

Literary Legacies

Local writer Ellen Waterston wins multiple awards

By [Jared Rasic](#)

Ellen Waterston, an author and also a columnist for the Source Weekly, has been an amazing resource to those of us who have literary aspirations in Central Oregon. Her undying love of Oregon and the written word have been an inspiration to me for decades, and her work with The Nature of Words introduced me to the robust and lovely writing community of the high desert. In March, Waterston was the recipient of the [Soapstone Bread](#) and Roses Award from the Soapstone grassroots writing organization. And then on April 8, Waterston receives the [Stewart H. Holbrook Award Literary Legacy Award](#) during the Oregon Book Awards ceremony. The Source checked in with Waterston to discuss the awards and the Central Oregon writing scene.



Courtesy Ellen Waterston

Bend writer Ellen Waterston credits Oregon's Outback for much of her inspiration.

Source Weekly: Tell me what it was like winning the Literary Legacy Award. Was it something you expected?

Ellen Waterston: No, I surely did not expect either the Soapstone Bread and Roses Award (March) or the Stewart H. Holbrook Award (April)! I knew I was nominated for the latter, but never expected to be selected. The Bread and Roses Award came out of the blue. Two big surprises. Two big honors. They were both established approximately 40 years ago, and this is the first time a woman has won these awards on this side of the Cascades and only the third time the Holbrook has crossed the mountains.

SW: You've contributed so much to the literary arts in Oregon and your writing is so closely linked to the state in some ways. How does Oregon inspire you? Does it still inspire you as much as it used to?

EW: The literary arts community of Oregon is my inspiration and support, but the high desert is my muse and has been for decades. Its inscrutability is its allure. Originally from the East Coast, I feel incredibly lucky to have landed in this high and dry part of Oregon. I believe we're led to the landscape that will teach us what we need to know. For me that teacher turns out to be Oregon's Outback.

SW: You've been a huge inspiration to my own poetry writing in particular. What would you say to modern readers who haven't discovered the beauty of poetry yet?

EW: Jared, thank you! We may not realize it, but we all have experienced the power, humor and beauty of poetry— in song lyrics, slam and hip-hop, not to mention within the prose we read. We all recognize the ability of a few carefully chosen and placed words to tell a complete story, to open our hearts, to shift our earth on its axis. That's amore, poetry-style! So I'd say be more intentional, choose to read a book of poetry, and then another. The Source Weekly's annual poetry contest winners will be published soon. Read them. Area bookstores often feature poetry readings. Go and listen. In each case, you'll be glad you did.

SW: How would you convince someone to try poetry who hadn't before?

EW: The best way to get better at writing poetry, or prose for that matter, is to first read a lot of, in this case, poems (narrative, formal forms, free verse, lyric, cowboy), see what grabs you. And then write. Sit down, pen or tablet in hand, and "think like a canyon" as Madras poet Jarold Ramsey says. Think obliquely. See the presence of story, of metaphor, in everything. More practically, there are many "prompts" or exercises online and in books on writing poetry that will get you out of your own way, allow your words and thoughts to have their say on the page, to rock your readers' worlds. Go, poetry team, go!

SW: I know you get asked this question a lot, but for those struggling to find their voice as writers, what advice would you give them?

EW: Again, read more. We like some books more than others, some writers' voices on the page more than others. The author's voice is their unique thumbprint on the page, their unique

perspective and way of expressing it. As you get more into the discipline, habit and swing of writing, you'll start to recognize and have confidence in your voice as expressed by what you put down on the page. Your writing doesn't have to sound a certain way, only like your writing. Don't subscribe, invent.

SW: Are there any poets, fiction and non-fiction authors that you don't think are getting enough love in 2024?

EW: Of course, but as with all the arts, luck has a lot to do with the distribution of love. Some of the most talented and committed artists don't rise to the top. However, thanks to traditional and nontraditional ways of getting books in front of the public and the promotion of authors by our regional libraries, bookstores, colleges, universities, cultural nonprofits and literary arts organizations, writers are increasingly receiving the exposure they deserve.

SW: Most of the people I know either only read books on their phone or listen to audiobooks. Do you think physical books will ever go the way of so much other physical media, or do you think they'll always be here to stay?

EW: Granted, reading a book on your phone or Kindle while traveling, or listening to the audio version while out for a run or walking the dog is efficient and convenient, but the experience of reading a book that you hold in your hands is a more dedicated activity; dinner-on-the-run versus a slow-food, home-cooked, sit-down feast. That's a reason to safeguard physical books. Another is if the great Godzilla cyber-attack occurs, it wouldn't only be hard to get money out of the bank, gas into your car, pay for food at the grocery store, but wouldn't audiobooks be inaccessible too? If so, that's another reason to safeguard books. Then again, nothing will always be here to stay.