

Good morning! This is Marylou Burton. You're listening to "Reading Between the Lines," brought to you by the Friends of the Homer Public Library.

What literary experience does the word "memoir" conjure up for you? Not so long ago it most likely would have involved a famous person's recounting of his life and times, beginning with point A and continuing on with dogged determination to points B and C. In recent years, though, the memoir (along with other non-fiction) has been liberated, become more "creative." And no where is this more evident than in Peggy Shumaker's extraordinary memoir *Just Breathe Normally*.

Shumaker, a retired UA Fairbanks professor and the current Alaska State Writer Laureate, is first and foremost a poet. If you didn't know this before starting *Just Breathe Normally*, you would quickly figure it out. Shumaker applies the same skills and sensibilities to her memoir that she does to her poems – short chapters, precise language, vivid imagery, highly selective snapshots from her memory. Remarkably, this scattering of bits and pieces comes together to tell a story that is not so much "complete" as it is "sufficient" to thoroughly engage the reader.

And Shumaker certainly has a life story worth sharing. *Just Breathe Normally* opens with a terrible accident that almost cost the author her life. Shumaker and her husband Joe were bicycling along a bike path that borders one of Fairbanks' busiest thoroughfares. It's not well maintained, and is riddled with permafrost cracks and birch seedlings that incredibly burst their way through the asphalt to the light of day. But it's fenced off and offers a sense of security. On this day, however, a kid came roaring up the path on his 4-wheeler, past the No Motor Vehicle signs, around a blind curve, and smack into Joe, who was thrown from his bike but not seriously injured, and then right over Peggy, doing more damage to a human body than it seems possible to survive.

From this starting point, Shumaker circles back to the people and events that shaped her life, around again to Fairbanks and her slow and painful recovery, back and around again and again. It's not an easy story, either in the past or in the present. Shumaker's childhood was, as they used to say, hard-scrabble. Her father wasn't much in the picture. Her mom, an alcoholic, took her pain and frustration out on her children. Money was tight. Yet somehow, Shumaker emerged from this – and emerges from her accident – with her spirit and empathy intact. It's a remarkable book, and Shumaker is a remarkable writer.

By the way, Shumaker will be visiting Homer in early March, and will be giving a public reading as well as teaching a one-credit class on creative writing at the Kachemak Bay Campus. Contact the college for more information.

In the meantime, *Just Breathe Normally* is available at the Homer Public Library, as are some of Shumaker's poetry collections.

Library hours are Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m, and Tuesday and Thursday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Tune in next Sunday morning at this same time for "Reading Between the Lines," right here on KBBI 890, Homer!