

Soapstone: Celebrating Women Writers / Grants

Before we started this program formally we provided funding for two events:

A Memorial Reading for Adrienne Rich, organized by Katharine Salzmann, was held at the Unitarian Church in May of 2012. Beautiful banners of some of Rich's poems graced the room along with flowers. Several hundred came for the program in which people who knew Rich were invited to read a poem of hers and talk about her. An open-mic followed for audience members to read their favorite Rich poem.

A Birthday Party on What Would Have Been Grace Paley's 90th Birthday, organized by Judith Arcana was held at the Clinton Street Theatre December 11, 2012. A documentary film of Grace's life was shown, invited presenters read from her prose, poetry and nonfiction, and a birthday cake was enjoyed by a packed audience.

It was these events, in part, that propelled us along the path we are now on, supporting independent events and study groups that celebrate women writers. All events are offered free of charge. A small fee is charged for the study groups. Since the grant program was announced and proposals solicited, we have funded the following.

Study Groups

Reading Elizabeth Bishop

Study group leader: Barbara Drake
Four sessions, 10 to 1, Spring 2017
Friends Meeting House

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was one of the major American poets of the twentieth century. A recipient of many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956 and the National Book Award in 1970, she was friends with famous poets of her time such as Robert Lowell and Marianne Moore, published work in *The New Yorker* and other prominent magazines, and from time to time held prestigious teaching positions. And yet in some ways she was an outsider and a mystery. She traveled extensively and for many years lived in Brazil with her lover, architect and political activist Lota de Macedo Soares. Bishop's poetry often deals with loss and the difficulty of finding one's place in the world. This is not surprising since her father died when she was only 8 months old. A few years later her mother suffered a nervous breakdown, was confined to a mental hospital, disappearing from Elizabeth's life forever. Shuffled between relatives in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts, she was in some ways rootless.

The need to situate one's self in a lonely world is often reflected in her poems. Throughout her adult life Bishop struggled with her own demons of depression and alcohol, but judging by her work she must have been a delightful person with a warm sense of humor. Her poetry is often playful. Poems such as "The Man-Moth," about a mysterious and lonely imaginary character based on a newspaper typo, or "One Art," a catalog of life's losses, from door keys to people and places, adopt a fanciful, even humorous, tone. And simply studying the way in which Bishop uses observant and detailed description, as in her poem "The Fish" and many others, is itself a whole course

in the art of poetry. Reading her poems, admiring her craft, delighting in her images and ideas, one feels an impulse to share the experience with others, perhaps turning to the nearest human being—friend, lover, or stranger in a coffee shop—and saying, you’ve got to read this, it’s so good. How does she do that? This will be the central topic of our study group. We will gather for the sheer joy of reading, talking about, learning from, and coming to understand the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop in the company of others.

Our text will be *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, Elizabeth Bishop, supplemented with selected material about the writer, including essays and film.

Barbara Drake’s books and chapbooks of poetry include *Driving One Hundred*, *Love at the Egyptian Theatre*, *What We Say to Strangers*, *Life in a Gothic Novel*, *Bees in Wet Weather*, and *Small Favors*. She is also the author of two memoirs, *Peace at Heart: an Oregon Country Life*, and *Morning Light: Wildflowers, Night Skies, and Other Ordinary Joys of Oregon Country Life*. Her book *Writing Poetry*, a widely used college textbook, has been in print since 1983. Her writing appears in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. She developed the creative writing program at Linfield College where she taught until retiring as Professor Emerita in 2007.

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Reading Joy Williams

Study group leader: Sallie Tisdale
Four sessions, Spring 2017, 10 to 1
Friends Meeting House

Joy Williams has written four novels, five short story collections, and two books of nonfiction. Williams is one of the rare writers whose voice is commanding in several genres. Her stated desire is to make literature “dangerous” again, with the power to “awaken and change us,” to describe the “the mysterious, undeserved beauty of the world.” This beauty, Williams believes, lives behind the “heat, the recklessness and ruthlessness, the grotesqueries and cruelties” of American experience. American writers, she believes, “must reflect the sprawl and smallness of America.”

She has been nominated for a National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, and National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. In 2016, she received the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story.

At 72, Williams has never owned a computer, does not have a television, and writes on one of her seven Smith-Corona typewriters. She has had only two jobs in her life: a brief stint as a waitress when she was at the Iowa Writers Workshop, and researching shark attacks for the Navy for a time. Only one of her books sold well—a tourist’s guide to the Florida Keys that is supremely scornful of tourism. Williams is on the road almost all the time, driving in an old Bronco with her two dogs on an endless pilgrimage from Arizona to Maine to Wyoming, seeking the deep solitude and isolation she requires for writing.

She believes that each form has its own tale to tell; that short stories should “touch people on a deeper level, a deeper, stranger level” than they often do. Her characters are filled with longing; their mistakes are often big ones. “Many of my figures seek something that cannot be found.”

This group will examine two of Williams’ books, the recent retrospective collection of her short stories called *The Visiting Privilege* and a bracing book of essays about environmental topics called *Ill Nature*.

Sallie Tisdale is the author of eight books of nonfiction, including the recent collection of essays, *Violation*. She has taught essay and memoir in a variety of settings. <http://sallietisdale.com>

Reading Jane Austen

Study group leader: Annie Lighthart
Four sessions, Fall 2016, 10 to 1
TaborSpace

“Perhaps we shouldn’t find Jane Austen’s novels as fascinating as we do: people from another era sit quietly and talk. They politely drink tea. Characters take uneventful walks to neighboring towns. Yet the tensions, passions, and histories in that world of small gestures make the novels of Austen complex, astute, and, in a word, irresistible. This study group will look at four of Austen’s enduring novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

“We’ll consider the questions Austen’s work raises, especially her recurring and timely inquiry into whether the heart and mind stand a chance in a world dominated by status and money. Participants are asked to read one novel per session and join in a relaxed and friendly discussion. Since Austen’s characters valued good conversation over tea or a meal, we will too: please feel free to bring your lunch or pick up a cup of tea at the TaborSpace café.

Whether you are new to Austen’s work or a long-time fan, a reader looking to immerse herself in another world or a writer hoping to gain new insights from a past master, this study group welcomes you.”

Annie Lighthart is a writer, teacher, and the author of the poetry collection *Iron String*. Her work has been read by Garrison Keillor on *The Writer’s Almanac* and chosen by Naomi Shihab Nye to be placed in Ireland’s Galway University Hospitals as part of their *Poems for Patience* project. She has taught at Boston College, with Portland’s Mountain Writers, and with community groups of all ages.

Reading Leslie Marmon Silko

Study group leader: Janice Gould
The weekend of November 4-6, 2016
Friends Meeting House

We’ll focus on Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, supplemented by her book of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. Contemporary Native American written literature is often beholden to tribal oral traditions. Silko’s masterpiece, *Ceremony*, is a case in point. Drawing on stories and concepts from both Pueblo and Navajo sources, and using the modernist device of the novel, Silko crafts a complex tale about the power and endurance of ceremony. We will explore this novel’s themes and structure. Is *Ceremony* a novel about identity? Is it an anti-war novel? Is it an ecological argument, a plea for the environment? Is *Ceremony* still a relevant piece of fiction? Silko’s first book of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* provides us with some details about Silko’s life and helps us understand some of her thoughts as a writer, and as a mixed-blood woman of Native American (Laguna Pueblo) descent.

Janice Gould is a poet and writer of Native American (Koyoonk'auwi) descent: "Silko was one of the first Native American authors I read, after reading N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*. Silko's short stories were familiar and approachable, contemporaneous. With humor and pathos, she draws a picture of Native American village life—of extended families, day-to-day work and activities, the importance of the natural world, and the presence of the oral tradition—stories and gossip, songs and prayers. While I grew up in California and not in New Mexico, I could still appreciate Silko's sense of connection to place, and especially to the arid, rural landscape of her homeland. Silko's novel *Ceremony* spoke to me powerfully; I read it while my mother was dying of cancer. It seemed to express the feelings of anomie, loss, and disorientation I felt during that time as I cared for my mother, and yet the message of love and connection permeated the novel too, and gave me solace. For this, and for other reasons, I have always loved this work."

Sappho and her Sisters: Greek and Roman Women Poets

Study group Leader: Paul Merchant

Three Saturdays in June, 2016 from 9:30 to 2:30

TaborSpace

The Greek poet Sappho and the Roman poet Sulpicia are the only women poets of the classical period whose work survives in any appreciable quantity. (A small handful of others are known to us in even more fragmentary form.) Sappho and Sulpicia are interesting to compare, since they are both writers of startling inventiveness and vivid personality. They are also, for modern readers and writers, valuable reminders of a lost world of women's writing that now has to be reimagined, and in their different ways can be an inspiration for courage and honesty in our own writing lives.

From Paul Merchant's proposal: My original degree at Cambridge was in Classics, and my main interest was in poetry, so I've been a devotee of Sappho's poetry for more than fifty years. I've also translated a good deal of Catullus, and have always wondered whether his friend Clodia, whom he called Lesbia, was a poet. More recently I've been translating Horace, who must surely have known the only Roman woman poet whose work survives, Sulpicia. I enjoy the thought of comparing two women poets, Sappho and Sulpicia, who are both so daring and outspoken.

Reading the Poetry of Maxine Kumin

Study group leaders: Andrea Hollander and Judith Barrington

Four Saturdays in January of 2016, from 10 to 1

TaborSpace

Maxine Kumin (1925 - 2014) is one of the great poets of our time. Winner of the Pulitzer and Ruth Lilly Poetry Prizes among many others, and Poet Laureate of the United States, she produced a large body of work which was very important to Andrea Hollander and Judith Barrington, both of whom also knew her personally.

From Judith and Andrea's proposal: "Each session will focus on a few poems, all of which can be found in *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems*. You will be expected to read the poems ahead of time and participate in discussion about them. It will be a relaxed atmosphere, with participants encouraged to bring their lunch, to make it easier to fit in on a Saturday. The study group welcomes both readers and writers, those who already

know Kumin's work well, those who would like to become better acquainted with it, and those for whom the study group will be an introduction to her work."

Reading the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Study group leader: Kate Gray

Four sessions: October, 2015 to February, 2016, from 6:30 to 8

Friends Meeting House

This study group began on Plath's birthday and ended on the date of her death. The group read and discussed the 25 poems from *Ariel* that Plath wrote in the last four months of her life, the same four-month span of the study group.

From Kate Gray's proposal: "Since I was 16 years old, I've explored the work of Sylvia Plath. When *Letters Home* was published, my mother dropped a copy on my desk and told me to read the letter written when Plath attended my aunt's debutante party at my grandparents' home. Plath and my aunt were dorm-mates at Smith College. For me, Plath is personal. In the past 15 years I have attended conferences on Plath, written drafts of a novel about her, put on the white gloves and touched drafts of "Daddy" and the calendar she used the last year of her life and more. I've met her roommate at Haven House and the last person to see her alive. I'm currently in the thick of writing the novel with her as one of the point-of-view characters. My contention is that the media image of Plath is way too narrow and sensationalized, and I hope that through the study of her, we can experience her joy and brilliance, her growing pains as a young woman, and her drive."

Events

Women Writers in Discussion: a Quarterly Series

Organizer and moderator: Elisa Saphier

Another Read Through Bookstore, Portland

Soapstone has funded the first two in this series.

Saturday April 16, from 1:30-3, a discussion with Ellen Urbani, Rene Denfeld, and Karen Karbo about "flawed" women characters, and finding strength in both adversity and imperfection.

Saturday June 25, from 1:30-3, a discussion with Liz Prato, Margaret Malone, and Monica Drake focusing on "unlikeable" female characters and publishers', reviewers', and readers' reactions to them.

Queen of the Night An Evening with Shirley Jackson

Organized by Karen Munro

October 28, 2015, 6 to 8

Glyph Café and Art Space, Portland

This free public reading celebrated the work of Shirley Jackson, who wrote the classic short story "The Lottery" as well as several novels and many short stories from the 1940s through the 1960s. Jackson was known both for her uncanny and chilling fiction, as well

as her humorous family memoirs. The event celebrated her at a moment when she is receiving renewed interest and reputation, with a new posthumous collection out in 2015 and a new biography in 2016.

Readers Leni Zumas, Lara Messersmith-Glavin, and Jemiah Jefferson read three of Jackson's short stories for a full house audience. Zumas read "The Beautiful Stranger," Messersmith-Glavin read "The Witch," and Jefferson read "The Lottery." Colleen Burner, co-publisher of Shirley literary magazine (<http://www.shirleymag.com/>) provided raffle prizes including chapbooks of some of the magazine's stories. Design work for promotional materials was by Amanda Morgan. The evening finished with a mock "stoning," with audience members tossing balled tissue paper "stones" at raffle prize winners on the stage.

From Karen Munro's evaluation: "We promoted the evening primarily via a Facebook Event, to which 160 Facebook users were invited. (Public events allow invitees to invite their own friends.) We also sent an event description and the Facebook URL to Portland's literary calendars, including Swamp Lit and The Rumpus's "Notable Portland" feature. We shared free listings with the free weekly websites, although this wasn't as effective as we had hoped.

We posted regularly to the Facebook Event page in order to keep it showing up in people's feeds, and generally noticed an increase in "likes" and "going" responses after each post. We would recommend that future events also use Facebook, and try to target "influencer" people in the Portland literary community who can help spread the word."

International Women's Day Celebrations

Starting in 2015, Soapstone has sponsored a reading by women of both their own work and the work of feminist poets from the past. The Soapstone Board appoints an organizer and she is given a budget and asked to design and organize the event.

International Women's Day 2017 / "Our Foremothers' Voices"

Organized, devised and directed by Kathleen Worley

March 4, 2017, 2 to 4

First Unitarian Church

Readers: Judith Arcana, Diane Olson Dieter, Michelle Fujii, Robin Amy Gordon, Michele M. Mariana, Emma Oliver, Jamie M. Rea, Ithaca Tell, Kathleen Worley

Writers: Susan B. Anthony, Gloria Anzaldua, Lucille Clifton, Maria Irene Fornes, Judy Grahn, Susan Griffin, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Pat Parker, Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others.

International Women's Day 2016

Organized and introduced by Brittney Corrigan McElroy

March 6, 2016, 3 to 5

Concordia University in the George R. White Library

Brittney handpicked a diverse group of six poets to read: Leanne Gabel, Kate Gray, Brandi Katherine Herrera, Kaia Sand, Annie Lighthart, Wendy Willis, each of whom

read a poem by a “foremother” and their own work. Light refreshments. Co-sponsored by Concordia University.

International Women’s Day 2015 / “Of Course I’m a Feminist!”

Organized and introduced by Ellen Goldberg

March 8, 2015, 6 to 8

TaborSpace

A standing room only crowd, approximately 120 women and men, came to hear 18 women each read a poem of her own. The readers were chosen by Ellen after a call for anonymous submissions. Ellen gave a wonderful introduction which included excerpts from many important poems from the past forty years with a slide show of photos of feminist poets, present and past. Cookies in the shape of the Women’s Liberation symbol were served during the intermission (and books from the readers were sold). The event ended with a surprise singing of Bread and Roses (lyrics supplied to the audience in the program) led by Izetta Smith. Readers were: Judith Arcana, Elise Kuechle, Brittney Corrigan, Carlyn Syvanen, Penelope Schott, Pam Crow, Francis Payne Adler, Marilyn Stablein, Ila Suzanne Gray, Linda Ferguson, Gail Barker, Tricia Knoll, Carter McKenzie, Andrea Hollander, Emily Carr, Shawn Aveningo, and Sharon Wood Wortman. Judith Barrington read at Ellen’s request.

From the program: “Feminist poetry readings have a long history in Portland going back to the mid-seventies at the YWCA. They were mobbed and thrumming with energy—we were all hungry for the new poetry about our lives, our “wild impatience,” our secrets. Poetry nurtured and inspired us, prodded and affirmed us. It was a central part of the Second Wave. Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn and the brave new voices who stood in front of us and read—all their work was crucial to each of us personally, and in significant ways, it was the heart of the movement. Ellen Goldberg has been writing and reading her poems and supporting women writers since those heady days. She has organized this reading to launch Soapstone’s new program of grants celebrating women writers.”