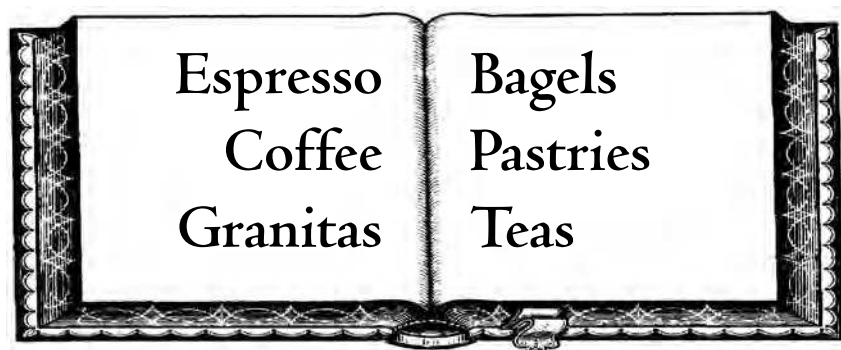


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Sixth Annual Oregon Quarterly Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest Reading

Wednesday, June 8, 2005 ♦ 7 p.m.
Alumni Lounge in Gerlinger Hall

Opening remarks by contest judge, Lauren Kessler.
Readings by:

Rebecca Merritt Lundgren of Redmond for "Farm Lessons"
Steve Radosevich of Corvallis for "Backlash"
Eric Gunderson of Eugene for "Stacking Wood"
Kirsten Rudestam of Eugene for "Trail Grace"
Caroline Cummins of Eugene for "Hello Goodbye"

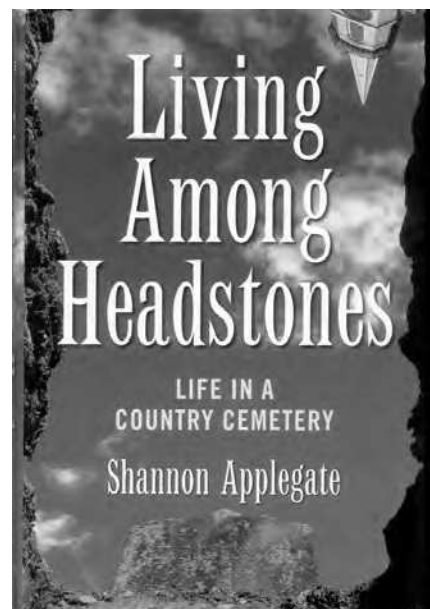
BOOKS BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

An Unusual Responsibility

Living with death in a small Oregon town.

Living Among Headstones: Life in a Country Cemetery, memoir by Shannon Applegate.
Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005. Hardcover, \$24.95

Shannon Applegate's memoir begins, "When I told my father I would take responsibility for the cemetery I did not reckon on having to bury my friends. There is a hollow place in the pit of my stomach." With these two brief sentences, Applegate's tone is set: Pragmatic and straightforward, she's also deeply in touch with the emotions that she sets gently on the page, even through the stranger, sadder parts of her life as a cemetery sexton.



Applegate is new to this world. What she's clearly familiar with is small-town Oregon, the history of her long-standing pioneer family and their relationship with the land. When she writes about pruning the ancient trees in the cemetery, about a conversation with the friends of a teenage boy who's just committed suicide, or about her long-gone relatives whose marble headstone she polishes with meticulous care, Applegate's narration lights up. She captures the diverse personalities of Yoncalla's residents unhesitatingly and fairly, from a piano-playing elderly neighbor about to undergo treatment for breast cancer to the

What makes this tale exceptionally interesting is not, as one might expect, the descriptions of the varied and intricate rituals and practices associated with death, but Applegate's empathy for and understanding of the grief of her neighbors.

In 1997, Applegate became responsible for a small pioneer cemetery in Yoncalla, in Douglas County. It had passed through her family for years, and though Colonel Applegate, Shannon's father, had tried to get the city to take over, the strange job of sexton fell to Shannon. As sexton, Applegate is part caretaker, part manager and part student of the rituals of death. She sells plots, trims trees and speaks to families whose attitudes run from grateful to irate, all the while reflecting on her own friends and family — those who come to the cemetery to help, and those whose plots she carefully marks and maintains.

What makes this tale exceptionally interesting is not, as one might expect, the descriptions of the varied and intricate rituals and practices associated with death, but Applegate's empathy for and understanding of the grief of her neighbors. As she writes about her dealings within "The Industry," as one of her friends refers to cemetery and mortuary work, Applegate is precise, intelligent and sympathetic, an involved observer making sense of each piece of new information.

family of a man who makes ugly late-night phone calls. While Applegate certainly loves one better than the other, she's ultimately thoughtful and understanding with both. This is her strength and her gift, both as a writer and as a person trying to bring some peace and grace to those experiencing a strange and grief-laden part of life.

Living Among Headstones is, as a quote from *Kirkus Reviews* notes on the jacket, "fresh and interesting." It's also frustrating, though not necessarily through any fault of the author's: Applegate deserved a better editor, one who would have corrected the small errors that dot the text. A stronger editor might have strengthened the threads connecting the sometimes anecdotal chapters. Authors don't turn in perfect manuscripts, but editors owe it to their authors to make those manuscripts as close to perfect as humanly possible before they go to press. Hopefully Applegate's next book will get the careful editorial hand such an original story deserves. **EW**

Shannon Applegate reads at 7pm Monday, June 6 at the UO's Knight Library.

BOOK NOTES

John Daniel reads from *Rogue River Journal* at 7:30 pm 6/2 at Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland ... Hugo Award-winning science fiction author **Lois McMaster Bujold** reads from *Hallowed Hunt* at 7 pm 6/7 at Powell's Books, Beaverton ... Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest winners **Rebecca Merritt Lundgren, Steve Radosevich, Kristen Rudestam** and **Caroline Cummins** read, 7 pm 6/8 at the Alumni Lounge in Gerlinger Hall, UO ... **Anne Giardini**, daughter of novelist **Carol Shields**, reads from *The Sad Truth About Happiness* at 7:30 pm 6/8 at Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Nick Hornby** reads from his new novel *A Long Way Down* at 7:30 pm 6/15 at the First Unitarian Church, Portland ... **William L. Sullivan** discusses and shows slides for *100 Hikes in the Central Oregon Cascades*, 7 pm 6/16 at Barnes & Noble.