

Maxine Kumin's Complicated Relationship With the Classroom

The Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. poet laureate, who died today at age 88, revealed to The Atlantic in 1992 and 2002 the ways education had influenced her work.

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Maxine Kumin, who died today at age 88, will be remembered for her accomplishments in the world of poetry. In 1973, she won a Pulitzer Prize for her work "Up Country," and in 1982 she was appointed a U.S. poet laureate. Kumin's work was celebrated for its plainspoken grit; as the *Prairie Schooner* put it in 2005, Kumin "carved a place" in what was then a distinctly male canon with her "steady voice and steely grace."

But some of Kumin's notable works were shaped by time she spent in the classroom, both as a student and as an educator. Though her family was Jewish, she attended Catholic school as a child. Later, she attended Radcliffe College as a 17-year-old, and as an adult, she studied poetry at the Boston Center for Adult Education—which is where she met her fellow poet and close friend Anne Sexton. Kumin twice shared her memories of her years in the classroom with *The Atlantic*: She published two poems in the February 1992 issue likely inspired by the nuns who taught her in her early years, and in 2002, she spoke to *The Atlantic*'s Erin Rogers about how her writing instructors (and her own time as a writing instructor) influenced her work.

[Megan] Harlan [of The New York Times] ... comments on your "apparent allergy to flowery language." I was interested to read in *Always Beginning*, your latest book of essays, that Wallace Stegner, your writing instructor at Radcliffe, told you to "Say it with flowers but for God's sake don't write poems about it." Did his comment have anything to do with the direct style that you developed over the years?

That just simply turned me off of poetry. I didn't write another poem for years and years and years. I was seventeen. I had led a comparatively sheltered life, at least intellectually, and I was not at all prepared for this. I had no comprehension of the fact that I was writing flowery, romantic sonnets. I thought the fact that they were metered and rhymed was pretty good. The one thing I learned from that was never, ever do that to a young student, because you simply cannot predict what somebody who is seventeen or eighteen years old is going to be like in five years. And then of course I forgive him because I think he was only four or five years older than I was.

Are you glad that you began so steeped in rhyme and meter?

I think so, yes. I was very fortunate to have what I guess is now referred to as a classical education. It was the Columbia eight-year study plan, which was very innovative back then. I had the same Latin teacher and the same English teacher from ninth grade straight through, and they were both wonderful. They were dedicated teachers of the old style. I just think I got a terrific start.

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The thing that's depressing is teaching graduate students today and discovering that they don't know simple elemental facts of grammar. They really do not know how to scan a line; they've never been taught to scan a line. Many of them don't know the difference between lie and lay, let alone its and it's. And they're in graduate school! So I get very upset about that, although I realize that I'm taking an embattled position.

Have you found your study of Latin helpful in your work as a writer?

I think the background in Latin has been immensely useful to me over the long haul. I started Latin in eighth grade and by the time I was a senior in high school I'd already done the standard curriculum—right up through Virgil, which is the name of the dog lying at my feet this moment. I had a year translating Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and that was just sheer heaven for me. I loved it.

[...]

I want to ask you about the poem "Pantoum, with Swan." It evokes the image of Leda and the Swan, and it ends "I had his knowledge, I had no power/the year I taught Yeats in a classroom so pale/ that a mist enshrouded the ancient religions/ and bits of his down flew from under my fingernails." This speaks to me, in part, about what it means to be a woman in academics or simply a woman in a man's world. Is that what you were trying to convey?

Well, that's part of it, certainly. For many years I've taught Yeats' sonnet "Leda and the Swan," and have been struck over and over again with what a terribly sexist poem it is (though enshrined in the canon). And then, I felt harassed teaching a seminar in prosody—teaching form—at the graduate school level to unwilling, even surly students who were only taking it because they needed the credit. They would say things like, "Form is just a crutch. Who needs form?" Meanwhile, I'm assigning everyone to write a sestina, and everyone has to write a villanelle, and so on. When we came to the pantoum I just sort of decided, "Well, I'm going to write a pantoum, too. I'm so sick of the way these people are responding." And so it was a "get even" poem, initially. But I love to work in form. I think the challenges of form elicit extraordinary responses. You don't know what's going to come. And that was certainly the case with this poem. Remember in the Yeats version it says, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power?" That to me was one of the more offensive lines. That's why mine says, "I had his knowledge but Bird had the power."