

Check It Out!

Coming Home with Community Read 2021

House Lessons and Its Port Townsend Author

by Lynn Nowak

DURING OUR LONG pandemic year, while many of us dream of future travel to far-off places and our present is limited to outdoor activities and virtual engagements, those of us who are lucky enough to have roofs over our heads return home.

More than ever, home is our refuge, our safe haven against the virus, and our centering space in an uncertain world. Port Townsend library director Melody Sky Eisler said she read Erica Bauermeister's *House Lessons* after its publication in March 2020, during the early days of Washington's Stay Home, Stay Healthy order. "It's such a lovely ode to the power of home, family, and our community, and Erica is a beautiful writer," Eisler said. "Who could have imagined we would still be in this pandemic a year later? So now this memoir seems like a celebration of the homes that have taken such wonderful care of those of us privileged enough to have housing."

With home such a resounding theme for people worldwide, *House Lessons: Renovating a Life* became an easy and obvious choice for Port Townsend's 2021 Community Read. In her memoir-in-essays about her family's adventures renovating a trash-filled, 1909 American Foursquare house in PT, Bauermeister explores myriad topics, including the psychology of architecture and the connections people form as the custodians of their homes. The story becomes both a chronicle of renovation and a personal saga. As the book unfolds, the reader learns how the renovation process affected her, her family, and her marriage.

"I moved every five years as a child, and changing locations became a normal part of life," Bauermeister said in an interview. "Later my roots were my husband and my kids, wherever we were. But when I saw the house in Port Townsend, even in the awful shape it was in, I knew I would want to live there for the rest of my life. I instantly imagined weddings, and grandchildren, and roots in the dirt. Living here

has taught me the importance of that kind of grounding."

Keith Darrock, library manager for public and technical services, said *House Lessons* is a good Community Read choice for at least a couple of reasons. First, Bauermeister is a local author, and the book takes place mostly in Port Townsend. "That provides something relatable for many," he said. "Renovating a house is also relatable, as is the connection to Victorian era architecture—at least in the sense that you are around it daily, living in Port Townsend." Darrock said he built the house he

lives in with his family, so he understands the relationship with a house. "It carries an extra special connection for me, knowing each component of its construction intimately."

March is "Reading Month"

The city of Port Townsend has proclaimed March its official Reading Month. Community Read is designed to promote community through the shared experience of reading, sharing, and discussing the same book and related topics. Approximately 400 free copies of *House Lessons* are available

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Erica Bauermeister stands before her renovated home.

The original American Foursquare house when it was built in 1909.



for curbside pickup at the Port Townsend Public Library on a first-come, first-served basis. More copies will be added to the library's collection for two-week checkouts; they can be put on hold and picked up curbside. Books also may be purchased at Imprint Bookstore in downtown Port Townsend.

After delving into the book, readers may choose from among several book-related special events during March, most via Zoom (see sidebar). They include a virtual screening of a film sponsored by the Port Townsend Film Festival, online book discussions, a memoir-writing webinar, and a culminating presentation and reading by the author on March 25. In-person activities include the *Spirit of Home*, an exhibit at Grover Gallery throughout the month, and two activities for kids and their families.

Hilary Verheggen, manager of youth services, said that instead of regular grab bags during curbside pickup the week of March 8, staff will offer the materials for 100, first-come, first-served take-and-make fairy gardens. "We will encourage crafters to find other objects near home, on the beach, or in the woods," Verheggen said. The second program for children is a StoryWalk on March 20 (12–4 PM at Kah Tai Lagoon) based on the children's classic *The Little House*, by Virginia Lee Burton. "*The Little House* is a sweet tale that reminds us to slow down and use our senses to explore what is around us and to not take for granted the beautiful land we have been gifted," Verheggen said.

The author of four works of fiction and coauthor of two other nonfiction books besides *House Lessons*,

Bauermeister has participated in community reads in other towns over the years. "I love what happens over the month," she said. Discussions often branch beyond the book to associated topics. She looks forward to the memoir webinar, which is a shortened version of a course she has taught in the past. Also in the works is a Zoom talk with Port Townsend High School students. For the author reading and lecture on March 25, she said she likes to watch how things unfold and note which topics create the most conversation. "I know we've all been thinking a lot about our houses this past year, so I'm sure that will factor in, but I like to give myself the freedom to respond to what is important to the community."

Affordable housing

The themes of houses, architecture, and the meaning of "home" also lay bare a more serious issue—the lack of affordable housing.

"Erica and I wanted to have a part of Community Read acknowledge the housing crisis in our community," said Eisler. So the kickoff event (March 1–7) is a Port Townsend Film Festival free virtual screening of *Community First: A Home for the Homeless*, recommended by PTFP director Janette Force. "Janette's film suggestion is perfect. This year we are celebrating homes, renovating historical homes, and the dream of everyone being housed," Eisler emphasized.

"This is an incredibly important topic, especially now when the disparities in our society are so painfully obvious," Bauermeister said. "My family was extraordinarily lucky to be able to do

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Community Read Events

Kickoff: PTFP Virtual Film Screening

***Community First: A Home for the Homeless*, Monday–Sunday, March 1–7**

Screen the movie through Port Townsend Film Festival's online platform, and celebrate the dream of everyone having a home.

Northwind Arts: *The Spirit of Home*

Thursdays–Mondays, March 4–28, Grover Gallery, 236 Taylor St., 12–5 PM

A special art exhibit inspired by *House Lessons*, featuring artists Max Grover, Liz Reutlinger, Joe Wuts, and others.

Book Lovers' Café

Monday, March 1, online via Zoom, 2 PM

Join the library's book club for a discussion of *House Lessons* with Library Director Melody Sky Eisler.

Jump-start Your Memoir: Webinar with Erica Bauermeister, March 13–14, online via Zoom, 10 AM–12 PM both days

A two-day webinar on memoir writing for all writing levels. Registration required.

Community Book Discussion

Thursday, March 18, via Zoom, 7 PM

Treat yourself to a curbside meal from your favorite local restaurant and join this discussion of *House Lessons* with Richard Berg of Terrapin Architecture.

StoryWalk: *The Little House*, Saturday, March 20, Kah Tai Lagoon, 12–4 PM

Fun outdoor adventure for the whole family. Pages posted at stations along the trail will tell a story for all to enjoy while walking the path near the lagoon. Explore anytime between noon and 4 PM. Children must be accompanied by an adult.

Meet the Author: Erica Bauermeister

Thursday, March 25, via Zoom, 7 PM

Join Erica for a presentation and reading. Signed books can be purchased at Imprint Bookstore.

All Community Read events—most online via Zoom—are free and open to everyone; see ptpubliclibrary.org/library, or call 360-385-3181 for more details.

what we did. Those of us who have been fortunate need to be advocating and giving. The Housing Solutions Network, Habitat for Humanity, Bayside Housing, and Peter's Place provide just some of the opportunities to swing a hammer or write a check." She added, "A big shout-out to the wonderful Port Townsend Film Festival for making the film screening possible!"

The pull of Port Townsend

Although Bauermeister and her husband, Ben, moved to Port Townsend in 2011, they have spent twenty-plus years loving the City of Dreams. Simply put, "We were pulled here from the get-go," she said. The natural setting drew them, of course, but Bauermeister said they also appreciate how walkable it is here, and how much individuals can truly effect change when they get to know the community. People who are able should focus on doing instead of merely talking, she said. Ben, for example, saw a need and strived to get low-income kids connected to the internet during the pandemic. In a small town, "an individual can work and get things done."

Italy was home to the Bauermeister family for a time and became a future influence in many ways. She fell in love with its pace of life. The country's beauty is slow and awe-inspiring, Bauermeister said. "The people there take care of the things they are responsible for. What we did with this house [in Port Townsend] was all about preservation, saving something and making it beautiful again. It brought me home."

Her penchant for architecture is stirred in Port Townsend, especially compared with Seattle, where Bauermeister's family lived just before moving to Port Townsend. She loves the diversity of this city's architecture, so unlike Seattle's streets lined with

Craftsman house after Craftsman house, punctuated by an ultramodern structure. And not only that: she is attracted to how creative people are with their spaces. "They love them so much that they do something with them; they take care of details," she said. "It's a lovely mix. My imagination is constantly being lit—or calmed," as the case may be. Details matter to Bauermeister. "I love imagining how each house encourages people to live." And in *House Lessons*, she writes about the importance of creating purposeful environments.

Fostering creativity

Function is key in house planning, but so is determining what individuals need emotionally. She said, for example, that a nook in her house was designed



We had come without knowing it
to our inevitable place.

— Robinson Jeffers

specifically to foster reading. The kitchen layout nudged her toward more social interactions. Even furniture can be deliberate to create a setting that people need and want. "I think of houses as verbs," she said, describing them as active, alive, fluid.

In *House Lessons*, Bauermeister discusses building a writing studio in her backyard, which was a later addition to the property. "My productivity has skyrocketed since we built the studio," she said, but she countered that she's

written all over her house. People don't have to wait until they have the perfect space to be creative, she insisted.

She is still writing, and walking. Now that she and Ben are empty nesters, they try to explore the many possibilities in life that they said they would do when they had the time. Of *House Lessons*, she said, "It took twenty years to get it right." It needed more than a chronological order, she emphasized. She loves research, so years of collecting factual tidbits helped, and once the manuscript turned into essays, it really began to take shape. She said she might have described the house demolition, reconstruction and renovation earlier, but the personal reflection took much longer, definitely benefiting from the additional years to percolate.

Bauermeister's renovation project, and writing about it, was instructive for both her and her husband. They have carried some of those lessons into the present to cope with months of isolation due to the coronavirus. "Probably the most important lesson was to use our house to bring out the best in ourselves—or in the case of the pandemic, to keep ourselves sane," Bauermeister said. "We turned our front porch into a COVID-safe place to meet. We made sure our workspaces were inspiring creativity. We did lots of smaller projects to thank

our home, so it felt like a gift and not a prison. We take care of her, and she takes care of us. I've never felt that as strongly as in the past twelve months." 📖

For curbside book pickup instructions, visit ptpubliclibrary.org/library/page/curbside-services, or call 360-385-3181.

Photos courtesy of the Jefferson County Museum of Art & History and of Erica and Ben Bauermeister.

What Friends Are Reading

◆ *Hamnet*

Maggie O'Farrell (2020)

◆ *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie*

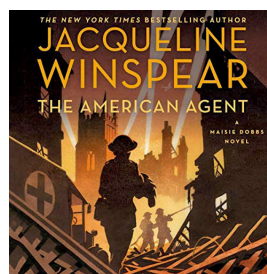
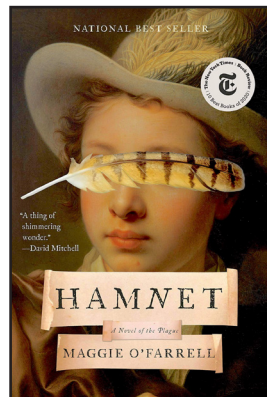
Marie Benedict (2021)

A pair of recent novels seeks to fill gaps in our knowledge of the lives of the two most famous names in English literature: Agatha Christie and William Shakespeare.

Although the words of William Shakespeare remain familiar more than four centuries after his death, little is known about the man himself. He married young, to an older woman we know as Anne but whose father's will named as Agnes. They had two, or perhaps three children, including a boy, Hamnet, who died at age eleven and was buried in Holy Trinity churchyard in Stratford. And four years after Hamnet's death, his father produced one of his greatest plays—bearing a name almost identical to that of the lost boy's. Around these facts, novelist Maggie O'Farrell has woven a brilliant story that brings history vividly to life. Switching back and forth from the early days of Will and Agnes's courtship and marriage to the time surrounding the loss of their son, *Hamnet* is gorgeously written, deeply emotional, and impossible to put down. When I reached the final page, I paused just long enough to savor the ending—and then I started it all over again.

Unlike Shakespeare's, we actually know quite a lot about Agatha Christie's life—except for eleven days in December 1926, when she went missing. The only traces left behind by the up-and-coming mystery writer were her abandoned car and her fur coat on the back seat. Her disappearance baffled both the local police and Scotland Yard and was closely followed by all the British papers and most of the public. Although her disappearance has been the subject of much speculation over the years, there remains no real explanation. Marie Benedict, bestselling author of a number of historical novels featuring strong female figures, offers up an imaginative, intriguing, and ultimately plausible tale of Christie's inner life, her marriage, and her conflicting desires to be a good wife and a great writer. Benedict deftly turns the story into a compelling mystery, as the police begin to fear that the worst has occurred, and Christie's philandering husband comes under increasing suspicion. Was this disappearance the fault of amnesia, as Christie actually claimed at the time, or could it have been an elaborate plot cooked up by the master of impossible crimes?

—Kristine Kaufman



◆ Maisie Dobbs and *The American Agent*

Jacqueline Winspear (2019)

Fans of Louise Penny's Inspector Gamache may also appreciate Jacqueline Winspear's series featuring female sleuth Maisie Dobbs. Taking place primarily in England between the two world wars, the books are likely to draw readers who enjoy historical fiction as well as mystery.

Winspear describes the series not so much as "whodunnits" as "whydunnits." Bright, intuitive, and trained in forensic analysis, Maisie is undeterred at taking on a profession typically held by men. A background in psychology serves her well, as does meditation, a practice she learned from her mentor. Maisie's investigative approach is crime scene reconstruction—gaining an understanding of the people involved and fitting the puzzle pieces together.

The series starts in the late 1920s but flashes back often to World War I. Through the early books, we learn how much the English were affected by that war. Maisie, her capable assistant Billy, their clients, and those they investigate all carry the physical and emotional scars.

I have read two of the early titles and then jumped ahead to audiobooks of two recent stories, which take place in the WW II era. By this time, Masie's personal life has taken many twists and turns, as interesting as the mysteries she unravels. Listening to narrator Orlagh Cassidy—an American actress with a gift for accents who voices Maisie, Billy, and characters from all over Britain, America, and Europe—brings these stories to life.

The most recent book, *The American Agent*, takes place during the 1940 nightly bombings of London. Still assisted by the resourceful Billy, Maisie is a respected investigator, connected with Scotland Yard and British intelligence.

She also volunteers as an ambulance driver. One night a young American journalist, Catherine—who is committed to informing the Americans about the anguish of the nightly blitz and the Brits' sacrifices—accompanies Maisie. A few days later, Catherine is found dead in her boarding house, and a Scotland Yard inspector enlists Maisie's help. As she and Billy investigate, we learn about the politics with America, London's dire conditions as the British try to go it alone against the Nazis, and the power of wartime propaganda. Will the Americans join the Brits against Hitler? Do Americans understand and care about what is at stake?

I look forward to starting another Maisie Dobbs story soon. Get to know Maisie. You will not be disappointed.

—Cindy Johnson

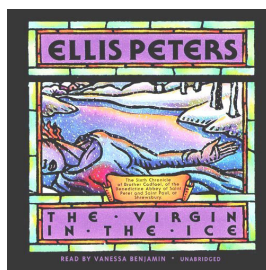
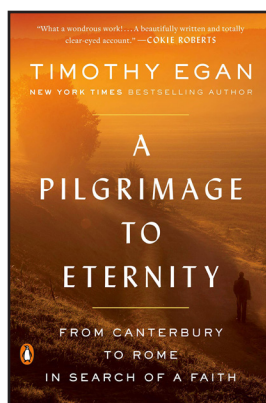
◆ *The Chronicles of Brother Cadfael*

Ellis Peters (1977–1994)

I have been listening to audiobooks for the past year and have learned that the narrator is as important as the author (in this case, Edith Pargeter, an English linguist-scholar who lived from 1913 to 1995 and wrote under pseudonyms). The Cadfael Chronicles, set during the twelfth century and read by Vanessa Benjamin, have been keeping me entertained, distracted, and enlightened over many difficult months. Brother Cadfael, a Welsh Benedictine monk, had been a sailor and soldier who fought in the Crusades. Now he is the herbalist—and amateur sleuth—for the brotherhood of Shrewsbury Abbey in western England.

These stories are what I call “murder light”: no graphic or overt violence, no gore. They are interesting, and you always know, even at a tale’s darkest point (and there is always a darkest point), that it will turn out well, and the falsely accused will be found innocent. Peters spins a good yarn, nicely plotted, with good character development. The time period spans the great civil war between King Stephen and Empress Maude, otherwise known as the Anarchy, and Peters skillfully incorporates this unrest into her plots; a number of historical figures give her chronicles both depth and continuity.

I am very fond of Brother Cadfael, as the author intended. He came to his monkhood later in life and thus knows much about people and their unpredictable behaviors. He learned herbalism from the Muslims during the holy wars and is well known for his skills, using them whenever needed for medical treatments. This knowledge gives him reason to go among the townspeople of Shrewsbury and interact with the secular community. He is sensible and fair and brings his many talents to every unfolding story. I am about halfway through the chronicles and look forward to more tales of this good brother and these long-ago times. Among other merits, they help me keep current events in better perspective. —Fran Post



◆ *A Pilgrimage to Eternity*

Timothy Egan (2020)

Many of us have heard of the Camino de Santiago, a walk in Spain taken by thousands of people annually, at least before COVID. But there are other comparable and ancient journeys, often dating from Medieval times, one of which is the Via Francigena.

In *Pilgrimage*, acclaimed Northwest writer and *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan details his trek from Canterbury, England, to Rome on the this Via Francigena. The result is part travelogue, part autobiography, and part European history seen through the lens of religious pilgrimage.

Egan was raised Catholic in Spokane but describes himself as “a skeptic by profession, an Irish Catholic by baptism, culture, and upbringing—lapsed but listening . . .” And while the book’s subtext is indeed religion, for me it was more about the history, cities, towns, and countryside along the route than about dogma or differing beliefs.

Egan’s narrative enjoyably embraces the physicality of walking twenty miles a day, meeting other walkers and pilgrims, and observing the cities and landscape. But at the same time, Egan confronts moral and spiritual issues—dilemmas—that others have faced over the centuries.

Though Egan goes through “only” four countries (England, France, Switzerland, and Italy), he is good at noticing and describing the differences across cultures and countrysides. Ditto for his fellow walkers—of all ages and places, from Asia and the Americas as well as Europe. They, too, have their reasons for taking the journey, and Egan’s chapters tell many of their stories. In particular, I liked how he described the stretches when his son, and then later his daughter, joined him. His personal reflections and thoughts in the broader context of history make the book an outstanding read.

—Marc Perrett



◆ House Lessons

Erica Bauermeister (2020)

Because here's the thing—we aren't looking for a house; we're looking for a home. A house can supply you with a place to sleep, to cook, to store your car. A home fits your soul.

House Lessons is Erica Bauermeister's newest book, a memoir, a compilation of essays, about finding and renovating a wreck of a house in Port Townsend. It is also a story of a marriage, a family, coming to grips with reality, paying attention to dreams, and refreshing life by finding one's true home.

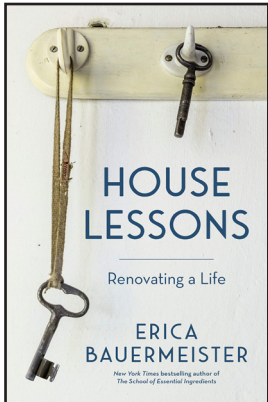
Bauermeister deftly commingles narrative of history, geography, junk removal, house decisions, construction, architectural design, plan approvals, inspections, and garden rejuvenation with stories of her and her family's lives before, during, and after the renovation. Architectural design—and how the arrangement of doors, staircases, windows, and then some—shapes a building's ambiance, playing a particular

role. She slyly implies analogies, for example by juxtaposing an essay on starting counseling therapy and a piece about ridding the orchard of its strangling ivy and blackberry vines.

I have enjoyed Bauermeister's novels, so I was thrilled to discover that she is a local writer and *House Lessons* had been selected as the library's 2021 Community Read. Her writing is inviting and insightful, with an acute attentiveness to the senses, enabling her to transport readers into the narrative. We can smell the distinct appeal of the scent of the completed house. At one quiet point, when the work had stalled, Bauermeister asked the house what it needed to allow work to proceed; the answer became immediately clear.

This is a brave, self-revealing work, rich with satisfying prose about the things affecting everyday life, sometimes without our conscious knowledge. Renovation stories, whether of home or self, are part of our shared human experience. We all long to find our place.

—Kathleen Woods-Smith is a Port Townsend Public Library Foundation board member



The Port Townsend Public Library community lost a good friend with the passing of Kate Schumann last fall. Kate served two terms on the Library Advisory Board in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She was an active and supportive board member. Her level-headed approach was always appreciated.

In 2004, as a board member, Kate attended the Washington Library Association's annual conference with library staff members. There she participated in a workshop on a new program in public libraries called Read to Rover. The idea was very attractive to Kate.

In summer 2005, she organized the first Read to Rover program at Port Townsend's library, as a way to help children keep and improve their reading skills during the summer months. The program matches children with dogs, and the children read aloud, without fear of their reading skills being judged by their audience.

Kate continued to support Read to Rover in collaboration with Olympic Mountain Pet Pals. With her enthusiastic leadership, the program was so successful that it has grown to one through which more than 100 volunteers have earned certification for their dogs. Reading experiences take place at Chimacum Creek Primary, Salish Coast Elementary, and Quilcene schools, as well as at both the Port Townsend and Jefferson County libraries.

Kate left a wonderful legacy to our community and, with her dogs Bissie and Lillie, individually spent many hours helping children discover a love of reading. Many of the students form bonds with their "forever" dogs that they never forget.

As the Pet Pals newsletter stated, "Her memory will live on through the delightful program she created. So many kids have been touched by her generosity."

—Linnea Patrick was Port Townsend Public Library Director from 1995 to 2004, during the first of Kate's two terms on the Library Advisory Board



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Who We Are

THE PORT TOWNSEND PUBLIC LIBRARY was founded in 1898 by volunteers and, thanks to continuing community support, has remained an active Carnegie Library since its present doors opened in 1913.

The Friends of the Port Townsend Library, established in 1978, supports programs, services, and materials beyond what the city's library budget covers. Every year we fund reading programs, events, and activities for all ages; we also hold three book sales and publish three newsletters. Newsletters are available in the library, around town, and at friendsofptlibrary.org.

Our funding comes primarily from supporters, donations, and book sales. We invite anyone to become a Friend and attend our board meetings, which take place on the second Wednesday of each month, 3:30 PM, via Zoom. Please contact us by e-mail at friendsofptlibrary@gmail.com to receive an active link.

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