

This Book Will Change You by Kristin Steele

An introduction to Write Around Portland's Fall 2011 anthology, *Blueprint to My Backbone*

Kristin Steele has facilitated Write Around Portland workshops for the last ten years, and also coaches playwriting for at-risk youth. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Goddard College. Her writing has appeared in magazines, anthologies, online and on stage. She is currently at work on a novel and her first musical. Her chapbook, *Focal Length*, was released earlier this year by Gertrude Press.



This book will change you. I promise.

When is the last time you really listened to someone?

Listened to them breathe. Listened to them dream. Listened to their pen move across a piece of paper. Listened to the moment when fear and hesitation give way to something bigger and deeper that has to find its way onto the page.

It was spring of 1999. I sat at Write Around Portland Co-Founder Ben Moorad's dining room table, interviewing with him and Co-Founder Liza Halley about being a workshop facilitator. I remember their excitement about their new non-profit and their passion for building community through the act of writing. It was how I had always felt about writing in my life, and I remember thinking at the time, *please pick me because I may have just found home*.

The first night of my first workshop that summer, I was a wreck. I was sure I was forgetting something. I was sure I was doing it wrong. But as the small, hesitant group gathered around a funky table with mismatched chairs all that stopped mattering. We just opened up our notebooks, and somehow in this crazy world with all the crazy things we could be doing, writing together seemed sane. And it was. Individual voices rising from notebooks of pens spilling ink to reel in the ineffable. To reel in what connects us and makes us human.

At the end of each workshop, writers can have their work published in an anthology like the one you are holding. Watching them crack open these pages to see themselves here in a permanent way is beautiful. There are also readings where writers have the opportunity to read their work in front of a crowd. These are transcendent moments where people who could barely read their work aloud in a group, find a pride and bravery that lets them belt it to the rafters. I don't know if it is more amazing for the writers or for the audience. I haven't attended one yet where I haven't found myself crying grateful tears at the beauty of watching sidelined voices find center stage and speak.

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Write Around Portland is one of the best things about this city. After a decade as a workshop facilitator, I still feel that excitement, and am proud to call this organization home. Having the opportunity to prompt others to reach out from the spaces that isolate them toward the spaces that we share is a privilege. I have watched quiet souls scream on the page. I have heard the unassuming unleash their wicked humor. I have seen the broken find grace in words. And I have been humbled and have learned from every one of them.

We have to hold space for one another to have the chance to clear our throats, find the words and put them onto the table. It's the only thing that has ever mattered or ever will. Write Around Portland has taught me this—still teaches me this—every time I show up to a workshop. I have heard hearts singing, my own joining them. And I will, gladly, never be the same.

This is the human transaction. Our hardwired nature for storytelling is what makes us human. To be able to create narrative from our experience is what makes us unique. So read the beautiful, heartbreaking, celebratory, truthful stories in this anthology and imagine the saints behind them. The saints we all are, because telling stories and truly listening to them takes guts.

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