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AWARD-WINNING POET TURNER CASSITY DIES AT 80

Hailed as “A national treasure,” Cassity was famed for writing style, wit and humor

Turner Cassity, a nationally known, award-winning poet and a librarian at Emory University’s Robert W. Woodruff Library for 29 years, died July 26 at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta after a brief illness. He was 80 years old and actively wrote until his illness. Cassity was hailed as “a national treasure” by *Booklist* contributor Ray Olson, and as “perhaps the most brilliantly eccentric poet in America,” by Dana Gioia, immediate past chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.



Turner Cassity upon his retirement from the Emory Libraries, 1991.

Cassity published 11 volumes of poetry, the first in 1966 (*Watchboy, What of the Night?*, Wesleyan University Press) and the most recent in 2007 (*Devils and Islands*, Ohio University Press). A 12th volume is scheduled for fall 2009 publication. In 1966, an entire issue of the literary journal *Poetry* was devoted to Cassity’s 12-chapter poem *The Airship Boys in Africa*. His work was featured in *The Kenyon Review* and numerous other publications.

Cassity’s poetry drew critical acclaim and a wide following among poets and poetry lovers who appreciated his terse, elegant style, his wit and biting humor, and his telling observations about people. He often noted that, “You just should not expect too much of people.” When asked what he wrote about, he once replied, “the wickedness of the world. That way I will never run out of material.”

Cassity’s verse was characterized by his disciplined devotion to rhyme and meter — particularly the couplet — and an economical choice of words. Well read and widely traveled, Cassity wrote poems that drew on his experiences in the military (1952-1954) and his time spent in South Africa, where he worked for the Transvaal Provincial Library, as well as on opera, British colonial and post-colonial history, current events, literature and popular culture.

He liked to say that he never wrote about emotions and never about himself and that, though a Southerner, he was not a “Southern writer” and did not write about the South. Poetry readings by Cassity invariably

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drew large and mixed audiences who responded to his irony and playfulness and to his wry and pithy observations on world events, people and places. The Poetry Foundation described Cassity's work as "renowned for its satiric humor and tight structure."

National recognitions included the Blumenthal-Leviton-Blonder Prize for poetry, 1966; A National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1980; the Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, 1991; and the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Michael Braude Award, 1993. The West Chester Poetry Conference included a special "Tribute to Turner Cassity" in its 2008 program.

Cassity was a graduate of Millsaps College, which presented him with an honorary doctorate of humane letters in 2003. He earned an M. A. in English from Stanford University, where he was a student of Yvor Winters, and an M.S. in library science from Columbia University. After positions as a librarian in Jackson, Miss. and Pretoria, South Africa, he joined the Emory Libraries in 1962 and remained until his retirement in 1991. For most of his Emory career he was head of head of serials and binding — the job, he said, that made his real career as a poet possible.

Cassity briefly taught classes in Emory's Creative Writing program, ensuring that his legacy endures among current and future poets. In addition, he and poet Michael Mott co-founded the Callanwolde Readings Program, which highlights poets and readers, at Atlanta's Callanwolde Fine Arts Center. Cassity was sought after nationwide for live readings of his poetry throughout his life.

The Turner Cassity Fund at the Emory Libraries supports the growth of poetry collections in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Library (MARBL), which also houses his archive. MARBL is renowned internationally for its collections in modern literature, African American literature, and the history of Georgia and the South.

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[Emory University \(http://www.emory.edu\)](http://www.emory.edu) is known for its demanding academics, outstanding undergraduate experience, highly ranked professional schools and state-of-the-art research facilities. Perennially ranked as one of the country's top 20 national universities by U.S. News & World Report, Emory encompasses nine academic divisions as well as the Carlos Museum, The Carter Center, the Yerkes National Primate Research Center and Emory Healthcare, Georgia's largest and most comprehensive health care system.