

ARTS & CULTURE

John Barr, Poetry Czar; That's Her Story, and She's Sticking to It

After Vietnam and Wall Street, John Barr's ready to take on the Poetry Foundation.

by Deanna Isaacs February 12, 2004



John Barr, Poetry Czar

When pharmaceutical heir Ruth Lilly announced a gift of more than \$100 million to Poetry magazine a couple years ago, she launched Chicago's greatest institutional Cinderella story.

The pot shrank rapidly. Within months, Poetry's gift was down \$36 million and the magazine was party to a lawsuit charging the Indiana bank that manages the Lilly trusts with mishandling the funds.

But the wand had waved. The Modern Poetry Association was transformed into the Poetry Foundation, editor Christian Wiman took over the journal, and a national search was begun for a leader.



Smitten by Wordsworth and Emerson in high school, Barr was determined to be a poet—and savvy enough not to depend on it for his livelihood. He majored in English at Harvard, joining the navy to get his tuition paid.

Meanwhile, he wrote. His first book, War Zone, culled from notes scribbled in Vietnam, was published by a small literary press in 1989.

Now commuting from his home in Connecticut (which he'll keep, along with a part-time role at his firm), Barr expects to be settled in Chicago in a matter of weeks.

That's Her Story, and She's Sticking to It

City planning and development commissioner Alicia Berg says troubles with the mayor are not behind her move to Columbia College—a report in the Sun-Times to that effect notwithstanding.

Berg does say the mayor “was disappointed that there was anything that could have been misconstrued as to be unusual,” but insists the timing of her exit is “coincidental.”

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo/Bruce Powell.

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