

# The writing that connects us

A few years ago, I got to spend two weeks in the Fishtrap writing cabin on the Imnaha River. High spring runoff and the click of laptop keys were the only sounds we heard all day. But after a late-afternoon walk in that beautiful canyon and conversation around dinner, we lit the fireplace and five women shared what we had written.

That's how I met a MacArthur Foundation "genius" 12 miles upriver from the Imnaha store and tavern.

Kelly Link, one of writers in that Imnaha cabin, has just received a MacArthur Foundation fellowship grant — \$625,000 distributed over five years to help creative people from a wide variety of fields pursue their projects. Perhaps I shouldn't feel so happily stunned to actually know one of these amazing 25 human beings.

Writing connects people — that's the point, right?

And stories lead to other stories, layer upon layer. It's not magic, but it can feel like magic. It's probably no coincidence that one of Link's books is titled "Magic for Beginners."

I felt some of those connections at last month's First Draft Writers' Series. Rebecca Clarren's reading from her new novel "Kickdown" was as great as I had expected — it's a story set in eastern Colorado

dealing with cattle ranching, fracking, and a veteran's PTSD, subjects that can take us deeper and deeper as we read. Clarren's novel begins with a headnote defining kickdown: "A well will kick or kick down when the pressure of the natural gas overcomes the pressure exerted by the mud column." When that happens, her story tells us, people see fireballs on the horizon.

Clarren is an investigative journalist as well as a novelist, and in preparing for her visit I found myself reading not only about fracking but also about the Goldwater Institute's efforts to repeal the Indian Child Welfare Act and the possible repercussions for tribal sovereignty if they are successful (think gas wells, again). About "Native Harvey

Weinsteins," sex and labor trafficking in the West, the dark side of dairies. Indigenous models of dispute resolution. She has been writing about the West, and winning awards for her journalism, for 20 years. How deep could I dive?

Clarren's friend Laura Viers accompanied her on the drive from Portland, so when we met for a pre-reading dinner at the Prodigal Son Brewery, I would discover even more layers of story. Viers, who grew up hearing the folk song "Freight Train" — both parents sang it to her at bedtime, she said — is a touring

musician and professional songwriter. She knew "Freight Train" was written at age 11 by Elizabeth (Libba) Cotton, but when she began studying country-blues guitar and discovered the complex fingerstyle techniques of this song, she was "blown away" to learn that Libba, who was left-handed and self-taught, had played her guitar upside down and backwards.

Then Viers had her first child, and while researching for an album of songs for children, she discovered Peggy Seeger's "American Folk Songs for Children" and another amazing connection: Libba had been working in a department store and by chance met Peggy's mother Ruth and became her housekeeper. One day, Viers learned, the Seeger children heard music coming from the kitchen: the famous folk-singing Seeger family had connected with another musical genius.

So Libba Cotton, who was born in North Carolina in 1893, would record her first album in 1958, and tour through the United States and Europe in her sixties, seventies, and eighties. She would win a National Heritage Fellowship and a 1985 Grammy in her early nineties. Her songs would be covered by Peter, Paul, and Mary; Bob Dylan; and the Grateful Dead.

It's quite a story. To share it, Laura Viers would write a children's book: "Libba: The Magnificent Life of Elizabeth Cotton." It's beautifully written and beautifully illustrated by Tatyana Fazlalizadeh — a first picture book for both women.

Writing connects. Who knows where

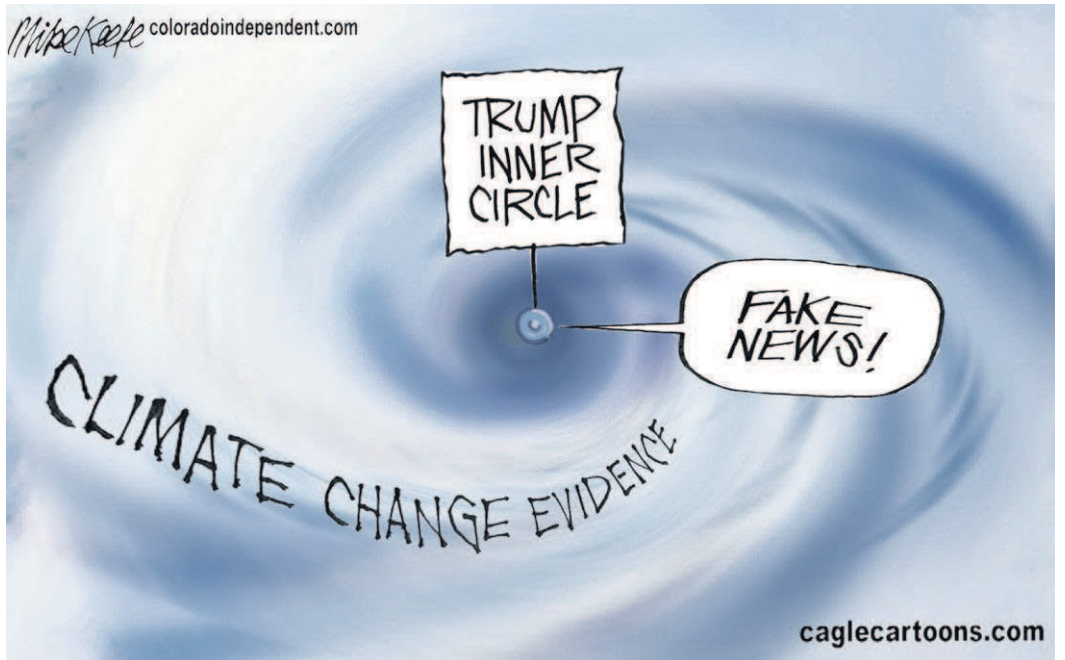


## BETTE HUSTED FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

those connections stop? *The Washington Post* published a review of "Kickdown" by Molly Gloss, and when Rebecca and Laura heard that I knew Molly through our poetry workshop group, they decided to go home and start such a group themselves.

And don't tell my 5-year-old granddaughter, but she will be getting "Libba" for Christmas. If I can wait that long.

Writing connects. Who knows where those connections stop?



## Culture change needed at Portland Public Schools

The Oregonian

Here's what \$200,000 pays for at Portland Public Schools: Salaries, not including benefits, for four entry-level teachers; one-third of the cost for the district's summer nutrition program; and more than half the library books that the district will buy in the 2018-19 year.

And here's what the district, or its insurer, will have to use \$200,000 for, thanks to a failed lawsuit filed in spring 2017: Legal fees for itself and two women sued by the district because they sought public records that the Multnomah County District Attorney had already ruled should be released.

As *The Portland Tribune's* Shasta Kearns Moore reported, a judge last week ordered Portland Public Schools to cover attorneys' fees and related costs for journalist Beth Slovic and parent activist Kim Sordyl stemming from the public records lawsuit. The two, independently of one another, had sought a list of district employees who were on paid leave — information the district had released in the past and that has since revealed how slowly PPS has handled some disciplinary complaints.

The district refused. Slovic and Sordyl both then appealed to the Multnomah County District Attorney who declared the records public. And still, the district refused, with then-interim superintendent Bob McKean saying that he was concerned people might gossip about employees who are on paid leave. On the advice of then-PPS attorney Stephanie Harper and with McKean's blessing, the district sued the two women in order to seek "clarity" about the legal requirements, McKean said at the time.

The suit didn't even get to trial, however, before the judge brushed aside the district's arguments and ruled in Slovic and Sordyl's favor. State law allows for the two to recover fees for the district's denial, resulting in last week's judgment.

It would be unfair to pin the blame for this foolish lawsuit on the current administration. Both Harper and McKean are gone, as is the former school board chairman, Tom Koehler, who failed to head off this ill-conceived lawsuit. And in the past year, the board and district have adopted a new public records policy designed to promote transparency.

But it takes more than a year and a policy to change a culture, especially one as secretive and anti-accountability as PPS has been for years. Hopefully that \$200,000 bill, as painful as it is, will provide the "clarity" the district needs to stay on course.

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## After ruining mayonnaise, can millennials save America?

Mocking millennials has become a sport and a pastime. You've heard most of the complaints: about the trophies for showing up, the Instagramming of tedium, the use of Venmo to buy street drugs.

They ruined lunch, motorcycles and marriage. They gave us selfies at funerals and placenta pix from the delivery room. As they move into the dominant demographic position in American life, they've made doorbells obsolete (better to text), vacations passé (too busy) and face-to-face conversations a lost art (see doorbells).

They prefer liquid soap to a simple bar. They're killing the Post Office, phasing out breakfast cereal, dashing dinner dates. Ditto mayonnaise; in the era of identity condiments, it's too bland. They're the Lamest Generation.

And worst of all, they don't vote.

*The Washington Post* blamed millennials for the 2016 election result, even though they made up just 25 percent of the electorate. Yes, Donald Trump — the most self-absorbed, television-fixated, crybaby boomer of them all — is the fault of young people because not enough of them got off their phones and cast a ballot for someone else.

That is bogus. Boomers gave us Donald Trump, the draft-dodging, tax-evading, wife-cheating poster child for '60s-bred self-indulgence. It's boomers who are bankrupting the nation with a trillion-dollar deficit from a selfish tax cut. And it's boomers who are ignoring climate change while the earth convulses and heads toward an early end.

I've given up hope that boomers can rescue us from the tyranny of the Trump age. Boomers were supposed to fix

things, build things, save things for future generations. They would see things as they are, and instead of asking why, dream of things that never were and ask why not — as Robert Kennedy promised. Allow me to burn my generational card.

But the moment of greatness will soon arrive for millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996. Within a year or so, there are projected to be more of them among eligible voters than us. This is good. Millennials are more progressive and unafraid of change. They are forward-looking. They are more appalled by Trump and his party than any other generation. Their lie detectors are first-rate.

But millennials have one glaring, society-crushing character problem, and it has nothing to do with sandwich preference: They truly don't vote. Too many have checked out of the whole citizen-power thing. You can blame the lack of civics education during their formative years, when not enough of them studied the owner's manual of democracy. Now it's a pain in the butt, an afterthought, or OMG, is there an election? Or you can blame a dozen other reasons.

The numbers tell a shameful story. Barely half of all eligible millennial voters cast a ballot in the last presidential election, compared with nearly 70 percent of baby boomers and the two generations older than them.

The midterms are far worse. In 2014, just 16 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 29 voted. So, while I love the placard that a kid held up during one of the March for Life anti-gun protests this year — "You can't fix stupid but you can vote it out" — midterms are largely ignored by the young.

And this November, with a president and a party in power determined to turn back time,

only 28 percent of young adults say they are "absolutely certain" they will vote in midterms, according to one poll. By comparison, 74 percent of seniors say they will show up on Election Day. Other polls show a higher turnout among those at the front end of adult life, but it still lags behind those at the opposite end.

Old folks are counting on the young to be clueless, to stay in a social media stupor while the rest of the country designs the future. A terrific online ad by Knock the Vote shows a series of senior citizens mocking millennials. "Climate change — that's a you problem. I'll be dead soon," a retiree says. "I can't keep track of which lives matter," another says. "I can't keep track of which lives matter," another says. "You might even share this video on Facebook, but you won't vote. You never do."

Are millennials just going to take that kind of abuse? Are they no better than that empty husk of a man, Sen. Ted Cruz, who let Donald Trump insult his wife and accuse his father of involvement in the Kennedy assassination? Have they no pride?

Right now we have government by an entitled, pampered and aging minority. Barely 46 percent of the popular vote put Trump in office. And senators representing 44 percent of the population just gave a man whose views are not shared by a majority a lifetime seat on the Supreme Court.

Government by the few and the well connected will continue so long as the emerging majority does not exercise the most powerful option for a citizen. The good news is that turnout increases by about 1 percent each year. But we can't afford to wait. Millennials, this one's on you.

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Comment