



Photo by Matt Love

Empty chairs await a presentation at Powell's Books in Portland.

## A GLIMPSE INSIDE

An occasional feature by MATT LOVE

### Fishermen in Powell's

On a Thursday night in March, my 52nd birthday, I sat on a bench in the event space of Powell's City of Books in downtown Portland. A few feet away, a couple hundred empty chairs seemed to stare at me. In 90 minutes, my presentation of my debut novel, "The Great Birthright," would commence.

I wasn't thinking about the show. Rather, I wondered what 32 of my students from Astoria High School were doing inside

the biggest and best bookstore in the country. They had joined me on the trip from the Oregon Coast, and we rode a magic school bus together. Most had never been inside Powell's. Many had never bought a book before.

Yes, the prospect of 32 teenagers roaming around a four-story bookstore the size of a city block made me slightly nervous. But all you can do as a teacher in these unscripted scenarios is place trust and keep the faith in young people. I've never grown as an educator unless I put myself in

these precarious positions, and yes, I've sometimes been burned. Nevertheless, when I finally start to feel safe with my teaching, I am done.

At the appointed time, 15 minutes before the gig, all 32 students rallied back in the event space. They were eager to show me all the books they'd purchased. Some of them had really loaded up!

I did the show, and we walked out into the big city night and boarded the bus. After I made the last head count and all 32 were safely into the fold, I breathed a sigh of relief and then passed out the birthday cupcakes my mom had brought to the event. A cupcake never tasted so good.

On the way home, some of the students requested the bus driver leave the lights on. They wanted to read their new books.

Mission accomplished. The students didn't even know they were on one.

*Matt Love is the author/editor of 14 books, including a detective novel called "The Great Birthright." His books are available through all coastal bookstores (except one) or his web site, nestuccaspitpress.com*

# Wild SIDE

## Lysichiton americanus

### American skunk cabbage

Story by LYNETTE RAE McADAMS

Widespread from northern California all the way to central Alaska, *L. americanus* thrives in wet, low-lying woodlands and swamps across the Pacific Northwest, blooming profusely (and dramatically), from March through early June.

Known commonly as Western skunk cabbage, yellow skunk cabbage, or swamp lantern, this fascinating plant emerges as one of spring's first offerings, rising up from the soggy ground with a luminous yellow spathe (a kind of specialized leaf) wrapped around a blossom-bearing central stalk, called a spadix.

In the language of science, the plant takes its name from two Greek words, "lysis" and "chiton," which, in combination, mean, "loosening tunic" — a perfect description for this well-dressed woodland native.

But make no mistake: while its looks are certainly striking, it's the skunk cabbage's pungent smell that really makes it stand out.

Flowering when temperatures are still too cool to support our planet's more glamorous pollinators — the bees and butterflies — this plant, still governed by the need to reproduce, is forced to follow one of nature's first rules: Make do with what you have. To that end, it releases a foul-smelling odor that combines the aromas of skunk spray and rotting meat — essentially the Chanel No. 5 of the insect world — attracting carrion beetles and scavenging flies, who move from one stinky spadix to the next, fulfilling an age-old part-

nership in botanical procreation.

Beloved by black bears just coming out of hibernation (or in our area, torpor, which is more like a lazy grogginess), skunk cabbage acts as a natural laxative and helps the bear get its digestive tract up and running after a long nap.

But don't get any ideas: all parts of the plant carry needle-sharp crystals of calcium oxalate, which, when con-

sumed by humans (or most critters, for that matter), pierce the lips, tongue, and throat, causing painful swellings, paralysis, and in extreme cases, death.

Of course, there are ways around that.

Native Americans discovered that the toxic effects were nullified when the roots of the plant were boiled or the leaves dried, and they used skunk cabbage as a starvation food (read: complete last resort) and also medicinally, to treat burns and inflammation. More happily, the large, tough leaves of the plant (which can grow to 5 feet in length), also served to line baskets and wrap fish for the fire, earning the plant its final common calling: Indian wax paper.



Submitted photo

Lysichiton americanus, or American skunk cabbage, growing in the wetlands of Beard's Hollow in Seaview, Wash

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