

Celebrating the powerful words of women

Jorah LaFleur delves into the rich history of poetry with the Celebration of Women Poets at Luna

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Jorah LaFleur was a senior at Sheldon High School when she first recognized the power of the spoken word. At a graduation event, she read a poem titled "I am an American," which dealt with her personal struggles to reconcile her white, middle-class background with lessons she had learned throughout high school about power dynamics and the nation's history.

"It was a really powerful experience," she said. "There were hundreds of teachers and students assembled from all different grades and they just explosively loved it. I think that was the first time I really harnessed the feeling of the energy that takes over when you're on stage."

Since that time, LaFleur has slowly made performance poetry an integral part of her life. However, she readily admits that when it comes to the work of the female poets before her, her knowledge is limited. The desire to learn more about this rich history of women writers was a major factor

behind LaFleur's decision to host a Celebration of Woman Poets at Luna next Wednesday.

Over the past three months, LaFleur has organized and hosted a number of similar poetry readings that have attempted, through a split open mic and presentation format, to both display the talents of local writers and honor more famous poets of the past or present. Thus far, the works of Pablo Neruda, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi and the beat poets of the '40s and '50s have been venerated at this event.

"It's exciting to give flesh or give voice to words that, in many cases, have been written by someone that has passed on," LaFleur said.

"They're not existent in their physical form anymore and yet their words are still so compelling and so powerful."

Claudia Lapp, a local poet who has attended all of the Luna readings and performed at a few, said she enjoys the idea of an educated poetry public. It is a fantasy she believes these Luna events could help make into a reality.

"I always remember that Neruda

was just so popular in his country," she said of the 20th century Chilean poet renowned for his strong political beliefs. "He was a people's poet; a real working class guy. He would go into bars and do poetry readings and people would stand up and start reciting parts of his poems. I suppose it's kind of idealistic to think we could have that in the U.S. today, but we can have pockets of it, can't we?"

To fuel this show, LaFleur hopes to draw partly on the educated poetry public already existent in Eugene. For the event, she will strike the pure open mic format where people can read their own work, instead encouraging anyone with a favorite female poet to come read a bit of her work and honor that woman's voice in doing so. Through this experience, LaFleur also hopes participants will come to recognize the basic human connection that often forms between a spoken word poet and their audience. It is one of LaFleur's favorite parts of reading poetry.

"You may have never talked to any of your listeners before," she said. "You're complete strangers and yet you share something very heartfelt, passionate and raw. So, when someone comes up to you at the end of the

reading, the doors are already open. It's like you don't have to go through all this small talk; you just jump right into that sharing of a vision or a value or a sense of humor."

Several reasons fueled LaFleur's decision to shift the focus for this particular reading to women exclusively. One explanation she gave was her belief that females are too often excluded or marginalized in society. It's important to LaFleur to bring women to the forefront in order to highlight and ensure their position of equality with men.

"I mean, it's been less than a hundred years since we've been able to vote," she said. "And in our generation, I think it's really easy to be disconnected with how recent it is that women and men have been recognized as equals. Even if that's not the reality — and, of course, it isn't in many cases — just for there to be that social acknowledgment is still really novel."

Lapp, who will be presenting at the event, hopes to display a range of female poets from a variety of age groups, time periods and cultures. Adrienne Rich, Shihab Nye, Lucille Clifton and Gertrude Stein are just a few of the women whose work she intends to read.

"It'll be a little sampler," she said.

"And since I've only got 20 minutes, I want to include some of the ones who've really knocked my socks off."

To better describe the event, LaFleur compares this poetry reading to Spike Lee's films, which often highlight some of the uglier aspects of racism in our history in order to show how it still affects us today. LaFleur explains it is important to do the same with sexism.

"Of course, change is being made and it's important to honor and acknowledge and continue that," she said. "But at the same time, to be like, 'Well, that's in the past. We're not sexist anymore. We're not racist anymore,' is bullshit. In order for us to continue to create greater equality, we have to be cognizant of our history so we can see its subtle manifestations in the present."

Sign-ups for The Celebration of Woman Poets reading will begin Wednesday at 7 p.m. The public open mic will begin at 8 p.m., and the formal reading will begin at 9 p.m. Cover charge will fall on a sliding scale of \$5 to \$3. Luna is located at 30 E. Broadway. For more information, check out the club's Web site at www.lunajazz.com.

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- 1** You must leave right away
- 2** It is never a good idea to join a large crowd (even as an observer) that is gathering in the streets.
- 3** In large public disturbances, you should leave so that you aren't interfering with a police officer, and you should leave for your own safety.
- 4** If the police ask you to step back into your residence or off the porch or balcony, you should do so.