

## Leila Philip: Oregon Bio

I discovered Oregon by chance, but once I found it, I was sure I'd never leave.

I was 18, recently graduated from high school and I wanted to be a writer. In Oregon I worked on a sheep and cattle ranch near Coos Bay, as a tree planter in the Siskiyou Mountains with a tree-planting cooperative based out of Roseburg, then later, as a cheetah Ranger at the *Wildlife Safari* in Winston. I loved Oregon's natural beauty and the scale of nature and the ethos of creativity and rugged individuality. As it would turn out, college, then studies in Japan, then my first job, then graduate school would draw me back east, then I met my husband, a visual artist based in New York City and I never moved back West. But Oregon influenced me greatly at a formative time in my life.

When my first book, *The Road Through Miyama* was published, Random House sent me on a West Coast book tour for the paperback edition. For me, the highlight of that trip was waking up in Portland to walk out and see my name on the Marquee of the amazing Powell's Bookstore. I haven't been to Oregon since that visit which is over twenty years! So, I am really looking forward to our upcoming trip this October to bring the book and art collaboration *Water Rising* to the Portland area; it feels like a kind of homecoming.

But back to how I arrived in Oregon in the first place. I had deferred going to college and for the first six months of that year I worked on a small newspaper near where my family lived and ran a farm. It was a great first job and fantastic experience for a fledgling writer. But I had this romantic idea that if I was going to write, I needed to travel and experience the world. For me, raised in New York City and on a farm in the Hudson Valley, heading west was a huge adventure. *Go West young Woman*.

So that February I bought a one-way plane ticket for San Francisco. I planned to visit a friend, but after that I did not know what I was going to do. In fact, having nothing set up in advance was part of the idea behind going west in the first place. The *not* knowing was a huge part of what seemed important. As it would turn out, fate would lead me to Oregon quite quickly. The first week I was there I met a friend of my mother's who was a writer to ask him some advice, and after talking to me for awhile, he suddenly asked if I wanted to go to Oregon. I remember saying, yes, without hesitation, although all I knew about Oregon was the name, which had an exotic ring. He had friends who owned a sheep and cattle ranch near Coos Bay and they might be able to use a hand once the lambing season started in a few weeks. It was arranged and two weeks later I was on a bus for Oregon.

I will never forget that long bus ride, then arriving in Roseburg in the early morning, passing logging trucks and a huge neon sign of a lumberjack at the diner where the bus stopped for food. I'd never seen trees so big or clear cutting, whole sides of mountains that looked as if they'd been shaved.

Working on the sheep and cattle ranch was heaven. Every morning we walked the hill pastures, checking on the sheep, hundreds of them, to count lambs born during the night and check for any problems. Usually it was pouring rain and cold. Often we came across newborn lambs soaked and half frozen. We'd tuck them inside our shirts and have the dog round up the anxious bleating mother. Back at the barn, we'd administer colostrum to the lambs, warming the tiny creatures until with a miraculous jolt they'd spring up like a wind up toys. Often we'd come across ewes in labor distress and the rancher and his wife, who were both as skilled as veterinarians, showed me how to turn lambs twisted the wrong way. Most of the time we were able to save both the lamb and the mother.

When the lambing season finished, I helped tend the growing lambs and round up cattle, then the summer season of ranch logging and fence repair set in and there wasn't really much work for me. I needed money for college and a friend of the ranchers who visited one weekend, suggested that I might try tree planting. One of his roommates was a member of a tree-planting cooperative and he knew that his partner had space in his camp. I might be able to join when they took a break to come down from the mountains for supplies.

For the next 3 months I lived in a canvas tepee in the Siskiyou Mountains with a group of tree-planters. Every morning, we'd line up carrying hoe dads and rucksacks for trees, along with enough food and water for the long day, then board a blue school bus owned by the coop to drove to the mountain slopes we were contracted to plant by the U.S. Forest Service. It was hard work, but paid well. My nickname was "Dash" because I was quick and able to scramble over the boulders and fallen trees that usually littered the steep slopes we had to plant. By the time we finished the contracted work I had earned enough money to pay for my first semester at Princeton.

While staying in Roseburg with the cooperative during supply runs, I had visited the *Wildlife Safari*, a 600-acre Animal Park and conservation center in nearby Winston. The fact that there in an Oregon valley they were successfully breeding the highly endangered cheetah, amazed me, as did the range of educational and conservation programs. Back at college, I wrote to the head of the park's cheetah breeding program and applied for a summer job. Next May I was headed back to Oregon to work at the Wildlife Safari as a cheetah ranger, a job I held for two wonderful summers.

From mid May through August I sat in a wooden tower from 8Am to 7PM four days a week and observed the animals, making notes about the groups of cheetahs in the compound. The park is one of the top breeding centers for cheetahs in the United

States and the larger western hemisphere so there was a lot going on. I also manned the two large gates that allowed cars to drive in and out of this area reserved for the big cats. The huge gates were open so that cars could drive through, while outside the perimeter of the cheetah compound, emu and gazelle and other animals wandered throughout the larger acreage of the park. The cheetahs gazed at these animals intently and sometimes they tried to dash through the open gates to get to them, which is when I had to pull the lever that released them with a powerful slam. Then I'd call for a ranger because the gates would have to be re-opened manually.

In the mornings or on breaks I'd help in the infirmary feeding animals or playing with the baby bears or watching the crazy capuchin monkeys. Sometimes the cheetah trainer would bring in the hand-raised orphaned cheetah that lived at the park for educational programs. I'd scratch his short chin and listen to his enormous purr. More than once, the elephant keeper who gave elephant rides throughout the day to generate income for the park, let me ride back with him when he took the elephant back to the elephant compound for the night. We'd saunter across the park through the herds of gazelle and other grazing animals and for 30 minutes I'd feel as if I were on an African veldt. Before leaving, we'd give the elephants watermelons which they'd pick up as if they were lifting grapes, then smash them with great gusto before picking up the busted, dripping pieces of melon to stuff them greedily in their smiley-shaped mouths. Then they'd lift those same trunks, which could just as easily have smashed our heads with one thwack and gently fondle our hands as if in thanks.

The incredible beauty of Oregon was not all that I took with me when I left. I'd grown up in the East coast in an old world family which had pictures of ancestors on the walls of our family house; history and etiquette, manners and rules were hugely important in my childhood. Our farm looked over the Catskill Mountains, a blue line of shapes worn smooth by geologic time. In contrast the mountains of Oregon, geologically much newer, were comparatively unweathered, with toothy, often snow-capped peaks. Oregon sparked my imagination and nurtured my desire to be creative.

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