

MOST POPULAR

CODY WALKER, Seattle's prince of the poetic one-two punch, adds a new book and a prestigious fellowship to his list of accomplishments

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IT'S NOT EVERY POET who can pull off a book that combines a high-brow reference to Walt Whitman (the title, *Shuffle and Breakdown*, is taken from *Leaves of Grass*) with an epigraph by Richard Pryor. But Seattle's official poet populist Cody Walker is not just any poet, and the Pryor quote—"This ain't as funny as we thought it was gonna be"—gives fair warning that readers can expect Walker's new book (Waywiser Press, November 2008, \$16.95) to pull them in many directions at once. The poems are way funnier than readers might anticipate, and also sadder, and more trenchant, and more biting. Walker's well-hewn poetic lines combine cerebral word play with verbal high jinks in a one-two punch of poetic bravado. "The lyric expansiveness of Whitman is undercut by the jabs of Pryor," explains Walker, who mines this high-low dichotomy in his work. "I like it when the 'ho ho' turns into the 'oh, no,'" he adds. ¶ Walker's poems—which have appeared in *Parnassus*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Best American Poetry*—pull readers in with their yearning, earnest tone, slap them around a little, and then leave them gasping, either in laughter or agony over the perfect combination of scathing social commentary and lexicographic legerdemain. An example is "Least Weasel,"



where the sounds of the title pull your mouth into a smile, even as you recoil at the image of the weasel. Walker says he rarely begins a poem with an idea. "I write in coffee shops," he says, "jotting down words and working on them until I find a rhythm." He writes poems to political figures, poems in the voice of Whitman's fictional grandson, even poems from the point of view of Bozo the Clown. ¶ This past year has been a good one for Walker, 41, who lives in Seattle and teaches English at the University of Washington. In addition to his poet populist term (ending in January), he has just finished a two-year stint as writer-in-residence at Richard Hugo House and was the first writer-in-residence at the Seattle Art Museum (2007–08), where he curated a reading series that invited local poets to write new work in response to art in SAM's collection. He completed his seventh year as a writer-in-residence with Seattle Arts & Lectures' Writers in the School (WITS) program. In addition, he won the prestigious 2009 Amy Clampitt Fellowship, which will pay him a salary and provide housing in Clampitt's former house in Lenox, Massachusetts, for six months while he works on manuscript number two. Walker is reluctant to leave the local poetry scene even for a short time, because of the supportive community here. His lifeline is a writers' group

known by its members as The Forgers' Circle, which meets once a month to study the work of a famous poet, removing the final stanza of a poem and "forging" their own version of an ending. "You have to figure out how they put their poems together, matching their meter, language and tone," says Walker. But this exercise isn't merely academic. "I've used some of my 'forgeries' to begin a new poem," he says. ¶ Walker looks forward to the new work that he hopes will come from the Clampitt Fellowship. In a typical combination of seriousness and humor, he says that at least "I'll have no excuse for not working."

LEAST WEASEL BY CODY WALKER

A theory goes that an artist handles heartache by making art. Here's what the least weasel does. He carts home God's mock-ups (feet, spare tails) and makes a woodland scarecrow. In all respects the piece is his: the detail of the forty eyes, the scars, the excess. *O tiny Rex of woes, least weasel!* Give him wide arc.

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