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Literary Arts, Inc.: Bringing the literary arts to center stage

Lori Robare
University of Oregon

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Literature has traditionally been the least visible, least well-supported segment of the non-profit arts community. Literary Arts, Inc. is trying to change that scenario and move the literary arts away from the margins of Oregon's cultural life and more toward center stage.

Many librarians know Literary Arts, Inc. as the sponsor of the Oregon Book Awards, but the small, dedicated group of people behind this non-profit organization is responsible for several outstanding programs that help support local writers and build the literary life of Oregon. Executive Director Julie Mancini believes that reading, writing, and a love of language are fundamental to any real understanding and appreciation of culture: "We think this is important work, not only because it makes us more civilized and enlightened, but because it will help to make us a better community.

In the process, we hear good minds and ideas, and we can connect to the voices and stories that come from Oregon."

It all began when Portland lawyer Brian Booth, sensing a need for some way to celebrate local writers, created the Oregon Institute for Literary Arts (OILA) and the Oregon Book Awards. In 1994, OILA merged with the Portland Arts & Lecture Series to form Literary Arts, Inc. The merger brought these two ventures together and resulted in a stronger foundation for support of the literary arts. "In 1994, nationally and internationally acclaimed writers were not making stops in Portland," Mancini notes. Now the literary arts have taken a more prominent place in the local cultural scene.

The Oregon Book Awards capture the attention of many librarians each fall; simply browsing the list of nominees in each category provides fodder for many a reading list and a checklist for collection development. The awards are presented annually to honor the year's finest accomplishments by Oregon writers in the areas of fiction, literary non-fiction, poetry, young readers' literature, and drama. Authors, publishers and members of the public may nominate works in these categories. To be eligible, a work must be written by a resident of Oregon and have an original publication date within the 12-month period ending March 31. Nominated works are reviewed by a panel of out-of state judges selected for having expertise in a specific area. The judges select five finalists and one winner in each category.

The awards are presented at a ceremony in November, a celebration of Oregon's writers and literary life

in a warm and appreciative setting. The general public is welcome, and admission is modestly priced. Each winner receives \$1000 and a certificate from Literary Arts. Of course, the impact of winning an Oregon Book Award goes far beyond the financial—some recipients describe it as a turning point in their own identity as writers.

"I was thrilled to win the award, because the Northwest writers I most admire have won it; it was something to shoot for," says Robin Cody, who won in 1995 for *Voyage of a Summer Sun*. "I would always go to the awards ceremony and listen to these writers I admire—and this time I was the one up on stage. It was a real validation of my work." Cody also noted that winning the award helped convince his toughest critic that what he was doing was worthwhile. "My mother still has trouble believing that I'm really a writer," he chuckled. "I tell her that I know guys like Craig Lesley, and she thinks I'm making it up. When I won the Oregon Book Award, it was harder for her to deny!"

Lars Nordstrom, who won the prize for literary non-fiction in 1998 for *Making It Home*, notes, "Writing a book is a lonely thing; you don't have a sense of what your readers will think. When you receive something like the Oregon Book Award, suddenly there is an affirmation that yes, you're doing something that speaks to people. It's different, more objective, than having your friends say they like your book." Nordstrom also appreciated gaining an increased sense of connection with readers and other writers after receiving the nomination. His book was published by a small, independent press and the publisher was not able to do much promotion through book signings and readings. "Once I received the nomination, I was able to participate in readings throughout the state and was put in touch with my audience in a way that wouldn't have happened otherwise. I met a lot of fellow writers this way too, and for the first time felt that I was part of a community of writers."

Literary Arts, Inc. also sponsors three special awards to recognize significant contributions to Oregon literature. The C.E.S. Wood Retrospective Award is presented in recognition of a distinguished career in Oregon letters. The award is named for Charles Erskine Scott Wood, a writer, poet, soldier, lawyer, orator and bibliophile who had a great impact on Portland's cultural life. Past recipients include Walt Morey, Terence O'Donnell, Damon Knight, and Eloise McGraw. The Stewart H. Holbrook Special Award is presented to a person or organization in recognition of current contributions to the advancement of Oregon's literary life. Holbrook was a colorful, popular historical writer from Portland, known as "Lumberjack Boswell" for his writings on loggers and the timber industry. It seems fitting that one recipient of the award was Brian Booth, who wrote Holbrook's biography, *Wildmen, Wobblers & Whistlepunks: Stewart Holbrook's Lowbrow Northwest*. Other recipients include Ruth Gundle and Judith Barrington, George

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Venn, Katharine McCanna, Walt Curtis, Clyde Rice, and Calyx.

The Walt Morey Award was presented for the first time in 1998 in recognition of contributions to young readers' literature. Barbara McKillip, founder and president of the Libri Foundation and long-time member of OLA, received the award for her work in providing new children's books to small rural libraries. She was overwhelmed to receive a standing ovation upon being presented with the award.

Nominations for any of these special awards can be made on an entry form available from the Literary Arts, Inc. Web site: www.literary-arts.org/index.html. The site also provides information about the other programs sponsored by Literary Arts.

Several literary fellowship programs encourage the development of new voices in Oregon literature by providing financial support to emerging writers and small independent publishers. Emerging Writer Fellowships provide funds to initiate, develop or complete writing projects in the areas of fiction, poetry, drama, literary non-fiction and young readers. Women Writers' Fellowships place special emphasis on funding writing that explores experiences of race, class, physical disability or sexual orientation. Fellowships to publishers are awarded to independent publishers, presses and magazines that demonstrate a commitment to publishing literary works.

The awards range from \$1,000 to \$3,000. "It's not enough to allow anyone to quit their day job," notes Julie Mancini, "but the fellowships do provide the recognition that what they're doing is good work." Mancini believes that the fellowship programs will be the enduring legacy of Literary Arts, long after other programs have come and gone, for their role in nurturing and supporting Oregon's writers.

Other Literary Arts, Inc. programs focus on promoting appreciation of the literary arts in the Portland area.

Portland Arts & Lectures brings distinguished authors and artists to Portland for a seven-part series of lectures. Speakers for the 1998/99 season included Charles Frazier, Kaye Gibbons, Richard Ford, David Remnick, Barbara Kopple, Julie Taynor, Caryl Phillips and Julian Barnes.

Writers in the Schools (WIS) combines a residency program in three area schools—Grant High School, Beaumont Middle School, and Vancouver School of Arts & Academics—with visits from authors who are on book tours or speaking in the Portland Arts & Lectures Series. The program aims to connect kids with writers in a meaningful way, beyond what is possible when authors visit schools and merely speak to large groups at assemblies. With WIS, kids form a relationship with an accomplished writer in ongoing classes and learn to tell their own stories. WIS classes have expanded beyond traditional writ-

ing seminars to encompass such courses as screenwriting, poetry for geometry students, and performance poetry.

Teachers also grow through the WIS program. Writers in residence offer writing workshops to teachers, and each summer WIS sends 2 to 5 teachers to their choice of the many excellent writing workshops available throughout Oregon, such as Fishtrap, Flight of the Mind, and the Oregon Writing Project. Literary Arts hopes to add more schools to the WIS program for 1999/2000.

Commuters in the greater Portland area may happen upon evidence of another Literary Arts program: Poetry in Motion! which places 20 poems on Tri-Met buses and MAX trains each year. Ten of this year's poems were selected from over 1,200 submitted by Oregon poets; the remaining ten were drawn from the *Poetry in Motion!* anthology. The Oregon component of this national project is coordinated by Literary Arts and co-sponsored by several organizations including Tri-Met, Starbucks, and the Poetry Society of America.

Through all of these programs, Literary Arts, Inc. is helping to bring the literary arts to the same level of visibility as the visual and performing arts and to ensure that writing and publishing are not relegated to the margins of our cultural life. Literary Arts, Inc. relies upon the contributions of individuals, businesses and foundations to fund its programs. **Q**

Critics tell us that literature is rather an image of the spiritual world, than of the physical—of the internal, rather than the external—that mountains, lakes and rivers, are after all only its scenery and decorations, not its substance and essence. And it is true that a man will not necessarily be a great poet because he lives at the foot of a great mountain—a Hood, a Jefferson, or a Shasta; nor being a poet, that he will write better poems than others because he lives where he can bear the thundering falls of the mighty Willamette. ...But, while mountains, rivers, and valleys do not create genius, no one can deny that they aid in developing it. ...No man or woman with the least poetic impulse can entirely escape and resist the inspiring influences of luxuriant vegetation, balmy air, and delightful scenery.

With a state drained on the north by the mighty Columbia, measured on the east by rivers and prairies and gold, guarded on the south by the sky-kissed Siskiyou, bathed on the west by the sunset seas; a state dotted here and there by the everlasting peaks—the sentinels of the world bound together with great mountain chains, reveling in delightful valleys beautifully tessellated (sic) with charming traceries—crystal streams winding like silvery threads from the glaciers far above as if seeking the violets, the daisies, and the witcheries of the lowlands, ours is not the scenery that makes warriors and bandits, but it is the taming, refining, elevating influence of the milder, gentler, environments that will in the coming days produce a literature most admired for the gentleness of its sentiment and the grace of its art. With us the perfection of the literary art will attain its zenith in approximating the perfection of the sweet nature and rich landscapes about us.

—John B. Horner, *Oregon Literature*, 1899