



The enigmatic Bob McAllister (and friends) will read from his new book of poetry, "Even in the Wind, Even in the Dark," March 13 at San Carlos Restaurant.
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BAINBRIDGE ISLAND REVIEW

Poetry is magic for 'Mad Priest' McAllister

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You can count the number of sentences on one hand before [Island Treasure](#) Bob McAllister gets allusional. Not delusional, *allusional*.

In this case, over lemonade at Doc's, the reference is to the movie "Little Big Man," where Chief Dan George plays a Lakota elder up on the sacred mountain with a dark storm cloud closing in. Even in the wind, even in the dark, the chief lays down on his elk robe and says, "And now I will die." His face is stone, his body still – until a large raindrop falls on his face and he flinches. He flinches again when another drop falls on his face. The elder sits up and asks if he's left this world yet and Dustin Hoffman's character tells him no.

"Well," the chief muses, "sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't."

McAllister shared the metaphor in regard to "[Even in the Wind, Even in the Dark](#)," the long-awaited collection of his poems. He's pretty sure that somewhere in this body of work, culled from 39 years of playing with words, "some magic has occurred."

The book is published by long-time colleagues and friends, Everett Thompson and Nancy Rekow of NW Trillium Press. Thompson had encouraged McAllister to commit his work to paper for several years. The book features 65 poems written by McAllister between 1970 and 2010 and 27 images by fellow Island Treasure photographer Joel Sackett.

McAllister will read from his new book, as one of three featured poets at tomorrow night's gathering at [Poulsbohemian Coffeehouse](#). He'll read again on March 13 at [San Carlos Restaurant](#) and April 7 at [Eagle Harbor Book Company](#).

Renaissance man

McAllister, who moved to the island in 1968, spent 35 years teaching English and drama at Bainbridge High School. He produced more than 100 stage productions during his tenure. His affect on former (and even current) students is evident from the effusive messages posted on his Facebook page.

He lives on the island with his wife Merry, who teaches science at Woodward Middle School, their children having flown the coop.

Nowadays he teaches English and communications at Olympic College and co-hosts a weekly writing week-shop with Rekow.

For years he supplemented his teaching income with carpentry work, until the bottom dropped out of the construction industry. He keeps the saw sharp though, building sets for BPA.

McAllister, who turns 70 in mid-March, is known for his collection of colorful Converse tennis shoes, a staple since eighth-grade basketball. His signature look comes in handy as a teacher, he said. Anything to keep the kids' attention.

Unfortunately, the classic shoes don't have a lot of arch support, he said, but suddenly turning traditionalist, he won't buy inserts.

"I welcome the pain," he joked. "I suffer for my style."

In deep

The cover of "Even in the Wind, Even in the Dark," features a Sackett photo of the churning sea.

After decades of nudging students into the deep end of self-expression, McAllister loses the lifeguard role and dives in with a double half-twist.

"It scares me," he said. "A book is really intimate. It's what matters to me, and I'm laying it out there. It leaves you a bit 'fragnurable.'"

McAllister loves words, or more accurately, he loves communication – as authentic, precise and passionate as possible. Words are just tools of the trade, and he's not above jury-rigging two of them to come up with just the right connotation.

"Fragnurable (fragile + vulnerable) is about those students who are open, still finding something new," he said.

The Mad Priest

As legend has it, in the early '70s, McAllister was taking a poetry workshop with poet Nelson Bentley. "Touched with a tinge of madness," McAllister adopted the persona of "Mad Priest," one night reading Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" by candlelight. When he finished the last line, a crow sitting outside responded with a "caw, caw," and the name stuck.

In "The Mad Priest," a poem he wrote in 2010, he writes:

"Now a coruscated 69, I am still at the altar,/still a riven water, still strange-mad, still/ stopped by a ribbon of birds, ripple of words...

In "Sometimes I see us with a Styrofoam Square," McAllister talks about the many faces we show to the world.

"The seventh[face], which does not appear,/ is the only one that interests me."

...petrified, pellucid and pregnant--/ waiting to be born when we finally/show the cracked mirror, the dark/regrets, the longing for love/that trembles like heavy water."

There are many faces in these pages – portraits of people McAllister has been influenced by, others simply sojourners along the way.

With sleight-of-hand mastery, he distracts the mind with linguistic antics, showing us the green scarf so we can see it with our own two eye... just before he turns it purple.

Some poems are written in dappled sunlight, other are weathered by the fiercest of storms. The section about his brother Gary, who committed suicide, is resolutely stark.

"You don't understand something until you write about it," McAllister said. He navigates the pitch and roll of loss and love, never more tender than when he's speaking of his mother: Schoolboy waving to his mother; adolescent slamming the door; later, father-yet-still-son waving a final goodbye.

In "Even As We Sleep," from which the title of the book is taken, McAlister let's us know that, despite it all, he's all right.

"Even in the Wind, Even in the Dark," covers a lifetime's worth of terrain. Sometimes the magic works, sometimes it doesn't. Now you see him. Now you don't.

A treasured collaboration



“A poet with a shutter,” McAllister called Joel Sackett, whose images grace “Even in the Wind, Even in the Dark.”

“The idea for combining photographs with his poems was Bob’s idea,” Sackett wrote in an email. about the creative process. “Then I read through the poems and started to get into them, some quickly, some much slower, or in fragments, each one a separate entity at first, and gradually I absorbed them as a collection.

“The project gave me an opportunity to play mix and match. Bob had a few suggestions about making new photographs, and those became collaborative. Some were new photos that were inspired by a particular phrase, line or image. Still others were existing photographs that related on somehow to a particular poem or section of poems, the more ambiguous the better. I wanted to leave as much room for the viewer’s imagination as possible.

“I carried a copy of Bob’s manuscript with me, literally and figuratively. I kept a copy in my truck and read it on the ferry. Sometimes inspiration came as I drove up 99 in Seattle, or walked through Pioneer Square at night. The images within the poems were there, waiting to be discovered.”

Con Man

- Bob McAllister, will read as one of three featured poets (with Ray Greott and Bill MaWhinney), from 7-9 p.m. Saturday at the Poulsbohemian Coffeehouse.
- McAllister and friends will read from “[Even in the Wind, Even in the Dark](#)” from 2-4 p.m. March 13 at San Carlos Restaurant.
- Joel Sackett joins McAllister to discuss their collaboration at 7:30 p.m. April 7 at Eagle Harbor Book Company.

For more information, visit www.madpriest.net.

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