

Tusculum graduate wins National Book Award

A Tusculum University alumnus has won the National Book Award for poetry.

Justin Phillip Reed, a 2013 Tusculum College graduate, earned the honor for his collection "Indecency." He had been one of five finalists to achieve this recognition and he joins some of the best-known authors in the country's history as recipients of a National Book Award.

"This is well-deserved recognition for outstanding work created by one of our youngest alums, who is already leaving an impressive mark on the literary world," said Dr. James Hurley, Tusculum's president. "We're thrilled Justin has attained this stature so early in his career, and we're extremely proud of our English faculty, who helped shape his immense skills and prepare him to reach these heights. This honor is a prime example of the quality of Tusculum University and the lengths to which our degrees can take you."

The National Book Foundation, a nonprofit organization that administers the awards, described "Indecency" this way:

"Questions of systemic hostility and the struggle against oppressive institutions live at the heart of Justin Phillip Reed's "Indecency," which seeks to intimately confront issues of masculinity, sexuality, racism and more, working to both critique and lament a culture of exploitation."

Previous National Book Awards winners include well-regarded writers William Faulkner, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, Katherine Anne Porter and John Updike.

Reed earned a bachelor of arts degree in English, with a concentration in creative writing, from Tusculum. He then obtained his master of fine arts in poetry from Washington University in St. Louis, where he was junior writer-in-residence.

"I would emphasize that all of the classes I took in the writing program at Tusculum were really rigorous," Reed said. "The program attempts to build an appreciation for and an ability to create using various genres and modes of writing and to develop a critical eye. That is not a common experience among my peers. All of my writing workshop classes at Tusculum continue to influence the way I write and read all kinds of poetry."

He lives in St. Louis, and his writings appear in publications such as African American Review, Best American Essay, Callaloo, the Kenyon Review and Obsidian. He was the inaugural St. Paul de Vence James Baldwin writer-in-residence and has received fellowships from the Cave Canem Foundation, the Conversation Literary Festival and the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis.

During the award ceremony, Reed discussed the importance of gratitude.

"Thank you endlessly," he said. "Every day, I mean to be grateful until gratitude sometimes overwhelms me. I have known such patient and persistent teachers, and in this moment, I want to effloresce with thanks to all teachers - your teachers, my teachers."

Reed returned to Tusculum in April to read from "Indecency" during the Old Oak Festival, and about 50 alumni came to listen to him. Wayne Thomas, dean of Tusculum's College of Civic and Liberal Arts, was one of Reed's teachers and introduced him at that event.

"He had an innate talent, he worked really hard and he was consistently thoughtful," Thomas said of Reed during his Tusculum years. "I tell my students there are three important qualities to being an effective writer — show initiative, do what you're asked when you're asked and pay attention to detail. Justin had all of those attributes, and it has paid off for him nicely."

"In the English Department, we have talked for a long time about how he was destined for success. The fact that he won this award so early in his writing career is surprising, but the fact he received this award is not shocking for those of us who have known him for a long time."

To learn more about the author, visit www.justinphillipreed.com. *A!*



Justin Phillip Reed (photo by Nicholas A. C. Nichols)

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