

Language of Landscape

A sense of place.

BEST ESSAYS NW: PERSPECTIVES FROM OREGON QUARTERLY MAGAZINE. Edited by Guy Maynard and Kathleen Holt. University of Oregon Press, 2003. Hardcover, \$24.95.

This new collection of essays provides newcomers and old timers alike a wide range of reflections about the Northwest experience. As editors Guy Maynard and Kathleen Holt note in their introduction, these essays are informed by the “social, cultural, political and economic ideas” that affect the Northwest. And in his foreword to the collection, Barry Lopez recognizes that in our fragmented age, the contemporary essayist argues for or tries “to reason toward, forms of reintegration.” These personal essays help shape a greater appreciation of the shared fate of nature and people in this unique bio-region.

“Speaking Oregon” by Brian Doyle draws in the reader with his observations of a hawk he watches through the window of his office at the University of Portland. “Something” about the hawk is Oregon to him, he writes. “Perhaps it is his unerring sense of direction amid the thick trees. Perhaps it is his silence; I have never heard him utter a sound, and I think silence is a powerful word in the language of this landscape.”

Beth Hege Piatote also works with language in “A Circle of Words,” her thoughtful essay on a ceremony between the Chief Joseph band of the Nez Perce and the descendants of C.E.S. Wood. As a young military officer, Wood had recorded the words of Chief Joseph’s surrender in October of 1877. Later Wood asked Chief Joseph if his son Erskine could visit his people. The boy spent two summers with Joseph in the late 1890s, which Erskine described to a reporter in 1956 as “the high spot of my entire life.”

C.E.S. had requested that Erskine see if there were a gift he could offer Chief Joseph in return for his hospitality. The boy asked, and Joseph said he would like a fine stallion to improve his herd. But the boy thought Joseph deserved a greater gift than a horse

and did not give his father Joseph’s message. Erskine, who lived to be 104, regretted his bad decision, as did later generations of the family.

In 1997, amid a quiet gathering, Joseph’s people offered gifts of woven blankets to the Woods family, and Erskine’s family offered the gift of a stallion to the Nez Perce people — a ceremonial correction to a 100-year misunderstanding.

In her essay, “Air, Earth, Fire, Water,” Jane Kyle addresses the elements, one at a time. In “Earth” she explores being a student at the University of Washington, spring of 1965, and taking a first-year geology class from a young professor. He introduced the class to new theories about plate tectonics, volcanism, mountain building and earthquakes.

Speaking of predictions, he asked the class what they would do if he told them there

would be an earthquake on Monday — move to Miami Beach? With uncanny timing, an earthquake registering 6.5 on the Richter scale hit the following Monday. Kyle writes of her experience as if it were happening in this moment:



“There begins a roaring, like a steam train bearing down, except you can’t locate the coming and going. The ground shimmies, so little at first I think it’s just my own dizzy spell, but then this accelerates and deepens until the floor begins to slide and the walls to rock.”

Native American ceremonies, hawks and earthquakes may have little in common logically. But each of these stories and many others

in the collection share what I call a Northwest sensibility — an intangible interaction between a human observer and the land, water, traditions, weather, seasons, people, plants and animals that live here. The region’s his-

tory, geography and geology also exert subtle effects.

I have consciously chosen not to review work by people I know well, but I want to call their essays to your attention, because they are among the best — “Blood Relative” by Bobbie Willis, my colleague at Eugene Weekly; “When He Falls Off a Horse” by Debra Gwartney, my memoir writing teacher; “I Love the Rain” by Lauren Kessler, my UO writing teacher; “Train Time” by Susan Rich, who wrote a books column for me; “Finding Frogs” by Cheri Brooks, my invaluable co-coordinator for a 2001 film festival; and “Get Off My Log” by Kellee Weinhold, also a former colleague.

Other writers include Kim Stafford, Kathleen Holt, Steve McQuiddy, Ross West, Ian McCluskey, Robert Leo Heilman, Ellen Waterston, Leslie Leyland Fields, Corrina Wycoff, Cynthia Pappas, Guy Maynard, Robin Cody, Joni James, Paul Keller, Mark Blaine, Charles Goodrich, Ana Maria Spagna, Gayle Forman, and John Daniel.

If you know someone who is thinking of moving to the Northwest, or if you just want to know more about this amazing spot we call home, here’s the book for you. I savored it, a couple of stories a night for a month. It’s lovely. **EW**

BOOK NOTES, June 26 – July 31: Art and the Vineyard Festival’s Oregon Authors Table features 30 regional writers on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, July 4, 5 and 6. at Alton Baker Park. **Joe Blakely** (*The Bellfountain Giant Killers*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/4; 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/5; and 5:30-7:30 pm 7/6. **Valerie Brooks** (*Scent of Cedars: Promising Writers of the Pacific Northwest*) at 11:30 am-3:30 pm 7/4; 1:30-7:30 pm 7/5; 11:30 am-7:30 pm 7/6. **Mike Carter** (*The Jade Gates*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/4; 3:30-5:30 pm 7/6. **James Cloutier** (*Orygone comics*) 11:30 am-5:30 pm 7/4; 3:30-7:30 pm 7/5; 11:30 am-5:30 pm 7/6. **Bean Comrada’s** translations of works by Karel Capek, 3:30-7:30 pm 7/5. **Korra Deaver** (*Entertain Angels Unawares*) at 5:30 - 7:30 pm 7/4 and 11:30 am-1:30 pm on 7/5. **Carola Dunn** (*The Case of the Murdered Muckraker*) 3:30-7:30 pm 7/4 and 7/6. **Jan Eliot** (*Stone Soup, Road Kill in the Closet*) 11:30 am-3:30 pm 7/4; 1:30-7:30 pm 7/5, and 11:30 am-7:30 pm 7/6. **Lydia Lee Garrett** (*Job Description: Angel*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/4 and 3:30-5:30 pm 7/6. **Eugene Gogol** (*The Concept of Other in Latin American Liberation*) 1:30-5:30 pm 7/4; 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/5; 1:30-5:30 pm 7/6. **Melissa Hart** (*Long Way Home*) 3:30-7:30 pm 7/5. **Ann Herrick** (*An Adorable Couple*) 1:30-3:30 pm 7/5. **Nancy Hopps** (*Relax Into Healing*) 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/4. **Robert Kono** (*The Last Fox*) 1:30-3:30 pm 7/4, 7/5 and 7/6. **Herman Krieger** (*Churches Ad Hoc: A Divine Comedy*) 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/4 and 1:30-3:30 pm on 7/5. **Jessica Maxwell** (*Sand in My Bra*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/4. **Larry McKaughan** (*Why Are Your Fingers Cold?*) 1:30 -5:30 pm 7/4; 11:30 am-1:30 pm and 3:30-5:30 pm 7/5. **J.J. Mingione** (*It’s a Sin to Tell a Lie*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/4 and 11:30 am-1:30 pm on 7/5. **Pat Murphy** (*Alternative Treatments for Epilepsy*) 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/4 and 7/6. **B.J. Novitski** (*Rendering Real and Imagined Buildings*): 5:30-7:30 pm 7/6. **Paula Prober** (*Ten Tips for Women Who Want to Change the World Without Losing Their Friends, Shirts or Minds*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/5. **Robert Rubinstein** (*Curtains Up! Theatre Games and Storytelling*) 3:30-5:30 pm 7/6. **Ellen Schlesinger** (*A Gaga Gardener’s Guide to Nearby Nurseries*) 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/6. **Colleen Sell** (*A Cup Of Comfort*) 11:30 am-1:30 pm 7/5. **Brenda Shaw** (*Eliza and Mentora*) 11:30 am-3:30 pm 7/4; 1:30-3:30 pm 7/5; 11:30 am-3:30 pm 7/6. **Alan Siporin** (*Fire’s Edge*) 3:30-7:30 pm 7/4; 11:30 am-3:30 pm 7/5. **Steven Ungerleider** (*Faust’s Gold: Inside the East German Doping Machine*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/5. **Toni Van Deusen** (*Moonmusic*) 3:30-5:30 pm 7/5. **Carol Wagner** (*Soul Survivors: Stories of Women and Children in Cambodia*) 5:30-7:30 pm 7/6.

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