

You never know who you're going to meet at the Writers Series. Several years ago I was invited to attend one of the writers events at the Hoffman Center, in which local authors present readings they have been working on. I sat through a couple people reading some poetry, and another offering some insight she had gained while going through a difficult time. I've spent my life in publishing, so I've attended hundreds of author readings like this. You go, because you never know. (I met Steve Jackson at the pub in Manzanita one time, and his true crime story *Monster* went on to hit the New York Times bestseller list.) So I went, and sat through some readings, and paid polite attention. And then, I got hit in the face.

This blonde woman stepped up to the microphone, and gave a very short introduction before turning to her manuscript and reading: "Am I wearing underwear? Her thoughts congealed..." She proceeded to give a hilarious but subdued true-to-life story about a new teacher, on her first day, sitting in a broken office chair and falling over backward. It was attention-grabbing, interesting, and different, and the writing had a subtlety to it that I loved. During the intermission, I walked up to her and said, "Um, you don't know me, but I just wanted you to know you have great voice."

She looked at me for a moment, offered a polite but enigmatic smile, said thanks, and walked away. I took a step to go after her, to tell her that I wasn't actually using that as a pick-up line — in the real world I'm a literary agent, and I talk to people about voice in their writing all the time, since it's the one thing that sets apart a great writer. But it was too late; she had escaped, and was talking to other people, and I really HAD just wanted to talk to her about her writing. I let it go, and that was that.

Until a month later, when the Hoffman Center had another writers series event, and I went to hear Deborah Reed talk about her latest release. After the reading, many of us went down to the wine bar to talk books and writing, and as I walked in, I heard someone say, "Well, why don't you talk to Chip?" I looked over, and it was Deborah herself, chatting about the craft with none other than the blonde woman I'd complimented a month earlier. It turns out they were discussing writing careers, and how someone with talent and voice might benefit from talking with a literary agent, and Deborah was suggesting she talk with me. So we were introduced that night, and that's how it all began. The blonde (her name turned out to be Holly) had been teaching writing for years, and was just completing her first novel, and needed some advice on going to a publishing conference. We talked for a while that night, met at Manzanita Espresso a bit later, and again a few months after that. Eventually she got her book published, and it won a big national award. Then she started working for me part-time, and later began writing more books — some on her own, and some with other people. She became a well-known editor and respected collaborator. And, eventually, she wised up and married me. We later bought that little wine bar and turned it into a cool little whiskey bar aimed at those who enjoy both good spirits and great books.

As I said, you never know who you're going to meet at the Writers Series. It might be someone that will change your life.