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# The State of Illinois has a new Poet Laureate and fellow poets rejoice



New Poet Laureate Mark Turcotte greets people during a 60th anniversary celebration of the Illinois Arts Council on April 29, 2025, at the Illinois Governor's Mansion in Springfield. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

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As of Tuesday, the new Illinois Poet Laureate is named Mark Turcotte and this is a portion of one of his poems, the beginning stanza of "Flies Buzzing."

*As a child I danced*

*to the heartfelt, savage*

*rhythm*

*of the Native, the*

*American Indian,*

*in the Turtle Mountains,*

*in the Round Hall,*

*in the greasy light of*

*kerosene lamps.*

"Mark Turcotte's work reflects the complex and beautiful landscape of both our state and the country as a whole through his unique perspective as a Native writer who has lived across the U.S. but has found a home here in Illinois," said Governor JB Pritzker at a celebration.

Turcotte was born in 1958 and raised on North Dakota's Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation. After school in Michigan, he traveled the country, often living in migrant camps, until landing in Chicago in 1993.

He almost immediately came to the attention of Gwendolyn Brooks, the esteemed, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and also an Illinois Poet Laureate. It was she who awarded Turcotte the first Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Award and recognized him as a Significant Illinois Poet. Other awards came his way, including from the Lannan Foundation, the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, and the Wisconsin Arts Board.

He is the author of many collections, including "Exploding Chippewas," "Le Chant de la Route" and "The Feathered Heart." He is a senior lecturer at DePaul University in Chicago.

He follows the term of Angela Jackson (2020-2025) and joins a small club that also includes Brooks (1968-2000), Howard B. Austin (1936-1962), Carl Sandburg (1962-1967) and Kevin Stein (2003-2017).

This is an honorary position, “tasked with promoting access to literary arts and raising awareness through statewide community engagement.” It comes with a yearly salary of \$35,000 and \$10,000 for expenses.

Many in the poetry community applauded the choice. Turcotte sent his friend poet/artist Tony Fitzpatrick a text earlier on Tuesday telling him the news.

“I cannot think of a better choice for this honor,” Fitzpatrick told me. “I met Mark in the early 90’s when we both got to read poems in honor of Gwendolyn Brooks. We were thrilled. I read a poem about Satchel Paige and Mark read one from his then upcoming book, ‘Exploding Chippewas.’

“The poem was nothing short of riveting. The hair on the back of my neck and my arms stood up. It was about his birth, his beginning, about being born into the culture of First Nation peoples.

“After Mark read his poem that day, Gwendolyn Brooks turned to me and said, ‘And that is how you do this.’”

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