

## Dave Eggers' Introduction to Write Around Portland's Fall 2009/10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthology, *More Than a Book*



*Dave Eggers wrote the screenplay to *Where the Wild Things Are*. He is the author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a finalist for the 2001 Pulitzer Prize, *Zeitoun* and *What is the What*, a finalist for the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Award. He is the founder and editor of *McSweeney's*, an independent publishing house that produces a quarterly journal, a monthly magazine (*The Believer*), and *Wholphin*, a quarterly DVD of short films and documentaries. In 2002, with Nínive Calegari, Dave co-founded 826 Valencia, a nonprofit writing and tutoring center for youth in the Mission District of San Francisco.*

*Dave has been a longtime supporter of Write Around Portland, headlining fundraisers for us in 2003 and 2004 and currently serving as a member of our Resource Council.*

A few months ago, I did an onstage conversation with Junot Diaz, the author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a novel that won every prize in the world a few years back. We were talking about how we both came to writing, and if you know anything about him, you know that he wasn't to the manor born. He grew up without much, in a family that had left the Dominican Republic and was living in New Jersey. He wasn't so good in school. Junot was, in fact, kicked out of high school.

Flash forward ten or so years, and he's getting a master's degree in creative writing. A few years later, he publishes his first collection, *Drown*, and it knocks everyone flat; critics and readers love it and he's on his way. But ten years go by before *Oscar Wao*, and during that time his brain is about to explode from the pressure to follow up his first book, to produce something.

But finally he does, it finds its audience, wins the Pulitzer, and for the first time ever, millions of Americans learn a thing or two about the Dominican-American experience. The book is so specific about an overweight, nerdy, love-starved Dominican teenager (Oscar) trying to survive adolescence in New Jersey and so honest, so raw and funny and true, that it becomes universal.

So then everyone wants to talk to him about how he writes, how he teaches, how he *did it*. And so he and I are talking about these subjects, in a church, in front of an audience of San Franciscans. Junot and I start talking about graduate programs that allow aspiring writers to

have a few years to concentrate on their work and get a master's in fine arts. I don't have a degree in anything like that, and of course you don't need a degree in anything at all to write a book (though it sure is nice when you can get such a deal). But Junot, who teaches graduate school, lamented the fact that there's little to nothing being done to bring in people from all ages and walks of life to these programs. These wonderful graduate writing programs, where you spend two years or so concentrating on your work, surrounded by other writers-to-be, are dominated by young, white, upper-middle-class kids.

Not that there's anything wrong with being one of these kids. No sir. But there's something to be said for writers who have lived a bit. With life comes experience, and with experience comes (one hopes) wisdom, and any writing worth its salt springs from wisdom, the gaining of insight, the learning of a thing or two.

So Junot and I lamented that there isn't enough being done to support and nurture these voices, voices of people who have seen things, who have walked a bending or bumpy path, who have traveled through darkness, have emerged (even if temporarily) and have put a few words down on paper. And right then, when we were onstage and talking about the lack of such programs, I thought about Write Around Portland. Aha. There were such programs that honor the words of the occasional writer, the unknown philosopher, the man or woman who needs to get a few things off his or her chest. Yes, there was a program doing something to fill the void, to create a platform from which writers from the community of Portland, writers who might not know how much they have to say and how well they're able to say it, can emerge, have their work published, their voices amplified.

I've been acquainted with Write Around Portland for a good chunk of its ten years in existence, and it's been so gratifying to see the program grow and thrive. The only problem with a program like Write Around Portland is knowing how good it is, how necessary it is, and how unfortunate it is that it doesn't exist in every city and town in the country. It should be part of any city's charter, part of any town's ethos. People have got to have a place to write, and to have that writing encouraged, polished and published. When the voices of a civilization's citizens aren't heard, well, we know what happens. People are marginalized, people are frustrated, and bad things happen. So let's not have bad things happen. Let's listen to each other. When people are heard, people are happy.