

DOIG (Opening remarks)

It's my pleasure to hand out the goodies tonight. In this assignment, I promise to be on better behavior than twenty years ago when the New York Times travel section sent me down here to do a piece, and I told the nation that downtown Portland after dark was a medium thrill. Mea culpa, Portlandia..)

So, I'm here as a tourist again, although the Literary Arts folks have fancied up the job description to "master of ceremonies." I had better master time, first of all, and in my opening errand of standing up here and talking about writing for about fifteen minutes, I do know what a deadline is.

Let us begin at the beginning, when art began to dance off the cave walls to us. Literature perhaps begins there, in the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace--I think stories still can be our way of sharing light, of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

Our work, our words, of course have to start on the cave walls between our own ears--the everyday life of the writer, if that's what you can call sitting around in your own head all the time. Herman Melville surely gave the creed of all us stay-at-homes, hunkered there trying to make books, when he let forth in Moby Dick his narrator's ever so literary yearning: "Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!"

The patience of one of the odd patron saints of our trade, the late Flannery O'Connor, has always guided me in the long devotion of the writer's backside to the seat of the chair where he or she sits and works. Flannery O'Connor was ill, most of her short writing life, but her collection of letters show her to have been a dedicated sardonic professional, as when she gave this unbeatable version of the experience of looking over one's own writing: "I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting 'seems' and 'as if' constructions out of it. It was like getting ticks off a dog."

This is what she had to say about a writer's necessary state of patience:

"I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away. I see it happen all the time. Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is that if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Ultimately, Flannery O'Connor's advice does add up. Tonight we have these honored books--days, nights, weeks, and years turned into words. Their authors now will forever face, at booksignings, readings, and other gatherings, that eternal audience question: "Where do you get your ideas?" Always a good question, but the answer is tough. It's not as if writers live in an aquarium. The writer floating dreamily all day long in the fluid of thought and word, and at suppertime the figure of God--in the unlikely disguise of a literary critic--drops in the fish food.

No, art comes by way of craft, of working and reworking those sounds that come off the page. The heart of the language must beat there. Three hearts, really. The rhythms and tides of the bloodstream we all share, words, constitute the first. The Pacific Northwest poet Richard Hugo once did a splendid book on the craft of using words on paper--The Triggering Town, with alloys of common sense and revelation such as this paragraph:

"A student may love the sound of Yeats' 'Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more' and not know that the single-syllable word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that's one reason 'blood dark track' goes off like rifle shots.... The

young poet is too often paying attention to the big things and can't be bothered with little matters like that. But little matters like that are what make and break poems."

The second vital pulse on the page, I don't know what to call except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality by which a writer writes better than he has any right to. By which Faulkner, who could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent post office, had somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his uppercrust nose, somehow--somehow--could see deeply "to where all ladders start/ in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

The third heart of writing is geographical: where we speak from. "They call it regional," our late great friend Bill Stafford wrote in his telling poem, "Lake Chelan"-- "They call it regional, this relevance: the deepest place we have." For my part, as someone who writes about both the Rocky Mountain slopes where I grew up and about the Pacific Northwest where I've spent the majority of my years, I've always believed that writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country, life.

Now, to begin to turn to the night's main event--the writers of caliber being honored here--let me preach a quick paragraph of history. We're here celebrating the tenth anniversary of these Oregon Book Awards, created to acknowledge the outstanding writers of this state. The awards are given in five fields of writing--fiction, literary nonfiction, poetry, books for young readers, and drama--and each award has a nice round number to it, the sum of one thousand dollars. (Recall Moby Dick: "Time, Strength, CASH and Patience!") Like the plot of a good book, these awards have not been predictable, sometimes have been controversial in the selection of finalists and winners. Since I normally get to watch from relative safety north of the Columbia River, the Oregon Book

Awards remind me a bit of the literary equivalent of that journalistic axiom of what makes a good newspaper: being not afraid to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Miraculous things, books. Every so often, I wish we could re-weave time and bring forth a writer from his own neighborhood of history to an era where we need his particular eye and skill. Shakespeare, for instance, to write about the massive murderous idiocy of the trench warfare of World War One. Joseph Conrad to be aboard a moon voyage and tell us of the cold ocean of space.

If I could shuffle time, tonight, there is a trio of historical figures whom I passionately wish could witness these Oregon Book Awards, so that they could know how far their imagination has led. Thomas Jefferson, that one-man academy of arts and sciences, who sent his explorers toward the mouth of Columbia River with instructions to write and write and write--to keep journals "with great pains and accuracy, to be entered distinctly and intelligibly for others as well as yourself; and those two superb diarists, that odd perfect couple Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. It was Clark who wrote a creed of simple pride in having stuck to the task, as the Corps of Discovery broke camp after the winter of rain at Fort Clatsop: "(We) have lived as well as we had any right to expect."

I believe that those three early figures who touched, with their pens, the land which would become Oregon, would grin astonished approval tonight as this state honors its makers of literature.

And now, those Oregon Book Awards for this year.

Welcome to an evening when the State of Washington becomes a state of literary exultation, a place where we celebrate that strange tapping behavior which somehow turns the keyboard's scrambled alphabet into a book, and a place where we declare ourselves a statewide community with--in the wise counsel of our late great literary neighbor, the Oregon poet William Stafford--"a one-word constitution: Patience."

Literature and politics are both work you can't rush, and maybe it's those terms of the two jobs that brought about Washington's distinctive tribal habit of its governors honoring its writers--Dan Evans gazing into some page on a green and gray winter day those 30 years ago and realizing that the same rain falls on chiefs and storytellers.

This is the fourth time that **Mike** and **Mary Lowry** have graced this annual occasion, and we thank them for faithfully carrying on the tradition of these awards.

There of course can't be awards without judges, the critical quintet who took on the task of choosing tonight's books for their literary merit, lasting importance, and elegance in their published form--the five who read and read and read:

Bruce Barcott, of Seattle

Scott Blume, of Bellingham

Nancy Olsen, of Bainbridge Island

Doris Pieroth, of Seattle

and **Konny Thompson** of Spokane--please stand and get a hand of thanks for your work.

As to why I'm up here, I've been cropping up at this event now through--well, four governors. This is my first time here as a tourist, although **Margaret Ann** has fancied up the job description to "master of ceremonies." What I am mostly to master is time, and in my assignment tonight to "comment for about 15 minutes on the art of writing," I do know what a deadline is.

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hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace--I think stories still can be our way of sharing light, of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

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“A student may love the sound of Yeats’ ‘Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more’ and not know that the single-syllable word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that’s one reason ‘blood dark track’ goes off like rifle shots.... The young poet is too often paying attention to the big things and can’t be bothered with little matters like that. But little matters like that are what make and break poems.”

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Here on our own turf, my travels convince me that Washington is an incurably bookish place, from end to end. In a back room of Auntie's Bookstore in Spokane, you could find a running list on the wall of "Why books make great entertainment," such as:

"In a book you always have somebody else's life to live when you can't handle your own."

And: "Won't electrocute you if it falls in the tub."

Out at Neah Bay, when I was following the tracks of the pioneer diarist James G. Swan for my book *Winter Brothers*, I discovered that when experts on the art of the coastal natives would be looking at the motifs of the Makah tribe and come across a Chinese dragon or the double-headed eagle emblem of the Hapsburg Empire, they figured Swan had been lending the Makahs his books again.

And--a final tantalizing literary thought--it has occurred, not just to me, that we scribbling residents of the state of Washington may be naturally onomatopoeically gifted, just from living in the place. Sinclair Lewis must have thought so, as in one of his novels he had a young poet make up a poem of place names as she drove through our state, with lines such as

“Humptulips, Tumtum, Moclips, Yelm...

Soap Lake, Loon Lake, Addy...Usk...

Fishtrap, Carnation, Shine, Monte Cristo...”

Whether or not we live in a state of demented haiku, Washington writers across the decades of these awards have produced some of America's most distinguished writing, and it has always particularly pleased me, in my times of hanging around this event, that the Governor's Awards cover so many literary fields so well. The lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of sci fi, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir--all prowl prominently in our Washington wordworld. Now, Governor and Mrs. Lowry will present the awards to this year's representatives from the kingdom of words.

(This does NOT conclude tonight's celebration of Washington's writers. There'll be an informal reception now, upstairs, in the McCurdy Gallery. You're all invited to meet these authors; their winning books will be on sale, and they can probably be persuaded to sign up copies for you. So, thanks for coming--and to be continued, upstairs.)