



Milagro production "Corrido Calavera." Photo by Russell J. Young Photography. Courtesy Milagro.

to change and impact them, to uplift and entertain them. I truly believe that the arts are transformative."

#### FISHTRAP, LITERARY ARTS, AND LITERARY PHILANTHROPY

If storytelling is at the heart of good theater, it is also at the heart of our daily lives. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," wrote Joan Didion. We seek narrative, whether in our internal monologue or in our interactions and entertainments—it's part, some might say, of what makes us human. Literature satiates that need: for many of us, a book can provoke thought, deliver entertainment, and open doors onto other traditions and lives. Oregon has been feted as a state with a uniquely strong literary community. We cherish independent bookstores like Paulina Springs Books in Sisters and Powell's Books in Portland; we laud homegrown authors like Ursula Le Guin and Mary Szybist and Barry Lopez; and our literary strengths certainly feed into our wider identities as Oregonians—our sense of place, our appreciation of difference, and our desire to protect valuable ecologies have in part been sculpted by the work of Oregon's great writers.

Oregon's writers have succeeded because of their own talent and tenacity, and also because citizens across the state have coalesced around literature as something to value and support. From Write Around Portland to Playa, an artists' retreat in Lake County, nonprofits and arts funders across the state are dedicated to preserving Oregon's reputation as a great place to be a writer and a reader.

One organization, Fishtrap, focuses specifically on what it means to be a writer working within a wider region and ecology. "Our mission is to promote clear thinking and good writing about the West," says Ann Whitfield Powers, Fishtrap's executive director. It's in a good position to do both



Wallowa Lake. Photo by Kristin Anderson.

of those things: located near Joseph, high up in the Wallowa Mountains, Fishtrap is surrounded by the kind of natural beauty that clears heads and inspires. Its main retreat facility is at the end of Wallowa Lake. To reach it, you drive through the tiny, artsy town of Joseph, past some beautiful farm country, along Wallowa Lake's famous glacial moraine, and into the forested foothills at the head of the lake. "Fishtrap is very place-based," Ann says. "It started in reaction to a gathering of writers in Portland that was supposed to be a statewide representation but was really only those from the I-5 corridor. Folks here felt like there's a lot of great writers in the rest of the West, too. We're remote in a quintessentially western way, and when people come here, they are making a conscious effort to step away from their regular life."

The organization's flagship program is Summer Fishtrap, held at its Wallowa Lake facility. "We bring together creative writers, readers, and thinkers for a week of conferences and conversations, and we've done that for twenty-seven years," Ann says. In addition, Fishtrap runs a writers' retreat in Imnaha Canyon (at a cabin generously lent to them by longtime supporters) and offers writers a chance to interact with the nearby Zumwalt Prairie at its Zumwalt outpost. Whatever the location, Ann says, "community is a big part of the Fishtrap experience. Writers always need community and connection, but we need it even more out here. Here you can be surrounded by two hundred writers from different walks of life. It's refreshing to meet someone who shares your passions and is completely different from you."

While writers come from both near and far for Fishtrap's retreats and conferences, Fishtrap also runs year-round programs for the local community from its center in Enterprise. "We do the Big Read, and the whole county (population 7,000) celebrates a great work of literature every year," Ann says. "And we do book discussions and arts classes; we've just started Fishtrap Fireside, a monthly reading series and open mic night; and we've

also just started a new program with OSU where they send two of their graduate students to work with us for a year. One of them is currently teaching a college-credit Fishtrap class for high-school seniors.”

Accessibility is a key part of all of these programs: fostering both local and regional aspiring and emerging writers is one of Fishtrap’s principal aims, which often means offering direct financial support to writers interested in participating. “We give fellowships to those who have the potential to be strong voices out there in the world,” Ann explains. “They can attend Summer Fishtrap for free—it’s a real mark of encouragement for writers.” It can also be a launchpad: for example, Amanda Coplin, author of *The Orchardist* (2013), was a Fishtrap Fellow, and Fishtrap’s teachers have included Sherman Alexie, Terry Tempest Williams, and David James Duncan. “We can really play a part in launching people into their writing life and helping them to have the courage and skills and support to maximize their potential,” Ann says.

None of this would have happened were it not for Fishtrap’s founder and longtime executive director, Rich Wandschneider. Rich’s vision for Fishtrap as a nexus of Western writing, and his commitment to developing both local and regional cultural capacity, established Fishtrap as a central presence in Wallowa County. For Rich, part of what makes Fishtrap exceptional is its inclusivity: in its programs, “all kinds of writing are considered. Poets meet historians meet journalists meet song-writers.”<sup>13</sup> That diversity of voices is also represented in its geographical draw and the artistic empathy it fosters, says Rich. “I always thought that Fishtrap was a window on the world for the people who live in rural Eastern Oregon, and a window to us for the people from other places—urban and suburban Oregon, the larger Pacific Northwest, and the world, really.”<sup>14</sup> “Rich was the heart of Fishtrap,” says Ann. “It wouldn’t be what it is if not for the generosity of spirit that Rich had and has to this day. He’s a big-hearted, inspiring guy and he really took an idea, brought it to life, and cultivated it.”

Nor could Fishtrap survive without a loyal army of volunteers to help run their programs and raise their funds. A Fishtrap supporter for twenty-six years, Sara Miller is a volunteer and now a board member as well as a participant in workshops and conferences. She says that she volunteers because “the organization is really important for the literary community across Oregon and across the west. Its benefits are being generated both locally and society-wide, and the bottom line is that I really believe in the mission.” It is an exceptional writer’s resource, she says, partly because of “its physical location. The valley, with its heart of Wallowa Lake, the moraine,



Amy Zahm and Jim Hepworth.  
Courtesy Fishtrap.



Cheryl Strayed's keynote address at Summer Fishtrap 2013. Courtesy Fishtrap.

the mountains . . . it's been a spiritual aperture for cultures as long as people have been here." Ann agrees. "This is really a sacred place, a place of peace and quiet, but also a community of passionate people. I hate to use the word 'magical,' but there are many magical moments here."

In addition to her time, Sara also donates what she can. "We gave an auction item—a day at our ranch, which sold for \$350. During the verbal appeal, I agreed to do a challenge of \$300, but that was a lot of money for us. I've personally benefited from Fishtrap's scholarships, so I'm not always in the position to contribute money. An old guy once told me that Wallowa County is like a bushel of apples: sometimes you take a few apples out, sometimes you put a few apples in."

That's a good model for community in general—a willingness to be helped and to return the favor. Sara's generosity of time, and, when possible, money helps underwrite an organization that contributes a lot of apples to the communal bushel. To locals, Fishtrap is a precious thing. "Whether or not you can come out to Fishtrap, it's important to support us and other organizations like us. A lot of arts organizations have come and gone in the time we've been here, but we have deep roots. Fishtrap is beloved in this county," Ann says. "It's really wonderful to see. That's one of the things that happens in small communities: no one takes anything for granted, and they work hard to keep good things alive. It's really impressive to see how many great creative voices there are in this county, and how many good stories people have to tell."

Around thirty years ago, a few Portland-based literary enthusiasts independently realized something similar: there were a lot of good stories out there, and not enough celebrations of them. In 1984, Karen Frank founded a