



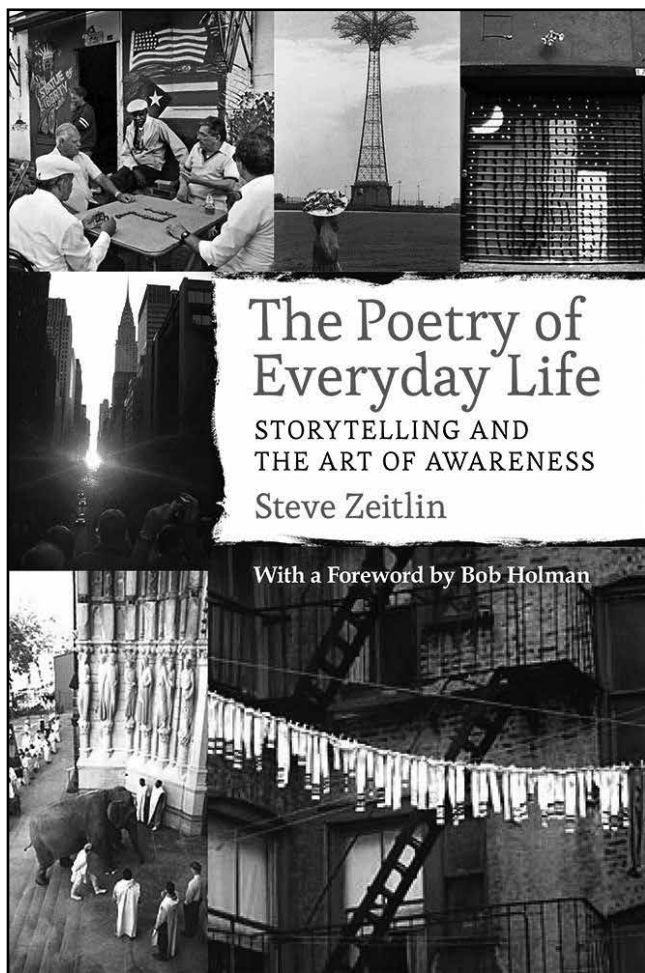
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A Jumpstart for Inspiration, A Salve for Troubled Times

BY NANCY SCHEEMAKER



The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness by Steve Zeitlin. Foreword by Bob Holman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, October 11, 2016, 280 pages, ISBN 978-1-5017-0235-8, 6x9" hardcover, \$26.00

I've been a bookseller for a long, long time. And I continue to be quite happy spending most of my time in a building full of stories and the people who love them. Every now and then, I stumble across an exceptional book that awakens my book-selling senses, one I can provide to the right seeker. After all these years, I have learned that the right book can be a tonic for what ails us, a jumpstart for inspiration, a salve

for troubled times, a sincere reminder of what is good right now in our lives.

The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness, by Steve Zeitlin, has become one of those books for me. And it entered my life at precisely the right time.

Zeitlin's collection is part memoir, part documentary and personal essays that represent a cross-section of his experience as a folklorist, examining and documenting the meaning and power of human expression in all of its varied forms. Here he challenges and inspires us to celebrate the ordinary as the extraordinary—how our daily work, play, music, food, art, and family traditions matter. How

these precious ingredients, if we allow them, if we are mindful and aware of their importance to us and to our time, can be the inspiration that allows us to engage in a more creative life.

For me, the most affecting books are those that teach us something new, change our perception of the world, help us grow. Zeitlin suggests "Perhaps stories and poems, like prayers, have the power to heal." As a professional bookseller, this I have never doubted. What is exceptional about this book is the use of poetry as the lens, as an instrument of interpretation, and as an accelerant for creative engagement.

Each of the 23 chapters takes the reader into themes of living that most of us know on some level of intimacy in our

own lives—the lessons to be found in collaboration with another human being, the power and metaphor in play, aging, and the importance of shared memory ... death ... food ... sex.

Anyone who reads the testimonials in Chapter 9, "The Aids Project," and the subsequent chapter regarding September 11, "Street Poems," will find new insight into the power of poems and stories to heal and express human grief and resilience.

As a lifelong reader, poetry as a genre has always seemed just beyond the reach of my full understanding and passion. This single book has changed me. Page 94 helped me jump that cavern. Here, Zeitlin conveys the story of his yearlong observance from his office on the Lower East Side of the homeless gathered in the park below reading, studying, and praying before an engraved bronze installment of a poem entitled "The Black Sheep." I get it.

More than ever, it seems our lives are infused with worrisome headlines and news that we never thought possible. If in the writing this book, Zeitlin intended to convey how poetry can reach across boundaries and build bridges, he has succeeded. And if he also intended to invite readers to listen, watch, and appreciate our commonalities, this is an affective treatise.

And if the poetry of my everyday life as bookseller means putting the right book in the right hands at the right time, I am so grateful to have this one in my toolbox. ▼

Nancy Scheemaker is the General Manager of Northshire Bookstore in Saratoga Springs, NY. She experiments with textiles, pottery, and collage, and holds an MA in African American Studies. Photo by Todd DeGarmo.



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