

American Women Writers National Museum
Roberta Shaffer's Read Remarks
February 13, 2012

It is my pleasure to be here this afternoon to add my words of welcome to this new and very much needed addition to the Washington museum community, to the American cultural landscape,

But perhaps of greatest importance--an addition to the never large enough list of entities created and committed to enable and engage conversation across borders and boundaries worldwide

AND

To convene these conversations across time, space, generations, genders, professions, among people of and from all walks...

Since I have the benefit of knowing the AWWNM founder, Janice Law, I know that this endeavor will be a success.

I must admit when Janice first told me about her idea for creating this museum, I did have some doubts, but also could easily embrace the dream.

My concerns centered around the scope of her idea — Enormous!

“Women writers” includes novelists, journalists, teachers, lawyers, law-makers, editors, filmmakers, publishers, playwrights, literary patrons, poets, and pioneers (and I include Janice here) who use the written word to share their personal and professional journeys, experiences, opinions and stories.

And in so doing connect us all.

Being here today, I can see that we are well on our way...

I am happy to put in a plug for the Library of Congress which then in turns makes the promise to all these writers (and their readers) that their words will be preserved, protected, and will not just be within the purview of the privileged few, but accessible to all.

So this brings me to my second point today -- this museum also highlights the necessity to be literate. The 19th century ideals of “reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic” are even more critical today in the 21st century for they are the means by which we can create a population that can communicate the critical message of our democratic values.

And literacy celebrates the assumed contract that the writer makes with the reader—to write to be read.

And, in turn, to perhaps be inspired to innovate, ignite into action, and yes, to imagine greater things for yourself, your children, your country, and your world.

But lest we think writing is an easy art, I will share Cynthia Ozick's words about writing with you:

"Writing is not a choice. You will do it no matter what. You can't not do it. The freedom in the delectable sense of making things up coexists with the torment of writing. It is *hard* to write a sentence that you know is not just for yourself. It has to come out of the sentence before and anticipate the sentence to come. It has to have a certain cadence and clarity of meaning and insight."

So today, we honor all writers, while we are highlighting American women writers, for the efforts they expend and to let them know about this new house of knowledge which has opened its doors.

Thank you, Janice Law, for your vision and vitality. Thank you my colleagues, Janice Ruth and Alice Lotvin Birney, at the Library of Congress for helping to compile the booklet that is being distributed here this afternoon.

I would like to close by reading a few stanzas from Muriel Rukeyer's poem, "This Place in the Ways" from her collection, *The Green Wave*.

[Stanza I]

Having come to this place
I set out once again
on the dark and marvelous way
from where I began:
belief in the love of the world,
woman, spirit, and man.

[Stanza IV]

And at this place in the ways
I wait for song.
My poem-hand still, on the paper,
all night long.
Poems in throat and hand, asleep,
and my storm beating strong.

Thank you all.