

# the UTD Mercury

Sunday, February 28, 2010

- Home
- News
- Life & Arts
- Sports
- Features
- Opinion
- Multimedia
- Classifieds and Ad Info
- Jobs
- Contact

The UTD Mercury > News

## Award carries poetic justice

### Displaced by protest in 1990, Albanian finds 'poetic brotherhood' at UTD

By Eric Nicholson

Published: Sunday, January 11, 2009

Updated: Saturday, January 2, 2010



Gjeke Marinaj is about as non-traditional a student as can be found at UTD. The 43 year-old literary studies graduate student is the author and translator of numerous books of poetry, the founder and editor of an international literary journal and, after winter break, the recipient of a major international literary award.



Literary studies graduate student Gjeke Marinaj holds a copy of the newspaper in which he published "Horses," the poem for which he was forced to flee his native Albania.

On Dec. 24, the International Cultural Center of the Albanian Ministry of Culture awarded Marinaj 2008 Pjeter Abnori prize for literature by the International Cultural Center, part of the Albanian Ministry of Culture.

The award is given annually to an Albanian or international author in recognition of their ongoing contribution to national and world literature, essentially equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize in the United States.

None of this Marinaj could have imagined 20 years ago. At the time, he was a young underpaid and unknown journalist living under one of the most repressive governments in Europe.

Tucked away in the hall closet of his modest Richardson home amidst stacks of yellowing newsprint - articles written over the years by or about Marinaj - is a tattered copy of the newspaper Marinaj holds most dear. It is an artifact from a previous life, something that has brought Marinaj both great pain and great joy.

In it are the lines that changed his life.

#### The Poem

Writers spend entire careers laboring to achieve the impact Marinaj had with a single poem.

The year was 1990. The Soviet Union was on the path to dissolution, but the communist government in Albania maintained a tight grip over life in the small southeastern European country. Opposition to the regime was tantamount to treason. Any dissent was quickly silenced.

For the majority of the people, Marinaj said, life was miserable.

#### UTD Mercury Blog

- [Comets train to help first responders](#)
- [ASC quarterfinals: Men's basketball defeats Sul Ross 82-65](#)
- [Don't forget: early voting ends today](#)
- [Founders Hall renovations "Chime" in](#)
- [Cafe rocking out with new juke box](#)
- [Wish upon your star](#)
- [Severe weather awareness week on campus](#)
- [May be more snow tonight](#)
- [School of Management mobile competition underway](#)
- [Tech store clearance rack](#)
- [Claiming responsibility for social violence](#)

#### Most Popular Articles

- [UTD Muggles ready their brooms](#)
- [PHOTOS: Got Snow?](#)
- [Serious gaming meets math](#)
- [Practicing practical, protective art](#)

It was against this backdrop, in a mood of discontent, that Marinaj wrote a short but politically charged poem. Innocuously titled "Horses," the piece was a sharp critique of life in communist Albania.

"The poem was totally anti-governmental," he said. "Nobody else really could write anything like that. People who tried, they were killed. They would hang poets in middle of the city."

With the help of a sympathetic editor Marinaj published the piece in "Drita," one of the most widely read and most tightly censored newspapers in the country.

The poem was a sensation.

Papers flew off the stands; by mid-morning the entire country had sold out, but word of mouth continued to spread like wildfire. Those with a newspaper would scribble copies of the poem on scraps of paper to pass to strangers. Some recited the poem to passersby on the street. The entire country was abuzz with excitement over what the unknown young poet had written.

#### Leaving Home

For Marinaj, the excitement was short-lived. He had written the poem as a personal expression of his own dissatisfaction. He had never imagined the poem would actually be published. Now it was all over the country. It had happened so fast.

Approached at lunch the same day by an agent from Albania's intelligence service, he knew he was in trouble.

At home, he packed a small bag with some family pictures, four or five favorite books, and a blanket. That night he took his dog and began the six hour trek through the mountains to the Yugoslav border.

"Every time I was on a mountain, I could see the little town I was living in below. From the very top I could even spot where my house was," Marinaj said. "You just feel sad. You feel like you're betraying the country and you wonder what is going to happen to your relatives."

Marinaj made it safely across the border where he was detained by Yugoslav authorities.

He spent the next few months in a refugee camp in Belgrade, waiting to be admitted to some other country. After showing a copy of his poem to the American ambassador, he was given U.S. immigration papers almost immediately.

"He was an American politician, but he understood the power of poetry," Marinaj said. "All of us who left the country were bits of information saying that something was going wrong with the communist countries. It was something to point a finger at to say look, this guys not happy. It was actually something good, something rare for a real intellectual to leave the country."

#### Coming to UTD

It was through a literary-minded college professor that Marinaj had his first real taste of English literature, most of which was banned by the government. Of the contraband literature he read, the author he most admired was poet Frederick Turner.

After he had settled in the United States and it came to finding a place to study literature, it didn't take him long to figure out where he wanted to be. He enrolled at UTD where Turner has been Founder's Professor of Arts and Humanities

[Rock benefit turns five, graduates](#)

[SG in a race with the clock to secure legacy](#)

[Customer service model degrades education](#)

[PHOTO: Women No. 2 ASC East seed for postseason after ETBU beatdown](#)

Log In

E-mail:

Password:

Not already a member? [Register now](#)

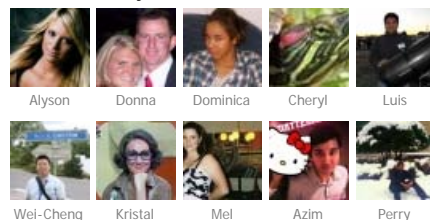
facebook



The UTD Mercury on Facebook

[Become a Fan](#)

The UTD Mercury has 165 Fans



[The UTD Mercury on Facebook](#)

since 1985.

Turner said he first met Marinaj when the latter was a precocious undergraduate. It wasn't until later, as the two began to collaborate professionally, that Turner learned Marinaj's story.

"To meet a genuine hero of poetry in the great classical mold was staggering to me," Turner said. "At first I didn't believe it because it was too good to be true. He works incredibly hard and he's quite an extraordinary poet."

Turner said he considers Marinaj more his "poetic brother" than his student.

The two have worked closely in the years since their first encounter. Marinaj has translated some of Turner's work into Albanian. Most recently the two collaborated on a project collecting and translating Albanian oral poetry, most of which has never before been recorded.

Marinaj graduated with a master's degree in literary studies last December and has already begun work towards his doctorate. He travels frequently to Albania, which is now a parliamentary democracy and has been invited to join NATO.



Recommended: Articles that may interest you

[Star of MTV's "Jersey Shore" Attended NYIT](#) (The Campus Slate)

[Youtube pick of the week: E-Trade commercial takes Super Bowl to next level](#) (Washburn Review)

[Copy machines losing cash](#) (The UTD Mercury)

['Strokes' focuses on method of art creation](#) (The UTD Mercury)



Be the first to comment on this article!

Add comment

I am not posting spam. I understand posting spam or other comments that are unrelated to this article will cause my comment to be flagged for deletion and possibly cause my IP address to be permanently banned from this server.



Enter the characters in the image above:

[log out](#)