

LITERARY OREGON

Oregon is something of a concept before it's a place—its very name a mystery, with many avid interlocutors primed to share their “true” explanation of its source and meaning. Our boundaries, later borders, changed several times en route to statehood. In this selection of one hundred volumes to represent the literature and lore of this place, we're referring both to “the Oregon Country,” a legendary place beyond the Rocky Mountains, and to Oregon, the thirty-third state. The Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission is honored to have the opportunity and challenge of making the selection and producing this exhibition. The project is supported in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Library Services and Technology Act, administered by the Oregon State Library. As the Library celebrates its centennial, it's most appropriate that we launch a look back to the roots of our written culture and across its contemporary breadth.

In defining the project, we focused on Literary Oregon from 1800 to 2000. We decided to forgo many first-person classics by explorers, trappers, missionaries, and settlers, opting instead for books like Washington Irving's *Astoria*, a work that synthesizes several accounts into a powerful, still-lively narrative. Still, memoirs by such nineteenth-century scribes as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, David Douglas, Jesse Applegate, Margaret Jewett Bailey, and Joaquin Miller, emblematic of their time, are both captivating and revealing. Most of the volumes chosen are readily available, through your library or bookstore, or on the web. Works not currently in print certainly deserve reissue, a list including surprisingly recent volumes. These hundred books, by their very thrust and range, speak to the quality of our literary community over time, our rich culture, and the influence of our amazing landscape. They are Oregon's gifts to the greater world.

In a memorable conversation some thirty years back, a Coos County woman said, “I'm as independent as a hawg on ice.” Many characters in this hundred-book selection from the past two centuries could have uttered the same phrase without the reader skipping a beat: Hank Stamper, created whole cloth out of Ken Kesey's mind and keen power of observation; or Lydia Sanderson, in Molly Gloss's *The Jump-Off Creek*; or Joe Meek, portrayed historically in Frances Fuller Victor's *River of the West* and fictionally in Alfred Powers' *Long Way to Frisco*; or Wild Woman, as recounted by Nehalem Tillamook

Clara Pearson; or Danny Kachiah, in Craig Lesley's *Winterkill*. All seek to carve out a modest place for themselves in the face of enormous obstacles, and their own, often warts-and-all, pedigrees and personalities. The volumes selected offer windows into the character of our state, and feature the writers who have distilled our very mythos.

A dynamic Oregon has drawn dreamers and pioneers for more than ten thousand years. While we honor the first who carved out homes here, we're just as intrigued by those who fell in love with this place, and then, tired of the rain — or for that matter the drought — suddenly headed out for further adventures. Though most works chosen are set partially or fully in the Oregon country, those who ventured further — including to Mexico (John Reed), to Japan (Ranald MacDonald), and even into the distant European past (Jean Auel) — through personal exploration or by dint of research and imagination, also represent Oregon and its spirit. We are an adventurous people; the world is no less our stage than it was Shakespeare's. The many new cultures reflected in our midst have enriched our growth as a community. Any future list will reflect the far greater cultural diversity, and worldliness, of Oregonians.

While each volume was chosen for its unique literary merit, thorough reading reveals themes evoked since the first published writings here. The impact of human presence in this complex natural environment, and the inevitable cost of human endeavors to produce a livelihood from this fertile land, is explored in many works. Then there's the challenge of cross-cultural communication, foremost between the first peoples and those arriving since 1800. Many have faced systematic obstacles to their inclusion in the larger society. While racism and human blindness are clearly part of our history, these books manifest a remarkable progression that offers us strength to face such daunting obstacles as a community. The varied nature of relationships between the sexes, for both better and worse, runs through a notable number of these works as well. Oregon's literature testifies to our unfolding as a vibrant culture of strong individuals.

Several literary lions, including Ursula K. Le Guin and Don Berry, might easily qualify multiple volumes for such a list as this. We decided, however, that no author should appear more than once, except those collaborators in the delightful *The Loop*, a novel project by thirteen Oregonians of the 1930s; this allowed us to feature a broader range of talent. Given the strong inclination to storytelling and literacy from Oregon's earliest days, the challenge we faced was narrowing down a representative selection of works from hundreds of worthy contenders. We fully expect to hear from highly informed parties believing firmly in the merit of favorite books deserving inclusion here. Indeed we'll be very disappointed if what we've chosen is accepted as gospel. We'd love to hear from you — with any suggestions or critiques — in the notebook at the exhibition; or at www.ochcom.org; or write to us at the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, Post Office Box 3588, Portland, Oregon 97208.

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