

Barbara Drake (1939–)

By Eleanor Berry

Poet, essayist, and educator Barbara Drake makes the places in Oregon where she has lived central to her writing. Her poetry and essays, many of them focused on Coos Bay and rural Yamhill Valley, are significant contributions to the state's literature of place. For twenty-five years, she taught creative writing in Yamhill County at Linfield College in McMinnville.

Barbara Robertson, the first of four siblings, was born on April 13, 1939, in Abilene, Kansas, where her parents Monica (Lorson) and James Ward Robertson ran her grandfather Robertson's sheep farm. In 1941, the family traveled on Route 66 to California and then north to Oregon, where Ward Robertson found work with the West Coast Telephone Company. Over the next decade, the family lived in various Oregon and Washington towns until, in 1951, they settled in Coos Bay on the central Oregon Coast. Barbara graduated from Marshfield High School in 1957 and attended the University of Oregon, where she received a bachelor of arts degree in English literature.

Robertson married Albert Drake in 1960, and the couple traveled in Europe for a year, living six months on the island of Corfu in Greece. Returning to Oregon, they lived in a cabin outside Portland until 1964, when they both enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Oregon. They received their degrees in 1966 and moved with their two young children (born in 1963 and 1965) to Michigan, where Albert had a position at Michigan State University.

In East Lansing, Barbara Drake taught in Michigan's Writers in the Schools program and wrote textbooks for Holt, Rinehart, and Winston and the Oregon Curriculum Study Center. The couple's third child was born in 1967. In 1974, she joined the faculty of the American Thought and Language Department at MSU, where she taught full time for nine years. She published four poetry chapbooks, a full-length collection of poems, *Love at the Egyptian Theatre* (1978), and a widely used textbook, *Writing Poetry* (1983).

Drake returned to Oregon in 1983 and joined the faculty at Linfield College. During her twenty-four years at the small college, she developed an undergraduate creative writing program, taught environmental literature, and led study-abroad classes on "American Expatriate Writers in Europe." Barbara and Albert Drake divorced in 1985. She married William Beckman, and in 1987 the couple bought a farm in Yamhill County where they raised Romney sheep and maintained a small vineyard. That rural life became a deep source of inspiration for Drake's poems and essays.

In her work, Drake uses an easy, conversational voice that poet Diane Wakoski characterized as "an old-young voice, having both freshness and wisdom....The voice is western, mid-western in its flatness through which a thread of melody, sweet observation, moves literally, relentlessly." Through her poetry and essays, she sustains that poetic voice, which is generous and both disarmingly flat and unobtrusively melodious.

Drake's imagery "is literal, not metaphorical," poet Erik Muller wrote in 2017. Her tone is affectionate and wry and often full of wonder at what she has witnessed. "Wild Farm," in *The Road to Lilac Hill*, for example, has a long, marveling catalogue of seasonal bloomings. "What does it all mean?" the speaker asks, and then answers: "It is just an old story/the farm tells over and over." But even though her poetry delights in the everyday wonders of the farm, Drake's vision is not blinkered. Her writing also registers pain, terror, and waste, both immediate and in the wider world. The first line of "A Million Splinters of Glass" in *Driving One Hundred* is "The neighbor's dog/mauled one of my sheep last week," followed by the context of friends' small miseries and dismay at impending war. Her literal imagery is deeply rooted in place, and in most of her work, especially *Driving One Hundred*, *The Road to Lilac Hill*, *Peace at Heart* (a memoir), and *Morning Light*, that place is Oregon—principally a farm in Yamhill County.

Drake retired from Linfield College in 2007. She has remained active in Oregon's literary community and is a founder of the annual Terroir Creative Writing Festival, a program of the Arts Alliance of Yamhill County first held in 2010. She and her husband continue to live on their farm in the Yamhill Valley.

Sources

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