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CC's David Mason hits the road as state Poet Laureate

by *Jill Thomas*

Earlier this month, on the steps of the state's Capitol building, Gov. **Bill Ritter** introduced local author **David Mason** as the newest **Colorado Poet Laureate**. Then Mason took to the podium, and once he'd thanked the governor and spoken briefly, he turned what otherwise might have been a staid ceremony into an interactive event, convincing the crowd to repeat each line of a poem with him in a call-and-response-style reading.



"I don't do it all the time, but I do it when it seems appropriate," Mason later explains. "When I ask an audience to recite poetry with me, all I'm doing is playing a little game. I want to get them to move their mouths and make some sound, and perhaps relate that activity to the poems that they hear afterwards."

It's an activity he sometimes uses at readings of his own work, which includes several books of poetry, a collection of essays and the Colorado Book Award-winning *Ludlow*, a novel-length story of Colorado's 1914 **Ludlow Massacre**, told entirely in eight-line stanzas of blank pentameter.

"People will ask me, 'Why is *Ludlow* in verse?'" says the Colorado College English professor. "So I have them recite some verse, so they can feel it on their tongues and understand what's going on there. Then when I read a bit from *Ludlow*, they might see, 'Ah, *that's* what he's doing.'"

Now, almost one month into his term, Mason lists places he's scheduled to visit, and his voice trails off: Gunnison, Salida, Trinidad, Fort Collins, Fort Garland ... During the governor's kickoff event, Mason pledged to travel to all 64 Colorado counties visiting libraries, schools and other organizations "to share, teach and encourage poetry."

"Just having driven back from Gunnison [on the first of what will be two trips this month], I realize what a big, ambitious notion that is, and I am reminded of how big the state is," says Mason. "But I do have four years."

And in an author's note at the beginning of *Ludlow*, Mason offers an admission that makes his pledge less surprising. "I am one of the 'ungrounded ones,'" he notes. "I wrote *Ludlow* partly to root myself back in the West after twenty years of wandering."

When he was about 19, Mason quit college for a year to work in Alaska unloading fishing boats, then hitchhiked the perimeter of the British Isles. Later he travelled to Greece and then returned there to live for a time. His latest book, *News From the Village*, explores that journey.

Now 55, he says: "In different periods of my life when I've been traveling, or I've been alone, or I've been suffering difficulties, it has sustained me to have poems and songs in my head to perform."

So even as he endeavors to inspire others statewide, he expects a give-and-take experience: "In a sense, the pleasure of wandering around the state and meeting lots of different people is something I anticipate very much," he explains. "But at the same time, it's also a process of finding out a lot more about where I live and learning about where I am. I expect that *that* is going to contribute to *my* writing."

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Hear David Mason's reading of his poem, "The Picket Wire," from the July 1 ceremony at the state Capitol [here](#). Read and listen to other works by David Mason [here](#) on the Poetry Foundation website.