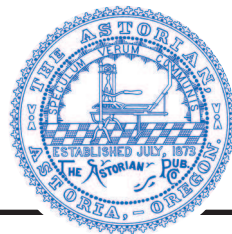


# OPINION



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editor@dailyastorian.com

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## SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



Wyn Berry

Author Don Berry.

# Capturing the essence of the land

Amidst an abundance of quality Pacific Northwest fiction, Don Berry presents the most vivid naturalism — bringing to mind the scent of the woods, the hollow of a log or the whisper of a dream.

The writer lived in Gearhart in the 1950s and 1960s and managed to capture the essence of the land and water around him, along with the heritage of the Nehalem, Clatsop and Killamook people.

The story of “Trask” is almost crude in its overt simplicity — Elbridge Trask, a settler on the Clatsop Plains with his wife Hannah — wants to settle on farmland to the south by what we now know as Tillamook Bay — then uncharted territory.

Not a trip to be undertaken lightly, considered the densely packed forests, deep crevasses and tides breaking across the rock.

Trask’s quixotic mission is abetted by two Native Americans — a holy man or “tanawanis,” and the ne’er-do-well Wahila who signs on as guide.

“It is my goal,” Trask tells the Native American Chief Kilchis, “to make of this bay one house, of which we can all live in peace.”

Berry’s descriptions are magnificent, painting word images of the dizzying heights of Neahkahnie Mountain to Manzanita and beyond.

“Five hundred feet below,” Berry writes, “the surf crashed against the base of the cliffs with a thunderous roar, throwing white water slowly up the side.”

“Jagged spires of rock” point upward, and the “base of the sheer slab was a jumble of sharp and angular pinnacles around which the surf surged and churned.”

Of the elk who wander the mountains, “they traveled in amiable companionship, a stark contrast to the mating season in the fall, when the bulls would be trumpeting their wild challenges and fighting for harems.”

Tillamook Bay is rendered in its primitive isolation: “There was a quietness in the air, and the distant thin screaming of seabirds could be heard clearly. Flights of gulls began to wheel over the flat waters of the bay in long floating arcs.”

Such descriptive prose is worthy of a thousand pictures.

The narrative is never predictable, never a “gee-whiz” Western — although this was marketed as a paperback pulp novel in the 1960s, followed by “Moontrap” and “To Build a Ship.”

### A North Coast heritage

In Jeff Baker’s introduction to the Oregon State University republishing of the books in 2004, he describes how Berry wrote the trilogy published between 1960 and 1963 “in a spasm of sustained creativity unequalled in Ore-

## The last chapter of ‘Trask’

Wyn Berry, the former wife of Don Berry, lives on Vashon Island, Washington. She looks back on the writing of “Trask,” and the shaping of its emotional conclusion.

In the late fall of 1958, we were living at Peach Cove on the Willamette River, south of Portland. We were managing financially, but barely. Three kids in the same independent school, Catlin Gabel, where I taught, 40 miles away, my salary our only income. Berry wrote obsessively in those years, on a portable Olivetti typewriter in the old red barn across the garden from the Red House in which we lived.

While preparations were underway at Viking Press for Berry’s first novel, “Trask,” to be published, his agent, Barthold Fles, sent a copy to Readers Digest owner-editor Lila Wallace. One day, Berry received an amazing letter from her saying she would fly him to San Francisco if he’d come and talk with her about the book. The possibility of a lucrative publication with the popular Digest was truly exciting!

Needless to say, Berry decided to go and hear what Mrs. Wallace had in mind. This could be the big break

that every beginning writer dreams of. With high hopes, I took him to the airport. He was back the next day.

“Well, what did she say? Will she take it?” I pressed, the moment he got into the car.

“No, she said I had not completed the story. She wanted me to add a

chapter,” he said tersely. “I refused. I’ll not change my writing for anyone. It is as it stands.”

My heart sank, even though I respected his standing up for his principles. So that was that. Quietly, we drove home.

But almost a year later, Berry reread his manuscript, went out to the barn, and all through the night, bombarded by nesting peregrine falcons and a young barn owl, he wrote the glorious last chapter. “Trask” was in galleys by that time, so he had to talk Viking into adding it, but they did.

“Trask,” in the timeless, profound, popular book it has become, was published in 1960. Berry refused to send this final version to Mrs. Wallace. He could not admit to being wrong, but he had realized it, and completed the book after all.

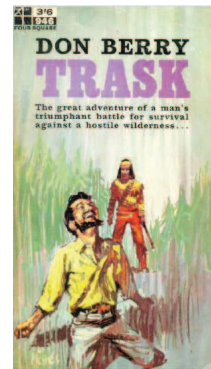


Wyn Berry

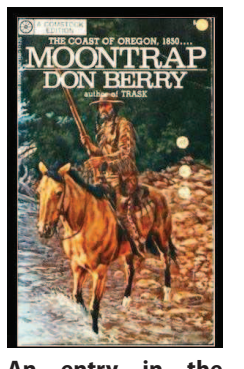
Wyn Berry at Little Beach in Gearhart in the 1960s.



R.J. MARX



A 1960s paperback cover of Don Berry’s ‘Trask.’



An entry in the Western trilogy with ‘Trask’ and ‘To Build a Ship.’

Graham and Bunny considered the kids to be their own grandkids.”

### The Northwest’s rainy glory

“Trask” was researched at the Tillamook County Museum and written in a barn on a farm in Peach Cove on the Willamette River, Wyn Berry recalled. The last chapter was written in a cabin built in the Coast Range forest.

Berry loved the Northwest in all its rainy glory. He spent many days wandering or hunting all over Clatsop County. He was one-eighth Native American — Fox — and always had an affinity for “wildness.”

Berry walked every step of whatever way he wrote about, from Hug Point, in “Trask,” to Sawtooth Mountain past the Lewis and Clark River, she said.

He was lucky enough to have an agent, based on his years of award-winning science fiction, who took “Trask” to publishers.

Trask’s contract asked for and got first refusal on any subsequent book, and “off he went,” Wyn Berry said. “He wrote ‘Moontrap’ in southern France, collected the galleys in New Zealand, and proofed them in Hong Kong. Then (he) came home, went to the cabin, and wrote ‘To Build A Ship,’ again based on early journals. Last time I looked, his cedar cabin was still there.”

Don Berry’s books earned immediate recognition by the public and critics quickly, she added, and the author enjoyed the accoutrements of success: glowing reviews, writers workshops and travel.

“Trask” won a Library Guild Award; “Moontrap” was nominated for a National Book Award and won the Golden Spur Award, given by the Western Writers of America for best historical novel that year.

Berry moved on from the area to develop a long career in Portland, San Francisco, the Caribbean and Vashon Island, in a career that is exotic as it sounds.

Berry eventually gave up writing except on the internet, Amos said, of which Berry was considered (appropriately) “a pioneer.”

R.J. Marx is editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette, and covers South County for The Daily Astorian.

gon literature. ... Berry believed fiction could tell larger truths as effectively as history.”

Cannon Beach artist Rex Amos knew Berry as a colleague and friend. “Don was a painter before becoming a writer,” Amos said.

Berry lived in a cabin in Gearhart, then had a log cabin on the Nehalem River, Amos recalled. “One day I dropped in on him and he came to the door with a bloody apron on. He had just shot a bear and was making bear jerky. Long story there; sort of Hemingwayish.”

Their acquaintance was launched in the 1960s, set up by a mutual friend, Friedrich Peters, first director of Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik — a German summer program then in Manzanita and now offered from Lewis and Clark College.

John Allen of the Pacific Way Cafe recalled Berry as a legend in Gearhart. While he never met Berry, he knew Berry’s wife, Wyn, as a journalist and erst-



Wyn Berry

Don Berry in Gearhart after a trip to France, New Zealand and Hong Kong. One of his sumi drawings is in the background.

while restaurant server.

Wyn, reached via email from her home in Vashon Island, Washington, recalled a happy time in Gearhart with family and friends in the early 1960s.

Don Berry met Gearhart’s Graham and Bunny Doar while at college at Reed, and the Doars introduced him to the North Coast. (Graham Doar was a recognized TV and science-fiction author whose short story “The Outer Limit” — a “close-encounter” story written in 1949 — was rewritten and readapted throughout the 1950s.)

Graham’s daughter, also at Reed, Wyn Berry said, met Don at the Reed Bookstore where he was working, heard him talk about wishing he could talk to a published writer, and Jane said, “Pops writes for Saturday Evening Post and Esquire — why don’t you go to Gearhart and talk to him?” He did, and thus began a long friendship, quickly followed by the addition of (the Berrys’ children) David, Bonny, Duncan and myself. Both