

# Poetry, Business Career 'Co-exist' for John Barr, and his Life Is Richer for It Will Read at Sunday's Festival

By Sean Ely

What do the occupations investment banker and poet have in common?

"Some people find it odd or interesting that someone can be both a businessman and a poet," said West Bluff cottager John Barr, who is both. "However, I've often wondered why it's odd. If you think of a doctor or surgeon who plays the violin, there are a lot of doctors who are gifted musicians, and nobody thinks that is odd. I think that the businessman-poet combination catches the popular imagination because they seem so different,

but in fact, for me, the one fits the other. I got a lot of raw material for my poems out of my business career, while dealing with people all the time and traveling. I think that poetry sort of gave me a way to think about things that weren't strictly business. I found that the two have coexisted very well, and my life is richer for it."

Mr. Barr will read excerpts from some of his published poetry, as well as new poems Sunday, July 8, at the Poetry Festival at Little Stone Church. The readings begin at 8 p.m.

He is one of the three poets featured in July at the church.

"The atmosphere and the whole Island become a setting for the poem," he said. "Another reason I love to read here is because people are so friendly, so it's an audience that is literate and receptive, and they come to have a good time, just as I do. The tone of the readings is also very nice."

Little Stone Church pastor, the Reverend Vincent Carroll, who will also be reading poetry later in the summer, is the festival organizer.

"John Barr," he said, "has been a particular supporter of Mackinac Island and he has brought his gift of poetry and other American poets to read at Mission Church and Little Stone Church. His experience in the business world brings great credibility, combined with his skills as a poet. It should be enormously attractive to people who want to hear poetry. His expertise is just phenomenal."



John Barr on the front porch of his West Bluff cottage, with views of the Round Island Lighthouse and Grand Hotel, looks over his epic poem, "Grace," which was published in 1999.

Mr. Barr has summered on the Island since 1990 with his wife, Penny. They have three grown children, Nate, Chris, and Jenny.

The Barrs commute from Chicago, where he is president of the Poetry Foundation, and from a home in New York, their ties to his Wall Street career.

He discovered poetry in college, where he majored in English and fell in love with the poems of William Butler Yates and took all the poetry-related courses he could.

"When I graduated," he said, "I had grounding in classical and modern poetry, and I've just continued to write ever since."

Even during the 18 years he spent at Morgan Stanley, where he was a partner heading a public utility group, and later, when he and several partners formed their own small company.

"We provided financial advice and service to public utilities, like gas and electric, around the country and we sort of caught a wave. There was a bunch of consolidation, compa-

nies merging with other companies in the utilities sector in the 1990s, and we were very instrumental in all of that," he said. "And then we sold that business to a large bank in 1998. I love the corporate finance, all 30-plus years of it."

After Ruth Lilly, an heir to the Lilly Pharmaceutical Company, made a large gift to the Poetry Foundation and the organization sought a person to manage it, John Barr applied for the job and was accepted.

"If it's possible to love two careers at once, that is what I did," he said. "I absolutely loved my work as an investment banker, in corporate finance. I just love that business. I've done a lot of work with boards of directors and management of companies around the country, and the world. That was great."

The Poetry Foundation publishes Poetry Magazine, which, at nearly a century old, is the oldest literary magazine in the country. It has been the first to publish popular poets like T. S. Elliot.

Under his leadership, the

foundation created a new Web site (www.poetryfoundation.org) containing an anthology of more than 5,000 poems, which can be downloaded free. The foundation has also created the Children's Poet Lauriat, to pay attention to poetry written for young people up through the eighth grade, and in a joint venture with the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, it has organized a national competition to recite poetry called Poetry Out Loud. It is voluntary, but more than 100,000 high school students competed last May in 50 state competitions. After memorizing poems, they are judged on accuracy, delivery, and body language. Yet another program encouraged the publication of poetry in newspapers.

"For me it's a wonderful opportunity," Mr. Barr said of his new post at the Poetry Foundation. "It brings together a career I had in business and a career I had in writing poetry. In 2006, 10 million Americans either read a poem or heard a poem because of our program, that they would have not otherwise seen it. If you add up the magazine, the Web site, the media programs, and the Poetry Out Loud, it's quite a big impact."

Mr. Barr has written formal poetry, free verse, and lyric poetry and has published six collections, which have overlapped, with some being collections of other collections. Two of these publications were trade edition books. The first one, A Hundred Fathom Curve, published in 1997, has a lot of formal poetry in it, summarizing a lot of the lyric poetry that he had written for 30 years.

The second trade edition book, Grace, published in 1999, was a 150-page book-length poem which he calls a "mock epic." He will read excerpts from it at the Poetry Festival. It is meant to be humorous, written in a voice of another character, covering themes that he found important during the time he wrote it.

His poetry evolves over time. "I write on and off frequently, so I don't have a set period of time I write everyday," he said. "I tend to carry around 3-by-5 [inch] cards. When a line comes to me, I stop and I write it down. After this gets full, I take all the 3-by-5 cards and copy the lines

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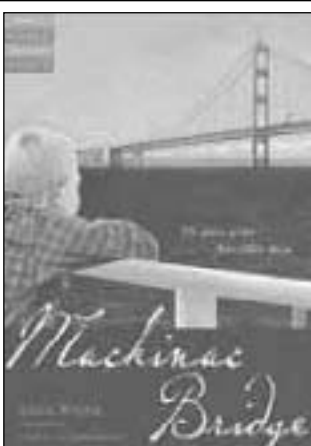
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**Thursday, July 12<sup>th</sup>**  
5:00 - 6:00 p.m.  
Illustrator **GIJSBERT VAN FRANKENHUYZEN**  
Also Robbyn Smith van Frankenhuyzen Author of "Kelly of Hazel Ridge"  
Sleeping Bear Press \$17<sup>95</sup>

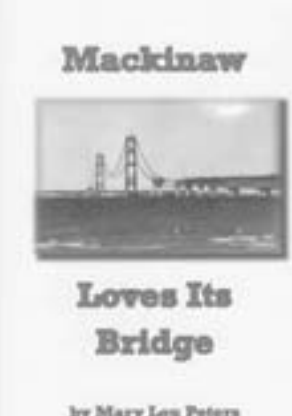
**BOOKSIGNINGS**

**Tuesday, July 10<sup>th</sup>**  
1:00 - 3:00 p.m.  
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**Saturday, July 14<sup>th</sup>**  
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