

The KEY REPORTER

Poet and Doctoral Student Caitlin Doyle Wins Prestigious International Award



By Xinchun Li June 20, 2018

“Doyle’s poetry,” according to University of Cincinnati professor Rebecca Lindenberg, reads like “literature with a capital L.”

Lindenberg is far from alone in her view of the young poet’s work. Caitlin Doyle, who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Cincinnati, has been selected as one of 100 doctoral students in the United States and Canada to receive a \$15,000 P.E.O. Scholar Award.

According to the award description, P.E.O. Scholars “are chosen for their exceptional level of academic achievement and their potential for having a significant impact on society.” Award recipients can use the funds in any manner that serves the furtherance of their goals.

The P.E.O. Scholar Award recognizes Doyle’s artistic and scholarly achievements. Doyle is pursuing a PhD in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati, where she is an Elliston Fellow in Poetry. She serves as an assistant editor of *The Cincinnati Review*, a nationally renowned literary magazine located on UC’s campus.

“I am enormously moved by the recognition and support of the P.E.O. Foundation,” Doyle said.

Reflecting on the aesthetic qualities of Doyle’s work, Lindenberg observed that “Caitlin Doyle’s poetry demonstrates a wide and insightful command of the literary tradition, and her seemingly-effortless gift for difficult poetic techniques stands out among her peers in

contemporary American poetry. Doyle's attention to detail in sound, image, syntactical play (her use of parentheticals in a villanelle, for example), and her uncanny ability to blend story and song in a poem are exceptional, and further to that, her poems grapple with challenging subject matter (such as domestic abuse, or climate change) in unexpected and interesting ways."

"At the same time, she reads as she writes: With soul," said Lindenberg.

Doyle's poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in numerous journals, magazines, and book anthologies, including *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *The Yale Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Boston Review*, *The Black Warrior Review*, and *Best New Poets*. Her work has also been featured through the PBS *NewsHour* Poetry Series, *Poetry Daily*, and the Poetry Foundation's "Poem of the Day" Series. She has received awards and fellowships through the James Merrill House, the Yaddo Colony, the MacDowell Colony, the Jack Kerouac House, Poets & Writers, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, among others.

Lindenberg, who is also the Poetry Editor of *The Cincinnati Review*, where Doyle serves as an Assistant Editor, spoke with pride on behalf of the University of Cincinnati Department of English and Comparative Literature:

"I've had the pleasure of working with Caitlin as a graduate student in the Ph.D. program in Poetry here at the University of Cincinnati, and I think I can speak on behalf of the entire magazine staff and the program when I say that we are extremely proud of Caitlin for winning a prestigious P.E.O. Scholarship, recognition well deserved for her extraordinary talent as a poet, and a testament to her dedication to poetry through not only her original writing but also her ambitious research and her keenly insightful editorial eye."

Many of Doyle's professors and mentors have offered resounding praise for her accomplishments as both a poet and a scholar.

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, who acted as Doyle's thesis adviser during her time as the George Starbuck Fellow in the Boston University Graduate Creative Writing Program, described her as a "poet of grace" and "formal ebullience" who possesses a "gorgeous, original imagination."

According to University of Cincinnati professor John Drury, "Our PhD program in poetry is recognized as one of the best in the country, and we have many gifted and accomplished poets as our students, but none of them is more perceptive and articulate in class discussions than Caitlin Doyle."

Drury characterized Doyle as "an innovative master with elements of poetic form, such as rhyme and meter," while emphasizing that "she writes free verse with equal élan." Commenting on her literary and academic undertakings, he noted that "she is gradually and patiently assembling a first collection with a far-reaching scope, and I believe her

completed poetry collection will have great success at the very best poetry book competitions. The ambition and the imaginative energy supporting it are both laudable and typical of Caitlin's drive as both a literary artist and scholar."

Lindenberg highlighted Caitlin as a "wonderful literary citizen" in addition to her outstanding achievements as a poet: "In her capacity on the editorial staff at *The Cincinnati Review*, she champions the work of other poets, both those established in their reputations and those just building their artistic lives and careers. Her eye for good poetry is as broad and generous as it is exacting, and neither in her own work nor in the work of others does she shy away from difficulty."

As an undergraduate, Doyle held the Thomas Wolfe Scholarship in Creative Writing, a four-year full tuition scholarship given each year to one incoming freshman and based, according to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Creative Writing Department, on "exceptionally focused literary ability and promise."

Doyle's passion for literature, however, can be traced much further back in time, long before she entered college.

"There was never a single defining experience that spurred me to place poems at the center of my life. I feel as though poetry caught me by the arm (or more accurately, by the ear!) when I was a young kid and spirited me away. I couldn't have fought myself free if I'd wanted to," she explained. "The poems I loved drew me into their orbit, over and over, with an irresistible incantatory pull. Those early encounters with poetry shaped me into somebody who had no choice but to continue exploring the mysteries of language."

Her talent on the page, much like her passion for the written word, was evident many years before she arrived at UNC Chapel Hill as the Thomas Wolfe Scholar in Creative Writing. After finishing middle school, Doyle was awarded a four-year scholarship to Miss Porter's School, a college preparatory boarding school in Farmington, Connecticut. Receiving a scholarship to attend Miss Porter's School, according to Doyle, "was a lifechanging opportunity for me."

Jack Pasanen, Doyle's English teacher during her time at Miss Porter's School, remembers her as a uniquely brilliant student:

"She was completely comfortable and intuitively insightful in the presence of great literature, reveling in Homer and T.S. Eliot and everyone in-between. Reading her writing was thrilling for me, for I realized, even then, that I had been given a gift few high school teachers ever receive: the chance to interact with a literary genius at an early stage in her development."

Doyle has been invited to return to Miss Porter's School as the Fall 2018 Visiting Writer. She will give a campus reading, lead workshops, and visit English classes. Doyle says that, during her time at Miss Porter's, she considered the visiting writer program to be a

major highlight of every academic year. Past poets who have served as the Fall Visiting Writer at Miss Porter's include Galway Kinnell, Tim Seibles, Naomi Shihab Nye, Sharon Olds, and Eileen Myles. Doyle says that she "could not be more honored to join such company as the Fall 2018 Visiting Writer" at her high school alma mater.

One of the qualities that makes Doyle distinct among other highly lauded emerging poets in the United States is her background as a first generation Irish American. Doyle often draws on this background in her poetry and literary scholarship, and she has frequently been noted both here and abroad for the Irish influences in her work. Peter McDermott of *The Irish Echo*, one of the most widely read Irish American newspapers around the globe, has [profiled](#) Doyle as "rising star" in American poetry.

Doyle's Irish American background has also been noted in the prestigious PBS *NewsHour* Poetry Series, where her work was [featured](#) in 2016. Mary Jo Brooks of the PBS wrote the following:

"Poet Caitlin Doyle... can trace her love of language and wordplay back to her childhood. She grew up in an Irish immigrant household where poetry and song were ever-present. Her father, who moved to New York from Dublin, was a bartender and often came home with tales of eccentric patrons—many of them writers. According to Doyle, those stories "stirred her curiosity and planted in her an early fascination with the literary life."

In an interview with *The Guardian*, where her poem "Carnival" appeared last January as the Poem of the Week, Doyle said:

"As a first generation Irish American, I grew up steeped in literature and music from Ireland, and I've always been compelled by the combination of story and song in Irish poetry. Some of my earliest and most memorable encounters with language came through the words of Louis MacNeice, Patrick Kavanagh, W.B. Yeats, Sinead Morrissey, Oliver Goldsmith, Eavan Boland, Derek Mahon, and Paula Meehan. Discovering their poems during my childhood and adolescence invited me into an enchantment with language that continues to sustain me."

Lindenberg noted Doyle as a poet with a remarkably wide range of subject matter:

"Doyle's poems are really impressive in their range – formal range, a range of emotional registers that includes humor as well as pathos... Doyle is as much at home in serious poems about abuse or illness as she is with lighter verse imagining comical interactions between famous characters of history. And from circuses to church bells, Doyle's work explores the strangeness of the everyday, the complexities of the seemingly straightforward, the sophistication in the apparently simple, with mindfulness and deep intelligence."

Mark Jarman, Centennial Professor of English at Vanderbilt University and Doyle's workshop leader during her time as a Tennessee Williams Scholar in Poetry at the

Sewanee Writers' Conference, also relished the tonal range of Caitlin's work: "She impressed me as a splendid poet of wit, of the kind of serious light verse that we see very little of nowadays, in the style of Dorothy Parker and the great songwriter Lorenz Hart, and also W. H. Auden."

While Doyle's gift for humor and wit comprises a unique aspect of her writing, her poetry has been recognized most often for its gravitas and layered depths, as this statement by critic Michelle Lewis shows:

"Much has been made of her work with rhyme and wordplay... which she employs to heighten the ominousness of her subjects... But something more complex than wordplay is at work... Her true aim is something different, and serves a specific purpose: to examine the merits and dysfunctions of faux worlds (call them self-delusion, fantasy, or simply nothingness) that haunt and displace traditional realities... Doyle is keenly attuned to the haunting counterparts to the authentic..."

Of recent note, Doyle won the 2017 Frost Farm Poetry Prize, one of the most competitive and sought-after international awards for metrical poetry. Distinguished Judge Deborah Warren calls "Wish," Caitlin's winning submission, "a masterpiece masquerading (with its incantatory beat and simple language) as a Mother Goose rhyme."

University of Cincinnati professor John Drury shared Warren's admiration for the combination of lucidity and complexity in Doyle's work: "Her poems speak clearly, directly, vividly, and memorably, and yet they go far deeper, into Yeats's "enchanted woods" full of symbols."

Drury also highlighted the fact that Doyle has been forging a successful path as a literary critic, reviewer, and scholar. Her book reviews have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Literary Matters*, *Blackbird*, *The Common*, *Cork Literary Review*, and elsewhere, and her reviews of poetry collections by Amit Majmudar and Edna St. Vincent Millay have been featured on the widely read Poetry Foundation site. In support of her continued scholarship on the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, Doyle has recently been awarded a 2018 Taft Research Fellowship. As Drury said, "Caitlin is not just a lyric poet but also a literary scholar, equally adept at synthesis and analysis, the creative and the critical act."

In addition to her work as a poet and scholar, Doyle is also a devoted educator who has taught writing classes centered on poetry, fiction, literary nonfiction, and screenwriting in a variety of academic settings around the country.

Doyle first gained teaching experience during her time as the George Starbuck Fellow in Poetry in the Boston University MFA Program, where she taught multi-genre creative writing courses. After graduating, she returned to Boston University to teach as a Lecturer in Creative Writing. Doyle has also taught as the Emerging Writer-in-Residence

at Penn State Altoona, the Writer-in-Residence at St. Albans School, and the Writer-in-Residence at Interlochen Arts Academy.

During her time at the University of Cincinnati, where she has taught a broad range of courses, Doyle has been recognized for her skills in the classroom by the Boyce Teaching Award Committee. After observing Doyle teaching a poetry class, Drury reflected:

“The class was working on multiple levels, much like a poem. As the class considered various poems, she began serving as a virtuoso master-of-ceremonies, asking questions and soliciting responses, which students offered eagerly. Throughout the class, there was a wonderful give-and-take, an intellectual volleying full of exuberance. The whole session was intense but relaxed, an ideal combination of discussion and discovery, a lively example of the Horatian merger of instruction and delight.”

Doyle said her ambition as a teacher is to turn students into lifelong language lovers.

“The main lesson I endeavor to teach students is that language belongs to them,” she said. “I want them to recognize that the written word is a tool, a medicine, an enormous gift that exists in the world for their personal use, a readily accessible source of gratification and insight for the rest of their lives...I want my students to learn how to really *listen* to language, to receive it with their guards down and all of their senses alert, so that the words can perform their true magic.”

On top of her literary and academic accomplishments, Doyle has recently added “librettist” to her collection of distinctions. Last fall, she was commissioned by Grammy-nominated composer Anna Clyne to write lyrics for “Silent Voices: If You Listen,” a program featuring the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. Doyle was in rarified company as a writer for the show. Her fellow librettists included lauded poets Jane Hirschfield, Brenda Shaughnessy, and Safiya Sinclair. The concert took place this spring over the course of three sold-out nights at the National Sawdust Theatre in Brooklyn, New York.

Reflecting on her experience working as a librettist, Doyle said: “The way that repetition and variation interact to create memorable language in poetry has fascinated me since childhood, and I’ve always seen a direct relationship between that process and the sonic workings of music. I delighted in the chance to explore this relationship as I developed the lyrics for our song ‘Body Compass,’ and I’m eager to continue as a librettist in the future.”

As she enters her final year of doctoral work at the University of Cincinnati this fall, Doyle said that she plans to apply for teaching jobs and a variety of post-graduate opportunities in the literary sphere, while also further developing her debut poetry manuscript.

Above all, Doyle said her goal is to continue pursuing a path that allows her to place reading, writing, and teaching at the core of her life, which is consistent with the values of Phi Beta Kappa.

“I have remained an ardent believer in the important work that Phi Beta Kappa does to support achievement in the arts and sciences,” Doyle said. “Phi Beta Kappa’s central focus on championing freedom of thought resonates with my own convictions as a writer and educator.”

The P.E.O. Scholar Award recognizes Doyle for her creative accomplishments, her outstanding record on the doctoral level, her contributions to the UC Department of English and Comparative Literature, and her service both in and beyond academia.

To read some of Caitlin’s work and learn more about her literary trajectory, you can visit her website at this link: <http://caitlindoylepoetry.com>

To hear a recent radio interview with Caitlin on 91.7 WVXU, an NPR affiliated radio station located in Cincinnati, you can click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UJ9DI5kBFw>

Xinchen Li is a junior at Duke University, majoring in political science and economics. She transferred to Duke from the University of California, Los Angeles, where she became a member of Phi Beta Kappa in 2017. UCLA is home to the Eta of California Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. Duke is home to the Beta of North Carolina Chapter.