

# Mary Szybist (1970–)

By Kimberly Campbell

"With her intelligence and understated grace," the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote, poet and educator Mary Szybist "may become one of the best-known writers of her generation." The recipient of the 2013 National Book Award for *Incaradine*, Szybist is candid about taking risks as a poet, acknowledging that not all risks pay off. Poetry, she believes, requires patience. Reviewers of her poems note her commitment to exploring complex issues of relationships with self, others, and the world, as well as love and faith.

Mary Szybist (pronounced she-bist) was born on September 20, 1970, in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and grew up in what she described as a religious home. As a young girl, she attended Annunciation Catholic Church, where she "spent many hours looking up at the Annunciation scene," she told the *Oregonian*. "I may not have had regular access to great museums growing up, but each week I did sit and look up at real Tiffany windows of religious icons that changed, continually, with the light." The poems in her award-winning collection *Incaradine* were inspired by paintings of the Annunciation she studied during a trip to Florence and her thoughts about how those works connect to images in her family church.

Szybist attended the University of Virginia, earning a bachelor of arts degree in 1992 and a master of teaching in 1994. She received a master of fine arts in 1996 from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was a teaching-writing fellow. She went on to teach at Kenyon College, the University of Iowa, the Tennessee Governor's School for Humanities, the University of Virginia's Young Writers Workshop, and West High School in Iowa City. She also served on the faculty of Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina.

Since 2004, Szybist has been on the faculty at Lewis & Clark College, where she is the Morgan S. Odell Professor of Humanities. In an interview on her faculty page she shares her appreciation for how teaching has allowed her to "think with students." She is married to poet Jerry Harp, who also teaches at Lewis & Clark.

Szybist's first book of poetry, *Granted*, was published in 2003, a collection of poems that focus on relationships and explore the difficulties of faith and love. "This is poetry of a rare fine delicacy," reviewer Donald Justice wrote. "Its very modesty testifies to a great ambition—to overcome by the quietest of means." A finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the book won the 2002 Beatrice Hawley Award and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award in 2004. The *Library Journal* listed *Granted* on its list of the Best Poetry of 2003.

*Incaradine*, her second poetry collection, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2013. Szybist's "lovely musical touch is light and exact enough to catch the weight and grind of love," Kay Ryan, one of the poetry judges, wrote. "This is a hard paradox to master as she does." The poems in the collection were inspired by the paintings depicting religious scenes that Szybist studied in Italian art museums. *Slate* named *Incaradine* the Best Book of the Year, and *Publisher's Weekly* listed it as one of the Top Five Books of 2013. *Incaradine* also received the Oregon Book Award for Poetry in 2014. "Szybist gives us poems that wrestle with the same mysteries and contradictions we all face on a daily basis," James Crews wrote, "doing our best, and often failing to make sense of them. Somehow she has managed to make lasting art of our human failings; she has turned our sometimes humorous, sometimes serious engagement with confusion into a beautiful, grace-filled book."

Szybist's poetry has been published in several journals, including the *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, the *Denver Quarterly*, and the *Iowa Review*. Her work received two Pushcart prizes, in 2012 and 2015, and her poems have appeared in Pushcart Prize anthologies and in *Best American Poetry* (2008). She received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rona Jaffe Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She also received the Witter Bynner Fellowship, which is administered in conjunction with the Library of Congress. Her work was supported by two residencies, at MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy.

## Sources

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