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New poet laureate, A.F. Moritz, calls Toronto an ‘outstanding little city-state’

By **David Rider** City Hall Bureau Chief
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Al (A.F.) Moritz is the new poet laureate of Toronto, an adopted home the celebrated writer calls “an outstanding little city-state.”

Moritz, a University of Toronto professor whose many honours include the 2009 Griffin Poetry Prize, was announced Wednesday as the sixth person to receive the appointment, succeeding *Fugitive Pieces* author Anne Michaels.



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The four-year [poet laureate position](#), created in 2001, carries a \$10,000 honorarium. The city describes the role as Toronto's "literary ambassador" who promotes and attracts people to the arts.

Speaking at events across the city, the poets often write original works to reflect Toronto and its experience. In the wake of the 2018 van attack on north Yonge St. that killed 10 people and injured 16, Michaels wrote and read a poem titled "[In darkness, love cries out.](#)"

[Moritz](#) told the Star that he was on a committee that helped choose the first poet laureate, Dennis Lee, but has not been involved for years and had thought the role sounded "too busy" for him.

"Like a lot of Canadians I love Canada but I love it through my little corner of it," said Ohio-born Moritz, 71, who moved to Toronto in the 1970s. He said in recent years he has warmed more toward the public role of literature which flows out of the private act of writing.

"I really feel as if Toronto is an outstanding little city state, kind of like ancient Athens within ancient Greece, it's a country within a country. The idea of serving in some public way the culture of that state came to attract me more."

Moritz, who teaches at U of T's Victoria College, has published more than a dozen poetry collections including *The Sentinel* which won the \$100,000 Griffin Poetry Prize.

The [judges' citation](#) said: "We read his fable of a city awaiting the arrival of a butterfly and stand with the crowd in wonder, as a creature so large it blots out the sun transforms to 'a humble yellow thing', so menacing and loud it crashes to the sea 'like a fighter jet' but erupts in 'a burst of quiet.'"

Moritz said as poet laureate he will celebrate Toronto and its successes but also reflect its poverty, injustice and tragedies. Poetry can give people solace but, he said, as a writer he can't see himself as a "comforter of the whole city."

Many people don't pay attention to poetry, he added, until they feel they need it.

"It's like the seed of a certain crucial plant that most people might never think of or see, but if it weren't there the whole ecosystem would collapse," he said.

"In a certain way it suffuses everything and if you think to come to it particularly, you can do so, it's there for you."

Other past poets laureate include Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Dionne Brand and George Elliott

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