

**Outside the Box
by Phyllis Brown
An Introduction to Write
Around Portland's 34th
anthology, *Look Out On
Your City/Mira tu ciudad***



Phyllis Brown participated in Write Around Portland's *Prompt* workshop at Powell's City of Books in 2008. She trained to be a volunteer workshop facilitator in 2009 and has facilitated numerous writing workshops, including one at Laceleaf Apartments in Hillsboro this fall. Since retiring as an Ob-Gyn physician, Phyllis has somehow managed to keep herself busy. She is married and has four grown children and an adorable one year old granddaughter. She is an avid cyclist and tennis player, ethnic cook and organic gardener, yoga student and dog walker. All these activities give her plenty of material to write about with her writing group, founded by another Write Around Portland facilitator, Mary Kibbe.

Robyn offered up the writing prompt "In the back of my garage...." My pen grabbed at the fresh journal page and flew. It flew toward a cobwebbed-covered box in the back of my garage where broken ninja turtles mixed with a forgotten rock collection were piled onto the chipped casserole dishes. A box that held useless objects but told the story of my life, my family. When I signed up for the Write Around Portland *Prompt* workshop, I thought I could be an observer, a listener. I had honed my observational and listening skills during a long medical practice. A person's life story often reveals more than any blood test. Sometimes, to watch a person walk can tell more than a physical exam. Now, I thought, I could observe how the creative mind worked, explore another way of looking at the world, and most importantly, listen to the stories of others, marvel in this human journey. But no one is just an observer of a Write Around Portland workshop. I opened that box.

Robyn gave the two minute warning, the one minute warning and then asked everyone to finish their last line. It was time to share my piece, time to move from story listener to story teller. The words tightened in my throat. Robyn offered a tissue even before I knew I was going to need it. The tears let loose and so did my story. James, an engineer, broke the silence after my reading. *I really liked the part where the narrator goes down to the curb in her night gown and retrieves the box from the recycling, he said. It was so real, I wanted to hear more. I want to know what was in that box.* I loosened the grip on the tissue in my hand, I felt such relief that my story had connected with someone else. I had never thought of myself as a writer and definitely not a crier. It was time to change some assumptions. I had just jumped into the mosh pit of my first creative writing experience, but I was not alone, my fellow workshop participants carried me through.

A year later, I lumbered into my first Write Around Portland workshop as a volunteer facilitator. It was located at Volunteers of America, a residential community for men and women with chemical dependencies referred by the criminal justice system in northeast Portland. My bulky canvass bag overflowed with journals, pens and snacks. I felt awkward and out of place. I always had a white coat and stethoscope to define my role, create a boundary. Now, I just had paper and pens.

As I wound my way back to the conference room where the workshop was going to be held, a chef came from the kitchen, a ladle in his hand. He stopped me, *Hey, are you the Write Around Portland lady?* I nodded. He went on, *I took the workshop when I was doing my time at Inverness Jail. It helped me get through. I wrote stories about growing up in Hawaii. I still think about blue water sparkling like diamonds. I never got my anthology, moved around too much.* I sat down my bag. I dug around. Found an anthology, the one with his poem. He read me his work. His eyes brimmed over, sparkled like the water that lapped his blue Hawaiian home. He thanked me for giving him the anthology. I thanked him for reading his poem. I laughed, *I guess we're just the same, both writers and criers.*

I have now facilitated several Write Around Portland workshops. I have passed tissues, provided M&M's, written post cards to participants each week, and most importantly, composed and listened to stories. I have been carried back to that box many times. I find the missing pieces of a puzzle, clues to my life. Writing in community helps me put those clues together.

I am still a crier and a writer. I continue to marvel in this journey of being a human. I feel so lucky that I have become a part of this organization that believes in what I believe. Respect. Writing. Community. I am so glad I opened the box.