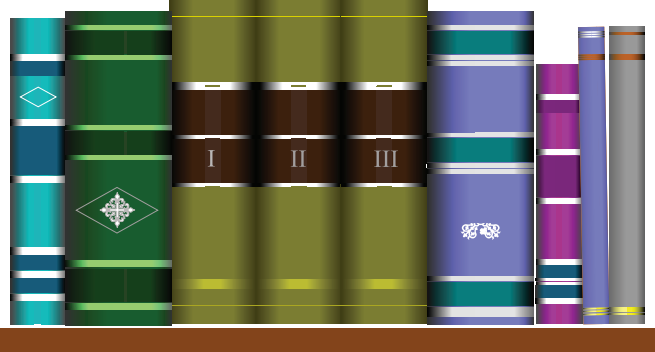




BOOKS

WHAT ARE THEY READING?



The Daily Astorian invites people to submit titles of books they are reading and share a few thoughts about the work. This week, Nancy Bass Wyden, the co-owner of the popular Strand Book Store in New York City, shares some of her favorites. Wyden is married to U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon. To submit, send to news@dailyastorian.com

As a bookstore owner, one of the most common questions I field is, “What are you reading?” As you can imagine, I have a stack of books in a wide variety of interests for consumption on my nightstand. I’ve often newly finished something enjoyable and would love to recommend it versus whatever title might be a best-seller at the time.

To kick off, the book for 2015 that I would highly recommend is Oliver Sacks’ memoir “On the Move: A Life.” The late brilliant neurologist was a remarkable polymath and prolific author, but he led an invigorating life of discovery outside the laboratory. The insight and charm and curiosity that shone through his best-selling books, such as “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,” “Awakenings,” and “Musicophilia,” are fully present in his autobiography, which should be considered a high-water mark for the form.

Another worthwhile recent read of mine, Mary Karr’s “The Art of Memoir,” has me inspired to take a shot at writing a memoir. A wonderfully accomplished memoirist herself (“The Liars’ Club,” “Cherry,” “Lit”), Karr’s advice to fellow writers is as entertaining and funny as you would expect from her own work. Its appeal stretches much further than the premise; you do not need to be planning an autobiography to be delighted by its perceptive grappling with the acts of reading and writing.

A weak spot for biographies

I have a weak spot for biographies. It’s something my husband, Ron, and I share — our love and fascination for history. Ron Chernow’s “Alexander Hamilton” is one of my favorite recommendations. Chernow writes powerfully about how Hamilton drew himself up from an orphaned childhood in the Caribbean to become the first Treasury secretary of the United States, and how he embodied and argued for many political ideas that would seem more comfortable in the modern world than the 18th century. It’s the perfect subject for a writer as keenly attentive as Chernow, who illustrates the human desires that drove Hamilton while never allowing the reader to miss the grand shift his actions influenced.

Additionally, there is Stacy Schiff’s “The Witches: Salem, 1692” that I’m currently en-

thralled with and can’t put down. Schiff’s biography of Cleopatra a few years ago surprised me: a subject who had been endlessly analyzed (for centuries!) was given a tremendous new life in that compelling book. I’m already having a similar reaction to “The Witches.” Thrillingly written, the unfolding hysteria and madness she describes is as gripping as any mystery novel. Her effortless narrative reminds me of the great David McCullough’s titanic works like “Truman,” “The Great Bridge,” and of course “John Adams.” Those deep dives into American history are books I have given as gifts time and time again because I haven’t found many readers who are not bewitched by them.

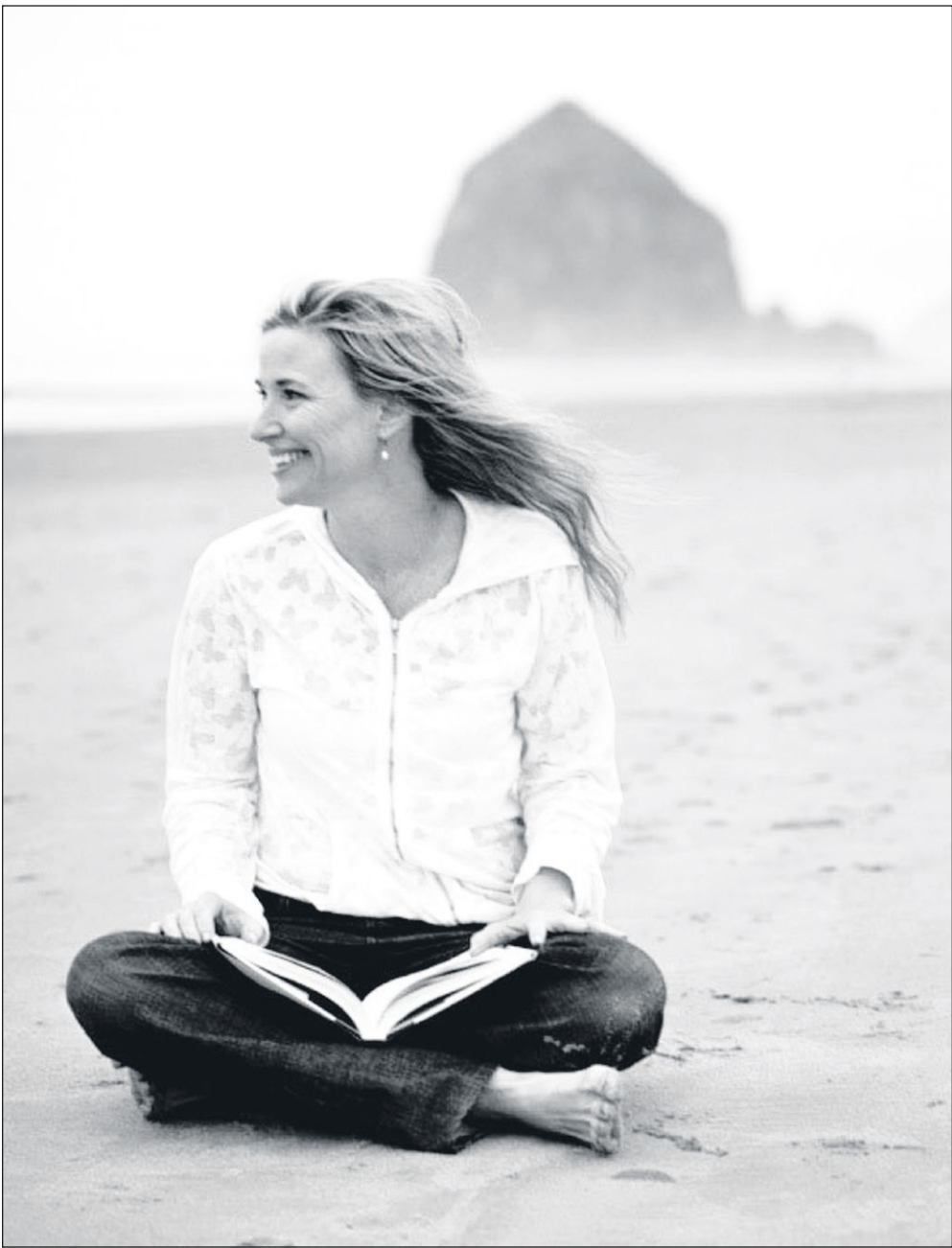
Deep dives into history

Of course if you’re interested in deep dives into Oregon history, Mason Drukman’s “Wayne Morse: A Political Biography” and Brent Walth’s “Fire at Eden’s Gate: Tom McCall and the Oregon Story” are classic book-ends for any collection. And, more recently, Peter Stark spins a rollicking historical yarn of Oregon’s northwest corner with “Astoria: John Jacob Astor and Thomas Jefferson’s Lost Pacific Empire: A Story of Wealth, Ambition and Survival.”

I’m also an enthusiastic fiction reader. Recently I picked up Anthony Doerr’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “All the Light We Cannot See” after hearing many rave reviews, and it lived up to all of my expectations. Doerr’s debut collection of stories, “The Shell Collector,” demonstrated incredible promise, and “All The Light We Cannot See” has delivered on it. Gorgeously written, the book is set in occupied France during World War II and centers around a blind French girl who has fled Paris to the walled city of Saint-Malo, and a German boy who has been tasked with rooting out the resistance, as he begins to question the moral consequences of his assignment. Doerr has a masterful sense of character, and his creations here are full embodiments of the human struggle against even the darkest tides of history.

Interesting picture books

But reading isn’t just a solitary enjoyment



Julie Adams Photography

Nancy Bass Wyden in Cannon Beach.

for adults — I have three children and to make sure I pass on the book-loving gene, I give them a fair amount of my reading life. There is a unique series of picture books from Workman Publishing built around a technology called Photicular. They contain sliding lenses laid over nature photography, creating an arresting sense of movement on the page. It is a magical effect for kids, and those books are always in high demand at home. There are three terrific entries in the series: “Safari,” “Ocean,”

and “Polar.” Another picture book on regular rotation is “The Day the Crayons Quit,” written by Drew Daywalt and illustrated by Oliver Jeffers, alongside its recent sequel “The Day the Crayons Came Home.” Both titles contain the perfect mix of subversion and silliness, and somehow pull off the difficult feat of not aggravating adult readers on the 20th telling.

The bottom line of all these recommendations? You simply can’t go wrong when you pick up a book.

Williams: Her books on mushrooms sell well locally

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A field guide and cookbook

The main author of two books on mushrooms — a field guide and a cookbook — Williams said she can identify a mushroom over the phone by its origin and description. In October, she led a group of more than 40 students on a mushroom foraging adventure.

“Her knowledge is really vast,” said Karmen Hughes, an owner at Blue Scorcher Bakery & Cafe who has gone mushrooming with the Mushroom Queen.

Williams’ handpicked kings, oysters, turkeys, chanterelles and matsutakes find their way into the soups, sautés, scrambles and other entrées served at prominent North Coast and Peninsula diners and restaurants.

Patrons who have eaten a meal containing mushrooms at, say, Blue Scorcher, Street 14 Coffee, Astoria Co-op Grocery, Pickled Fish at the Adrift Hotel and Astoria Coffeehouse & Bistro in recent years may well have enjoyed a specimen from Williams’ unofficial one-woman business, All Wild.

“She’s just kind of like a gypsy. She comes in with a

basket of goodies from her little car and offers us some,” said Jim Defeo, the owner of the bistro, who has known Williams for about eight years. “She’s been a great part of the restaurant community.”

‘Mushroom eyes’

Williams lives close to the earth, content to spend hours in the soil.

“I have picked in pouring down rain, and I don’t care,” she said. “You know what? When there’s mushrooms, I don’t even notice the rain.”

During a recent mushroom hunt — which took her to the private driveways of second homeowners who gave her permission to pick on their property — Williams stumbled upon a chanterelle bonanza in a shaded forest between Long Beach and Ocean View. With the growing season almost over, the discovery came as a “happy surprise,” she said.

“My adrenaline is going wild!” she cried, slicing through stems and emitting her high, merry laugh. “All I can say is, we’re sh--house lucky!”

Many people wouldn’t know where or how to look; they would scan the brush and move on, blind to the feast at their feet.



Submitted Photo

Beau Hogge, the chef at Pickled Fish restaurant at the Adrift Hotel, with a giant mushroom Williams found.

“You have to have mushroom eyes. That’s all,” she said, gathering her loot and preparing to clean them with a cloth. (Those “mushroom eyes” can spot a roadside mushroom while cruising by at several dozen miles per hour — a skill Williams

passed on to her grandchildren.)

Satisfied with her haul, she removed the most obvious traces of her presence, loaded the bounty into her hatchback and drove off, thanking Mother Earth.

When she takes rookie for-

agers into the woods for private lessons, she tells them: “Leave it the way you found it. You don’t trash it. You don’t upturn the moss and leave it there.”

Normally, she would sell the fresh loot to her clientele and take home the remainder to dry or pickle, which, along with her other edibles, she calls “money in the bank.” For Williams, though, gathering mushrooms has never been about making money.

“I do it for fun. I only do it for fun, because I enjoy it. The money is extra; it’s a bonus,” she said. “I’d do it anyway.”

‘A little Old Europe’

Williams, who emigrated with her family to Oregon in 1949, remembers feeling stunned at how many different varieties of mushrooms she could find in the state.

“All I knew from Hungary was the king mushroom, the big one. That’s the only thing we ever picked,” she said. “My god, there are so many mushrooms!”

She started out by selling mushrooms to ethnic restaurants near Portland and managed a restaurant in Tokeland, Washington, for five years.

Her books — “Coastal Bounty: A Guide for Gather-

ers” and “Woodland Bounty: Mushroom Delights for Gatherers & Gourmets” — sell well locally. At the Blue Scorcher, they don’t last long on the shelves, Hughes said.

A member of the Mycological Society of America, Williams said she has picked mushrooms in every state in the union except Texas, and in British Columbia. “That’s how I learned,” she said.

David Campiche, owner of the Shelburne Inn in Long Beach and one of Williams’ former students, shares her abiding love for all things natural, healthy and wild.

“She is eccentric in a wonderful way: She’s all herself, and that’s a hard thing in the world, to be eccentric when all the pressure from cell-phones and social media have kind of overtaken everyone,” said Campiche, a friend of Williams’ for about 40 years. “She hangs onto something that’s a little Old Europe.”

“She just likes to be active and alive,” he added, “and ‘alive’ is maybe the best word you could pin on her.”

Even if she doesn’t collect anything worth eating or selling, Williams feels her time outdoors is well spent. “I had my woods for the day,” she said. “I’m happy as can be.”



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