

Local Initiative: The Art of Booklift

While literary citizenship is not about promoting one's self, there are ample opportunities to help other writers engage with the community and connect with audiences. It can be a delicate balancing act managing the time it takes to write and promote one's work, let alone contribute something to the literary world by way of volunteering or hosting events. Group efforts, then, can prove useful for connecting with readers, mentoring fellow writers, and gaining a sense of camaraderie with like-minded peers.

As a grassroots initiative, Seattle-based Booklift was developed by poet [Susan Rich](#) as a means to bring together women writers and share resources as a group. Since its debut, Booklift has also started a sub-group, "A Poet at Your Table," that is offered in cooperation with the [Seattle Arts and Lectures](#) Poetry Series and [Crab Creek Review](#). Throughout their efforts, Booklift members work together to find meaningful ways to engage with the community.

In this Q&A, [Kelly Davio](#), author of *Burn This House* and co-founding editor of [Tahoma Literary Review](#), and [Kelli Russell Agodon](#), author of *Hourglass Museum* and co-founding editor of [Two Sylvias Press](#), share their experiences with Booklift and offer ideas for how other writers, in any region, can develop a similar group initiative.

How long have you been a member of Booklift? What attracted you to the group?

KRA: I joined Booklift in 2009 and about a week after joining my second manuscript (*Letters From the Emily Dickinson Room*) won the White Pine Press Poetry Book Prize and was scheduled to be published. So it felt a little magical joining a group about books and publication then having my manuscript selected. I was attracted to the group because it was a smart group of women authors who were doing interesting work. As poets, fiction writers, and memoirists, we were experiencing similar yet unique issues as writers and authors, so there was an inherent support system in place to help each other out. I loved the idea of having a community of authors to bounce ideas off of, share opportunities with, and to support.

KD: I've been in Booklift for a little over a year now. I was excited to become part of this group because of its specific focus; there are plenty of groups out there for people who want to write, critique, or give and receive accountability for writing or submission goals, but Booklift is the only community I know of that's dedicated to women supporting other women in their book marketing efforts. It's awfully tough to market yourself as an individual writer, and I think women writers in particular are socialized to dread self promotion; we're much more at ease talking about the great work that somebody else is doing. In a group like Booklift, in which we all genuinely respect and admire one another's writing, we can promote and publicize one another's books when they're published, and we can count on the same kind of support when our own work is published.

In what ways do the members of Booklift contribute to the greater literary community? How are readers reached?

KD: One of the things I like so much about Booklift is that we're not trying to be some giant entity that descends, swarm-like, upon the literary world. Instead, we're women writers helping one another on an individual basis. Every woman in Booklift has great work to share—he may just need the right contact to land that profile piece, the experienced person's tips on applying for a great residency, or an introduction to a reading series coordinator. When we help each other, person to person, it's a natural outgrowth of those efforts that our work gets out into readers' hands.

KRA: I think we are an interesting mix as we are both a public and private group. As authors, we try to create unique reading experiences for readers and book lovers. One of our members, Susan Rich, organized a reading at the Alexis Hotel where three of us read in our pajamas and then moved the reading up into what was called "The Author's Suite," a beautiful hotel room where we served appetizers, and read our work from a king-sized bed. We've had readings at local literary places like Hugo House, we've discussed reading or handing out poems on the ferry for Valentine's Day, we explore new unique ways to connect with our audience, and this year, we even had a panel at AWP. But as much as we find ourselves out in the community, we also have more quiet side where we meet quietly on our own in an old Seattle hotel reading room and share our struggles as well as things we've learned and things we feel would help each other. For me, that is the most important aspect of the group, connecting as writers and women.

Would you share a Booklift success story?

KRA: I think we each have had many individual success stories. I could tell you about Elizabeth Austen, who joined the group when I did in 2009. Elizabeth had many years of writing and completed manuscripts, but upon joining had no published books. Within that following year, she had a full poetry collection and a chapbook published. Elizabeth is now our Washington State Poet Laureate.

Other successes since joining Booklift are Midge Raymond, also a Booklift member since 2009, who started her own press, Ashland Press. Annette Spaulding-Convy and I also began a small indie press, Two Sylvias Press. Susan Rich and I came together and created Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Writing Retreat for Women and then Susan began her own reading series in West Seattle called WordsWest. Jeannine Hall Gailey became the Poet Laureate of Redmond, Washington. Kelly Davio published a book and started a new journal, *The Tahoma Literary Review*. Katharine Whitcomb was not only a highly-recognized award-winning poet and professor at Central Washington University, but also the co-editor of *Cascadia Chronicle* and Janna Cawrse Esarey's book was an Indiebound bestseller and featured on the Today Show. I could honestly go on for hours with what we've achieved since Booklift began.

I think our biggest success as a group is meeting each other. Some of the writers, especially the fiction and memoirists, I would have never met on such a personal level.

How has being a member of Booklift influenced other areas of your literary life?

KRA: You know, I think being a member of Booklift gave me confidence about trying to submit my work in other genres. I finished a memoir called *Retreat* that I wasn't sure what to do with, as I am known for my poetry and much more comfortable with the poetry world. The other writers gave me advice on literary agents and places to send it. Seeing what they've achieved and understanding how to get my work out in a new genre has been helpful and has opened up a new direction for me.

What are the time and/or financial commitments of being a Booklift member?

KD: In addition to a roughly two-hour meeting every other month, we in Booklift pay what we call "literary dues." Those dues are simply ways in which we can help one another. One member might send out an opportunity for a reading while another might help spread the word about a fellow member's class or workshop, and still another might offer to help with a fellow member's grant application. If everyone contributes something to another member's literary well being on a regular basis, then we've got a great thing happening!

What suggestions could you offer to others who might like to start something like Booklift in their own communities?

KD: Think about putting together a selective group of committed people in which each person has something to teach others. If everyone writes in the same genre, has the same connections, or relies on the same marketing and publicity ideas, there's not much room to be inspired or challenged. But if everyone brings a different experience or angle of approach to the group, the interchange of ideas will help everyone to grow.

KRA: I'd say connect with the people in your literary community that you respect and like to hang out with. For us, this is how we began, a small group of writers who were learning how to be a better writer in the world and who hoped to get their books out to a larger audience.

For more ideas on starting grassroots initiatives like Booklift, see Chapter 4: Community (re)defined and Chapter 8: Community outreach in *The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship & the Writing Life*.