



“—the hot sun and the heavy rain, the new green of spring and the fire-golden of fall: the farmer’s weather of Fresno, in which I lived and became a part of the human race.”

Saroyan, *The Time of Your Life*, (Preface) 1939

2008 Centennial Honors Saroyan’s Legacy

Fresno, California is leading a statewide celebration honoring their most high-spirited native son, William Saroyan, during the 100th anniversary year of his birth (1908-2008). Saroyan was an internationally renowned Armenian-American novelist and playwright, whose published writings topped over 4,000 literary works, including short stories, plays, and novels. William Saroyan was born in Fresno and died in Fresno, and in between he became an award-winning writer and playwright, to include a Pulitzer Prize, an Academy Award, and The Drama Critic’s Circle Award. He had an illustrious career that spanned over forty-seven years.

THE INIMITABLE SAROYAN

After living much of his youth in poverty, at the age of twenty-six, William Saroyan captured the American literary world with his aptly titled short-story, “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze.” The story was published in 1934 and it received the O. Henry Memorial Award for the best short-story of the year. This only encouraged a steady stream of continued, inexhaustible literary output. He maintained his newly found celebrity with the publication of numerous short stories and humorously kept his name in the newspapers and magazines with letters he wrote to critics. In 1939, Harlan Hatcher wrote in *The English Journal*, that his autobiographically-styled work encompassed growing up in the “beautiful, mad, and tragic world before and after Hoover, what he has done and thought, and how it feels to be Mr. Saroyan inhaling and exhaling, meeting people, intoxicated with the awareness of his own separate ego...and fascinated by the fun of making comments on all that engages his restless attention by tapping away on the keys of a typewriter.”

Saroyan’s earlier short stories made a significant contribution to American short-story literature. Personal stories about growing up in Fresno, adolescence, man upon the earth, eternity, death, love and the Great American novel placed his literary approach alongside the brilliant writing styles of Emerson and Whitman. In “The Tiger” his protagonist states:

You see, when I write English I write Chinese, Japanese, Italian, French, and every other language. You see, I said, I am a writer.

Born in 1908, Saroyan was the fourth child of Armenian immigrants. He never denied his heritage and his writings embraced his culture's distinctive qualities as an inspiration to his writing. Saroyan's cultural celebration was most notably apparent in his 1940 story, *My Name Is Aram*. Published in 1943, Saroyan's novel, *The Human Comedy*, was adapted for the silver screen, starring Mickey Rooney. The film received five Oscar nominations, and won Saroyan the award for Best Writing Original Screen Story. Along with his numerous short stories, novels, and screenplay, Saroyan was a prolific playwright. His writing for the stage included: *My Heart's in the Highlands*, *The Time of Your Life*, *Hello Out there!*, *The Cave Dwellers*, and *The Beautiful People*. Saroyan was the first American writer to win both the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his play, *The Time of Your Life* (1939). Saroyan's artistry extended into the visual arts and music as well. The Fresno Art Museum exhibited his paintings for the first time during the 2002 William Saroyan Festival, and based on an Armenian folk tune, Saroyan co-wrote "Come On-a My House," along with his cousin, Ross Bagdasarian. It was the song that catapulted the career of Rosemary Clooney.

Saroyan died from cancer on May 18, 1981, in Fresno at the age of 72, about a mile from where he was born. His lasting words to the press in face of the inevitable were, "Everybody has got to die...but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case." Half of his ashes were buried in California, and the remaining was interned in Armenia. In tribute to William Saroyan, Ronald Reagan, then President of the United States, wrote the following letter in 1981:

Dear Friends:

It is a great pleasure to join with you in this tribute to "William Saroyan—A Celebration of His Life and Works."

The son of Armenian refugees, Saroyan overcame hardship and poverty to become one of the great authors of this century. His timeless writings, which affectionately tell of average people struggling against the adversities of life, continue to arouse warmth and empathy in the hearts of audiences the world over.

Mr. Saroyan—a Californian—remained deeply tied to his special heritage. He dedicated his second volume of stories to the 'English tongue, the American earth, and the Armenian spirit.' William Saroyan was certainly the fiery embodiment of all three.

This nation is richer for his great talent and for his deep understanding of the human spirit and the world in which we live.

His works, among the finest in American literature, will live forever as an important part of the cultural history of this nation.

Sincerely,

RONALD REAGAN

In *Obituaries*, Saroyan's last book published during his lifetime, he wrote: "My work is writing, but my real work is being", and it is his remarkable "being" that the 2008 Centennial honors.

CENTENNIAL EVENTS

During the 2008 William Saroyan Centennial, a collaboration of over thirty-five San Joaquin Valley and State organizations will be presenting a series of exhibitions, musical performances, lectures, school activities, theatrical productions and readings, historical discussions, and literary events focusing on Saroyan's work and his life in the San Joaquin Valley. Events are planned for the entire year of 2008, with special activities planned around his birthday, August 31, and a memorial tribute on the day of his death, May 18. The Centennial begins the year's festivities on January 11, 2008, with a kick-off dinner sponsored by the Fresno Chamber of Commerce and the Armenian Museum.

Saroyan's art will be exhibited at various art centers in the Central Valley such as, Tulare Historical Museum, Kings Art Center, and Merced Cultural Center. The Fresno Art Museum will present an installation piece dedicated to Saroyan. Fresno's cooperative galleries, Fig Tree, Gallery 25, and the Corridor will hold group exhibitions by its members presenting art inspired by Saroyan and his life.

Vibrant plans of theatrical and cinematic events are planned. Colleges and universities throughout the state as well as Central Valley theatre groups will honor Saroyan with productions of his plays and theatrical readings, to include, *The Beautiful People*, *Cave Dwellers*, and an operetta based on his play *Hello Out There!*. A screening of the film, *The Human Comedy*, sponsored by the Fresno County Friends of the Library, with a special guest appearance by its leading actor, Mickey Rooney, promises a poignant moment of reflection.

Commemorating Saroyan's 100th year, programs will also include the William Saroyan Society's Annual Walk in Fresno and their student writing contest. As part of a musical tribute to Saroyan, the Fresno Philharmonic, among others, will honor Saroyan's Armenian culture with performances. The Fresno County Library plans a full schedule of literary events in the public schools and for the general public.

A preview of the Centennial's calendar of events will be posted on the William Saroyan Centennial website, www.saroyancentennial.org, by November 15, 2007.