

# A two-poet family

Matt and Sarah Mason balance parenthood and writing award-winning poetry

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Matt Mason already had a toaster waffle waiting on the kitchen counter when his wife, Sarah, began the gentle coaxing it would take to get their 4-year-old daughter, Lucia, ready for preschool.

"Are you sure you don't want some milk?" Sarah asked.

At another counter, Matt typed emails into his laptop, prepping for coming poetry events. A freelance audio engineer with Mason Video, his sister's videography company, he was headed out to do a news story on a security company for CNBC.

Daughter Sophia, 7, emerged in her school uniform. Matt offered to take her to school in time for early recess, if she hurried.

Sarah ran through the checklist: Does she need a raincoat? Did you get that sandwich? She reminded Sophia to tell her aunt, who was to pick her up after school, where to find her soccer gear. Sarah would be in Lincoln teaching poetry to third- and fourth-graders as a visiting artist through the Lied Center for Performing Arts. They kissed and hugged goodbye.

Sarah turned back to Lucia. Did she want to wear her secret socks, the ones with the pink toes that don't show with her uniform?

"It's like jujitsu," Sarah said. "You have to suggest and then pull back."

Mornings — indeed, days and weeks — are just such a dance in many households juggling young children and two careers. Here, there's a twist. The Masons are both award-winning poets. Yet they're living far from old stereotypes of poets out walking in the woods.

Sarah Mason, known professionally as Sarah McKinstry-Brown, won the Nebraska Book Award for Poetry late last year for "Cradling Monsoons," a collection with motherhood and family among its themes. Matt Mason, 43, claimed the award in 2007 with his volume "Things We Don't Know We Don't Know."

Both also are widely known slam poets, with Matt arguably the driving force behind Omaha's slam scene, which combines poetry and performance in live competitions. The executive director of the Nebraska Writers Collective, he organized the "Louder than a Bomb: Omaha" poetry slam among area high schools. Based on the "Louder than a Bomb" youth poetry festival in Chicago, the competition wrapped up Friday at Creighton University. Sarah has been teaching creative writing part time at the University of Nebraska at Omaha for four semesters. Both she and Matt also long have taught through visiting artist and writer workshop programs. She's also helping edit a collection of works by Nebraska poets and recently launched a blog. So when, exactly, do they write?

Both acknowledged that they have less time than they once did. Often they snatch it here and there or late at night.

Like many two-career couples, Sarah said, they feel the challenge of earning a living and also trying to make time for kids, career, students, marriage, organizations. But in the creative writing world, there's no traditional structure for making that happen.

"We help each other as much as we can to push the other forward in ways that hold us back the least," Matt Mason said.

Sarah, 35, recalled a conversation she had with friends when she was in her 20s. They said a woman could never be a great artist if she had a family. She argued the point. But, she said, "I think some part of me believed that."

So when the San Francisco-based Blue Light Press published her book, she was grateful, dumbfounded. She wrote many of the poems while pregnant with or tending Lucia.



REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

Sarah Mason, a visiting artist with the Lied Center for Performing Arts, teaches fourth-graders how to create a poem at Eastridge Elementary School in Lincoln.



Sarah Mason, a teaching artist, helps Breanna Bender create a poem using similes and metaphors at Eastridge Elementary in Lincoln.

"The one thing I was told would keep me from my art really fed my art and created this book," she said.

Indeed, the influx of women into the arts is changing what the arts look like, said David Fenza, executive director of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs.

The Fairfax, Va.-based organization's membership now runs about 60 percent women.

"We never saw so many proposals about managing hearth and home and artistic needs as we did this year," Fenza said, noting that the proposals came from both men and women.

Poet William Trowbridge, one of Sarah's mentors while she worked toward her master's of fine arts degree through the University of Nebraska Low Residency Program, said the poets he knows have day jobs and families.

Trowbridge, who recently was named Missouri's poet laureate, taught creative writing and American literature at Northwest Missouri State University for 27 years before joining the Low Residency program, which allows students to work with mentors from afar.

"We think of poets as these otherworldly people who sit and contemplate roses and don't have anything important to say to people who live ordinary lives," said Trowbridge. "Sarah has a lot to say to ordinary people in an extraordinary way."

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With Lucia at preschool, Sarah does get a walk in the woods. She leases the family's energetic young dog, Max, and heads out onto the rolling streets near their

Ponca Hills home.

But even as she power walks, she thinks about writing and planning lessons for her Lincoln sessions and her two UNO classes.

"I do my best work when I'm walking," she said.

At the back of her mind lurks the old dilemma. Should she give up the teaching, which gives her the same charge as writing poetry, for more time with her daughters? That's when she calls on what Matt told her: Don't you want to give your daughters the gift of seeing you do something you love?

She also looks at the payback that came from another leap. She'd grown up in Albuquerque, N.M., graduated from the University of New Mexico, studied for a year in England. She'd planned to go to Puerto Rico. Then came 9/11. Feeling how fearful the country was becoming, she decided to do what she loves. She sold everything that wouldn't fit in a suitcase and scheduled poetry readings across the country. That's how she met Omaha native Matt, who had booked her for an event. They married in 2003. "By giving everything up, I got this amazing life I wouldn't have had if I hadn't been willing to follow my poetry," she said.

Matt said the couple talked a bit about how they'd make it as working writers in a field with few full-time employment opportunities. But they figured they'd work it out. Sarah admitted that she has fretted about practical things like job security. But during the recent economic downturn, she saw people in supposedly secure fields losing jobs. She realized that job security lay in doing work she loved.

"It was a big moment for me,"

she said.

As for the division of labor at home, Matt said, they're still trying to figure that out.

As a freelancer, he has an unpredictable schedule, taking him out of town for days at a time. This week, he got a call asking if he could go to Minneapolis, Kan. There'd been a prison break. He had to turn it down, given that such assignments can unexpectedly stretch for days and he was committed to the poetry festival.

On the flip side, the gaps leave him time at home when he can pitch in more. He figures he gets more time with his daughters than many dads.

Sarah said the two don't argue over whose career is more important or who should get time to pursue it.

"We don't compete," she said, "but we definitely are aware of taking turns."

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By the time Sarah is back home in front of her laptop, she's decided to change her lesson plan for her Lincoln students.

Starting with a list of favorite items, she writes a poem about Lucia to make sure the writing exercise will work and to provide a fresh example. It's sweet and heartfelt, if simplistic by her usual standards.

That afternoon Sarah tells the children at Eastridge Elementary that poetry helps her figure out how she's feeling. They talk about metaphor. "You use metaphor to show how you feel, you create pictures with your words," she says.

She reads her Lucia poem. "You're the turquoise acoustic



While Lucia, 4 (background), eats a bedtime snack of carrots with milk, Sarah Mason cuts the crusts off a peanut butter and radish sandwich for Sophia, 7, with husband Matt on hand.

guitar strummed by a young Bob Dylan," it begins.

She asks the students to list a favorite color, place, animal. She gently coaxes them to turn them into metaphors and ultimately, a poem about a favorite person.

Josh Kohel's 1-year-old cousin, Teagan, goes down a slide like Dr Pepper pouring into a cup. Phoebe Boname's older sister, Jillian, is like the key of a piano being struck by a finger.

"I feel so inspired by all your words," Sarah says.

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On another recent night, the couple both are home. They stick to a routine — dinner, bath, stories, bed. They typically switch off on the bedtime duties.

On this night, Sophia sits next to Sarah, reading her own book. That means lots of questions.

Matt reads to Lucia. There's Judith Viorst's "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day"; and "Miss Nelson is Missing!," a story about a too-nice teacher who gets back at her rowdy students when she comes disguised and dishes out loads of homework.

If there's time or energy left, the Masons turn back to their laptops.

Sometimes they bounce ideas off each other, Sarah said, ask the other to read something they've written. The tricky part sometimes comes in figuring out how they're supposed to respond — as a writer or a supportive spouse.

But for now, there are papers to grade, emails to answer, a poetry slam to prep for, a blog to write and another day just around the corner.