

Some writers performed in Newport not knowing they were perched on a springboard to stardom, such as *Chuck Palahniuk* who read in March 1999 when *Fight Club*, the movie, hadn't yet been released.

# Writers on the Edge

By Carla Perry





### That's the name of the organization: **WRITERS ON THE EDGE.**

I like the name. It implies desperate writers about to dive off cliffs into the pounding surf of the Pacific below. It implies writers on the edge of a major breakthrough—an exploration past previous boundaries into dangerous waters of luminosity. It reflects our Pacific Northwest Coast geography with its ragged coastline and ferocious weather. The name even correctly identifies the locale where the organization's writerly events take place—the Visual Arts Center in the Nye Beach area of Newport where the second floor community room has a 200-degree view of setting suns and open ocean.

Writers On The Edge was the name we made up when the writers' series I reluctantly started in Yachats in 1997, and moved to the Performing Arts Center in Newport in 1999, had become so successful that it needed to be transformed into an independent nonprofit.

I like the organization's mission: To expose the coastal communities to the fantastic minds of writers from the Pacific Northwest, from across the country, and occasionally from other countries.

Through the years, programming expanded and the Nye Beach Writers' Series continued to flourish. These are its stats: 139 events, 311 featured authors, 11.5 years—so far. Events take place the third Saturday year round (except December). Some of our finest living writers have taken the stage, read their work, and answered questions from the crowd. Locals, coast-range folk, Willamette Valley people, tourists, refugees escaping from somewhere else holing up at the Sylvia Beach Hotel, friends, family, and vagabonds drift in the door just before 7 p.m.

Who are these people that show up for a poetry reading by someone they've never heard of? What are they doing here, listening to a young man whose only published book is the one he printed and sewed himself? The room fills with middle-aged hipsters, teenagers looking for extra credit, retired academics seeking brain stimulus, a few fishermen, sometimes even an ex-logger or two. It's always been a diverse crowd.

I used to ask myself, why do they keep coming back? Who ventures out on a cold, wet night in early spring, willing to pay \$5 to hear Lauren Kessler read from *Dancing With Rose*, a book about her experience working in an Alzheimers

residence facility? But the room filled up, and the beauty of Kessler's language and the tenderness with which she described the resident interactions touched our hearts and buoyed our spirits. I don't quite know how it happened, but we left that reading hopeful about our descent into old age. Such is the power of the written word.

My goal has always been to present the best writers, no matter what format their writing takes; people who have something to talk about, and the language skills to permeate and caress our hardened skulls. I approach literary readings as live entertainment. After all, we're competing with television, jammies, and comfortable couches.

Featured authors might write poetry, or Oregon history, or be novelists, investigative journalists, performance artists, playwrights, filmmakers, or solo singer/songwriters like June Rushing (June 2001, April 2004), or full bands like The Dolly Ranchers (April 2002), or Billy Joe Shaver, the country western songwriting icon whose caravan of mammoth buses made a quick stop in Newport on their west coast tour (April 2003). Surprisingly successful are the Oregon Coast Haiku Slam Classics, held at Café Mundo every April in celebration of Poetry Month.

*Eleanor Roosevelt: Across A Barrier of Fear*, was written and performed by Jane Van Boskirk (March 2001). "How To Make A Hardcover Book At Home In Your Spare Time" was demonstrated by Lorrie Height of Astoria (April 2004). "Haiku Inferno" (June 2004) starred Kevin Sampsel, Elizabeth Miller, and Frayn Masters creating improvised, politically satiric haiku on the spot.

Storyteller Jeff DeMark, from Blue Lake, California, has performed four separate solo shows (two in 2003, 2004, 2008).

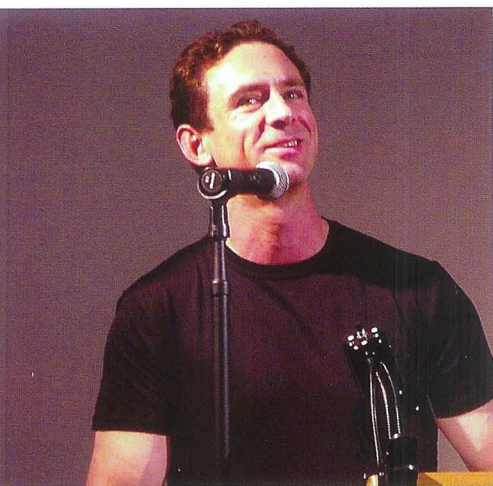
Sometimes the Nye Beach Writers' Series presents choreographed, original



shows with large casts, like *Vaudvillainous Poets* (June 1998) and *The Memory Place* (June 1999). In three Julys (2003, 2004, 2007) the full cast of *Hot Flashes!* and *Flashbacks: The Musical* performed in the Silverman Auditorium at the Newport Performing Arts Center. And each time the show raised enough money to keep the Writers On The Edge afloat for an entire year.

What big names would you recognize from our lineup? Perhaps actor/author Peter Coyote; Montana novelist William Kittredge; Pam Houston; Mark Doty (who received the 2008 National Book Award in poetry); Ursula K. Le Guin; Derrick Jensen; Sam Hamill who started Poets Against the War; former poet laureate of New York, Sharon Olds; former poet laureate of Utah, David Lee; former Oregon Governor Barbara Roberts, all reading from their books. Alone, on stage, in Newport. Standing room only and so quiet you could hear the book-binding creak as they turned the page.

Some writers performed in Newport not knowing they were perched on a springboard to stardom, such as Chuck



Chuck Palahniuk read in March 1999 before the film adaptation of his book *Fight Club*, starring Brad Pitt, had been released. He returned to the Writers' Series again in April 2003.

Palahniuk who read in March 1999 when *Fight Club*, the movie, hadn't yet been released. That same year, Diana Abu-Jaber read from *Arabian Jazz*, an Oregon

Book Award winner. Since then her books have been designated one of the twenty best novels in 2003 and she won the 2004 PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction, the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Writing Fellowship, a Fulbright Research Award to travel to Amman, Jordan, an International Writers NEA Fellowship in Fiction, and her most recent book, *Origin*, was named one of the top five Booksense Picks.

Lawson Inada was here twice, long before he was named Poet Laureate of the State of Oregon, and he spent the day before his reading holding a writing workshop at Waldport High.

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*"I wish I was from Newport. If I was from Newport, I would have never left. All I'm saying is I'm really pleased to be here. In Ashland we tend to believe we're the center of the world, but being here in Newport I realize we don't have Carla and we don't have a Writers' Series, so I'm thinking, we're kind of behind the times." – Lawson Fusao Inada (reading September 16, 2000).*

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And then there were the hundred or so Oregon Book Award winners and finalists who graced us with their presence, before or after they received their awards. Their names alone evoke a lyric litany. In the Poetry category: Dorianne Laux, Paulann Petersen, Vern Rutsala, Floyd Skloot, Judith Barrington, Robert McDowell, Rita Ott Ramstad, Clemens Starck, Joseph Millar, Willa Schneberg, Karen Braucher, Jeff Meyers, Diane Averill, Sandra Stone, Barbara LaMor-

ticella, Carlos Reyes, Jane Glazer, Doug Marx, Sharon Doubiago, Maxine Scates, John Daniel, Brian Doyle.

In Fiction: Molly Gloss, Alison Clement, Monica Drake, Tracy Daugherty, Gina Ochsner, Geronimo Tagatac, Kassten Alonso, Kris Nelscott, Marjorie Sandor, Cai Emmons, Alan Siporin, Kathleen Tyau, Sandra Scofield, Gregg Kleiner, Diana Abu-Jaber, Whitney Otto, David James Duncan, Karen Karbo, Tom Spanbauer, Rodger Larson.

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*"You run a fantastic program. Loved the open mic, the sense of camaraderie and community of the entire evening. How did Molly Gloss mesmerize us so thoroughly with that story? That's the kind of magic that keeps me going back to the lonely old desk. By way of thanks, I'm sending some copies of "Insects of South Corvallis" for you to give to anyone who would enjoy it – high school kids, prospective donors, open mic contest winners." – Charles Goodrich (reading with Molly Gloss, March 20, 2004).*

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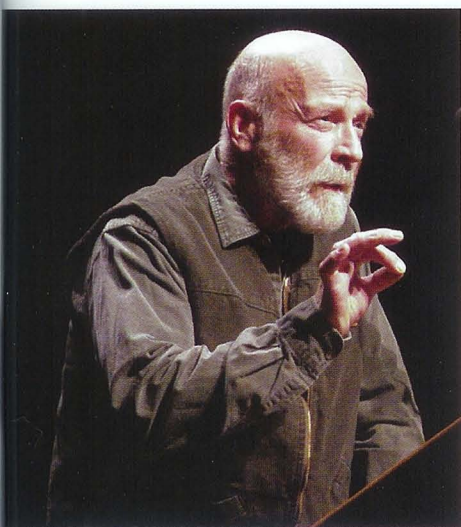
In Creative Nonfiction: Rene Denfeld, Kathleen Dean Moore, Elinor Langer, Ariel Gore, Bette Lynch Husted, Karen Karbo, Jennifer Lauck, Larry Colton, Chanrithy Him, Judith Barrington, Barbara Drake, Jeff Taylor, John Daniel, Robert Leo Heilman, Garrett Hongo, Robin Cody, Sallie Tisdale.

In Drama: Dori Appel, Molly Best



Tinsley, Jan Baross, Sharon Whitney.

I wish I had the space to mention them all.



Poet Clemens Starck has presented twice, once in September 1997 and again in January 2003.

Some of our featured authors have made their final leap off the edge. Science fiction writer Robert Sheckley (1928-2005) read on August 15, 1997. He started writing stories in the 1940's, and created, along with his friend Roger Zelazney, what became the genre of science fiction. In 2001, he received the designation of 'Author Emeritus' by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, a lifetime achievement award.

I had the extraordinary experience of interviewing Ken Kesey in Springfield to prepare publicity for his Writers' Series appearance on April 21, 2000. I asked him questions about his philosophy of benevolence, paying attention, especially to children, and about the concept of love. I asked him about writing as drama, novels as performance, books as money, and videos of the future. We spoke of magic, synchronicity, and his role in acid test musical extravaganzas. The interview turned out to be the final interview of this great man and was published in the United States and Romania.

The organization's mission is to nourish not only the artistic development

of individual writers, but to cultivate a writing community as well.

Talent and personal inclination are helpful, but technique can be taught to anyone, and practice makes you better. The Nye Beach Writers' Series includes an open mic that closes almost every show. Up to 10 audience members can sign up to read their original work for five minutes maximum. I figure around seven thousand people have shown up as audience. Of these, more than a thousand have bravely faced their peers and expressed their truths.

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*"Thank you for providing a place for writers to get our writing out in the public, and thank you for the Clyde Rice books I received as the open mic winner last Saturday night. He certainly is inspirational as far as being an older writer who once he got started couldn't be stopped! See you at the next show." – Patsy Brookshire, open mic regular and author of Threads (2006).*

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Hundreds of those open mic readers have been high school students, partly because Writers On The Edge provides free admission to them. The organization believes youth involvement is so absolutely vital that one seat on the board of directors is reserved for a high school student. If teachers bring students with them, they can get in free as well.

In fact, no one is turned away at the door due to lack of funds. We've been known to invite in grizzled wanderers stooped under the weight of backpacks when they pull out poetic scribbling on scraps of paper or perform their poems

from memory.

It turns out the open mic has far-reaching tendrils. Over the years, I've received calls from teachers telling me of the profound changes in their students after a particular author read in their classroom. I see parents at the grocery store who thank me again for offering those summer workshops. Sometimes I receive a letter from someone who read at an open mic years ago, when he was in high school.

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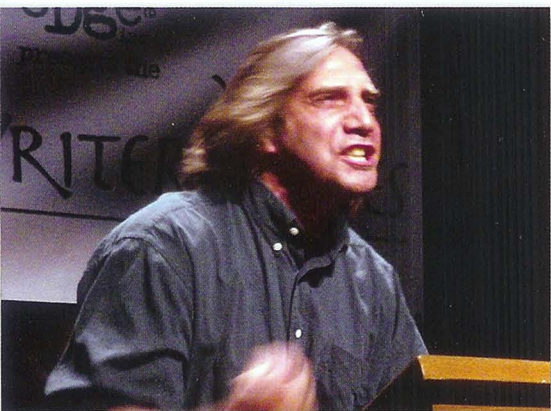
*It's me, Devin Whitaker. I am writing to you in regards to an idea I had last night. Since being back from Iraq, I've noticed that creative outlets in Southern California are fleeting, or at least in Orange County. My idea, of course, is to start a "Writers Series" down here in San*



Former Oregon Governor Barbara Roberts reads from her book *Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology: A Guide for Facing Death and Loss*.



Clemente. This idea was so incredibly motivating to me because it is something that I loved and enjoyed so much back home. Really, I'd like to duplicate the same ambiance and crowd energy like you had in Nye Beach, not the loud hysterics of poetry slams I had attended in Eugene and Portland. Although they have their relevance and beauty, your writers' series promoted creation in a way that I'd never seen or have since. The thought of gathering writers together to share and listen, like a sophisticated night on the town, makes my stomach lift. I'm just getting started with this and would be ever grateful if you could share with me your wisdom and knowledge. Thank you so much, I hope to hear from you soon. Grateful and sincerely," – Devin J. Whitaker (email December 19, 2007).



Andrew Rodman delivers a spirited performance during an open mic session.



So what about kids below high school age? They're too young to attend non-censored live literary entertainment, so it works out best when we hold in-school readings, or early evening writing workshops for kids and their parents, or week-long and month-long writing and performance workshops during the summer. And it works out best of all when we raise sufficient grant funds beforehand to cover full scholarships (and a free lunch) for all kids who apply.

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*"I clipped the article from the News-Times about the POETRY WRITING WORKSHOP!!!!!! I am so excited I can barely keep my lips from falling off. Do you have any details about the times, dates, costs?? I am going to plan my summer around it, since I am so eager to attend." – Jessica Jackson, aged 14 (email January 13, 2003)*

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Performance has always been a part of the youth writing workshops. Tuition is never charged.

Over the years, numerous grants

and collaborations have allowed Writers On The Edge to expand our reach. We've worked with the Cultural Tourism Partnership of Lincoln County, Ernest Bloch Festival, Lincoln County School District, Hatfield Marine Science Center, Oregon Coast Aquarium, Newport Public Library, the Oregon Coast Council for the Arts, and Café Mundo. Plus, Mountain Writers Series, Community of Writers, KBOO radio in Portland, the University of Oregon, Oregon Writers Colony, Oregon Council for the Humanities, the Lannan Foundation, and Rattapallax Press in NYC.

Writers On The Edge has no paid staff. It's our director, Matt Love, and the board that works hard to make everything we do seem effortless. We're writers, walking literary billboards, written word appreciators, crazy people who like to listen to writers read.

So, how many people have been impacted by Writers On The Edge? Twenty thousand? Thirty? More? No matter how you tally, it's a lot of people take the plunge off the literary cliff and finding out they can fly. \*

#### **Why not join us?**

Schedule details are posted on our website:  
[www.writersontheedge.org](http://www.writersontheedge.org).