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Carolyn Forché (1950-)

[Amy Kepple Strawser \(Otterbein University\)](#)

Editor; Poet; Translator; Teacher/ Professor.

Active 1976- in United States

Carolyn Forché has had a significant impact on contemporary poetry by expanding our understanding of the genre of political poetry and by helping to define and further what she has termed a “poetry of witness” during the past thirty years. The quantity of her literary output has been modest, with one volume of poetry every decade. However, her efforts to remember both the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the war in El Salvador through her poetry stand out as key contributions to a socially responsible literature with a conscience. Forché’s voice is authoritative, reflective, and highly respectful of those people who have suffered and perished due to oppressive political regimes throughout the globe during the last century. The lengthy anthology that she edited and introduced, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), is emblematic of her quest to promote such writing through the works of other poets. The volume is genuinely international in scope and comprehensive in its documentation of the numerous occasions for bearing witness to the loss of human lives and the continued struggle for human rights from 1900 until the early 1990s. Forché has also translated the poetry of Claribel Allegria, Robert Desnos, and Marmoud Darwish.

Forché’s first volume of poetry, *Gathering the Tribes* (1976), earned her the Yale Younger Poets prize for her crystalline language and keen insights, though her early work was without the focus on human rights abuses that would make her well-known a few years later. This book, which is situated geographically in the American Southwest, deals with themes of nascent sexuality and Native American culture. Its early success helped pave the way for the reception of her next collection, the widely praised and heralded *The Country Between Us* (1982), a book precipitated by the author’s work for Amnesty International in El Salvador.

Unlike most works of poetry, this book nearly gained best-seller status in the United States and catapulted Forché to literary celebrity in the early eighties. Also almost unheard of, many interviews with the poet appeared at that time in literary journals as well as popular magazines such as *Rolling Stone*. Carolyn Forché had, with her eloquent yet unrelenting poems and her demure public persona, struck a nerve with the reading public in the U.S. on the sensitive issue of American involvement in the war in El Salvador and American support of the repressive right-wing government there. One piece from the volume, a prose poem entitled “The Colonel”, has gained much recognition due to its graphic depiction of human war relics and is based on an actual meeting with a military officer Forché encountered during her time in El Salvador.

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the

cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of the wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

Forché's next poetry collection, *The Angel of History*, which did not appear until twelve years later, in 1994, is based upon and prefaced with the famous quote by the German Jewish intellectual and philosopher, Walter Benjamin, about the angel of history from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History". The book is a meticulous chronicle of global crises, from the devastation of Hiroshima at the end of World War II, to more recent sites of human suffering, chaos, and destruction such as the former Yugoslavia and Somalia. Written as a long poem with five parts, each with shorter sections with numbers or titles, the volume transcends the author's historical specificity and lends her voice credibility to witness the horrors of the past century. Perhaps it is the enormity of the poet's subject matter that prevents any kind of grandeur in terms of verbosity and length of expression; her language is honed down to the essence of her task, and every word matters.

Most recently, Forché has published the volume *The Blue Hour* in 2003. This collection of poetry continues on the path forged in *The Angel of History* with long poems exemplifying her ability to use the lyric form to express complex philosophical and ethical issues with grace and discernment. Her vision is authentic and uncompromising, and as with her previous works, this book has deservedly garnered enthusiastic reviews.

Forché grew up in Detroit, Michigan, during the 1950s and 60s. She was one of seven children born to Czech-American parents. She has lived and travelled extensively around the world. For many years she has lived in Maryland with her husband Harry Mattison and their son Sean-Christophe and has taught in the masters program for poetry at George Mason University in Virginia.

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