

The long incubation of a dream

Harold Johnson, a longtime teacher and poet, aspired to write a novel. Decades later, his goal has come to fruition.

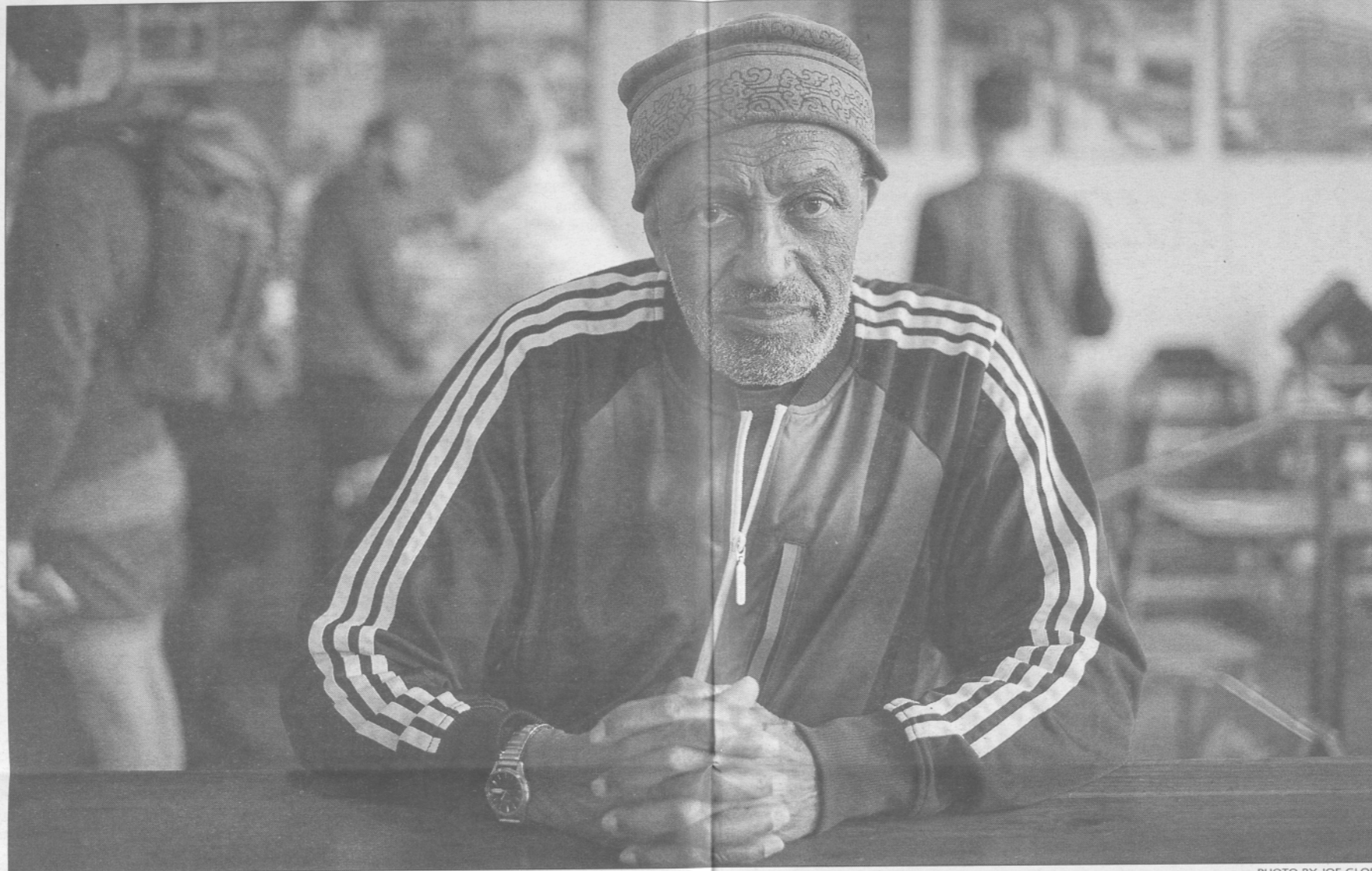
BY MARTHA GIES
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Last fall, Portland poet Harold Johnson launched his novel at Broadway Books, and a standing-room-only crowd filled the Northeast Portland shop to hear him read. Set on a U.S. Army base in the late '50s, "The Fort Showalter Blues" is a story of a young African-American trumpet player from Portland who gets initiated into the racism of the U.S. armed forces.

After reading two short sections and taking questions from the audience, Johnson closed the program with a story he loves to tell, one dating back to his undergraduate days as an English major at the University of Portland.

"I had a friend in one of my classes, and we both wanted to be novelists. Charlie was two years older than I, and he told me he figured he could get his novel published by the time he was 30. And I remember feeling sorry for him because he was going to be so *old* by then."

Johnson paused for a beat, then smiled broadly for the punch line: "So here I am, at 81!"



Portland poet Harold Johnson, author of "The Fort Showalter Blues," said the years he spent teaching at Portland Night High School were his most fulfilling.

Johnson was born in Yakima, Wash., in 1933, the year President Franklin Roosevelt took office and began introducing Depression recovery programs. Late summers during World War II, the whole family would rise at 3:30 in the morning so Johnson's father could deliver them to the hop field before going to his own job collecting garbage for the city.

"My father was a man with four kids who probably never made more than \$60 a month," Johnson said. "I didn't know anybody as poor as we were."

Despite the hardship, he remembers being a cheerful child.

"I loved school. My teachers were all kind people." They especially encouraged his painting and drawing, for which he showed an early talent.

"It was a white town," Johnson recalled. "In a town of 30,000 people, I was aware of maybe 100 African-Americans." He would see them when he visited his maternal grandmother on South Sixth Street, and he described going down to this little four-block black district as "entering an enchanted grove." Where his family lived, up on South 11th, he was often the only black child in his classroom.

"My best friend from the first grade was a white kid who was a very big influence in my life." Bob Linn was the son of college-educated North Dakota parents who were warm and welcoming to Johnson, and the two

boys were close all through school.

But it was Nat and Betty Rosler, a white Jewish couple from New York, who most powerfully influenced him. They had come out to Portland to work in the shipyards and had washed up in Yakima after the war. At the beginning of Johnson's junior year, they happened to see a particularly lovely watercolor, signed "Harold Johnson," hanging in their children's elementary school, and asked Johnson's father, who often stopped in at their little convenience store after work, if that might have been painted by his child. You'd better go down there, his father told Harold, because these people wanted to meet you.

"So I got to talking about art with Betty and Nat, and nobody had ever talked to me like that." First they hired him to work behind the counter, and then, having just had their fourth child, asked him to babysit their children.

"They had lots of books! They gave me 'Anna Karenina' to read and 'The Brothers Karamazov.' And they had all these records: Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Beethoven, Caruso. They had the opera 'Carmen!' Johnson's voice rose to his original excitement, even after all these years.

He worked one year for the Roslers, until they moved back to Ozone Park in his senior year, shortly after Johnson's own father died. "I was just pretty much on my own."

However, he got straight As, and won

Johnson was a talented student; he was great at memorization and loved languages. At University of Portland, he took four years of French and later, working on a master's at Portland State University, four years of Italian.

He was disappointed University of Portland didn't have an art department, but was pleased with the possibilities for writing.

"I had a wonderful teacher right away, Father Michael O'Brien," Johnson said. "The guy had studied with Robert Penn Warren at Minnesota and was really good."

By "good," Johnson meant rigorous, and he took classes with O'Brien for four semesters.

"He encouraged me by publishing my work in the college lit magazine," Johnson said. And it was here that Johnson's dream of writing a novel began.

Geoffrey Chaucer was a beautiful discovery for him, and he loved Shakespeare class. "Though I didn't have the money for the Shakespeare text," he recalled.

Instead, he used an edition he had seen advertised on the back of a comic book during his senior year in high school. "It cost \$3, and I had sent away for it." He simply made do without any of the footnotes and still earned top grades. He loved it all.

By the time he graduated, in 1956, he had accumulated the credits required for a teaching certificate, which he called his "route to employment." He quickly paid off his school loan teaching eighth grade at Sifton Elementary, was drafted in 1958 and played trumpet with the 62nd Army Band at Fort Bliss. When he returned to Portland, he taught at Boise Grammar School for a few years, then began a Master of Arts in Teaching in painting and drawing at Portland State.

At PSU, he met the poet Sandra McPherson, who mentored and encouraged his poetry, and the artist Anne Griffin, whom he married in 1971.

Meanwhile, in 1969, Portland Public Schools opened John Adams High School, at Northeast 39th Avenue and Jessup Street, launching a bold new experiment that garnered national attention for its conspicuously non-traditional curriculum. Each sub-school had a master teacher, called a director, who worked with the same group of high school students all four years.

Out of Adams was born Portland Night High School, an outreach program to kids who, for one reason or another, could not fit into conventional high school, and with it was born Johnson's true calling.

Johnson's career flowed smoothly along two channels: writing poetry and teaching troubled kids, many of whom graduated, made their way in the world and still call on him today.

He remembers those years of teaching as his most fulfilling.

"Those kids that I had during that time, I mean they were really ... " He could not talk about them without his voice breaking. "Excuse me a minute," he said, "but that hit me. We were like family."

Mary Frances Bowers, who was with Portland Public Schools from 1973 to 1997, remembers Johnson's work at the night school with unwed mothers, gay students, artists and musicians.

"He was perfect for that," she said. "Harold was a humanist, immensely well-educated in several subjects, and he was funny. He just had a good spirit."

When he retired from teaching in 1995, Johnson served as co-editor for "Fireweed: Poetry of Western Oregon" for two years. He had already been writing and publishing his own poetry – in literary journals, two chapbooks and several anthologies – for 25 years.

Finally, as the new century began, he got down to business: It was time to write that novel.

"The Fort Showalter Blues" took 13 years to complete, during which time Johnson's work was twice interrupted by bouts of cancer. But he rested, treated – chemo the first time, radiation the second – and

persevered. When the book was finally finished to his satisfaction, he did not seek an agent.

"Given my age," he said, "I didn't want to be bothered with all that."

Instead, he self-published under the imprint Irving Courts, a reference to the Irving Park Tennis Courts. In the long list of activities at which Johnson excels, tennis holds a key position.

And a beautiful novel it is, written with a poet's eye for detail, and a musician's ear for dialogue.

At the book launch, Paulann Petersen, Oregon Poet Laureate Emerita, was seated in the front row. A longtime friend, she had championed Johnson's recent volume of poetry, "Citizenship," with an enthusiastic back-cover blurb: "Savvy, sassy, satiric, his work is so encompassing, so compassionate, his poems can sing for a whole nation."

"When Harold began to read," she said later, "I was transfixed by the voice of the incomparable Harold. Exactly marvelous. Yes, he is."

Petersen was just one of the many Portland writers listening to Johnson in the room that night, but there might have been other friends present whom the rest of us could not see: his classmate Charlie, who had harbored the same desire for novel-making; and O'Brien, the English professor who expected so much from his students; or Nat and Betty Rosler, who had briefly and angelically descended into Yakima so many decades ago to encourage the young boy in his talent.

Johnson has an easy comfort with good fortune.

"I do think teaching was a lucky thing," he said. Then, with a broad smile: "And living long enough to write."

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MARY FRANCES BOWERS,
HAROLD JOHNSON'S FORMER
COLLEAGUE AT PORTLAND PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

second place – and cash – in a national essay contest sponsored by Seventeen magazine. (Later, when poetry became primary in his life, he realized the young Sylvia Plath had published in the same issue.)

He began to think about college. "Of course, my buddy, Bob, was aimed toward college all along. And I knew damned well if he could go, I could go. I just had no idea how I might pay for it."

Yet once, back when he was 12 years old and caddying for Yakima's bigwigs out at the golf course, he'd earned enough money to buy a trumpet he had coveted for three years, so he knew miracles did happen.

The two halves of the college miracle came together in quick succession.

A University of Portland recruiter showed up at Yakima High School, and Johnson, an avid reader of the sports pages, knew that the Winters brothers – two African-Americans with a spectacular talent for basketball – both played for that college.

"Wayne Durrell was this recruiter's name, and somehow I talked to him. 'Oh, yeah, come on down! Give us a call! Write to us!'"

Then his cousin Lizzy, 23, came up from Portland on a surprise Saturday afternoon visit. Johnson returned home from caddying to find her standing in the family front yard. "And she says, 'Oh, do come down; you can live with us!'"

Out of his correspondence with Wayne

Durrell came the offer of a loan and the promise of help finding work.

Sure enough, once he arrived in Portland, the school referred him to a Southwest 12th Avenue and Washington parking lot, where he not only got the job but worked the 5 to 10 p.m. shift six nights a week for all four years of college and straight through the summers. At night, he could study under the light bulb hanging in the parking shack. Meanwhile, he met a number of memorable customers who came through there. Among them, Thurgood Marshall, just one year after Marshall successfully argued *Brown v. Board of Education* in front of the Supreme Court, and Mark Hatfield, then serving in the Oregon Legislature.

Johnson lived with Lizzy's family on Southeast Ivon and took the old Eastmoreland electric trolley coach and two buses to get up north to campus. Yet even with the job and free rent, money was tight.

In 1952, Johnson's first year at University of Portland, the student body was mostly white. The great Jackson Winters had graduated and was playing center for the Harlem Globetrotters, and his brother Jim was serving in Korea. In those days, colleges recruited black kids for their athletic skill, but it was uncommon to recruit them for academic aptitude, and University of Portland was no exception. There were two other black students in his freshman class.