

traditions or norms,” she said. “I think we can look at a pioneer as one who adventures into the unknown and is willing to go places that other people aren’t willing to go.”

Overlooked, undervalued

During her research, Monson found stories of remarkable women that had simply never been published because of the stereotypes that define pioneer stories.

One such stereotype is that all pioneers traveled West. It was important to Monson to broaden the definition of “pioneer” beyond its association with Westward Expansion.

“The frontier has this mythology in the American psyche, but it’s different than how we’ve pictured it in movies and books,” she said. “It was actually an incredibly diverse place where people came from all different directions.”

One example is a Native Hawaiian woman named Makaopiopio, whose story is featured in “Frontier Grit.” Instead of moving west, Makaopiopio migrated East from Hawaii to the frontier of Utah in 1879 and settled within a Hawaiian colony in Iosepa. Members of the colony spoke ancient Hawaiian, had their own currency and made poi and sold flower leis.

When a temporary teaching opportunity brought Monson to Hawaii, she met Makaopiopio’s family who provided her with primary source documents for the book. “To my knowledge, ‘Frontier Grit’ is the first place Makaopiopio’s story has appeared in print form,” Monson said.

Taylor Gordon, Monson’s editor, said “there isn’t a woman in the book that follows the pioneer stereotype. These stories shatter that image.”

Magical communication

Monson wanted to be a writer from a young age. “I have a journal from when I was 7 that says, when I grow up I want to write stories,” she said.

Books played a big role in Monson’s development. “Books were my survival guide to junior high. They were free therapy and the way I figured out how to navigate the world. They just had a really profound impact on me.”

In college, she majored in English and began working at Beyond Words Publishing House in Portland where she would spend the next 10 years as their children’s book editor.

“I briefly thought about law school because that seemed more practical, but I couldn’t think of anything more amazing than creating writing that might potentially have that same impact on someone else,” she said. “I didn’t have a backup plan.”



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTO

Marianne Monson’s new book “Frontier Grit” is on shelves now at Lucy’s Books.

Monson’s tenacity paid off. She published her first children’s book, “Finding Fairies: Secrets for Attracting Little People from Around the World,” in 2000. After having her own children, she transitioned into teaching.

In 2003 Monson went for an MFA, which helped her develop the day-to-day practice of being a writer. “I had tons of rejection letters like any other writer. You have to develop a thick skin and love it enough that you can get past that part,” she said.

The best parts of being a writer “are pretty obvious,” Monson said. “I still think the very best thing is hearing from readers, especially kids who say they loved it, or were touched by it, or it helped them in some way. It’s this incredible communica-

tion that is intimate with someone you’ve never met in real life. It’s magical to me.”

In August 2017 Monson moved to Astoria with her family into an old house built by Finnish immigrants in 1915. She writes at home but also loves to write on location. “As a kid, I liked to write in trees. I still will if I can find a good tree to write in,” she said. “Anywhere I go, I’m writing.”

Putting women’s voices back in

Monson teaches writing at Clatsop Community College. Her next book about the unheralded role of women in the Civil War, “Women of the Blue & Gray: Civil War Mothers, Medics, Soldiers and Spies,” is slated to be released in fall 2018.

She plans to start a Writer’s Guild, a

literary nonprofit that would feature a writer-in-residence program, support for writers and at-risk populations within the community.

Monson is excited that high school classes have been using “Frontier Grit” to supplement their take on women’s history.

“That’s what women’s history is about: giving them a voice,” she said. “We’ve had one dominant narrative about these events, but there are so many other perspectives to be had, and they contribute so much to the richness of that conversation. Putting those women’s voices back into those events is so essential. It’s so important.”

Visit Monson’s website: mariannemonson.com 