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'Poetry' motion

Eclectic book-CD combination now flying off the shelves

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Can you imagine hearing Alfred, Lord Tennyson loudly recite "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or Walt Whitman declaiming "America"?

It sounds like science fiction. But rare recordings of those 19th-century poets — along with a hit parade of 20th-century

greats like Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath — are at the heart of "Poetry Speaks," a clever book/CD

combo that is turning into one of the unlikeliest hits of the fall season.

In an age when a very successful book of poetry might sell 10,000 copies, SourceBooks printed 60,000 copies of this collection and has already gone back to press for 20,000 more.

It's another winning gamble for founder Dominique Raccach and a company that has forged an identity for itself with book/CD combos (they call them "media fusions") and scored massive hits with titles like "We Interrupt This Broadcast" (a coffee table book combined with actual news reports of historic

events), and sports titles like "And the Crowd Goes Wild."

Still, sports and headline-making news are one thing. Poetry is quite another.

"I was thrilled" by the hefty first printing, says Rebekah Presson Mosby, who co-edited the book with Elise Paschen. She'd seen poetry score unexpected success for Rhino

Records, for whom she helped compile the CD-only boxed set "In Their Own Voices: A Century of Recorded Poetry." They had hoped the set would sell 10,000 copies; it went on to sell more than

40,000.

Besides, Mosby jokes, "It's not my money. I was elated. I know Dominique was terrified; it's her money. But SourceBooks has had tremendous success with this format."

With names like W.B. Yeats, Dorothy Parker, Dylan Thomas, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Carl Sandburg, "Poetry Speaks" includes numerous poems people will recognize, even if they haven't read a rhymed couplet since high school.

Each one of the 42 poets is given a brief biographical sketch, followed by an appreciation by a top liv-



Having assembled recordings of great poets speaking their work, co-editors Elise Paschen (above) and Rebekah Presson Mosby (right) have created what some are calling a definitive collection: "Poetry Speaks" (left).

ing poet of today, such as Seamus Heaney, Robert Pinsky and Rita Dove. That's followed by a generous selection of some of their greatest works, some of which are read aloud by the original poets on the three CDs included.

"If you know nothing about poetry," says Mosby, "you can just listen to the audio and let it wash over you. People aren't having enough fun with poetry, and you should. Serious poetry can also be a pleasant experience. It's fine to listen to Ogden Nash and laugh."

Also fun — but far more contentious — was narrowing down all the possible poets of the last 120

years to the final 42 selected.

"We were going to include James Joyce," says Mosby. "There's a wonderful recording of Joyce reading from 'Finnegan's Wake.' But his nephew refused to give us permission because we didn't have Ted Hughes included in the book. We got into this whole long blistering correspondence. No Ted Hughes, no James Joyce."

"Gertrude Stein was also controversial; some people didn't want her in. But whether you like her or not, she was influential."

Finally, even with the limited slots, personal favorites of the editors and the three poets who

served as advisory editors were argued for.

"After we had our list, Rita Dove weighed in and said, 'You put Melvin Tolson in or else.' We said, 'OK,'" says Mosby with a laugh. "Then Dana Gioia really wanted William Stafford, and I frankly was delighted because they were both on my original list."

"Then we thought we needed to do something for Robert Pinsky. And he had been nostalgic for John Crowe Ransom. Elise [Paschen, the other central editor on the project] was interested in Laura (Riding) Jackson, mainly because she wanted to use an experimental woman poet. And I just had warm, fuzzy feelings for Etheridge Knight."

They all made the final cut, giving this clever, thoughtful book a welcome quirkiness that group projects like this can sometimes lack.

Though rave reviews and strong early sales make SourceBooks' gamble look smart, it was a gamble, says publisher Raccach.

"I have to tell you, when I started working on 'Poetry Speaks,' a lot of people told me, 'Poetry doesn't sell; nobody's going to be interested and we were incredibly wasting our time.'"

But Raccach had been down that road before.

"I remember meeting with the chairman of one of the publishing conglomerates who told me that 'We Interrupt This Broadcast' was not such a good idea," says Raccach. "My staff remembers me coming back from that meeting very white-faced."

Raccach says she didn't sleep well for months when that title was about to hit stores. A tentative first printing of 25,000 turned into a runaway best-seller that has sold 1.5 million copies and counting. Now, with "Poetry Speaks," "I'm sleeping better and better every day."