

Literary Citizenship: A Gift of Action

It's been said that poetry is a [gift economy](#).¹ Poets are known for sharing their work freely, yet all writers have entered the gift economy in one way or another perhaps through mentoring an emerging writer, reviewing another's book, or merely recommending debut books to an avid reader. These acts are gifts. These gifts are examples of literary citizenship.

In recent years, the term literary citizenship has caught attention for its all-encompassing model of gifting, sharing, and paying kindness forward. Trends come and go and so this term may or may not stick, but the concept will as it is not new. In Chapter 1 of *The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship & The Writing Life*, a historical overview of literary citizenship is offered with examples of how Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf, and other beloved authors embraced their communities and gifted their talents and time for the benefit of others. There is indeed a long tradition of writers working in their communities and the goal of *The Write Crowd* is to exemplify how contemporary writers and readers – of all genres, of all experiences – may carry on this tradition.

Simply put, literary citizenship is about contributing to the greater community outside of one's own needs. The concept in action shows writers and readers working together to sustain a literary community and, more specifically, to help it thrive. Through hosting a reading series, contributing to a literary journal, or volunteering with a nonprofit organization, literary citizens give something back to the community in addition to their words on the page. Literary citizenship requires passion and action.

The act of writing may be solitary, but involving one's self as an active literary citizen requires community-minded thinking that relies on engagement with others. Yet writers and readers need not live in literary hotspots to make an impact. Writers in remote areas have opportunity to connect with others in their rural communities or reach a broader population online. Geography, finances, and experience are truly of little importance when it comes to helping and encouraging others. The interviewees throughout *The Write Crowd* share examples of literary citizenship at work in big cities and small communities alike, spanning from no-cost opportunities to those that require a meager start-up investment. The goal of *The Write Crowd* is to share as many examples of literary citizenship as possible with the intent of inspiring action in your own backyard, with your own personalized twist.

¹ Video from the inaugural Poets Forum, presented by the Academy of American Poets on October 20, 2007, at Marymount College in New York City. Robert Hass explains the gift economy of writers, as explored in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, written by Lewis Hyde (Vintage, 1983).

In *The Write Crowd*, more than fifty authors, agents, editors, and booksellers have contributed their experiences and examples of literary citizenship at work. Readers will find suggestions from Matt Bell, Kate Gale, Roxane Gay, Lee Herrick, Dinty W Moore, and other active voices in the community. Being a literary citizen needn't be time consuming nor break one's bank account. Yet in contributing to the literary landscape, in offering our time and passion to help and encourage others, we may gift to others in ways the whole community may benefit.

The Write Crowd is a call to action and it is also a showcase of how anyone can participate as a literary citizen. There are countless more ways to involve one's self in the community than can be demonstrated in this book, so I encourage readers to use *The Write Crowd* as a catalyst for discovering and defining your own path to literary citizenship. It's up to you to find a unique way to carry on this longstanding literary tradition.