

Gifting Inspiration

Fellowships
fund travel
for MFA
candidates

*By Susan
Seligson*

POET SOPHIE GRIMES IS CAPTIVATED BY LANGUAGE barriers and our earnest, often ill-fated efforts to transcend them. Since she was a child, she longed for sights and sounds far beyond the familiar. As an undergraduate at Oberlin College, Grimes (GRS'11) sharpened her focus, turning to the language and culture of China. Mandarin language studies followed, along with a semester in Beijing as an Oberlin Shansi fellow, and two postgraduate years in China teaching English. But it was during the nearly three months in East Asia as a recipient of a Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship in Creative Writing that the 27-year-old Grimes, with no directive other than to embrace her surroundings, allowed this land of colliding cultures and languages to fully ignite her muse.

Then a master's candidate in the Creative Writing Program, Grimes was one of the 2011 crop of MFA students to receive global fellowships as beneficiaries of a 2009 \$2 million gift by philanthropist Robert J. Hildreth, a BU trustee and former vice chair of the Board of Overseers. Founder and executive director of the Foundation for an Open America, which advocates for immigrants and immigration reform, Hildreth believes that three months of overseas travel can engage and inspire today's budding writers and poets, just as it did so many of their predecessors, from Gustave Flaubert to Mark Twain.

His gift provides fellowships of several thousand dollars for most of the MFA candidates who apply for

them. The fellows hone their writerly voices all over the map, checking in with their professors and one another through entries on the BU Creative Writing Global Fellowships blog.

The fellowship honors poet, translator, and critic Pinsky, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of English, who was U.S. poet laureate from 1997 to 2000. The Hildreth gift to the Creative Writing Program has also endowed a global fellowship for fiction writers and an international visiting professorship in creative writing, both named for novelist Leslie Epstein, program director and a CAS professor of English.

Although she'd already lived there, Grimes chose China for her fellowship so she could "go back and refresh" the way she saw the place that had captivated her since she first glimpsed a photo of the Great Wall. "It was a more acute way of exploring those experiences poetically," says Grimes, who recently submitted her first book of poems in hopes of publication. Between August and mid-November 2011, she traveled south across China from Beijing, and also visited Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, using the fellowship money to pay for transportation and lodging. She believes that detours from the safe and predictable are the stuff of inspiration for poets and writers alike. And it was something that connected the fellows, who set off to locales that include the Balkans, Bhutan, Spain, Vietnam, and Cuba. "Everyone had put themselves in a really unstable personal place," Grimes says, "and I feel that instability is a perfect kick-starter for people in their writing."

Grimes met Hildreth last fall, when the Pinsky global fellows gathered for a reading at the Castle. An international banker, Hildreth is CEO and founder of the Boston-based International Bank Services and has been an economist with the International Monetary Fund. "Bob is awesome," she says. "He is this really bubbly guy who is always deflecting the attention off himself. One thing he did that was really nice—he read parts of the blog anonymously from all the fellows, and all of them talked about their writing process. That is the heart of this whole fellowship."

As Hildreth puts it, "The best thing you can leave society is a few strands to our story." Telling stories about who we are as human beings is critically important, he says. "We have to keep that alive."



Poet Sophie Grimes spent three months in East Asia as a Robert Pinsky Global Fellow. Her sole directive: embrace your surroundings.

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