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Readers, Readers Everywhere

by **Lauren Kessler**

(Permission granted by the author to reprint the "On Craft" column of the Spring, 2009 online issue of *Etude: New Voices in Literary Nonfiction*, University of Oregon, <http://etude.uoregon.edu>)

With all the talk about how no one reads anymore and how the book is dead—I've gnashed teeth, wrung hands and written about this myself—I'd like to report back from the hinterlands that it ain't so. To paraphrase Mark Twain: The news of the death of literature has been greatly exaggerated. We writers may not have to abandon our craft and rush out to get honest employment—or take on PR clients.

What is the source of my wild optimism? It's called Oregon Reads, a statewide program that took place in nearly every public library and in every county in my home state of Oregon during our sesqui-centennial celebration (that's 150 years). Masterminded by those mild-mannered defenders of the faith, those bi-focaled bastions of literacy, the state's librarians, the program was amazingly, exuberantly, vibrantly successful.

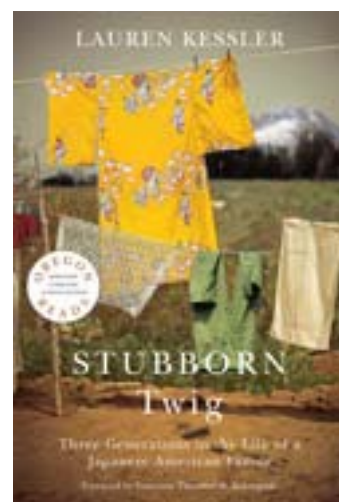
The librarians chose three books—a work of narrative nonfiction, a young adult novel and a children's book—wrote grants, beat the bushes and otherwise raised funds to buy copies of these books. Libraries, through the work of their dedicated foundations, also raised funds. (Let's pause a moment here to marvel at the fact that people are using their time and energy to fundraise for literature—and that these efforts have actually been successful, especially in these trying economic times) The result was the purchase and distribution of thousands and thousands of these books, boxes of books, palettes of boxes, sent to major metropolitan libraries and tiny old Carnegie libraries, libraries in wealthy suburbs and out in cowboy country, in coastal retirement communities and in dying timber towns. Many of these libraries not only acquired and distributed these books but hosted a variety of public programs in their

communities. At these programs, which ran from January through April of this year, sometimes as many as 600 people gathered in an auditorium to listen to an author talk about her book.

I know. I was privileged—honored—to be the author of one of the three books chosen for Oregon Reads. The book, a work of narrative nonfiction, was *Stubborn Twig*, a story of the promise and peril of becoming "American," an immigrant story, an Oregon pioneer story, told through the lives of three generations of a single family. I spoke in eighteen venues, from community rooms in libraries to school auditoriums to converted movie theatres, and everywhere I went there was excitement.

Excitement.

Not just about the book everyone was reading but about stories, about the power of stories in our lives, about how stories can tell us who we are and who we were. And equal excitement about libraries and their essential place in the life of communities.



Cover of *Stubborn Twig*



From the OLA President

In appreciation for the work of the Oregon Reads Committee:

- June Knudson, Hood River County Library, Co-chair
- Sara Charlton, Tillamook County Library, Co-chair
- Leah Griffith, Newberg Public Library, Initiating Chair
- Linda Ueki Absher, Portland State University
- Katie Anderson, Oregon State Library, Oregon Center for the Book
- Robin Beerbower, Salem Public Library
- Sharon Buehler, OASL Liaison
- Korie Jones Burkle, Newberg Public Library
- Dana Campbell, Corvallis-Benton County Library
- Terrilyn Chun, Multnomah County Library
- Linda Crum, Library User
- Michael Braun Hamilton, Emporia State University
- Burton Haun, Wilsonville Public Library
- Linda Malone, West Linn Public Library
- Rick Samuelson, Washington County Cooperative Library Services
- Jim Scheppke, Oregon State Librarian
- Chantal Strobel, Deschutes Public Library System
- Kimberly Willson-St. Clair, Portland State University

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- James and Marion Miller Foundation
- Starseed Foundation
- Oregon Public Broadcasting
- Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center
- Oregon 150

I was—I continue to be—flabbergasted by the intensity of involvement, by readers I thought did not exist, by librarians who have not slackened their pace despite budget cuts and understaffing, by business-people who donated money, who in some towns I visited hosted me in their hotels (a shout out here to the amazing Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City, Oregon).

At each of the public events, I was deluged with questions. People wanted to know why I wrote what I wrote, where I got my ideas, how I did my research, how I wrote. They were hungry to understand the life of a writer and the life of a book. They followed me out of the library. They e-mailed me the next day. And no, it wasn't creepy. It was wonderful.

And so I am back from the hinterlands, from Pendleton and Ashland, Lincoln City, Hood River and Bend—from those small cities and smaller towns that no one outside of Oregon even knows the name of—and I am, like the new immigrants I wrote about in *Stubborn Twig*, overblown with hope.

There are readers out there, plenty of them. 🌿

The Author

Lauren Kessler (www.laurenkessler.com) is the author of five works of narrative nonfiction, including the Oregon Library Association's Oregon Reads selection *Stubborn Twig* and, most recently, *Finding Life in the Land of Alzheimer's*, winner of both the Pacific Northwest and the Oregon Book Awards. She is the editor of *Etude* and directs the University of Oregon's program in Literary Nonfiction. See <http://thinhouse.net> for news of Lauren and family's energy independence project.



Lauren Kessler