

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

Celebrating PhD Student Joy Priest's Debut Poetry Collection, HORSEPOWER

Joy Priest is the author of *HORSEPOWER* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2020), winner of the Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. She is the recipient of the 2020 Stanley Kunitz Prize and her poems have appeared in the Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, *American Poetry Review*, and *The Atlantic*, among others. Below, Joy discusses *HORSEPOWER* and her impressions of Houston. Congratulations, Joy!



Student Spotlight

As a first-year PhD student, what has surprised you about Houston? Any favorite spots or reading series or people?

Well, I haven't much ventured outside of my apartment since I got here in June. So, my answers might be boring, lol. I suppose what surprised me—as in delighted me—were the cute little anoles running everywhere out of the grass, and my dog—Luna's—complete indifference to them. Also, the banana and lime trees in my courtyard and along my walks. I love that—when the eco- won't go gently against the artificial. I was surprised—as in not surprised—that I moved into this building that was built in the 70s, and has terrible plumbing, but if I walk five steps in any direction there are these, like, four-story mini-mansions with open-air rooftop patios that look more like nightclubs than homes. I was surprised by the spaciousness of the streets and the lack of car horns in such a big city. My favorite—and only—spot at the moment is the Menil's outdoor campus. It's about a mile and half away from where I live, so I try to walk there and back a couple of times a week to fight the claustrophobia of quarantine. I guess my favorite person so far is my mail-lady, who brings books, checks, and a gorgeous New Orleans accent.

Can you tell us about the publication process? Did you have to shop *HORSEPOWER* around for a long time?

I had one acquisitions editor interested in the manuscript. I'd been working on it for a while (~10 years) and I started publishing the poems in 2012. But I wanted to send to contests first because, I don't know, I guess the award distinguishes. It feels like it helps create momentum in one's career, and I gotta eat. Also, contests offer prize money, which is the closest poets will get to an advance for a first collection (I don't know, I could be talking out the side

of my neck here) and prizes already have the apparatus set up to get the book off the press in a year, since they are annual. Maybe after 10 years I was like, it's done! I don't wanna wait another 2-3 years to see it. Also, I gotta eat. First round of submissions I did Fall 2018, the penultimate semester of my MFA, once it had a sure title. I submitted to 6 or 7 contests. I didn't even finalize for the first (National Poetry Series). The Donald Hall was the second one I heard back from. I got the call that next June while I was at home at my parents' house in Kentucky, in the interim between the MFA and the Fine Arts Work Center fellowship. I withdrew from all the other contests. So, I guess I shopped it for 7 months? Mailed the final manuscript, hard copy, to Ed Ochester, the director of Pitt Poetry Series, in Sept. 2019, and the rest of the time between then and Sept. 2020 was working with the press: AQ (prepare yourself for the Author Questionnaire), Permissions paperwork, book cover, proofs. Also, lots of tweets—the book sold out before its release date, and so did I. Lol. The disillusionment process, more like. Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man and all that stuff Emily said on the matter. Gotta eat.

What books are currently on your nightstand?

This is the stack next to my lamp, from the bottom up: *Social Poetics*, Mark Nowak; *all about love*, bell hooks; *Cane*, Jean Toomer; *The Dawning of the Apocalypse*, Gerald Horne (who I hope to be in the classroom with before I leave UH); *Being Property Once Myself*, Joshua Bennett; *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, Louise Glück; *The Portable Nineteenth Century African American Women Writers Reader* from Penguin Classics; *Looking for Lorraine*, Imani Perry; *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett; *Afropessimism*, Frank B. Wilderson III; and *Inheritance*, Taylor Johnson.

What about HORSEPOWER resonates with our current moment?

For a full answer to this question, I refer you to this Q&A* I did with my press. But you know, as people painstakingly point out after every reading I do, it's a book heavy on place. It's a non-linear, cinematic narrative—rendered in poems—about “escaping” that place and the un-reality of doing so. That place is my hometown, Louisville, KY, home of The Greatest and the fourth most segregated city in the country after Detroit, Milwaukee, and Cleveland (check out, also, this review in which the reviewer performs a “literary mapping,” a concept she adopts from this scholar out of Detroit, named therein). The narrative of the speaker across the book is inextricable from the harshly segregated, socioeconomic realities of the mixed-race, and refugee, working class communities of South Louisville, and the isolated, disenfranchised Black West end. The actual, physical book enters into a world where my city has been in protest over the murder of Breonna Taylor for 180 days (as I write this), which, for me, affirms the ineffable suspicions of the speaker in the book that I could only render through poetry, over the past decade, post-exodus. I would also like to mention here that, when the National Guard was brought in the week after protests erupted, they went into the West end, where no protests were taking place and murdered a community chef, David “YaYa” McAtee, at his place of business while he was cooking barbecue for people standing in line. Black Louisville is already a food desert. His murder has gone virtually unaddressed. & on & on...

*<https://upittpress.org/qa-with-horsepower-author-joy-priest/>

** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali

*** <https://www.thebind.net/blog/joy-priest-horsepower>

Are there poets whose freedom of content and style inspired you in writing your collection? Do you have advice for aspiring poets?

This is an important question because I think that reading other poets always shows you the possibility of what a poem can be—it takes you outside of your default approaches and strategies. But I can't answer this question. It gives me too much anxiety—questions about favorites or having to choose or name writers. I might forget or am just not thinking of a more precise answer, and it will drive me nuts.

Similarly, I'm going to be resistant to this second question. You will write poems if that is what you devote your attention to. You will decide what is “good” for you through that process. I can't tell anyone what that is for them. I can only tell you to give it your attention, and whether you do or not determines if you will be an “aspiring” poet or a poet. Be in study. Do what you say that you do—is something I still tell myself regularly. A poet is someone who writes poems. & that has a lot to do with how you process the world.



Pictured above: Photos that Joy's high school English teacher sent her around the 100th day of the protests

Abecedarian for Alzheimer's

Angel was my pappaw's girlfriend when he died.
Back there, in my memory, I hear my mother fussing about
condoms & AIDS! she is saying, the girl is 25 & Black! My
daddy, amused at the irony of racism, whispering to me: He's at his
end anyway. Angel was stripping at Déjà Vu when he moved her into the
front bedroom & this is where I began to realize what, precisely, was
going on: He couldn't remember me, but by then he was forgetting who
he was too. Outside the club, next to our world-famous horseracing track, the
infamous sign read: Win-Place-Show Bar | 99 Pretty Girls & 1 Ugly One! A
jab at Angel—their only dark-skinned dancer. She mystified them with her
kaleidoscope of color contacts & quick weaves. They loved her equine legs. I
loved her for telling my secret loud, for making a messy joke of him & my
mother the way I felt they had made a mess of me. After Angel moved in, I
never saw him again. My mother avoided his street. She could not get
over the hypocrisy: How he'd disowned her when I was born, then made her
promise not to speak of my blackness, my father, to me. Buried hole of
quiet lies they dug for years before it opened beneath the two of us &
ruined everything. Maybe my mother envied Angel because she
saw the truth of him out & when he began forgetting
to hate us, to put his white hood on every day, Angel
used him the proper way. I like to think of her as
Veritas, the goddess of truth at the bottom of that empty
well, naked & holding a hand mirror. Or maybe it was me, a
xeric un-blooming thing down there beneath them. I had, for
years, been taught to live that way: Black, unassuming,
zipped up in history—a disease not even progress can cure.