whom the ties are closer, with whom we have so much to share.

Thank you, Ted. Thank you speakers. Thank you everyone. That's all the speeches and sermonizing there will be tonight. Now it's polka time, and it is my great pleasure to introduce the band and invite you all to dance.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome, from Crete, Nebraska, **Sue and the Blue River Czechs.**