



# PROFILE | From Chicago to the Ozarks, poet Carolyn Guinzio never felt like an outsider when she first saw Fayetteville

Her work reflects a life lived in deep observation

February 28, 2026 by Dustin Staggs



“Thinking is my favorite thing to do,” Carolyn Guinzio said.

It is a hobby of sorts, yes, but thinking, for Guinzio, is also an orientation; a way of standing inside the world long enough for it to start speaking back. It is how poems begin, images frame themselves and time unfolds rather than slipping by unnoticed.

She allows herself this kind of attention to the world around her on a wooded rise just outside Fayetteville, where a barn-red house wraps itself in a porch on three sides. Since early 2002, she and her husband, Davis McCombs, have lived here, where they raised their two children, Warren and Charlotte. From here, she has seen a town expand, a family grow and her own work broaden and deepen — all while remaining, by her own admission, something of a recluse.

“Not only do I barely leave Fayetteville, but I barely leave my house,” she said.

Guinzio is the author of eight poetry collections. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* and *The Nation*. Last year, she received the Porter Fund Literary Prize, which is granted yearly to an Arkansas writer whose work displays consistent excellence and contribution to the state’s literary life.

Founded in 1984 by novelist Jack Butler with novelist and lawyer Phil McMath, the prize honors Ben Kimpel, the noted professor of English at the University of Arkansas who died in 1983. The \$5,000 is awarded to an Arkansas writer annually in one of the selected categories: poetry, fiction, nonfiction, playwriting and lifetime achievement.

Rather than being chosen based on institutions or sales, the previous Porter prize winners nominate and vote to select the winner.

The list includes Charles Portis, Bob Ford, Mara Leveritt, Morris Arnold, Werner Trieschmann, Kevin Brockmeier and former Arkansas Poet Laureate Jo McDougal. Guinzio is one of 14 poets who've won the prize.

She was at home when she learned about winning it. She said the recognition means a lot to her at this time in her life.

“My background in poetry is more my education and the books that I read and was taught by my teachers,” she said. “It was more language-driven, maybe even experimental poetry.

“I have a wide-ranging aesthetic now, but I still do things where I like to experiment,” she said. “I do a lot of visual poetry, things that are sound-driven, and to be drawn into that community, having continued to do what I do, it did really mean a lot.”

At 61, Guinzio's voice rarely rises in conversation. She speaks softly, but not tentatively. Each word feels chosen, as if it has been passed through a quiet test before being released. She does not rush to fill silence. She lets it gather, then answers. And when she does, she again does so in measured phrases, as though language requires care. It's the kind of presence that makes one lean in, the kind of presence she has in her distinct body of contemporary American poetry.

**‘THERE IT IS’**

Guinzio grew up in Chicago — a city of density, concrete and people cacophony. She received her bachelor's degree in English from Columbia College Chicago and her master's in Writing from Bard College in New York, where she studied in an interdisciplinary program that placed writers alongside painters, composers, sculptors and filmmakers.

That cross-pollination from the program never left her. Early on, Guinzio was just as interested in how a poem looked or sounded as its content.

From an early age, she was drawn to photography. Filming short films came later.

“I would always see things, and the way things were framed, I would take pictures of things that other people probably didn't,” she said. She owns a macro lens and is drawn towards the tiny views of nature. “But I didn't really have much opportunity for it until I moved out of the city. And I think that because I'd grown up in a really kind of concrete environment, I was so charmed by everything that I was seeing here, especially on a very small scale.”

For her, language was never intended to operate alone.

“I like the combination of mediums,” she said.

She referenced poet Ezra Pound's idea of “First Intensity.”

“The work of art which is most ‘worth while’ is the work which would need a hundred works of any other kind of art to explain it,” Pound wrote. “Such works are what we call works of the ‘first intensity.’”

“I feel like in my case, sometimes it’s three things,” Guinzio said. “If there’s a place that I’m trying to get at and text alone won’t do it, it has to be a text with something else. With a visual, the text is shaped, or has a sound, or just some other thing where I can’t get there without all of that together.”

With “Leaf,” published in *The Hopper* magazine, Guinzio created a series of visual and text pieces consisting of macro-photos of disintegrating leaves layered with handwritten text, which include poem fragments, old journals and field notes, visible only through the holes in the leaves, or behind the leaves, disintegrating into the leaves.

“It requires a kind of intimacy with the reader,” she said. “Rather than, ‘Here’s something for you, and this will reach out to you,’ this is more like, ‘You have to reach toward each other if you’re going to get anything out of it.’”

Her husband McCombs is also a poet and the 2015 recipient of the Porter Prize. The two met when they were graduate students at separate schools and among the final 15 nationwide nominees for the Ruth Lily Poetry Convocation, a three-day banquet at Indiana University.

They married in 1998.

Guinzio has moved 12 times in her life, making her home here in Arkansas the longest she has stayed in one place.

After years in California and then Kentucky, the couple found themselves, somewhat abruptly, heading west on I-40 in the fall of 2001. McCombs was offered a one-semester post at the University of Arkansas, where, today, he

continues to serve as a professor in the Creative Writing and Translation program.

At the time of moving, Guinzio was pregnant with Charlotte, and Warren was 1 year old.

“We always say this, but we had left with crumbs on the highchair,” Guinzio said. “We just left. It was like Pompeii or something.”

She continued recounting, detailing as they left Memphis, the land began to change. Flatness turned into hills. The Delta melted into something older and more irregular. The car fell quiet as they came up over that crest. And “there it is,” Fayetteville, nestled in the hills.

“It was just this tiny little cluster of mountains,” she said. “It was our place. It became ours.”

## **DOCUMENTING A ‘LITTLE UNIVERSE’**

Guinzio published her first collection, “West Pullman,” in 2005, which won the Bordighera Poetry Prize.

It wasn’t long after their move when the Ozarks began entering Guinzio’s thinking.

There was a moment — she remembers it clearly — when her son Warren was about five years old. He returned from a small bluff behind their house carrying hundreds of tiny Archimedes corals, fossils that look like screws.

The implication stunned her. Four hundred and fifty million years ago, that part of their land was underwater.

In Chicago, she noted, finding something 200 years old means trouble. Here geologic time unfolds openly beneath your feet.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about that since,” she said.

Moments like that give us a little humility, is how she put it.

“Yes, we’re all here, but it’s temporal, and this is something more than just that,” she said. “Time is obviously a continuum, but we break it into these segments, and that’s just a construct that we can make sense of things,” she said.

“I like thinking about things that you probably shouldn’t be thinking about if you want to get through the day,” she added. A faint, playful smile tugged at her lips.

The land around the house appeared to be both cared for and allowed to be wild. Planted pine trees mark the family’s years there. A tiny trail runs through the woods, now overgrown in places once walked daily.

“With both the photography and the writing, I feel like I have documented my little universe to an inch of its life,” Guinzio said.

McCombs let out a light laugh when asked what Guinzio notices that others miss.

“Birds,” he said. “I think it’s more than seeing; it’s also auditory, and Carolyn’s just hyper aware of avian life wherever we are.”

Both being writers, they are each other’s first readers.

“Our lives are so intertwined, and yet it’s such a solitary thing to write a poem,” McCombs said.

“She has a kind of restlessness as an artist, and she reinvents herself with every book, and that’s so rare and so admirable,” he added. “And yet, there are constants in Carolyn’s work. I think her poems always are beautiful.

“If a line or an image comes to her and she doesn’t know where it came from or necessarily what it means at first, she still doesn’t distrust it.”

### **‘MEANWHILE, IN ARKANSAS’**

Despite national recognition, Guinzio measures success differently.

When her fifth collection, “Ozark Crows,” launched in 2018, the last poem, “Funeral,” was in *The New Yorker*.

The entire book was inspired by a moment she had in graduate school back in New York, where two crows were conversing in a tree not far from the Hudson River. For “Ozark Crows,” she was thinking about the local crows flying over all of these homes of people that others knew (or didn’t know) and that they loved.

She recounted the line she wrote in “Funeral.” The line reads, “Wild things die knowing only themselves,” and in it, a crow declares, “I know you.”

Guinzio created a series of short films to help showcase the poems in Fayetteville. For “Funeral,” she asked members of the community — artists, lawyers, doctors and neighbors — to record themselves uttering the statement of the crow. Everyone said yes.

During the screenings, she stood in the back and watched others smiling when they heard their voices.

“I felt that,” she said. “For me, it was the best of community. With the national recognition, obviously, you find out that you’re getting it for some work, and you’re really happy about it for about 48 hours. And then you move on. And then it’s on to the next thing.”

Although she knows the day she got in the New Yorker was a great day, she thinks the most about the day that everyone came to her launch of “Ozark Crows” and that others even considered participating in something “so weird.”

Five years before Guinzio was selected for the Porter Fund, Geoffrey Davis, a professor in the creative writing department at the University of Arkansas, received the prize in poetry.

“One of the effects of being a writer who’s moved around so much is that places are really important and significant,” he said. “What it means to be from a place is one thing, but to have a place claim you, I think, is also really important, and I think that that prize helped complete that loop.”

He also recalled the 2018 launch of “Ozark Crows.”

“There’s an additional attention that the book draws to the page with the visuals and the silhouettes of the crows that she has on the page and how the lines slant differently,” he said. “She puts a lot of different kinds of pressures or, like, maybe nudges you to pay closer attention than maybe you’re expecting or that you’re used to, but in a way that it doesn’t require specialized knowledge on the reader’s attention.”

Her poems elevate attention without challenging attention, Davis said.

“My favorite poet, the poet that I want to aspire to be, is one where the more attention you pay, the more kind of permission you get to then speak yourself or to apply what you’re getting from that attention,” he added.

“I’m grateful for writers like her, in that time restoring or adding, giving us reasons to keep having faith that we can call and call to and hear each other.”

Her previous collection, “Meanwhile in Arkansas,” was the winner of the Quarterly West Chapbook Prize and explored what it means to live in a place you’re not from — especially when your children are.

“When I moved here, one of my friends said, ‘I wouldn’t want so much space between myself and the world,’” Guinzio recalled. The moment didn’t offend her; it simply stuck with her.

“Her definition of the world was just people,” she explained. “Isn’t everything part of the world? Isn’t the stick bug on my porch just part of the world?”

Her newest book, “Cameo Blue,” published in February and examines liminal spaces, which are moments when one is unsure of where to go and is caught between the past and the future. It stems from Guinzio and McCombs frequently discussing leaving the house someday and moving closer to town as their kids are now grown and have left the nest.

“I would miss everything about it, really,” she said.

When asked what she hopes the land remembers about them, she answered as if she’s pondered the question.

“Whatever will that we have imposed on it, I hope is benevolent,” she said.

“We’ve been thinking a lot about ownership and about how much space we’re taking up, and I do feel like we have cared for it and loved it. Davis, in particular, has used it for so much good, growing things, and I suspect that’s what the land wants. It wants to be used in a benevolent way that helps the world.”

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## Self-Portrait

**Born:** June 24, 1964 in Evergreen Park, Illinois

**The time of day I feel most like myself:** Mornings when I am alone.

**What I always have nearby when I’m working:** Water in a mug with an illustration of Proust on it

**More drawn to movement or stillness in my work:** Stillness, because it doesn’t call attention to itself.

**The kind of weather that is my most favorite:** Partly sunny and 65 degrees.

**I know when a piece of work is finished:** When it collapses, exhausted, and says it can’t go on.

**What I make creatively when no one else will ever see it:** The baking is not as true anymore, but I make a a lot of work not meant for anyone’s eyes but my own. I find the low stakes invigorating and it often tells me something about what to try next.

A question I've been asking lately: Where to live.

I admire this in other people: Courage.

Always in my fridge: Dates and walnuts.

Best advice I've ever received: This triggered an incomprehensible avalanche of memory. I can't extract anything specific!

Favorite quote: "Only connect!" — E.M. Forster

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At A GLANCE

Reading & Book Launch

"Cameo Blue" by Carolyn Guinzio

WHEN — 7-8:30 p.m. March 12

WHERE — Pearl's Books, 28 E. Center St., Fayetteville

COST — Free to attend

INFO — [pearlsbooks.com](https://pearlsbooks.com)



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## Dustin Staggs

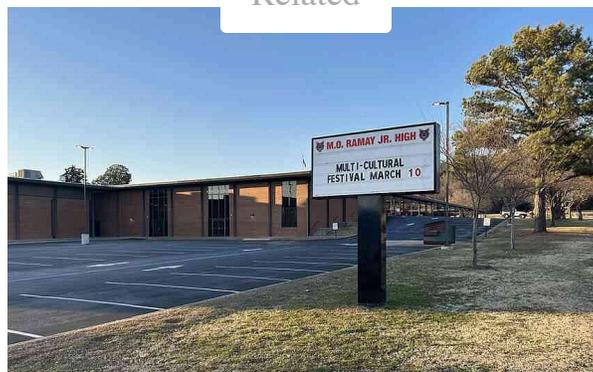
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Dustin Staggs is a features writer for the Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, where he covers arts, entertainment and community stories that showcase the vibrant culture of Northwest Arkansas. Dustin, a University of Arkansas graduate, joined the Democrat-Gazette features team in July 2024. During

his time at the university, Dustin's magazine story was named a Story of the Year finalist in the "In-Depth News Story" category by the Associated Collegiate Press, making him the only Arkansas college student to earn this recognition that year. At the Democrat-Gazette, Dustin has cultivated strong connections within the local arts and entertainment community and finds joy in spotlighting the creative talents and inspiring stories of the region.

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