

# Eleanor Berry

Will Receive the **Soapstone Bread and Roses Award**

**International Women's Day, March 8, 2023**



**The Soapstone Bread and Roses Award** honors a woman whose work has sustained the writing community. Eleanor Berry is being recognized for her work making poetry visible and accessible—some have said “really alive”—in the Central Willamette Valley with Salem as its center. She is a self-described “poet activist.” Her mission has been to “make poetry a part of the community.” Almost all of her work has been as a volunteer. As poet Lois Rosen said, “When she sees an opportunity for something to happen, she simply goes ahead and organizes it, regardless of whether or not she will get paid. Anything poetry-related in the mid-Willamette Valley area of Oregon will bear Eleanor’s fingerprint if you look for it.”

The award includes a check for \$1500, a bouquet of roses, and a luncheon on March 8, International Women’s Day

From 2000 to 2008, Eleanor coordinated the Second Sunday Poetry Series in Stayton, near her and her husband Richard’s farm. The series started when a friend, artist Paul Toews, opened Art Gone Wild Gallery and asked Eleanor if she would bring some poets and have a reading at the opening. That reading was so successful and satisfying that the two agreed such readings should become regular events at the

gallery. They became a way of bringing poets and poetry-lovers together from all over the Willamette Valley—from Portland to Eugene—in an artist's space in a beautiful, rural area. Richard was involved too, photographing the featured poets at all the readings and posting those poet-portraits. Those who read in the series attest to the care and preparation Eleanor put into promoting and introducing the readings and hosting the events, which had a regular audience of some forty poetry lovers.

Eleanor is one of the original members of The Peregrine Writers, a Salem-area poetry critique group founded in 1999 by poets Lois Rosen and Jane Bailey. The group, now including nine poets, continues to meet twice a month to share and critique work-in-progress. Over the years, they have also published several chapbooks of members' poems and held group readings.

In 2010 Eleanor and the late Virginia Corrie-Cozart co-founded the Mid-Valley Poetry Society and secured its approval as the Salem-area unit of the Oregon Poetry Association. After Virginia's death in 2012, Eleanor continued as MVPS chair. In that role she leads its monthly meetings and oversees its various programs. Some of these include:

- Poetry in Performance, an annual series, begun in 2013, of three events a year, providing an opportunity for poets for whom performance is a central part of their art to share their work with audiences. In these events, held at different venues in Marion County, the poets often collaborate with musicians and/or artists in other media. For several years, this series has received funding from the Marion Cultural Development Corporation, the Marion County affiliate of the Oregon Cultural Trust.
- Poetry boxes, currently an indoor poetry box in a downtown Salem coffee house and another in Bush's Pasture Park in Salem, both kept stocked with poems, most from local poets, by Susan Morse. During the pandemic closures, the sharing of poems was continued through an e-list, principally by Mike Shuler, who subsequently edited an anthology, *Poems out of the Box*.
- In recent years, particular PiP events have been focused on opportunities for young poets. The first PiP event of 2022, organized by Eleanor, was the first in two years to be held in person and featured poetry videos created by students at Corban University and Western Oregon University, which were shown on the big screen at Salem Cinema. Plans for 2023 include grant-funded poetry workshops for children and a children's poetry reading to be held at the Salem Art Fair and Festival.
- A radio show, "Poetry on the Air," hosted by Steve Slemenda on Salem's community radio station, KMUZ. The half-hour program airs twice-monthly, with interviews and readings by poets from the Salem area and beyond.
- Collaborations with Artists in Action and the Salem Art Association. For the past several years, AiA's long-standing summer program "Paint the Town" has embraced MVPS poets in a re-named "Paint/Write the Town" program in which both artists and writers go to designated sites to work *en plein air*, with the resultant pieces exhibited in a local art gallery in the fall. In 2020-2022, the MVPs joined with the Salem Art Association in a program of collaborative poet-artist residencies in which Eleanor played a key role. Because of the pandemic closures, they were adapted into extended, mostly long-distance collaborations. The resultant works, including an installation, "Land Scape Shift," created by artist Ann Kresge and Eleanor, were displayed in an exhibit at the Bush Barn Art Center in January-February 2022.

- A monthly column, written by MVPS members, about Oregon poets and poetry, past and present, in the *Salem Statesman Journal*. Eleanor curates the column, writing occasional articles herself. A recent article by Eleanor told of the ending, after twenty years, of the regional poetry magazine *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*. Another, a couple of months later, gave news of the re-launch, in a digital version, of another venerable little magazine of our region, *Fireweed: Poetry of Western Oregon*.

When, in 2010, artist Lynn Takata began work on the Salem Peace Mosaic, a community participatory public art project, she recruited poets, including Eleanor, to lead workshops to generate words and images for the mosaic. The mosaic was installed on the front of the old Salem YMCA. For the grand opening, Eleanor edited a chapbook of poetry generated in her and other Salem Peace Mosaic Project workshops. When the YMCA was slated to be demolished, Takata and others established a non-profit organization, Save the Salem Peace Mosaic. Through its work, the mosaic was removed in huge sections in late 2019, and stored for future re-installation on an addition to the Salem Riverfront Carousel in Riverfront Park. As part of an effort to spread word of the mosaic's preservation and its future, Eleanor recently led a workshop on "Making Poems/Making Peace: Writing Art-Inspired Poems of Peace" and is now editing an anthology, *Salem Means Peace*, of poems generated in that and other SSPM workshops.

Eleanor is an enthusiastic supporter of other poetry activists in the Salem area, as often as possible attending and participating in the weekly readings of Marc Janssen's Salem Poetry Project and the Silverton Poetry Festival and "Dead Poets" readings of the Silverton Poetry Association.

Besides her work in the Mid-Willamette Valley, Eleanor has worked on behalf of poets and poetry on both the state and national levels. She served on the board of the Oregon Poetry Association for ten years, including two terms as president. One of her goals as OPA president was to make the organization, which had become focused on Portland and the northern Willamette Valley, truly statewide, through holding conferences all around the state and reviving regional units of the association. During her term on the board, conferences were held in Bend, Medford, Newport, Pendleton, and Roseburg, as well as Eugene, Portland, and Salem. Several OPA units were established: the Marys Peak unit (based in Corvallis), the Eugene-Springfield unit, the Umpqua Valley unit (based in Roseburg), and the Rogue Valley unit (Medford and Ashland area). In 2021, OPA recognized Eleanor's work and that of Eugene poet and Uttered Chaos poetry publisher Laura LeHew with Patricia Ruth Banta Awards. The award "honors an individual or group that has made a significant contribution to Oregon poetry and to OPA's mission."

Eleanor has also been active on the national poetry scene, having served for a decade on the elective board of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, including a term as its president. During that term, she supported the work of Shirley Blackwell and Fil Peach in establishing what became known as the BlackBerry Peach Award, which recognizes poems for their excellence both on the page and as performed by the poet. She began her work with NFSPS on its appointive board, serving four years as chair of the Barbara Stevens Poetry Book Manuscript Competition, an international competition that awards publication and a cash prize. She is currently working to increase the visibility and prestige of this award through co-chairing it with Texas poet Terry Jude Miller.

Poetry has been Eleanor's passion for a long time. Her doctoral dissertation from the University of Toronto was on lineation and syntax in the poetry of William Carlos Williams. She regards that study of Williams as her equivalent of an MFA because it taught her so much about poetic technique. During her academic career, including teaching positions at several Wisconsin colleges and universities as well as

Willamette University in Salem, she published influential papers on the prosody of modern American free verse. Since leaving academe, she's led poetry workshops for NFSPS, OPA, Sitka, the Lord and Schryver Conservancy, and other Oregon literary and arts organizations, as well as doing occasional consulting on others' poetry manuscripts.

What motivates Eleanor to do this work on behalf of poetry? An avid reader of Ezra Pound's essays as well as his poetry, she was struck by his statement, "It is tremendously important that great poetry be written, it makes no jot of difference who writes it." That oriented her from focusing exclusively on her own poetry. When she was teaching, she could foster good writing through her work with students. When she was no longer in a classroom or writing center, she needed other venues. She was inspired by seeing what other Oregon poets were doing—David Hedges, who revitalized the Oregon Poetry Association during his time on its board and as its president; Ruth Gundle and Judith Barrington, who put on Flight of the Mind summer writing workshops for women for 18 years and then, with others, founded Soapstone; and Erik Muller, whose Traprock Books published many Oregon poets' first books and who in many other ways provided "a splendid example of someone who enabled the creation and sharing of poetry." These and others—notably, Paulann Petersen, Ellen Waterston, and Peter Sears—inspired her and served as models.

Eleanor and Richard bought their farm in the Santiam Canyon east of Salem—eight acres of forest and pasture—when they moved to Oregon in 1994. They chose to live there in part because of the dark skies and easy access to even darker skies farther east. (Former editor-in-chief of *Astronomy* magazine, Richard is an active observer and astrophotographer.) They lived there until Labor Day, 2020, when their house, outbuildings, and woods were completely destroyed in the Beachie Creek fire. Dina Triest, one of the Peregrine Writers, provided them an immediate temporary home. Eleanor and Richard now live in the West Valley.

Wanting to preserve the essential parts of her life despite the devastation and loss, Eleanor continued her work on behalf of the poetry community even right after the fire. She doesn't find it easy to talk about her fire experience, but just two weeks after that Labor Day, she wrote an article for the *Salem Statesman Journal* about how a few pieces of art pottery had survived the flames and how, though all her books had burned, passages of poetry remained in her mind. In the article, she muses on the work of her late friend Virginia Corrie-Cozart, who had grown up on a farm near Bandon and was very aware of the 1936 fire that had destroyed the town. Her poetry, Eleanor notes, conveys a "keen sense of mutability and ephemerality." Later, Penina Taesali gathered book donations from many Mid-Valley poets to help rebuild Eleanor's lost poetry library, and Erik Muller and Paul Merchant each gave her several cartons of volumes from their own shelves.

It is in her poetry that Eleanor has best been able to articulate the experience of wildfire—an experience too widely shared in this era of global warming. Her most recent collection, *Works of Wildfire*, won the 2022 Grayson Books Chapbook Award. Eleanor's previous poetry collections include the books *Green November*, published in 2007 by Erik Muller's Traprock Books, and *No Constant Hues* (Turnstone Books of Oregon, 2015), and a chapbook, *Only So Far* (Main Street Rag, 2019).