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Library as Poem Feeder and Breeder

by Karen Bonoff

Karen Bonoff is the library assistant at Rosemont Ridge Middle School in West Linn, Oregon. She enjoys getting students hepped up on a good read and the new wave of genres in literature makes for easy match-making. A native Oregonian, Karen loves pushing PNW writers and exploring every region of the state on foot, ski, or with a paddle. Want to talk regional lit? Drop a line at kbonoff@comcast.net.

Growing up in Lake Oswego, a visit to our public library was a trek full of anticipation. The rush there was followed by the sweet dawdle in Section 811. Anything from the *Rubaiyat* to e.e. cummings would be pulled down into the lap of languid reading. My favorite poet happened to be our neighbor, William Stafford. I anticipated his next book of poems as much as the next Dylan LP. Through my school years, I looked forward to his visits to our classrooms, listening to his stories, nibbling on his writbits. Stafford told us weekly library visits were a vital part of his childhood back in Kansas .

Over the last dozen or so years, libraries and bookstores all over the state, nation, and world, have hosted William Stafford birthday celebrations with poetry readings in his honor. I attend these annual events (every January) at the local libraries; enjoying the company of Stafford's many admirers among his many volumes of poetry. It's a time when high school students will give their first reading and wonderful stories are shared. I look forward to this New Year ritual: the reincarnation of poems via the spoken word.

Every year, the birthday audience is invited to come up and read their favorite Stafford poem and one of their own too. It was at an inaugural celebration where I chose to read the first of many favorite Stafford poems:

An Afternoon in the Stacks

Closing the book, I find I have left my head inside. It is dark in here, but the chapters open their beautiful spaces and give a rustling sound, words adjusting themselves to their meaning. Long passages open at successive pages. An echo, continuous from the title onward, hums behind me. From in here the world looms, a jungle redeemed by these linked sentences carved out when an author traveled and a reader kept the way open. When this book ends I will pull it inside-out like a sock and throw it back in the library. But the rumor of it will haunt all that follows in my life. A candleflame in Tibet leans when I move.

William Stafford, "An Afternoon in the Stacks" from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1991, 1998 by William Stafford and the Estate of William Stafford. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc. on behalf of Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, www.graywolfpress.org



2014 is the year of the William Stafford Centennial Celebration. Hundreds of public and school libraries, bookstores, meeting places, will become living rooms for sharing the poet's legacy and sometimes birthday cake too.

A few years back, I made a new connection between a library and poetry. I was lucky to join a small group of writers, led by Paul Merchant, Director of the William Stafford Archives at the Watzek Library at Lewis and Clark College. We were given the opportunity to publish a small chapbook of our own poetry and/or prose in the spirit of Stafford. This experience of working in a college environment (where Stafford taught for decades) was yet another catalyst a library can provide ... a haven for writers to learn and create together with the resources and inspiration to manifest fresh poetry.

Working in the library at Rosemont Ridge Middle School, we offer our interested poets varied slants on the subject of poetry. Something for everyone. Each April, we celebrate poetry month by participating in the Poem in Your Pocket program, we have a writing wall for walk-by thoughts, poetry readings at lunch, and little tidbits of poems posted throughout the school.

Using the library as the poetry hub to the masses is a necessity for all those who need a place to dawdle. 🌀



Rosemont Ridge Middle School "Poem in Your Pocket" day display

