

The Wild Woman: Kathleen Lawless Cox, "Citizen of the Earth"

Written by

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Kathleen Lawless Cox's novel *Maeve* was written over 29 years. Her new book, the poetry collection *Citizen of the Earth*, has been four decades in the making.

The 68-year-old author - born in England, raised in Ireland, a U.S. resident since 1961, and a Quad Cities citizen for the bulk of the past 45 years - is matter-of-fact about the book's creation.

"I had approximately 40 years' worth of poetry sitting around," she said this week, "and I decided I would like to do a book that covered those 40 years but with the best poems that I could muster out of the pile."

Citizen of the Earth, she said, coincides with her two-year tenure as the Quad Cities' Poet Laureate. "I felt I should show my work," she said.

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Lawless Cox's blitheness about her book masks the hot blood that courses through her work - a relentless energy that makes it challenging and exciting - as well as the seemingly contradictory balance brought by discipline and brevity; her poems are characterized by both passion and precision.

The poet uses vibrant, evocative, but grounded language that enlivens even trite subjects. In "The Mother's Song," Lawless Cox invokes the agony and ecstasy of childbirth and extends the metaphor to motherhood overall. Most impressively, she pulls it off in 57 words: "My body was the boat / that carried you as you grew / Muscle and sinew and bone / A mind of your own / My legs became the oars / That Sundered the stormy seas / And I sang at the height of my pain / My joy as we were borne / Lofty to the tender shore / My joy! A boy! A boy!"



There is something wild about Lawless Cox that might have been evident even at a young age. After moving back to London in her early teens, she said, she decided that she wanted to approach writing seriously.

"I'd seen an advertisement in a magazine about this famous writers' school where you send them in a sample of your writing and they decide whether you'll make a great writer or not," she said. (Yes, Lawless Cox acknowledged, it's a scam, no different from the television ads nowadays inviting you to take an art test and have it evaluated.) She submitted a sample and was invited to a meeting. "A very nice man said, 'Yes, you're a good writer.'" she recalled. "He said, 'It's going to cost money, you know.' ... It was too

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much. I didn't have it. He said, 'You go home and just keep on writing.' So that's what I did."

It might have been about the money. Or it could have been that the man had an inkling that to try to tame Lawless Cox's talent - to make it conform to convention - would be to neuter it.

That was the message she got about her visual artwork from two separate sources: St. Ambrose University's Les Bell and Bruce Carter, who at the time was teaching at Marycrest. "They both told me to stay away from academia," Lawless Cox said. She recalled that Bell told her, "They'll destroy you."

It's not that she was fragile, she said. "I would do things I didn't know you weren't supposed to do, and they would be successful," she said. "And he felt I would lose my spontaneity ... if I went to school. They'd drill it out of me."

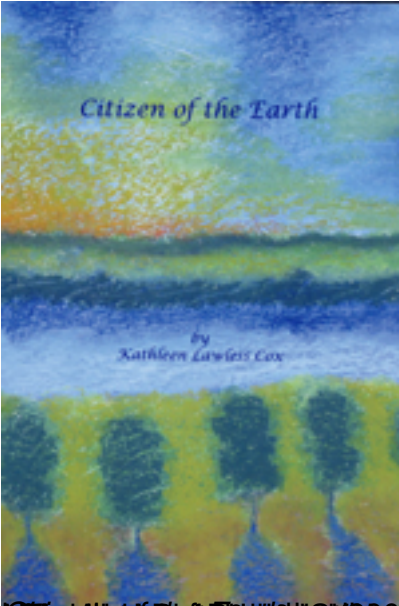
Although Lawless Cox spent two quarters at Augustana and attended Black Hawk College part-time for four years, that doesn't translate into a lack of finesse. Both her artwork and her poems, though earthy and raw, are dense and elegant.

"I'm confident enough in myself that I'm able to take risks, and I can tell if it's working or if it's not working - for me," Lawless Cox said. "It has to work for me first. If it doesn't work for me, it's not going to work for other people. ... I'm the first judge of my material And if I like it, then it's a gift. It's a gift to me."

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