

Sampsell and Bolton read at LAC

Kevin Sampsell

E.E. West
The Clackamas Print

If author Kevin Sampsell looks just like the guy in front of you at Starbucks, there might be a good reason: it might just be him.

Sampsell, a Portland-area writer, publisher, and Powell's Books employee, visited the Literary Arts Center last Wednesday to share a few of his stories and some tips with writing students.

"Kevin is really at the front and center of this great literary movement that's happening in Portland," English instructor Trevor Dodge said when introducing Sampsell to the audience. "Kevin likes to show some of the darker things that go on in this beautiful place. He writes about what really goes on here."

Sampsell's Northwest credentials are solid, and shine through in his work. His characters act and talk just like the people one is likely to meet walking down Burnside.

Whether it's a guy who takes in a stray old man as a pet, an LSD-befuddled store clerk, or a perennial convict who's forever spiraling further and further into jail (and into a port-a-potty), Sampsell's characters positively drip with Northwest authenticity, even if their surreal world does seem a million miles away.

A native of Kennewick Washington, Sampsell lived for a time in Spokane before moving to the Rose City in the mid-'90s. He began his writing career as a poet in Spokane, where he started his own publishing company, Future Tense Publishing.

Originally the works Future Tense published were mostly poetry, but Sampsell has since shifted his focus to short fiction.

"The poems I was writing were mostly long descriptive lines that told a story," he recalled. "I realized that what I really wanted to do was tell stories."

The stories he ended up telling were far from orthodox. Sampsell prefers the genre "flash fiction," or short one to two page stories that eschew traditional story elements (such as tidy conclusions or deep character development) in favor of brevity.

Sampsell believes that open-ended stories stir readers to use their own imaginations to fill in the blanks, allowing them to finish the stories their way. The effect is both unsettling and stirring at the same time.

"I was more conscious of endings when I started [writing]," Sampsell said. "Leaving my stories open kind of came from the authors I was reading ... authors like Raymond Carver. When I first read his stuff I wasn't that impressed. About a month later I was still thinking about his stories and wondering."

Another characteristic of his work is the frankness with which they deal with sex. Sampsell figures that of all the stories Future Tense publishes, whether written by him or by others, about 80% of them are what he would call "erotic" in nature.

"Sex strips away the layers that people put up around themselves," Sampsell responded when asked about this aspect of his work. "Sexual relationships show the desire that people have



Contributed Photo

Future Tense Publishing founder Kevin Sampsell.

to cut through all those layers and get down to their core. It gets right to the base of what people are really interested in."

Sampsell concluded his visit by giving some pointers for aspiring authors trying to get a start in the Portland writing scene.

"First of all you have to get a bunch of stories you've worked on a lot, and feel are good enough to show people; next, you have to take your work somewhere it'll be seen, like the web, Powell's, or in journals; and third, you have to be patient," Sampsell said, "publishing is very slow. Some places take as little as three weeks to respond; others might take six months. The best thing to do is just keep sending your work out."

Megan Koler
The Clackamas Print

The Literary Arts Center hosted the inspirational professor and writer from Iowa State University, Linda Bolton, on Oct. 21.

The normally calm and serene study area in Rook Hall was transformed by 20 to 30 excited students and faculty.

Bolton began by explaining how the works of M. Scott Momaday, a Native American writer, helped her decide the direction in which she would direct her studies.

"I felt like an old drum was drumming in my head ... and in my spirit," Bolton said, commenting on how she felt after reading just one paragraph of Momaday's novel "The American Land Ethic."

The theme of Momaday's works and the reading was looking at oneself in a different perspective; looking at who one is and where they are in terms of the universe and time.

"We are who we imagine ourselves to be," Bolton explained, quoting Momaday.

A refreshing quality of Bolton's reading was her interaction with the audience. Her

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Iowa State University Professor of literature Linda Bolton.

questions weren't rhetorical. She encouraged everyone to explain what the question meant to them and what their answer

might be.

Bolton also took volunteers to read from selected works by famous Native American poet and professor, Joy Harjo.

Bolton was a student of Harjo in the early '90s at the University of Arizona.

Harjo's poetry was simple and elegant. Like Momaday, work it incorporated the idea of a person being internationally and universally united with everyone and everything.

"Remember your birth, how your mother struggled to give you form and breath. You are evidence of her life, and her mother's, and hers," read Bolton of Harjo's poem "Remember."

The atmosphere created by the words and discussion was warm and intimate.

Bolton excelled at inspiring the audience to think and to be taught.

Even though the scheduled two hour reading was cut short due to intersecting classes for a majority of the audience, one could hardly have felt cheated.

The significance of the reading was to present some of Momaday's and Harjo's questions concerning the world.

As fundamentally pertinent and interesting as they were, the audience will surely remember them for time to come.

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