



The Valley's first poet laureate

PORTIA PRIEGRET/eVent photo

John Lent, Okanagan College's regional dean for the North Okanagan, has published nine books, ranging from poetry to fiction to non-fiction works.

Poet, novelist, teacher and songwriter thrilled with honour

By PORTIA PRIEGERT

Event
Jan 8/10

When the Okanagan Institute, a group that organizes weekly arts events, named John Lent as the region's first poet laureate, it seemed an obvious choice.

After mentoring a generation of emerging writers, Lent is an Okanagan institution himself.

"It's really a thrill," Lent said recently as he was handed a citizen's proclamation endorsing him for a two-year term as the Okanagan's poet laureate. "I don't know what to say — and that doesn't happen all that often."

Lent, Okanagan College's regional dean for the North Okanagan, has just published a new book of poetry, *Cantilevered Songs*, which looks at the ordinary moments of day-to-day life. (A cantilever is a beam supported only on one end.)

It's Lent's ninth book and his first poetry collection in 20 years.

Poets laureate are usually appointed by government and typically compose poems for state occasions.

But the institute's Robert MacDonald,

Okanagan College's first publisher-in-residence, said he was unable to find any government organization willing to name a poet laureate for the Okanagan.

So he decided to proceed with a citizen's proclamation to honour Lent's contributions to the region's creative and cultural life.

Lent, a longtime English and creative writing professor, has published poetry, fiction, short stories and non-fiction work, and has been active as an anthologist and editor.

He's also a singer/songwriter and plays in a jazz-and-roots trio based in Vernon, where he lives with his wife, Jude Clarke, a visual artist.

Lent remembers coming "young and hungry and full of ideas" to the Okanagan for a teaching job.

"Suddenly, 30 years go by and you don't recognize yourself in the mirror," he said.

He's just gone along doing what he does — teaching and writing — without thinking about fame and glory, and feels lucky to have published as much as he has.

Lent has long been interested in mundane aspects of existence — what he calls the "thick texture of our day-to-day lives."

While some say his work describes ordinary experience in ordinary language, he

sees his work as heir to a democratic trend that emerged with realism and its engagement with common folk in the mid-1800s.

Lent talks of the way the head and heart register life — "the rhythm and awareness of the body ticking away in all its random rushes" and invokes musical cadences in describing his writing process.

"I composed these poems as if I were playing an instrument," he said. "They tumbled down the page like notes from a saxophone. They surfaced like jazz suites."

Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch praises Lent for writing out of the present.

"I can think of no Canadian writer who so thoroughly positions us in front of the mirror that might offer us at once both reality and the imagined," Kroetsch has said. "It is to Lent that I turn when I need to be reminded, when I need to discover again, how the writer works in the daily world of place while aspiring to what endures."

Lent was born in Antigonish, N.S., in 1948, and grew up in Edmonton. He studied at the University of Alberta and York University in Toronto, where he focused on the British poet and novelist Malcolm Lowry, best known for *Under the Volcano*.

Lent's novel, *So It Won't Go Away*, was short-listed for a 2005 B.C. Book Prize and

another of his books, *Abundance*, features a series of conversations with Kroetsch about the writing life.

Lent is a founder of Kalamalka Press, an independent publisher based in Vernon that is now part of the Kalamalka Institute for Working Writers, an Okanagan College program that offers courses for aspiring writers.

Kalamalka Press has helped launch careers of local writers like Nancy Holmes and Dona Sturmanis, winning awards along the way.

It recently launched its James Hamilton Series with *Baptism by Mud*, a novel by Rod Schumacher, who began writing as a mature student at Okanagan College. He is now chair of the English department at Red Deer College in Alberta.

The series honours Hamilton, president of Okanagan College and a former English instructor.

"We intend to publish a unique book once a year from an author who is doing something new in writing," says Lent, noting Schumacher's book sets the perfect tone. "It's an experimental novel that explores the landscape of wilderness as it also explores the wilderness of consciousness."

