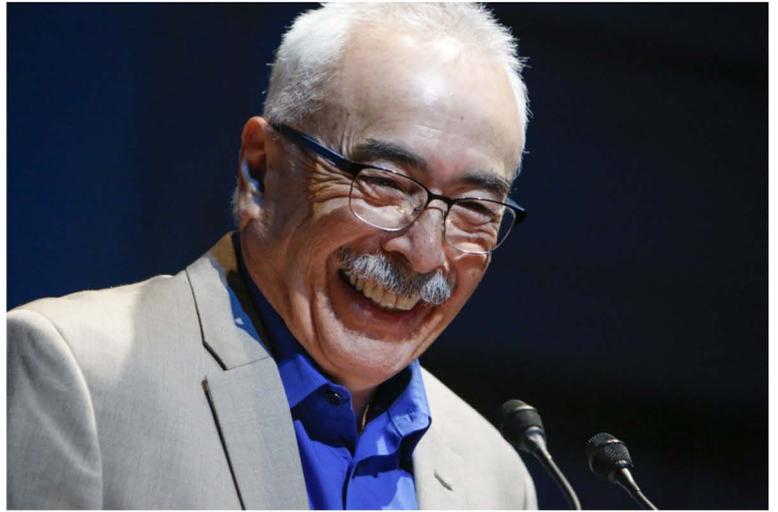


Books

New U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera fantastic debut in DC

By **Ron Charles** September 16



Juan Felipe Herrera conducts his inaugural reading as poet laureate at the Library of Congress in Washington. (Shawn Miller/Library of Congress)

Juan Felipe Herrera, the new U.S. poet laureate, thanked a lot of people during his inaugural reading Tuesday night. But then he took the audience back to 1958 and described a woman in Burbank, Calif., who put him on the path to Washington.

Herrera, a child of migrant farmers, had been punished in first grade for speaking Spanish; second grade, he sighed, was another “brutal year.” But in third grade, he had Mrs. Sampson. One day, she asked him to come to the front of the class and sing a song. Nervous and self-conscious, he sang “Three Blind Mice.” His friends had to translate Mrs. Sampson’s assessment into Spanish for him: “You have a beautiful voice.”

“It changed my life,” Herrera told the rapt audience at the Library of Congress. He has spent years trying to realize what Mrs. Sampson meant, and now he tells others, “You have a beautiful voice.”

Then, in a miracle that seemed entirely in harmony with the evening, Herrera pointed to the front row of the auditorium and introduced the 94-year-old Leyla Sampson.

If there were any doubt, Herrera, the first Mexican American U.S. poet laureate, made it clear Tuesday night that he’s bringing a new sense of wonder and drama to the position. His inaugural reading was infused with humility and graciousness, but it was also an elaborately choreographed event informed by his years as a teacher and activist.

Herrera recalled being so poor when he attended UCLA that he carried his books in a cardboard box with a rope around it. He arrived in San Francisco in the late 1970s thinking he’d “conquer the poetry scene.” He acknowledged with a laugh, “We didn’t conquer anything, but that was okay because it meant we made a lot of friends.”