

Laura Moulton

Portland, Oregon

JOHN ISAACSON

Laura Moulton is a writer and artist living in Portland, Oregon. Her print projects include home-made yearbooks, zines, writing anthologies, and poetry published in gumball capsules and online. Her web projects include Gumball Poetry, the Psychic Book Project, and Project Hamad. Her Object Permanence project debuted at Portland State University in 2009, and a piece from that is installed permanently in the Smith Student Union building. Moulton's Street Books, a bicycle-powered mobile library that serves people living outside, debuted in June 2011. Over the years, participants in Moulton's projects have included postal workers, poets, immigrants, homeless people, neighbors, high school and college students, and women prisoners from the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. She leads writing and art residencies in high schools for Writers in the Schools of Literary Arts in Portland, and is an adjunct professor at Marylhurst University. She has published short stories and essays, and recently finished her first novel.

John Isaacson: *Where did you grow up?*

Laura Moulton: I grew up in Kuna, Idaho, outside

John Isaacson is a writer and cartoonist living in Portland, Oregon. His writing and cartoons have appeared in the Willamette Week, the East Bay Express, and the Dill Pickle Club's Oregon History Comics. He teaches comics and screenprinting through the Independent Publishing Resource Center, and self-publishes the concert review minicomic Feedback. His graphic novel, Do It Yourself Screenprinting, was published by Microcosm in 2007.

of Boise, on a goat farm. Pretty rural.

Jl: *Did anything in particular get you into writing early on?*

LM: I loved reading and writing as a kid. In high school I had a great English teacher,

Linda Goodwin, for whom I wrote, among many other things, a rap about a Greek myth. ("When Argos was a land / Acrisius was the ruling man / He had one daughter, named Danae—he asked for a son but the gods said nay...") Funny what you remember years later when you've set it to a rap! Ms. Goodwin was a diamond in the rough out there in farm country, and I remember one day she called me over and said, "I want more sonnets from you." That really surprised and motivated me—I wrote my heart out for her.

Jl: *How did you get into teaching writing?*

LM: I directed a program in Spokane called Writers



Photo of Laura Moulton by Ben Parzybok.

in the Community, which gave me the opportunity to place writers in prisons, drop-in centers, and homeless shelters. I placed myself at an alternative school and tutored the students in writing.

Jl: *How did you wind up coming to Portland? And what prompted you to create community writing projects, such as *Object Permanence*, and the Gumball Poetry Project, where you invite a wide range of people to participate?*

LM: Portland seemed like such a friendly city to literary projects. And I think I've always had an impulse to gather people's stories and collect them. I've been doing these kinds of community-based participatory art projects for longer than I knew what they were called.

Jl: *Can you describe some of your projects?*

LM: I received a grant from Portland's Regional Arts & Culture Council for my latest project, Street Books. It's a bicycle-powered mobile library for people who live outside. As the resident street librarian, I offered library cards without requiring ID or proof of address, and checked out books to patrons. I operated twice-weekly shifts through the summer of 2011, and got to know a bunch of regular patrons who were serious about checking out books. It was inspiring to see how conscientious many of them were in getting books back to me, or in seeking me out to explain why they wouldn't be returning them (in cases of theft of belongings or damage from the rain, for example). Though the grant ended in August, I decided to keep the project going. With the help of fellow street librarian, Sue Zalokar, I



Laura Moulton and her Street Books Mobile Library. Photo by Sue Zalokar.

managed to keep regular shifts through the fall and winter, and now we're getting ready to launch our second summer session. This summer we'll offer a book group as well. We've got a Street Books board of directors, and are on our way to being a nonprofit. One important component of the project is that patrons are invited to pose for a photograph with the book they choose. These photos can be seen at www.streetbooks.org.

Jl: *Could you talk about *Object Permanence*?*

LM: I created *Object Permanence* when I was commissioned to do a piece at Portland State University. I had a couple of assistants who fanned out and

solicited objects from the community at PSU that were meaningful to them in some way, and then I displayed those in a mobile gallery with plexiglass windows—super beautiful but very heavy! Next to the display I put two beautiful

Royal typewriters, antiques that fold out on little tables. I put chairs next to them and invited passersby to sit down and contribute their own stories to the project.

Jl: *Some of these projects must have influenced how you teach in the classroom, because there you have another collection of stories.*

LM: I think that's part of why I love to teach: most every student has a terribly interesting story.

Jl: *How do you get your students to contribute these stories in the classroom?*

LM: One lesson that I like to do is based on Pablo Neruda's "Ode To My Socks." I show the students

this poem about someone in love with their socks, then have them write an ode to something of their own, an object that is important to them.

If they finish quickly, sometimes I will try to motivate them to write more with a weekly bonus challenge, with much pomp and circumstance about it. I have a bag that says “Bonus Challenge” on it and it says something like “the lackluster and that’s-so-last-week need not apply.” Only if you’re curious, I tell the students. Which has sort of backfired occasionally because some of them decided they weren’t curious.

One week the bonus was “Go out and find a favorite piece of graffiti in the city and document it however you want,” because we had been talking about Basquiat and Andy Warhol and looking at some of their pieces in the museum, and the students were all really interested in talking about them.

JJ: *You also do a residency at the Portland Art Museum, working with high school students. How is that structured?*

LM: It is a collaboration between Lincoln High School and the Writers in the Schools program, and most of the classes are conducted at the museum. The teachers love being able to get out with their students, and of course the museum is an amazing classroom. For one lesson, we gathered together in one of the galleries where I gave them an introduction to Sue Coe, the vegetarian animal rights activist and artist. Coe has a painting called *Greed* that’s in the permanent collection at the museum, and we sat in front of the painting and did a freewrite. I allowed time at the end for each of them to read what they had written. While they were listening to their classmates read, I asked the students to stay seated, looking at the piece. Even the students who hadn’t liked the painting participated, and sometimes theirs was the best writing.

“I launch each residency by showing the students my own stack of journals and sketchbooks to let them see how I work.”

JJ: *What are some other ways you structure lessons in the museum?*

LM: I arrange tours where a docent leads the students through the museum. The students are able to see multiple pieces, ask the docent questions, and then, the next week, I give them time to go seek out one piece of art that they saw on the tour and want to have a chance to study for a bit longer. I call it “Find your Piece.” The students head off with their notebooks to find their artwork, and ideally they sit, they study it, they sketch it a little bit, and then they write about it. This can take the form of a conversation with the piece, a description of it, even a list. I’m not too strict about how they get at it, but I want them to interact with the art on the page.

JJ: *Do you ask your students to keep journals when you work as a writer in the schools?*

LM: In every residency I give my students the “Writer’s Notebook” challenge, asking that they look at the class as an immersive “jump into this” experience. I offer to buy them lunch if at least three times a week they have written something or drawn something in their notebooks. I launch each residency by showing the students my own stack of journals and sketchbooks to let them see how I work.

JJ: *So you encourage them to keep a writing practice that is completely outside of school?*

LM: Yes. And I give them tons of examples of how to do this. For example, I’ll say, “Ride the Number 6 bus back and forth and write down what you hear.” If there’s anything that comes out of a residency with students, my hope would be that they continue a writing practice, a journaling discipline. To have them be able to tell me, “Last week I found this and wrote it down...” That would be the best. ☺

Classroom Snapshot

LAURA MOULTON

My writing residency with Lincoln High School students is part of a collaboration between Writers in the Schools and the Portland Art Museum, so most of our classes are held in the museum. We often write in response to a particular painting or sculpture we see there. But some weeks we gather in a beautiful, well-lit gallery and respond to something I bring in from the outside.

For this lesson, I asked students to bring an object from home that held some significant meaning for them. Among the objects they brought were dangling peacock feather earrings, an ancient pocketknife, a photo of one student as a newborn, an old Matchbox car. I gave them each a copy of Pablo Neruda's poem, "Ode to My Socks." It's a wonderful poem for its lively, descriptive detail, and it is chock-full of compelling similes and metaphors. The socks Neruda's friend has knitted for him are "two long sharks / sea blue, shot through / by one golden thread / two immense blackbirds / two cannons..." In the face of such marvelous socks, Neruda's feet are suddenly "two decrepit firemen / firemen unworthy of that woven fire / of those glowing socks." Students typically have a range of reactions to Neruda's ode. I remember one student saying, "Dude is crazy about his socks." Students may think he was obsessive about his footwear, but then again, Neruda has written odes to everything from an artichoke to a table to flowers. They got the picture that it was okay to get excited about their objects. It was okay to wax a little silly and be devoted,

to choose language that amplified their sentiments. We talked briefly about the elements of an ode and its place in the tradition of lyric poetry. Then I asked them to write odes to their own objects, using Neruda's structure as a model. There was a lot of excitement and interest in this prompt, and students moved to different spots on the floor to study their objects and create odes to them.

When we gathered again to share our writing, my Danish student Signe Iskau read a lovely freewrite about her meandering shoes, and all the things they'd seen on their journey. Signe's shoes with their new smell, like "cement and burned rubber" had covered a lot of territory, and the details of this journey, (the "smell of old water," "people walking in their suits," "dead chickens, their heads hanging down") were as vivid as Neruda's own. All of this in a language second to Signe's native one. I was impressed. Signe went on to shape her freewrite into a poem, and polish it for publication in our 2009–2010 Writers in the Schools anthology, *Take My Hand, I Want to Show You Something*. I like her poem a lot. And I've never looked at my shoes in quite the same light since.

Ode to my Shoes

SIGNE ISKAU

The life of my shoes started in Barcelona,
in a little store called "Shoes of the Streets."
They began their journey walking around the
biggest unfinished church, all white,
smelling like cement and burned rubber.
Thousands of people saw my shoes write my life story,
with every step I took. More than 15,000 km away,
red dust and sand started sticking. Step after step
taken through the hot, red desert in Australia.
With the aboriginal drawings in caves, in the dark,
surrounding them with the smell of old water.
Going from dry and warm to humid and wet,
my shoes took over the Chinese streets. The smell of cars, busy people
walking in their suits, all with uniquely patterned umbrellas,
prepared for the rain. Markets with fried dead chickens,
their heads hanging down. Workers building a safety bar with only bamboo.
Closer to home my shoes walked the pavement
from store to store in Soho. Around the giant Big Ben,
over the London Bridge, printing my story in the new pavement.
Walking and walking from my house to school
they experienced the confidence I felt by wearing them,
the safety by bringing them home. In this moment
they take part in writing my life history in the United States.
Coming home with scars and dirt from the American streets
and what nature fills them with, now waiting to go home.
The moral of my ode is this: No other thing can tell the story of your life
better than your shoes.