



The Associated Press
Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, right, and columnist Garrison Keillor talk before the National Book Awards ceremony in New York on Nov. 16. Ferlinghetti was presented the Literarian Award for Outstanding Service to the American Literary Community by Keillor.

Writers and readers share an unbearably intimate bond

Award ceremony gave me a chance to pass out some excrescences



Garrison Keillor
The Old Scout

I got to put on a tux and go to the National Book Awards in New York a couple weeks ago and eat lamb chops in a hotel ballroom and breathe air recently exhaled by Toni Morrison and Norman Mailer and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and other greats and near-greats of the trade.

I was there as an innocent bystander, not a nominee (God forbid.) Having never won a big prize, I am opposed to them on principle: They are an excrescence of commerce and a corruption of the purity of artistic creation. Nonetheless, it was good to see the brilliant young novelist, William Vollman, pick up the trophy for fiction, and that grand old man, W.S. Merwin, get the nod for poetry. If you can't be the creator of Harry Potter or the decoder of Da Vinci, winning a big prize is some consolation. It gives you reason to believe you may not have wasted your life after all.

The urge to write stuff and put it between covers is powerful, as one can see by the godawful books that emerge every day — vanity, thy name is publishing! — and anybody with the authorial urge ought to visit the underground stacks of a major public library and feel the chill of oblivion. Good writers such as Glenway Wescott, John Dos Passos, Carloline Gordon, gone, gone, gone. They had their shining moment and then descended into storage where they wait for years to be opened. Sometimes, to placate the ghosts, I take a book

off the shelf that looks as if nobody's opened it for a few decades and I open it. And then I close it.

Emily Dickinson died unpublished and her work was rescued and eventually found its way from deep anonymity to the pantheon of American Lit, and now her grave in Amherst is one of the most beloved anywhere in the world. She is the patron saint of the meek and lonely. A devout unbeliever, she lies under a tombstone that says "Called Back," and here, every week, strangers come and place pebbles on her stone and leave notes to her folded into tiny squares. Perhaps they are unpublished poets, too. As Emily said, success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed. She would have known about that.

People like to speculate about her love life but their chatter about that is dull stuff compared to the poems, the flies buzzing and the horses turning their heads toward eternity and the narrow fellow in the grass and "Hope is the thing with feathers" and all — the lady was a fine piece of Yankee free-thinking who dwelt in the richness of Victorian language. Through her poems, you can enter into the mind of New England, from which seeds blew westward and blossomed across the country. You read her and, whether you know it or not, your vision of America is elevated.

One reads books in order to gain the privilege of living more

than one life. People who don't read are trapped in a mine-shaft, even if they think the sun is shining. Most New Yorkers wouldn't travel to Minnesota if a bright star shone in the west and hosts of angels were handing out plane tickets, but they might read a book about Minnesota and thereby form some interesting and useful impression of us. This is the benefit of literacy. Life is lonely; it is less so if one reads.

I once got on the subway at 96th and Broadway in Manhattan and sat down opposite a handsome young African-American woman who was reading a book of mine. The train rattled along and I waited for her to smile or laugh but she didn't. She did, however, keep reading. I stayed on the train past 72nd and 42nd and 34th and finally it was too much for me — if she had slapped the book shut and tossed it away, it would've hurt me so awfully bad, so I got off at 14th and I was a more thoughtful man for the rest of the day. A writer craves readers, but what passes between him and them is so intimate that it's unbearable to sit and watch.

Questions for class discussion:

- Is the author using irony when he declares he is opposed to prizes?
- What is "excrescence"?
- Have you ever sat reading a book and then realized that the author was sitting across from you and as a joke, you kept a straight face?

Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard Saturday nights on public radio stations across the country.