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Who are Oregon's Writers?

by George Venn
Eastern Oregon University

Question: What unique Oregon series is 2,100 pages deep, took six years to complete, cost around \$500,000 and includes 580 Oregon authors selected by 11 editors? Hint: the Oregon Library Association endorsed this anthology. In 1991, then President Michael K. Gaston wrote, "We anticipate great interest in this series on the part of Oregon's libraries... We applaud your innovation and wish you well with this important project." Second hint: the *Oregonian* described this collection as "Probably the most remarkable endeavor in the state's literary history." Last hint: this anthology received a Multicultural Publishing Award from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1995. If you said the Oregon Literature Series, sponsored by the Oregon Council of Teachers of English (OCTE) and Oregon State University Press, you're right.

HERE—BRIEFLY—IS HOW IT HAPPENED.

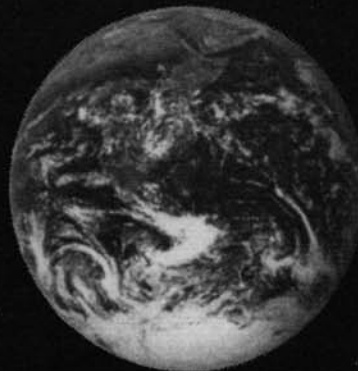
The idea for The Oregon Literature Series, six anthologies of the best Oregon writing, was first proposed to the Oregon Council of Teachers of English (OCTE) in 1988. At that time, OCTE decided to depart from the conventional state literary anthology—a monolithic tome put together by a few academic volunteers and generally intended for libraries and adult readers. Instead, OCTE decided to create six shorter, genre-based anthologies: prose, poetry, autobiography, folk literature, letters and diaries, and short fiction. OCTE would publish a public "Call for Editors," and the most qualified individuals would be hired for their expertise and treated professionally—honoraria, expenses, research assistance, travel, etc. The anthologies would be intended as classroom/reference texts for students and teachers, and as introductory readers for the general public. Books would be designed to be easily held, carried, and read.

Numerous arguments were raised against this innovative proposal—most of them signaling Oregon's 150-year status as a literary colony. No one had ever done this before. Oregon's literature was non-existent. There wasn't much writing of merit. Most scholars and critics have ignored Oregon literature—even in the best histories of Western literature. There's no literary history of Oregon. It will take years to find this work. No one will read these books. In Oregon, literature has the least financial support of all the major arts. We had no publisher. It might rain.

Nevertheless, in 1989, Ulrich Hardt and I were appointed by OCTE to complete the Oregon Literature Series. The work began when we signed a publication contract with Oregon State University Press, our first and most important professional collaborator. Next, from a pool of 130 applicants, OCTE chose these editors to discover Oregon's literary heritage: Shannon Applegate, Stephen Dow Beckham, Gordon Dodds, Primus St. John, Suzi Jones, Glen Love, Terence O'Donnell, Jarold Ramsey, and Ingrid Wendt. Appointed in August 1990, those individuals began the search for Oregon writing that eventually spread beyond every corner of the state—from ranch houses to university archives, from oral storytellers in longhouses to Chinese miners in museums, from Desdemona Sands to Burns. Some editors traveled thousands of miles. Others corresponded with hundreds of authors. Most read thousands of pages. Poets, historians, folklorists, critics, scholars, and editors—they all benefited from and shared their research expertise. Even though honoraria were small, editors gave generously of their time.

While the editors looked for Oregon writing, Ulrich Hardt and I sought out and received endorsements from many major cultural and arts organizations. Financial support seemed like rain in the time of drought, but we attracted a few wise, faithful, and generous patrons:

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Oregon Council of Teachers of English (OCTE), \$42,000
Oregon State University Press (OSU), \$54,000
Oregon Council for the Humanities, \$40,000
Portland State University, \$33,000
National Endowment for the Arts, \$39,000,
Oregon Arts Commission, \$4,000
Oregon Center for the Book, \$3,000
Jackson Foundation, \$2,500
Eastern Oregon University, \$2,000

Once the editors had discovered this vast, unstudied, and unknown body of writing, they assembled their manuscripts by using the following guidelines—guidelines that challenged them to choose writing—in its broadest sense—that might reveal the Oregon experience to both students and the public:

- (1) The volume must include a representative sample of the best Oregon writing from all periods, regions, occupations, genders, genres and sub-genres, ethnic, religious, political, and cultural backgrounds.
- (2) Oregon birth should not be used as a single criterion for inclusion. Oregon residence is important, but no arbitrary length of stay is required for a writer to be included.
- (3) Works about experience in Oregon are preferred, but editors are not limited to that criterion alone.
- (4) "Oregon" will be defined by its changing historical boundaries—native American tribal territories, Spanish, Russian, British, U.S. Territory, statehood.
- (5) One or more translations and original from non-English languages may be included—when appropriate—to show linguistic multiplicity has always been a part of Oregon.
- (6) Controversial subjects such as sexism and racism should not be avoided. Multiple versions of events, people, and places should be included when available.
- (7) Length of works must vary; limit snippets when possible. Meet the need for diversity in reading—from complex to simple.
- (8) New, unknown, or unpublished work should be included.
- (9) Works will be edited for clarity but not necessarily for correctness. Editors may invent titles, delete text, and select text as appropriate and with appropriate notation.

Once assembled in draft, most of these manuscripts were two to three times longer than could be published by Oregon State University Press, so much fine writing had to be omitted—which all editors

and our publisher regret. After being reduced to the requisite size, the manuscripts passed through two separate reviews: first, a different Advisory Board for each volume read and rated all selections; second, the Editorial Board composed of all fellow editors, read, responded, and eventually voted to adopt the manuscript for publication. At all stages, both Ulrich Hardt and I worked closely with editors in many ways: readers, critics, administrators, arbitrators, secretaries, grant writers, researchers, coordinators, pollsters.

Since 1993, this unique series of anthologies—with beautiful color covers by Oregon artists—has been creating for Oregon literature a legitimate place in Oregon schools and communities, where the best texts that celebrate, invent, evaluate, and illuminate the Oregon condition had been invisible for too long. For the first time, students have books that actually include writing by Oregonians; teachers can find original, whole, local, and authentic texts from all regions, periods, and peoples in the state. Librarians have been able to recommend the best Oregon reading to their patrons; the new reader and the general reader alike have found answers to the question that haunted this project like a colonial ghost: "Who are Oregon's writers, anyway?" **Q**

THE OREGON LITERATURE SERIES

Published by Oregon State University Press

The World Begins Here: An Anthology of Oregon Short Fiction, edited by Glen Love. Volume 1, 1993.

Thirty-three Oregon stories ranging from a Nez Perce tale to stories by many contemporary writers including Ursula Le Guin, Craig Lesley, Barry Lopez, and Ken Kesey.
0-87071-369-8 (cloth)
0-87071-370-1 (paper)

Many Faces: An Anthology of Oregon Autobiography, edited by Stephen Dow Beckham. Volume 2, 1993.

Here forty Oregonians, from the prominent to the plain, tell their own stories.
0-87071-371-X (cloth)
0-87071-372-8 (paper)

Varieties of Hope: An Anthology of Oregon Prose, edited by Gordon B. Dodds. Volume 3, 1993.

This wide-ranging anthology of speeches, essays, and works of biography, history, and journalism, profiles the Oregon experience.
0-87071-373-6 (cloth)
0-87071-374-4 (paper)

From Here We Speak: An Anthology of Oregon Poetry, edited by Ingrid Wendt and Primus St. John. Volume 4, 1993.

This historical anthology opens with Native American texts and ends with a broad sampling of Oregon's finest contemporary poets.

0-87071-375-2 (cloth)
0-87071-376-0 (paper)

The Stories We Tell: An Anthology of Oregon Folk Literature, edited by Suzi Jones and Jarold Ramsey. Volume 5, 1994.

These traditional stories, songs, tales, and sayings—from Native American creation myths to spotted owl jokes—reveal the richness of Oregon's oral traditions.

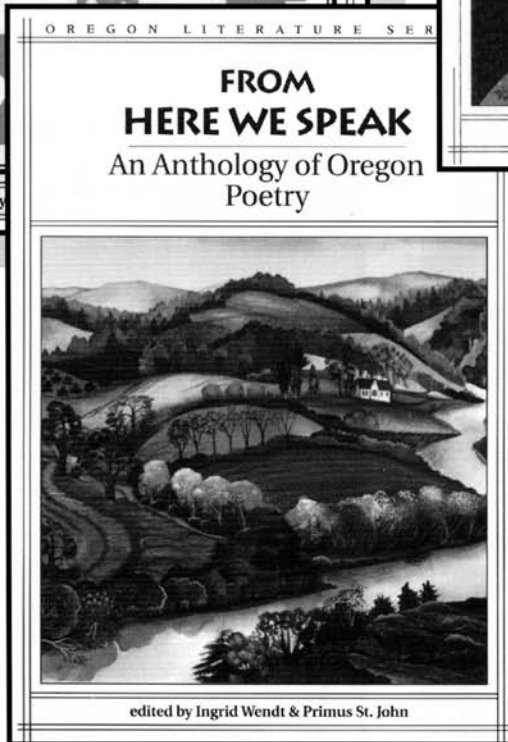
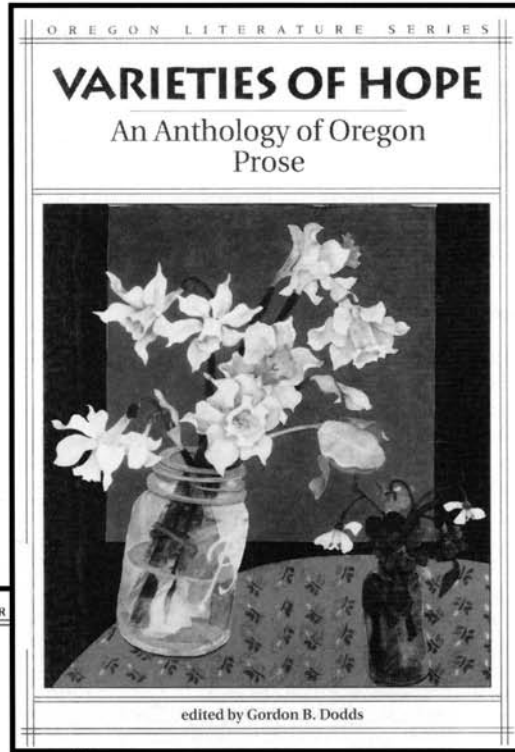
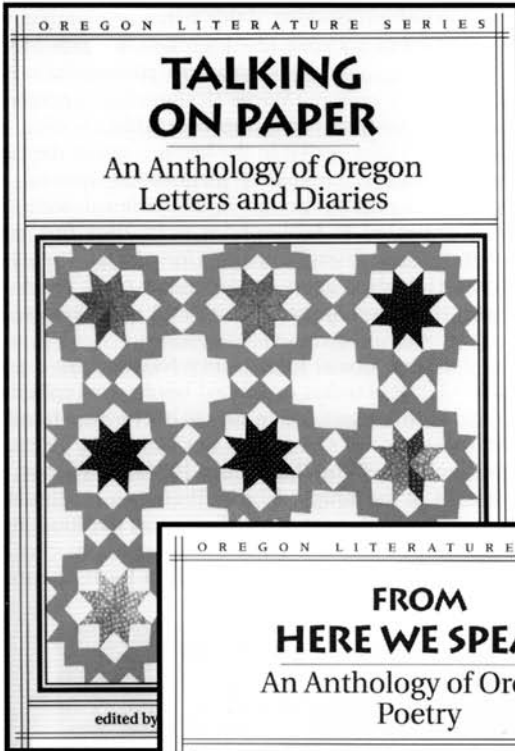
0-87071-379-5 (cloth)
0-87071-380-9 (paper)

Talking on Paper: An Anthology of Oregon Letters and Diaries, edited by Shannon Applegate and Terence O'Donnell. Volume 6, 1994.

These writings by ordinary Oregonians reveal a personal side of Oregon history, filled with the concrete details of everyday life.

0-87071-377-9 (cloth)
0-87071-378-7 (paper)

All volumes are available from library wholesalers or directly from the distributor, University of Arizona Press, at 1-800-426-3797.



Oregon artists provided cover art for titles in the Oregon Literature Series: *Varieties of Hope* features *Light Changes* by Carol Riley; *From Here We Speak* features a detail from Jennifer Joyce's *Southern Exposure*; and *Talking on Paper* features a detail of a quilt (ca. 1876) donated by John Lawrence and probably made by his grandmother, Sarah Hawley.