

# Storyteller Enchants

ELLEN BRYANT VOIGT SHARES LYRICAL STYLE

READING TO A FULL HOUSE of students, faculty, and community members in the Sorenson Center on February 11, Thompson Visiting Poet Ellen Bryant Voigt chose a range of poems that displayed her skill both as a storyteller and as a master of the lyric. One of the most riveting selections was drawn from her 1995 book-length collection of sonnets, *Kyrie*. Giving voice to a range of characters living and dying through the influenza epidemic of 1918 and World War I, Voigt performs the work of historian, anthropologist, physician, seer, and reporter of a pandemic that has, as she points out, received surprisingly little attention.

For those students and faculty studying *Kyrie* in liberal arts foundation courses, it was especially powerful to hear the poems read aloud by the poet. As one of my students put it, "It just made the poems come to life." Directly after the reading, Voigt entertained questions from the audience, and, for almost an hour, signed copies of her books at a reception in the Sorenson lobby.

The next morning, Voigt held an informal conversation about poetry with students and faculty in the Glavin Chapel. When asked about the influence of music in her life, she began by saying, "Well, music was my first language." Her interest in music from a young age, in particular the piano, has influenced her lyrical, formalist tendencies as a poet and shaped one of her major themes: the relationship between the self and the world.



Ellen Bryant Voigt

Voigt has published six collections of poetry, and two of her most recent, *Kyrie* and *Shadow of Heaven*, were finalists for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award for Poetry, respectively. She has also published one book of essays, *The Flexible Lyric*, a fiercely intelligent collection of craft essays that should be on every poet's – and lover of poetry's – bookshelf. She has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. She lives in Vermont, where she recently served as Vermont State Poet, and she teaches in the MFA program for writers at Warren Wilson College.

More than 20 years ago, the Charles D. and Marjorie J. Thompson Visiting Poet Series was endowed to encourage awareness and appreciation of poets and poetry.

– Mary Pinard,  
associate professor of English