

Biography

Etheridge Knight was a man of mystery. According to Sanford Pinsker, “Knight is the kind of poet who gives poetry a good name.”¹ Fran Quinn, a close friend of Knight’s said that Knight is “the kind of person that a lot of rumors are going to gather around.”² One thing that is certain is the he managed to produce a body of work that is to this day considered some of the finest of American poetry.

Etheridge Knight was born on April 19, 1931, in Corinth, Mississippi. He grew up in Paducah, Kentucky. Knight only attended school until he had finished the eighth grade. It was during this period that his problems with drug and alcohol use began, although this was also when he was introduced to the art of toasting. Toasts are traditional oral forms of narratives, often focusing on “drugs, sex, illegal activities, and violence.” After he dropped out, he ended up joining the army in 1947. Knight saw active duty in Korea and served until he was discharged in 1951 after suffering a shrapnel wound.³

In 1960 he was arrested for what was officially called armed robbery.⁴ Knight had distracted a clerk at a convenience store and taken \$12 out of the register. When the police picked him up a few blocks away, he was found to have a knife in his pocket. The whole incident had been caught on the store’s security camera, and despite never having drawn the weapon, Knight was convicted of armed robbery and made into an example by the judge; who sentenced him to one year in prison for each dollar taken. Knight believed that his sentence was too harsh and was racially motivated.⁵

It was while Knight was serving his term in the Indiana State Prison that he began writing poetry. Knight had sent some of his work to Hoyt Fuller, the editor of *Negro Digest* (now *Jet Magazine*), who in turn had given it to the poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Brooks struck up a correspondence with Knight and visited him in prison. Thanks in part to her encouragement, Knight began trying to get other prisoners interested in poetry. During one of her visits Brooks even ran a poetry workshop which was open to other inmates.⁶

Others, such as Sonia Sanchez, a poet, and Dudley Randall, an editor, also supported Knight during his time in prison. Randall got Knight’s *Poems from Prison* published in 1968. Knight was also released on parole and married Sonia Sanchez that same year.⁷

Knight was published in *Black Voices from Prison* in 1970, along with other inmates who wrote in the Indiana State Prison. Between 1968 and 1972 Knight held positions at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Hartford, and Lincoln University.^{8,9} However, Knight found it difficult throughout his career to hold down any particular position for very long, due to both his ongoing battle with addiction and his background. Knight’s marriage to Sonia Sanchez ended in 1970, having lasted only two years.¹⁰

In 1972, Knight received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.¹¹ Knight was also married to Mary McAnally during 1972, they had two children together.¹² During 1973, he had *Belly Song and Other Poems* published. In 1974 he won a Guggenheim Fellowship.¹³ Then, in 1977, his second marriage ended.¹⁴

By 1978 Knight was married again, this time to Charlene Blackburn. In December of that year, he had his only biological son with Blackburn. It was around this

time that Robert Bly invited Knight to his Great Mother Conference, and hailed Knight as “one of the great poets in America today.” After making the acquaintance of Fran Quinn at the conference, he began giving readings in Worcester regularly.¹⁵ In 1980, Knight published *Born of a Woman* and received a second National Endowment for the Arts grant.¹⁶ In 1986 he published *The Essential Etheridge Knight*.

Eventually, Knight moved to Worcester and began some of his famous Free People’s Poetry Workshops. These workshops were free and were open to anyone who wished to attend. Those who wished to learn bought Knight drinks throughout the night and in return he would look over their poetry and offer advice. They were held in bars, of which Knight demanded a very particular structure: the bar had to be up front, with a space between it and the bathrooms. Knight explained that if someone’s reading poetry and it can stop a drunk man with a bladder full of beer on his way to the bathroom, then you know it’s a good poem.¹⁷

Near the end of his life, Knight dropped out of contact, eventually, two of his friends found that he was homeless and had been living in an alley for 3-4 months. Knight managed to get himself set up in an apartment in Philadelphia. One day, as he was leaving the apartment, he was hit by a car and dragged for approximately 1000 feet. Knight was taken to a hospital, but as he had no insurance and little money, he did not receive the greatest of care.¹⁸

Knight eventually recovered enough to go out and do poetry readings again, but he quickly weakened. He refused to go back into a hospital to find out what was wrong. A huge benefit event was held for Knight shortly before his death, in order to help ensure he was able to maintain a place to live and other essentials.¹⁹ Knight died on March 10, 1991 of lung cancer.

While Knight’s career was not lengthy, it was colorful. Etheridge Knight was one of the foremost (African) American poets of his time. While his circumstances leant him some of the subject matter, it was still a tragedy that his life was cut short.

By: David Shaw

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