In Memoriam: Richard Shelton

College of Humanities
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Richard Shelton, Regents Professor emeritus of English and a renowned writer considered by some to be the "poet laureate of the Sonoran Desert," died Nov. 29. He was 89.

Shelton began working at the University in 1960 and was one of the founders of the Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing, which was launched in 1972.

"He is remembered with enormous respect and affection by all who have shared stories about him," said Kate Bernheimer, the program's current director. "Richard Shelton was instrumental to the Department of English and the Poetry Center, and to establishing creative nonfiction as an essential genre in this MFA program and in the field. He was passionate about the ethical contributions to society and the planet that can be made through literary work."

Shelton served two stints as interim director of the University of Arizona Poetry Center in the 1960s and 1990s. His wife, Lois Shelton, who died in 2015, was the center's director from 1970-1990. Richard Shelton was designated a Regents Professor in 1991 and retired in 2006.

Among the many marks he left at the University is the Shelton Wall at the Poetry Center, which features a line of poetry from Shelton that has been translated into binary code using the line and space of a concrete block wall. Two different size openings represent the 1's and 0's. Sunlight shines through the binary wall into glass windows and into the Poetry Center building, filtering the ambient light through Shelton's words. The binary translation was done by Line and Space, the Tucson-based architecture firm that designed the Poetry Center. The line, from Shelton's poem "Desert," reads, "If I stay here long enough, I will learn the art of silence."

Shelton wrote 13 books of poetry and creative nonfiction, and his poems and essays have appeared in more than 200 magazines and literary journals, including The New Yorker, The Poetry Review, Harper's Magazine, The Atlantic and the Paris Review. In addition to his own writing and work for the University, Shelton established Creative Writer's Workshop [1] at the Arizona state prison in Florence in 1974. The program has expanded to multiple prisons within the Arizona State Prison complex, including units in Rincon and Santa Rita, and has been supported by grants from the Lannan Foundation [2] since 1991. Participants in the program have published poetry and prose in dozens of journals and books of poetry.

The University of Arizona Press published several of Shelton's books, including his first book of creative nonfiction, a memoir published in 1992 titled "Going Back to Bisbee," which was a New York Times notable book. It also won the Western States Book Award in 1992 and was honored as a "One Book Arizona" by the Arizona State Library as part of the national "One City, One Book" program.

"Richard Shelton's legacy will be detailed by many, and it will take many to document his transformative contributions to the University of Arizona, to literature, and to so many lives," Kathryn Conrad, director of the University of Arizona Press, wrote in a memorial [3] posted on the press's website. "When we remember Dick, however, we will remember him through these books, books that let us know him and that touched us all."

To recognize Shelton's accomplishments as a writer, his service to the Poetry Center and the University, and his mentorship of fledgling writers both inside and outside the University, then-Gov. Janet Napolitano proclaimed April 22, 2006, as "Richard Shelton Day."

"If there is to be some sort of definition for a literary citizen, then it has to be Richard Shelton," said Tyler Meier, director of the Poetry Center. "When you take stock, it bewilders the mind. Thousands of students – both at the University and in the prison system – count him as a mentor and guiding influence, and their many successes are a testament to his legacy as a teacher and lover of words."

A memorial is being planned for the spring at the Poetry Center.

Read more about Shelton in the Arizona Daily Star's obituary [4].