

Poet Sharon Olds will read at the Mount

by Madeline Vuong, Special to Berkshires Week & Shires of Vermont,

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Pulitzer Prize-winner Sharon Olds on the porch of her home in Pittsfield, N.H. She will read her poems at the Mount on Friday (Associated Press)

ENOX -- Sharon Olds calls herself a poet of ordinary things.

"I seem to have written a lot about ordinary subjects, such as parents, children, sex, love, and divorce," she said. "I'm interested in things like how parents treat their children and the challenges those children face when they're trying to grow up to be good parents themselves."

On Friday, Sept. 12, Olds will read some of her poems at The Mount, the estate of Edith Wharton, the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. Every year, the Mount partners with the

ampitt Fund to bring a living writer to the estate.

Wharton's home was alive with writing 100 years ago. Part of our vision is to bring writing back, to re-kindle that creative spirit here on the land," said Kelsey Muir, director of public programs and education at the Mount.

Like Wharton, Olds won a Pulitzer Prize, but Olds won hers in poetry. She won the prize for her collection, "Stag's Leap," about the complex and often painful feelings surrounding her divorce.

"When the drawing on the label of our favorite wine / looks like my husband casting himself off in his fervor to get free of me," she writes in the title poem.

Though some critics have characterized "Stag's Leap" as a collection of poems about Olds' divorce from her husband of 32 years, Olds herself is reluctant to say that the collection is autobiographical.

"I like to talk about my poems not as memoirs or autobiography, but as poems. The important thing, it seems to me, is not to compare the life to the art and to try to use every poem as a means to find out more about the poet, but instead to try to understand the poems as they are on their own terms," she said.

In fact, Olds has never talked about her family in any interview with the media.

"I'm not comfortable with it," she said. "It took a long time for me to even admit that some of these poems had autobiographical elements, because I was worried it would obscure the universality of experience that I wanted them to communicate with one particular narrative. It could become the truth of those poems."

Though Olds has now been writing and publishing poems for more than 40 years, she did not always know poetry was for her.

"I think it's most accurate to say that poetry chose me, rather than the other way around," she said. "I experimented with other literary forms. I tried to write a play. It was terrible. I tried to write fiction. It was terrible."

But she settled on poetry.

"It was the only one I was good at," she said.

And Olds believes she may have gotten her predilection for poetry early on.

The pattern of scansion that appears in most of my poems -- which I didn't intend, and I didn't know about until I was in my 50s -- is four-beat lines," she said. "I think it was an unconscious copying and altering of the hymns I was hearing as a child in church that also had four-beat lines."

It makes sense, then, that what Olds likes best about poetry is its musicality.

The fact that [poetry] is in thought-out lines is very important to me," she said. "It doesn't go the way to the end of the line and back, like prose. It wants a pause, a certain kind of rhythm. It has a musicality that's more obvious than prose's."

Sometimes, though, her focus on the musical element of poetry poses a challenge.

"I don't want to choose weird, obscure words because of how they hit my ear," she said. "But one of my neighbors told me she'd had to look up every other word in my book, and I thought, 'Oh my God!' I don't want people to think of my poems as vocabulary quizzes or as overly intellectual. It's not that. It's just something I worry about when I'm writing."

It seems that Olds' concern about alienating readers through strange word choice is a test of how much she wants for her poetry to be relatable. Ultimately, she writes poetry not only for her own pleasure, but to communicate with others.

"Why do I do poetry? Why do people do anything? We want to feel like our lives matter, that we've been able to touch others' lives, to give them pleasure or knowledge, companionship, to combat loneliness," she said.

And for many readers, Olds has succeeded in touching their lives through her poetry.

"It's a tremendous gift to be able to share Sharon Olds' work with the Berkshires," Mullen says. "I think anyone who comes to her reading will be able to see at least a little bit of their own lives in what they hear. Her poetry isn't ivory tower poetry -- instead, it's poetry of the everyday experience. She really is a poet of ordinary things, and that's why people relate to her. Anybody can take away something from what they've heard."

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What: Reading by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Sharon Olds

When: 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 12

Where: The Mount, 2 Plunkett St., Lenox.

Admission: Free with registration, no walk-ins: please call ahead

Information: (413) 551-5111, edithwharton.org