Juan Felipe Herrera
2015 United States Poet Laureate

About Juan Felipe Herrera
Waking up is the biggest thing. I'm a political poet — let us say a human poet, a poet that's concerned with the plight of people who suffer. If words can be of assistance, then that's what I'm going to use.” —Juan Felipe Herrera

In 2015 Juan Felipe Herrera was appointed the 21st United State Poet Laureate, the first Mexican American to hold the position. In his statement of choice, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington said Herrera's poems “contain Whitman-esque multitudes that champion voices, traditions and histories, as well as a cultural perspective” that serve to illuminate our larger American identity. Herrera grew up in California as the son to migrant farmers, which he has commented strongly shaped much of his work. A Washington Post article tells the story that “As a child, Herrera learned to love poetry by singing about the Mexican Revolution with his mother, a migrant farmworker in California. Inspired by her spirit, he has spent his life crossing borders, erasing boundaries and expanding the American chorus.”

Herrera is the author of thirty books, including collections of poetry, prose, short stories, young adult novels and picture books for children. His collections of poetry include Notes of the Assemblage (City Lights, 2015), Senegal Taxi (University of Arizona, 2013); Half of the World in Light: New and Selected Poems (2008), a recipient of the PEN/Beyond Margins Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award; 187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross The Border: Undocuments 1971-2007 (City Lights, 2007); and Crashboomlove: A Novel in Verse (University of New Mexico, 1999), which received the Americas Award. In 2014, he released the nonfiction work Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes (Dial), which showcases twenty Hispanic and Latino American men and women who have made outstanding contributions to the arts, politics, science, humanitarianism, and athletics—a magnificent homage to those who have shaped our nation.

His books of prose for children include: SkateFate (Rayo, 2011); Calling The Doves (Children’s Book, 2001), which won the Ezra Jack Keats Award; Upside Down Boy (2006), which was adapted into a musical for young audiences in New York City; and Cinnamon Girl: Letters Found Inside a Cereal Box (HarperCollins, 2005), which tells the tragedy of 9/11 through the eyes of a young Puerto Rican girl.

From 2012-2014, Herrera served as California’s Poet Laureate, appointed by Governor Jerry Brown. As the state Poet Laureate, Herrera created the i-Promise Joanna Project, an anti-bullying poetry project. Joanna was an elementary school girl who was bullied and killed in an afterschool fight in Long Beach. The first half asks students to send in poems about experiences and effects of bullying. The second half of the project is to take action in preventing bullying. Herrera hopes to collect the poems and publish it as a book in the future. Other projects included Answer Cancer with a Poem, Show Me Your Papers, and The Most Incredible and Biggest Poem on Unity in the World.

Influenced by Allen Ginsberg and Luis Valdez and his own immersion into the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Herrera writes passionately about social issues. Herrera is also a performance artist and activist on behalf of migrant and indigenous communities and at-risk youth. His work has been known to cross genres, even into opera and dance theatre. While 187 Reasons Mexicanos Can’t Cross the Borders chronicles Herrera’s involvement with spoken word and street movement performance troupes across the nation, his attention to language-centered texts can be seen in Half of the World in Light. While calling Herrera “the elder statesman of Mexican American poetry,” former National Endowment for the Arts chairman Dana Gioia points to the significance of his connection to a younger generation. Herrera is “the first U.S. laureate whose work has emerged from the new oral traditions that have been transforming American poetry over the past “quarter-century,” Gioia says. “He can write traditional poems for the page, but many of his poems are designed primarily for spoken delivery. His work is performative, and communal. In this sense, Herrera speaks powerfully to younger poets and audiences.” (Washington Post)

Herrera has received fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the University of California at Berkeley, the Breadloaf Writers’ Conference, the Stanford Chicano Fellows Program, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He was elected an Academy Chancellor in 2011. He was educated at UCLA and Stanford University in Social Anthropology, and received his MFA from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He has taught at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop and served as chair of the Chicano and Latin American Studies Department at CSU-Fresno. Herrera recently retired from the Creative Writing Department at UC Riverside. He lives in Fresno, California with his partner, the poet and performance artist, Margarita Robles.
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