

Jonathan earned his B.A. (1963) in English from Oberlin College, his M.A. (1970) in English and creative writing from San Francisco State College, and his Ph.D. (1974) in English from the University of Colorado. Following a tenure-track appointment at Stephens College (1974-78), Jonathan joined the Department of English in 1978 as an assistant professor in creative writing. He earned tenure and was promoted to Associate Professor in 1980, and he was promoted to Professor in 1984. In 1988, he earned the rank of University Distinguished Professor and the title Poet-in-Residence.

Jonathan is author of nineteen books across a range of genres, including but hardly limited to poetry. In addition to award-winning books of poetry, he has published six books of literary criticism, over 200 poems in more than eighty journals and anthologies, and over fifty essays and articles. He published his most recent collection of poetry in 2011 and continues work on his next monograph of literary criticism.

Within and beyond the university, Jonathan has received numerous accolades in recognition of his talents as a poet and a literary critic. Most notably, in 2004, Jonathan was named the first Poet Laureate of the State of Kansas. He has served on the nominating jury for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for 2001. Jonathan’s most prestigious awards include the Devins Award (1972), the Associate Writing Programs Award (1983), the Juniper Prize (1985), and the Vassar Miller Prize (1991). He has also received two National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowships (1974,1985).

As a teacher, Jonathan has mentored many students to develop their own talents, providing, in his own words, "sensitive and sustained coaching." In 1986, he received the Distinguished Graduate Faculty Award, a formal recognition of what his students have valued for years: his dedication to craft, his intellectual prowess, his professional acumen, and his prodigious knowledge of verse.

During his 35 years at Kansas State, Jonathan contributed widely and significantly to the Department of English, to the College of Arts and Sciences, to the University, and to the profession. Within the department, he served as Director of Creative Writing (1978-82, 1996), as a member of the editorial board for the Kansas Quarterly, and as a long-standing member of the Program in Creative Writing. Of particular note were the resources he secured for visiting writers, including a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

<http://www.jonathanholden.com/about.htm>

By Jan Biles  
The Capital-Journal   
  
MANHATTAN -- Class rosters and photocopies of his latest book of poetry float in a sea of paper strewn on the office floor of Kansas State University professor and poet-in-residence Jonathan Holden. His brown briefcase and wooden cane lie among the white.

A student enters the office, wanting to sign up for Holden's poetry writing class. He looks through his desk drawers and rearranges paper trying to find a sign-up sheet or other documents that will tell him the course number as he jokes about being the proverbial absent-minded professor.

The disorganized world of Holden, though, becomes defined when he begins to talk about crafting poems.



"All the best poetry I know is intellectual. It's not so much about emotion as it is about beauty," he said. "The theme of most contemporary poetry -- and mine doesn't differ -- is desire of various kinds. Writers write in order to have contact with the world, to find the best verbal formula for something."

Holden, who teaches two poetry writing classes at K-State, recently was selected over 12 other candidates to be the state's first poet laureate, which he says "pleases me more than it should." His two-year term starts July 1.

Karen Brady, program consultant for the Kansas Arts Commission, said Holden was selected because of the strength of his poetry and the artist statement he submitted during the nomination process.

Holden was chosen by an eight-member panel that included two Kansas Arts Commission members, three Kansas poets, one representative each from Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' office and the Kansas Humanities Council, and William Kloefkorn, then-poet laureate of Nebraska.

In his artist statement, Holden proposed the development of a Kansas Poets Shoptalk Series that would center on video teleconferencing Kansas poets as they read and discuss their poetry. The readings would be live and could be accessed at 25 sites across the state.

He suggested that a DVD of those conversations could be produced and provided to adult reading groups and classroom teachers at high schools, community colleges and state universities.

"Furthermore, my telenet advisers assure me it would be possible to design an interactive Web site, complete with audio and video streaming, for continued discussion and 'shoptalk,' " he wrote in his artist statement.

Holden said he began writing poetry while an undergraduate student at Oberlin College. Soon, his poems were garnering awards: Devins Award for "Design for a House," 1972; Associated Writing Programs Annual Award Series in Poetry for "Leverage," 1983; Juniper Prize for "The Names of the Rapids," 1985; and Vassar Miller Prize for "The Sublime," 1995. He received two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships: a $5,000 fellowship in poetry and a $25,000 creative nonfiction writing fellowship.

In 2000, he was one of the three judges for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

Holden describes himself as a Wordsworthian poet whose writing comes from remembering the important moments, or epiphanies, in his life. A poem, he said, should surprise both the writer and the reader.

"I try to re-imagine the experience, and then try to describe the experience," he said. "When you're reliving an experience, you have to relive it totally, so much so that sometimes you forget where you are."

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| "Some of my best poems are about the real world," Holden says.  "It's an odd cliché, the real world -- the real world,  as opposed to the unreal world." |

Once he has described the experience, he revisits his writing and picks out "the good stuff."

"And hopefully, if I'm lucky, a poem is there," he said. "But you have to be lucky."

Holden said the biggest influence on his writing was his father, Alan Holden, an award-winning physicist who worked at Bell Telephone Company and won the Millikan Award for his book, "Crystals and Crystal Growing." His father died in 1985.

"In the late 1950s, after Sputnik, there was a tremendous movement to upgrade the teaching of science and math in American education," he said. "Doubleday started a popular series about science. My father wrote the one (on crystal growing). It still makes royalties, about $300 a year."

As his father became more famous, he spent more time working at home. Holden remembers his father sitting at their dining room table[[](http://cjonline.com/photo_pages/013005/27618.shtml)](http://cjonline.com/photo_pages/013005/27618.shtml) and writing equations.

"He lived for his work," he said. "I was taught to make your living doing something you love doing. It is hard to do. To get a job as a poet-in-residence at a university is hard to get. Many are called, and few are chosen. Well, I managed to get chosen. The luck of it is incredible."

In addition to poetry, Holden also has published a novel, literary criticism and an autobiography. He is working on his second memoir, "Momma's Boy: The Journey Toward Identity of an Identical Twin." Holden's identical twin, Stephen Holden, is a New York Times critic who has appeared on such television shows as "60 Minutes," "20/20," "NBC Nightly News," "Entertainment Tonight" and Bravo's "Biography" series. In 1986, his brother and six other writers won a Grammy for Best Albums Notes for "The Voice: the Columbia Years," a Frank Sinatra anthology.

In his role as Kansas poet laureate, Holden's name will be placed on a roster of touring Kansas artists compiled by the Kansas Arts Commission and sent out to various agencies and groups throughout the state.

"I will be available," Holden said, "like a natural resource of Kansas."

POET PROFILE

Jonathan Holden, Kansas' first poet laureate, is an English professor and poet-in-residence at Kansas State University. He earned his doctorate degree in 1974 at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

His works include "The Old Formalism: Character in Contemporary American Poetry," 1999; "Knowing: New and Selected Poems," 2000; "Guns and Boyhood in America: Memoir of Growing Up in the '50s," 1997.

He has received numerous creative writing awards and two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships.

<http://www.jonathanholden.com/in_the_news.htm>

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| Interview with Jonathan Holden  By Chris Ellis, former student c.2000  Chris Ellis:  There are some critics of poetry who maintain that public interest in poetry is declining. What is your opinion on this? Do you feel this decrease is related to people's waning interest in reading in general, or do you think that, possibly, people are not taught to read and appreciate modern poetry appropriately in the first place, thus making interpreting poems too difficult to be enjoyed as "entertainment"?  Jonathan Holden:  Serious poetry, like serious reading, has always been a marginal art. Proclamations about "decline" are clichés and somewhat tiresome. The primary place for poetry has been the place where all serious reading happens — the university: with the democratization of higher education has come, inevitably, the democratization of poetry within what Robert Persig calls in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance "the church of reason."  Of course, there are many different styles of poetry.  The "style" which I pursue was founded by Pound and Eliot around 1914, "The Modernist" movement — a movement that was originally elitist but which, in 1956 with the publication of Ginsberg’s "Howl" and in 1959 with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies,* threw off the yoke of Eliotian "impersonality" and, with the confessional poets like Plath and Sexton and Snodgrass, became more human.  American poetry became personalized, and that is the dominant vein in American university poetry.  (I’ve likened it to secular prayer, in various places: prayer within "the church of reason."  Like all serious art, it requires indoctrination.)  **Ellis:**  You made a comment in *The Fate of American Poetry* that there is a lot of poetry being written today, and stated that there is more poetry being published and written today than at any other time in the history of American poetry.  Is this a good thing, or a bad thing overall?  **Holden:**  Poetry goes on.  Most of it is, like most things, mediocre, but a small percentage of it is miraculous.  As Randall Jarrell famously said: "A poet is a man who stands outside in thunderstorms hoping to be struck by lightning, and if he is lucky he may be struck three or four times in a lifetime."  **Ellis:**  Poetry slams are becoming very popular.  Most poets do not really hold these slams in very high regard.  I can certainly see how they represent what can happen to poetry when it is written strictly for reading aloud.  What is your opinion on poetry slams?  How do you think they will affect poetry in the future?  What do you tell your students about them?  **Holden:**  Slams are fun, but have little to do with poetry as I know it.  One of my former students here, Taylor Mali, has gone high in the slam world.  Remember that name.  **Ellis:**  In *The Fate of American Poetry* you make a strong case for poetry's movement toward the page.  In a sense you maintain that poetry is meant to be appreciated on the page first, and that oral readings are second place in importance.  Why do you feel this is so?  **Holden:**  It’s a bias of mine to like books.  The idea that one can open a book and hear a voice is amazing to me.  It doesn’t require equipment.  That so much heartrending "music" can be encompassed in a mere book will always amaze me, and this is why poetry, like prayer, will never die.  **Ellis:**  Robert Pinsky seems to maintain an almost completely opposite point of view.  On his Favorite Poem Project website, he is quoted several times in poetry's defense as an "oral art," and maintains that it must always retain its oral quality.  What is your opinion on this?  **Holden:**  Obviously, I agree with Pinsky, though there’s a famous tradeoff between the "oral" qualities of a text and the imagistic potential.  The two qualities are almost mutually exclusive.  Most of the best imagistic poems don’t read aloud well.  In the ideal poetry reading, the audience would have studied in advance each poem being read.  Since this is rare, many poets, when they read aloud, will compensate in one way or another, trading off literary values for performance values.  **Ellis:**  You have drawn similarities between poetry and mathematics. Can you explain the association or similarity between poetry and math in a way the mathematically challenged can grasp?  **Holden:**  The "poetry and mathematics" analogy was simply to demonstrate, for those with some mathematical sophistication, that both languages "measure" things.  **Ellis:**  A visiting poet on the Valparaiso University campus recently made the comment that you single-handedly stopped the overuse/abuse of poems written in second person with one essay you wrote in which you basically said everyone ought to "knock off the second-person thing."  What do you think of that?  **Holden:**  My chapter, "The Abuse of the Second-Person Pronoun," was in response to a particular fashion popular in the seventies; but what I said then still holds.  **Ellis:**  What inspired you to want to make poetry a principal part of your life and career?  When did you begin to write poetry?  What evolutionary process did your writing career go through from the beginning to the present position?  **Holden:**  From studying poetry as literature.  But every serious student of poetry as literature has wanted to make poetry; to get a job such as mine is difficult.  You have to win prizes and be in the right place at the right time.  I happened to win an important prize when I was a graduate student at the University of Colorado — The Devins Award.  At that historical moment, every college and university in the country was looking for poets as the creative writing boom happened.  The Devins Award guaranteed me a job teaching creative writing at the college level, a vocation which I had always envisioned.  I was lucky; for as my celebrated father (a physicist) explained: "Many are called, few are chosen."  Creative Writing (like a career in, say, show-biz) is fearsomely competitive.  **Ellis:**  Who inspired you then, and who inspires you today?  What poets do you consider to be particularly influential in American poetry — in the past and present?   Richard Hugo states that poets learn by first mimicking poets they admire.  For an aspiring student of poetry, what poets do you strongly recommend as models?  **Holden:**  Although I wrote a book about the poetry of Dick Hugo and a book about the poetry of Bill Stafford, I can’t say that either of them influenced my style.  I’m influenced by particular poems by many different poets — by the poems which I know by heart, going back to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, etc.  I’m influenced by The Tradition.  My advice: if you have picked up part of a poem which you have studied, and if you like the poem a lot, memorize the rest.  This is what composers and conductors do routinely.  **Ellis:**  What texts do you suggest to someone who wants to learn about the history of poetry?  **Holden:**  The best text for me is the famous one, *The Anatomy of Criticism* by Northrop Frye.  **Ellis:**  How have the students changed over the years?  Are they more or less knowledgeable about creative writing in general?  Has the quality of their writing, their perspective, or their subject matter changed greatly?  **Holden:**  Students come and students go.  Occasionally, one will be a genius.  The percentage of talent remains the same over the years.  **Ellis:**  When you write a poem, how do you prioritize its content or form?  How does the poem take shape for you?  Do you decide you are going to write a sonnet, couplets, or free verse first, or do you just sit down to write and see what takes shape?  How do you pick your subject matter?  What exercises (if you still have to do those at this point in your career) do you use to "get yourself going?"  **Holden:**  Every poem finds its way via a unique route.  I’ve written fixed form poems and, predominantly, "free verse" poems, though Eliot was right when he declared that "no verse is free for the man who does a good job," by which he meant that in every accomplished "free verse" poem one hears the echoes of traditional prosodies, especially iambic pentameter.     I don’t have an agenda regarding content, although I guess you’d say that I am, like Wordsworth, a poet of memory: my way of working is to imagine some scene which really happened, to relive it in my imagination until I may actually forget where I am.  Usually, at that moment of composition, I’ll discover a particularly memorable way of phrasing something.  Then I’ll go back later and more coolly play with language for the experience.  I don’t use exercises to "get myself going."  The route of every poem is *sui generis* — absolutely unique.   Lately, I’ve been working on a longish poem about the paintings of Edward Hopper, which I decided to compare to grand opera, and I’m bringing into the poem a part of an opera libretto by Paul Valery, called *Cantate du Narcisse,* telling the story of Narcissus and Echo.  I had translated the libretto from the French as an undergraduate at Oberlin, and suddenly, over 30 years later, writing about Hopper (who loved opera and who was quite narcissistic) I can make use of my translation.  I use Hopper’s famous painting, *Nighthawks.* But this is just one example.  As I said, every poem’s genesis is *sui generis.* |

<http://www.jonathanholden.com/insight.htm>