

Introduction by David Bragdon to Write Around Portland's Summer 2010 anthology, *Follow Me, Move the World*



David Bragdon was elected Metro Council President for the Portland region in 2002 and re-elected in 2006, and would like to be a writer sometime in the future. He evidently also has read books, or at least owns books by E. M. Forster and John Dos Passos, and apparently has visited the Skidmore Fountain. He asked us to say that he wrote this introduction by himself rather than ask his staff to ghost-write it for him, and asked us to say we believe he is telling the truth. We think he is.

Charles Erskine Scott Wood's inscription on the Skidmore Fountain claims that "good citizens are the riches of a city." It would be considered impolite for me to dispute that very Portlandish homily at your local neighborhood association, but Wood always invited liberties so I will take him one further: the riches of a city are counted partly in the stories those citizens can tell. Citizenship can't co-exist with voicelessness. And voice takes many forms: we unwittingly tell a story about our society when we cast a ballot and collectively decide an election; we weave narratives when we invent a new version of Pad Thai and open a food cart at 10th and Alder or when we plant trees or choose to kick heroin. We tell stories about ourselves and imagine stories about who we might become all the time. But those stories don't always find verbal expression or paper. Contrary to E.M. Forster's assertion in *A Room with a View* that "Life is easy to chronicle, but bewildering to practice," both the living and the chronicling can be tough. That's why Write Around Portland provides such a valuable service by coaxing those stories out of our citizens.

I heard a lot of stories when I drove a cab in Portland: the cancer patient going to Good Samaritan in response to a phone call that after two years of waiting a suitable bone marrow donor had been found; the man setting off on an Internet blind date in Troutdale on Christmas Eve; the passenger who rode from 82nd and Flavel to the Rite Aid at 118th and Division and then paid me the \$6.50 fare entirely with nickels, slowly counted out of a clear plastic bag. They were the riches of my city because they were the stories and the voices of my city. I'd like to imagine some of those passengers having the opportunity to take a Write Around Portland workshop.

John Dos Passos, another lefty writer of Wood's time, wrote a three-part anthology of social fiction entitled *U.S.A.*, published around the time of the Great Depression. In his introduction Dos Passos first tried to describe this country in social, political and geographic terms—"U.S.A. is a group of holding companies...a set of laws bound in calf... U.S.A. is the world's greatest river valley fringed with mountains...."—but he ended the piece by having to conclude, "But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people." By that definition, Portland is the speech of the people, and Write Around Portland is the people's means of developing a voice for that speech. Write Around Portland helps a diverse assortment of us give expression to the stories which need to be more precisely and emphatically told. And in the very telling—by activating voices which for one reason or another might have been muffled until now—those stories create exactly the type of good citizens that I would like to think rabble-rousing old C.E.S. Wood had in mind when he bestowed his eight words on the Skidmore Fountain.