

SEMINAR REVEALS

# Poets' Profanity Is Curse to Some City Teachers

By DAN WASCOE JR.  
Minneapolis Tribune Staff Writer

----, ---- and ---- are fighting words to some Minneapolis parents.

Profanity in the poetry read aloud to their school-age children stirs a certain amount of protective sentiment.

Some of the parents' passionate protests have inhibited some participants in the city's Poets in the Schools program. Five poets and 14 teachers in the program discussed the implications during a seminar Saturday at the University of Minnesota's Nolte Center for Continuing Education.

**THE PROGRAM**, which recently was renewed for a second year, enables junior and senior high school students to hear poets, many of them from the Upper Midwest, read and discuss their own works. The program is financed this year by \$5,000 in federal funds and a matching amount from local sources.

Mrs. Fran Johnson, a teacher at Anthony Junior High, asked the five poets at the seminar: "Are these (four-letter) words so important to you people that you can't use something else?"

Yes, replied poet Keith Gunderson: "There aren't any exact synonyms for any word in the English language."

**PEOPLE LIKE** to make fine distinctions among words, he contended, and substituting inexact synonyms "would make me dishonest."

Another poet, John Cad-

dy, said that if he uses a four-letter word, "I don't do it to shock anyone but just because it seems right."

One complicating factor, teachers and poets agreed, is that some students remember and repeat the lines containing words that they know are "dirty."

Gunderson read a poem to the seminar about a typical debate in a labor union preceding a strike vote. The poem contains impressions of union members, some boisterous, some timid, and pokes fun at some union procedures. It also contains several "dirty words."

Although students may understand the intent of the work and can intelligently discuss some of its nuances, he indicated, they may refer to it among themselves and before their parents by the "dirty words" involved.

**MRS. JOHNSON** agreed: "They go home with the individual word and tell mother, who gets very irate."

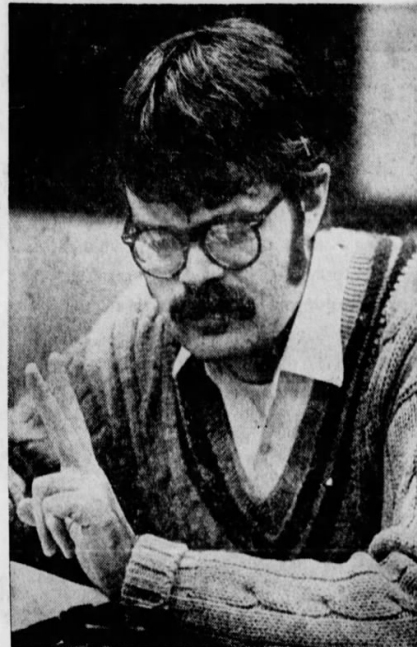
Maybe, suggested Mrs. Beatrice Antholz of Roosevelt High School, if an offensive word were taught "as a spelling word in kindergarten, they'd have to find another dirty word."

Mrs. Johnson asked how the poets would decide which poems to read to certain grades if it were entirely up to them.

Caddy said he would select and reject poems not because of the language in



PETER WELTER HAD READING CANCELED  
*'I think the kids liked it'*



GARRISON KEILLOR: PROFANITY'S NOT UNCOMMON  
*'They're doing it in the streets . . . in the offices'*

Poets

Continued on Page 16

16 THE MINNEAPOLIS TRIBUNE  
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### Poets

Continued From Page 13

them but because listeners could or could not relate to the experiences described in the verse.

SEVERAL POETS agreed that some references to sexual relationships would be inappropriate before junior high school students because "not many seventh graders have had the experiences" that would enable them to understand the poems.

Mrs. Johnson contended that "teachers are very much aware, because we're with youngsters all the time, of what is appropriate for various grade levels."

Poet Peter Welter, whose final reading at Anthony was cancelled following parent protests, said that to set the teachers up "as the only judge of (appropriateness) is maybe the only way out."

But Caddy had reservations.

"Some teachers have lousy judgment, some teachers have good judgment, some teachers are scared to death most of the time" of anything that might offend, he said.

Caddy admitted, however, that if an audience couldn't hear the rest of a poem after a four-letter word was recited, then the profane reference wouldn't be worth it.

GUNDERSON SAID he has not yet resolved this problem: How to be a good guest within a school by submitting to "the incredible kind of arbitrariness" of some school principals and yet be frank about his own personal beliefs as expressed through his poetry. He said he had been discouraged from talking with students outside of class.

Poet Garrison Keillor said he also felt constrained.

"I am unable to speak to the best students I see at Washburn and Vocational (High Schools) because they see they can't speak to me," he said. "I'm not a free man."

Keillor suggested that both poets and teachers should encourage literacy, which he defined as the understanding that words have "human values and human meanings."

Mrs. Antholz said she has not encountered angry parents over the profanity issue and suggested it may be because she has asked beforehand if they objected to obscenity or pornographic literature being presented in class.

Their reaction, she said, was: "If you can teach my kids any four-letter words they don't know, go right ahead."

She conceded, however, that "I've been lucky to have the right people."

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