

Lucky Us: An introduction Write Around Portland's spring 2010 anthology, *The Top* by Paulann Petersen



Paulann Petersen was recently named Oregon's Poet Laureate. She is a former Stegner Fellow at Stanford University whose poems have appeared in many publications including *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Wilderness Magazine*. She has four chapbooks—*Under the Sign of a Neon Wolf*, *The Animal Bride*, *Fabrication*, and *The Hermaphrodite Flower*. Her first full-length collection of poems, *The Wild Awake*, was published by Confluence Press in 2002. A second, *Blood-Silk*, poems about Turkey, was published by Quiet Lion Press of Portland in 2004. *A Bride of Narrow Escape* was published by Cloudbank Books as part of its Northwest Poetry Series in 2006. Her latest book is *Kindle*, published by Mountains and Rivers Press in 2008. She serves on the board for Friends of William Stafford, organizing the annual January William Stafford Birthday Events.

Why *writing*? you might ask. Why *Write Around Portland*? Why do social service agencies vie to partner with Write Around Portland so they can offer workshops, publish anthologies, and host readings for people who wouldn't usually be part of a writing community? Why all this effort aimed at providing chances for writing and publishing to people such as homeless youth, low-income seniors, and those who are incarcerated? Why?

The answer is easy. The answer is both simple and profound: because people write to create themselves.

We people are story-telling creatures, creatures defined by language. We imagine the future, re-imagine the past, create each present moment with the stories we tell, listen to, read, and write. We re-create ourselves moment to moment to moment with the language we dream up. Each bit of conversation, each thought, each reverie is part of the ongoing story that is us. To record that story—in prose or in poetry—is a way of truly seeing ourselves, understanding ourselves. Writing down an account of who we are gives us insight into our very essence. Writing takes us past mere noise and everyday distraction to the place where we are most ourselves, where we are creative, attentive, responsive.

Writing is a remarkably human endeavor because language both creates *and* records our humanity. *We write to create ourselves.*

So, what better opportunity to offer to someone recovering from addiction? To a parent living with HIV/AIDS? To an Iraq War veteran? To a woman trying to re-shape her life after a history of domestic violence? Writing gives people the chance to remember, recount, assess, examine, weigh, and test what constitutes their lives. The chance to gain the wisdom of perspective.

Given the gentle encouragement and unvarying support of the Write Around Portland facilitators and group members, participants are able to express what they might never have been able to reveal before. Fear, joy, shame. Piercing regret. Hard-won contentment. Unexpected joy.

In the pages that follow, you will hear the voice of a man who steps out into the yard of a jail "...to sing a ceremonial song to say goodbye the Native way..."—a son marking his father's death by singing that father's soul into the next world.

You'll hear the voice of a woman who eloquently defines her heritage by stating she comes from "...the sound/Of a moving creek in chorus with/Crickets at night."

In these pages of the 32nd Write Around Portland anthology, you'll encounter a number of voices that—without the efforts of this worthy organization—might not have been heard. These voices search for the best words to convey what their hearts and minds know, remember and imagine. They join a community that respects and values the words of others. In short, *they become writers*. And we get to be their readers. Their stories—told in poems and prose—expand and deepen our understanding of the larger human story. Lucky us.