

Walter Alan Curtis (1941–2023)

By David Hedges

Walt Curtis was an Oregon writer, painter, and literary activist and—in the mold of his idol Walt Whitman—a poet unfettered by convention. As an independent historian, he showcased Oregon poets and writers of the past, bringing many out of obscurity, and delved into Pacific Northwest Indigenous cultures and mythologies. As an untutored artist, his paintings employed arresting and often erotic themes. As a literary activist, he cofounded the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission and served as its secretary until his death.

Walter Alan Curtis was born on July 4, 1941, in Olympia, Washington, the second of five children. The family moved to Oregon City in 1952, when Walt was twelve years old. In time, his parents bought a house above Abernethy Green, the official end of the Oregon Trail and a source of personal pride to Walt. His father, Donald, died in 1977, and Walt lived with his mother, Margaret, until her death in 2001.

Curtis graduated from Oregon City High School in 1959. Drawn to writing in the early 1960s, he studied under Beat author Ed McClanahan while attending Portland State College (now Portland State University). He graduated in 1966, the first member of his family to earn a college degree. McClanahan, a member of Wallace Stegner's Creative Writing Program at Stanford University, introduced Curtis to Ken Kesey, and they became lifelong friends. In 1975, Kesey invited him to his farm in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, with this note: "All we can really offer is shelter, lunch, and infamy. Even so, you are my No. 1 draft choice." Curtis read with Beat writers Allen Ginsberg at Reed College and William S. Burrows at Portland's Northwest Service Center (now the Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center).

In 1973, Curtis helped launch the Portland Poetry Festival, and for fifty-two years he hosted radio station KBOO-FM's *The Talking Earth*. He hosted open-mic poetry readings at such offbeat Portland venues as The Long Goodbye, Satyricon, and Mediterranean Tavern and was a regular reader at Café Lena open mics, a touchstone for Portland's literary community. In 1999, he cofounded the Autumn Equinox Maryhill Museum of Art Poetry Picnic and Stonehenge War Memorial Reading, an annual event held until Covid-19 hit in 2020.

Notorious as a bombastic, bawdy street poet, Curtis often sprinkled his poems with scatological and sexual imagery. Self-identified as "Portland's unofficial poet laureate," he described himself in 2015 as "a spiritual ecological preacher" who "has been given the cosmic task of alerting world consciousness from the Tao." Poets are born, he believed, not made, and he scorned Master of Fine Arts graduates for not being "true poets."

Curtis had a deep appreciation for Oregon's cultural history and an extensive knowledge of the state's writers and artists. In 1988, he cofounded—with Brian Booth, David Milholland, and Portland Mayor J. E. "Bud" Clark—the nonprofit Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission "to discover and commemorate important literary and cultural contributions to Oregon's history." Among writers he memorialized in essays for *The Clinton Street Quarterly* and other publications were poets Joaquin Miller, Hazel Hall, and Sam Simpson.

Curtis supported himself as a clerk in Old Town grocery stores and later as a book scout, scouring bins at Goodwill and the Multnomah County Library and selling to bookstores. For much of his life, he was a familiar sight on Portland streets, pulling a two-wheeled cart stuffed with books, papers, and bottles of red wine. *The Atlantic Monthly* published his poetry, and his work appeared in *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*, *Northwest Magazine*, and *Mississippi Mud*, all based in Portland. He also published six chapbooks: *Angel Pussy* (1970), *The Erotic Flying Machine* (1971), *The Roses of Portland* (1974), *The Sunflower and Other Earth Poems* (1975), *Peckeneck Country* (1978), and *Salmon Song, And Other Wet Poems* (1995). His nonfiction includes *The Mad Bombers Notebook* (1975) and *Journey Across America* (1979), a travelogue. *Rhymes for Alice Bluelight* was released by poet Christopher Howell's Lynx House Press in 1984.

Mala Noche, the autobiographical novel Curtis is best known for, was serialized in Joel Weinstein's *Mississippi Mud* (1977) and later published in French, Italian, and Spanish editions. The novel was

adapted for *Mala Noche* (1985), Gus Van Sant's first full-length motion picture. Curtis and a coterie of street-poet friends were extras in the film. He also appeared in Penny Allen's *Property* (1978) and *Paydirt* (1981) and in Sabrina Guitart's ecological documentary *Salmon Poet* (2009), whose title is drawn from a Curtis poem. He is the subject of documentary films *Walt Curtis: The Peckernack Poet* (1997) and *An Afternoon with Walt Curtis* (2013).

Curtis received the 1991 Stewart H. Holbrook Literary Legacy Award from Literary Arts. Following a fire at Great Northwest Bookstore, in which Curtis lost personal possessions as well as writings and paintings, Mayor Sam Adams proclaimed July 1-7, 2010, "Walt Curtis Week in Portland."

After he injured himself in a fall, Curtis's health declined and he died on August 25, 2023. He was buried in Portland's Lone Fir Cemetery near poet Sam Simpson. Curtis based much of his poetry on landscapes he loved, including Willamette Falls, the Molalla River, the Columbia River Gorge, Klickitat Falls, Eagle Creek, and Horsethief Butte, where the rock art known as Tsagaglalal (She Who Watches) has been preserved on the Columbia River. His poem about Tsagaglalal is inscribed on his gravestone:

Each day you glower at Amtrak
as it passes, awaiting
the cataclysm which
will end the modern world,
bursting The Dalles Dam,
releasing drowned Celilo.
Perhaps then, the great salmon
runs will return and women
will again be chief.

Sources

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