

University law professor's work earns an Oregon Book Award

By *Karen McCowan The Register-Guard*

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University of Oregon law professor Garrett Epps has captured an Oregon Book Award for "Democracy Reborn," his suspenseful recounting of the fierce fight for passage of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Epps received the honor Sunday night at an awards ceremony at the Portland Art Museum.

New York author and teacher Robert Polito, who judged Epps' nonfiction category, said "Democracy Reborn" ranked among the best "audacious works of historical reconstruction" by summoning the past to recast the present.

"Smart, stylish, dramatic, probing, vivid, and moral," he wrote. "This is history and this is also literature."

Though Epps previously has published novels and poetry, as well as scholarly legal writing, he said he was bowled over by the award.

"I did not expect to get a prize for it," he said, praising in particular two fellow University of Oregon colleagues also nominated in the category: John Bellamy Foster ("Naked Imperialism: The U.S. Pursuit of Global Dominance") and Ben Saunders ("Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation").

He also credited what proved to be surprisingly dramatic material.

Essentially, the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment were "reconstituting" a U.S. Constitution that had fallen apart during the Civil War, he said.

A far more diverse group than the Founding Fathers of the previous century — Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton among them — they managed to establish groundbreaking civil rights against a turbulent political backdrop.

"There were some odd and eerie echoes of our current situation," Epps said. "There was a president, Andrew Johnson, whose ascension to the office was absolutely dubious ... he was very rigid. You were either his friend or his enemy. He thought the executive (branch) had all the power and Congress was not supposed to interfere. There was an occupation (the South) and the president had the power to jail anybody there just by executive signature."

There was talk not only of impeachment, Epps said, but of a coup d'etat, of the president bringing in the army and disbanding the Congress, of the Civil War breaking out again.

Reading the entire Congressional Record of the period, Epps said, he thought: "Shazam! This is not just important — it's an incredible story."

The Fourteenth Amendment is very much at the center of current political debate, he

said. For example, Epps will discuss its implications next month when the UO's Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics convenes a symposium on "Immigration and Citizenship."

"The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees that children born in this country are citizens," he said. "Yet a small but determined minority of politicians and legal thinkers want to deny citizenship to children of illegal aliens, which I think would be re-creating slavery. ... The authors of the amendment wanted to make sure there would never be a class of people inferior to everyone else."

Other 2007 Oregon Book Awards went to Tom Blood of Portland for "The Sky Position" (poetry); Allison Clement of Corvallis for "Twenty Questions" (novel); Charles D'Ambrosio of Portland for "The Dead Fish Museum" (short stories); Lee Montgomery of Portland for "The Things Between Us" (creative nonfiction); Shannon Riggs of Salem for "Not in Room 204" (children's literature); and Susan Fletcher of Wilsonville for "Alphabet of Dreams" (young adult literature.)

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