

Ellen Waterston

Will Receive the **Soapstone Bread and Roses Award**
International Women's Day, March 8, 2024



The Soapstone Bread and Roses Award honors a woman whose work has sustained the Oregon writing community. We celebrate Ellen Waterston for her work creating a vibrant literary life east of the Cascades; she created unique and important events; focused attention on the literature of the High Desert, mentored numerous writers, while writing poetry and nonfiction works that have become an essential part of the literature of Oregon and the West. The award includes \$1500, a bouquet of roses, and a luncheon with the Soapstone Board.

Ellen has lived in the Oregon High Desert for fifty years. She has loved it, celebrated it, and, in her words, it has been her muse:

“Speaking of names, the Oregon Outback, the sage steppe, the empty quarter, the cold desert, the back of beyond, cowboy country, the nothing-but-nothing, the sagebrush

ocean, the Great Basin, the great sandy desert, the rolling sage plain, the Artemisia desert all refer to the same thing: the high desert... But the enduring fascination of the high desert, and the reason its survival as a wild place is within reach, may well lie in the fact that this vast open can't quite be named." —From *Walking the High Desert: Encounters with Rural America along the Oregon Desert Trail*

She grew up in New England and came to Oregon with her husband in 1974 where they ranched on 100,000 acres in a remote corner of Central Oregon. There, and later on a smaller ranch closer to the town of Prineville, she raised her three children. She moved to Bend in the 90s where she now lives.

In 2000 she founded **The Writing Ranch** which offers workshops and retreats for established and emerging writers, "through multi-day generative workshops and retreats." One important aspect of these gatherings is the focus on the unique landscapes and cultures of Central and Southern Oregon. Among the locations where they have taken place are Playa, Summer Lake; the GR Ranch in Post; Grindstone Lakes in Paulina, Caldera in Sisters, and on the Rogue River. Participants speak highly about Ellen's gift for leading a group, her humor, and her ability to inspire writers to stretch beyond their previous limits, generating new material that will be the basis for future writing. In her own words, "Nothing compares to gathering and bonding with a group of writers, the heady experience of feeling you are with your people, your tribe, and together are supporting one another's writing process and goals."

In 2011 Ellen created **Writing Down the Baja**, an annual writing workshop in Todos Santos, Mexico, a colorful oasis on the geologically isolated peninsula, site of the only desert in the world surrounded by two seas. The most recent gathering was February 17 to 25, 2024, a week of writing "that explored the intersection of poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction and encouraged experimentation with language, format and genre." It is held at Serendipity, a beachfront hacienda-style boutique hotel where the writers each have their own rooms and meals are provided amidst a proliferation of cacti, bougainvillea, palms, and birdsong.

Another important project was **The Nature of Words**, which, in 2002, Ellen founded and, for over a decade as executive director, guided as Central Oregon's premier literary event. With five days of readings, workshops, lectures, and a gala author dinner, The Nature of Words brought writers from around the country as well as around the state. A literary arts nonprofit, it also offered creative writing workshops to regional schools, social welfare programs, and at its literary arts center's Storefront Project.

In 2014 Ellen established the **Waterston Desert Writing Prize**. Winners receive \$3000 and a reading and reception at the High Desert Museum in Bend. The prize recognizes a nonfiction book proposal that examines the role of deserts in the human narrative. Her brother, the actor Sam Waterston, after whom the Prize is named, provided the original endowment that launched the prize. The Prize, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, was adopted as a program of the High Desert Museum in 2020.

Ellen authored the original feasibility study for **OSU Cascades' MFA Low Residency Program** which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year and where she now teaches. Ellen has often served on the faculty of Summer Fishtrap, in Wallowa County, and for five years led a creative writing workshop at the Bend Cancer Care Center of St. Charles Health.

One of her most audacious contributions to the cultural life of Oregon was her collaboration with Portland composer Rebecca Oswald to create the full-length opera *Vía Láctea*, based on her verse novel, *Vía Láctea: a Woman of a Certain Age Walks the Camino*. Performed in 2016 by OperaBend, it has seven principal characters, a chorus of twelve, a boys' chorus of four, and five dancers.

Her monthly column, “**The Third Act**,” on ageing and ageism, runs in *The Source Weekly*, a paper in print and online, circulated throughout Central Oregon.

“**Sharing Common Ground**,” is an ongoing project under the auspices of the Oregon Desert Land Trust. Ellen has been interviewing and profiling a broad range of people who care about the High Desert: ranchers, hikers, river rafters, birders, and those who go there because they love the dark skies and wide open spaces.

Her own body of work has received high praise. She is the author of a chapbook and three poetry collections, a collection of essays, a memoir, and most recently, *Walking the High Desert, Encounters with Rural America Along the Oregon Desert Trail*.

“In language as crisp as the desert air, her book serves equally well as a primer on Western conservation, a lure into difficult but hugely rewarding country, and a who’s who and what’s what of high desert life and culture. Woven out of her own remarkable stories, her trek becomes an insightful research for how we might all get along, here and elsewhere, in a perilously shifting world.” — Robert Michael Pyle

Her poetry books are: *Hotel Domicos*, *Via Lactea*, *Between Desert Seasons*, and *I Am Madagascar*. Her book of essays is *Where the Crooked River Rises*; her memoir is *Then There Was No Mountain*.

“Ellen Waterston’s [*Where the Crooked River Rises*] is a slug of juniper air, a breathtaking view of a rough-edged land, as bracing and taut as October mornings—part celebration, part elegy, all love and the wisdom that grows from deep roots in basalt rock. Like Wallace Stegner and Ivan Doig, Waterston writes masterfully about what it means—what it really means—to live in the West.” — Kathleen Dean Moore