Banned Books Week is an annual celebration of the freedom to read. The American Library Association first organized the event and has since grown to include many organizations dedicated to free expression (www.bannedbooksweek.org).

One of the events organized for the week of Sept 18-24th, was "Breaking Bans: A Celebration of Challenged Books, which including current student Kim Johnson, who was part of a panel of published writers discussing book banning.

Kim's novel, This is My America, was in good company with Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, Nicole Hannah Jones, creator of the landmark, The 1619 Project, Renee Watson, author of Born in Water, and Kyle Lukoff, author of several children's books, including, different kinds of fruit. The panel discussion was moderated by Dr. Emily Knox.

Each of the authors were asked to summarize their book, share reasons for writing their books, how they've impacted their readers, and what kind of feedback they have received.

Kim spoke about empowering young people to read this work because she wants readers to see themselves in what's possible, see their power when they use their voice and their mind to make a change. When asked what surprised her the most, she said she didn't expect the range of people responding to her work. "I thought it would be black teenagers who might see themselves in this work, but I received messages from an eleven year-old white girl who had no experience being around anyone of another race, and an entire seniors center who read it as a group. I never imagined that," she laughed, "and all this just inspires me to do more with what I'm doing."

Kyle Lukoff offered, "I see my books, like all literature, as a way to ask questions that I have about the world and as a way to explore my own answers to those questions, but also let readers do their own asking and their own answering through collaborative process of writing."
Then the discussion turned to censorship, and Dr. Knox asked the panel to discuss their thoughts and actions on this issue. Nicole Hannah Jones spoke about a banned book tour they organized to go into the states where legislation is underway to ban books, like The 1619 Project. She talked about the importance of speaking out against this, not only about her book, but against book bans in general. “I’ve changed my book talks to include speaking about democracy and that a society that is banning books is losing their democracy,” she said, “It is important to uphold the rights to learn and teach.”

These bans are often about repression and silencing oppressed communities. The panel discussed methods for supporting teachers, librarians, and communities. Kim brought up that generally books aren’t outright banned. They’re just silently removed because of an email sent to a library or a group of parents asking for the removal of a book in school, often for no apparent reason. She spoke about her experience working with a library in the Midwest that implemented a program where they created a process to evaluate every book. While it may sound negative, it gives a best response: ‘we have a process, we’ve evaluated, and this book will remain.’ Silent removal can be far more dangerous than a public book banning because it’s difficult to advocate for something like that. Teachers and librarians need to be supported because they may be worried that a conflict may affect their job.

Nicole Hannah Jones added, “There is no justification for banning a book, and even knowing why your book is being banned, or if a book is talking about something political or historical, there still is no excuse to ban a book. People can say, I don’t want my child in class that day when you discuss the book, you certainly have that right, but there is no justification…We just have to be clear, these bans are not about trying to protect children. It’s about politics. It’s about politicizing people who are on the fringes, who are seen as marginal, or who can be scapegoated in order to gain political power…there is no rhyme or reason to why books are being targeted except that they are seen as a tool for larger political gains.”

The conversation continued and the panel shared experiences of how to find support in their work so that they can continue to write. Renee Watson spoke about the importance of taking care of the self, resting, or taking a break, and having a solid support system, like family and friends. “I have people who know me and love me deeply, and those are the people I go to when I need somebody to lean on, and that is often…so I ask for help…to just make sure that I’m staying focused on why I’m doing what I’m doing, and so that I don’t quit or don’t get so scared that I silence myself…you need one or two people in your corner who just have you and can hold space for you when you need them. I think it’s important to rest. Sometimes you need to step away…it’s draining sometimes, and sometimes you got to go refill the well…Self-care has become like a cliche thing to say at this point, but the real foundation of self-care was a revolutionary act, to actually care for yourself, especially when you’re doing the work of resistance and social justice.

Dr. Knox then asked the panel to give words of encouragement to the librarians and teachers. "I mean, mine is really, thank you. We need you." Kim declared, “I write books so they can land in places, whether that’s a bookstore, a little library on the corner of someone’s house, or the public library, or the schools, and I can’t do that if I don’t have the people on the other end doing it. So, anything, I’m doing I’m hoping that I’m giving to them, and I appreciate the giving back to us by having our words reaching…young people, but I know the reach is much wider than that.”

The other three panelists agreed that gratitude for teachers and librarians was in order. Nicole Hannah Jones added that hopefully didn’t need reminding, that they are transforming and affirming lives. She expressed the impact of the educators who taught the history of 1619 and encouraged her to become a journalist. Renee Watson agreed, “I know that I would not be the writer that I am, or also the person I am...and so you are literally shaping the future, and we thank you for that. I just hope that you know that this work that you’re doing matters. Sometimes we talk about activism with this capital A, like you have to be doing something really big or famous or the loudest, but that little book that you put into a student’s hand, it is an act, and it is important, and it is revolutionary. I want to encourage you to keep doing the good work.”

Emily Knox ended the discussion, noting that it was the fortieth anniversary of the Island Trees versus Pico Supreme Court decision that gave all students the freedom to read books in their library, and concluded, "I think that there’s no mistake that we are still trying to make sure that people have the right to read, and that is really something we are working towards during this banned books week."

Imke Wernicke is a contributing writer
Our Distinguished Visiting Writer for Fall term is the lovely and insightful Kaui Hart Hemmings, author of, The Descendants, her first novel, which was adapted by Alexander Payne, Nat Faxon, and Jim Rash into the highly acclaimed 2011 American film The Descendants, starring George Clooney and Shailene Woodley.

Kaui Hart Hemmings was born and raised in Hawaii. She has degrees from Colorado College and Sarah Lawrence and was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and has written five novels. She will be teaching Intro. Fiction Foundations and a fiction workshop (open to all current students, faculty, and alumni) during the Fall residency. We asked her to answer some questions.

Who are you in one word?
An explorer.

Please tell us about your current project(s) and share a little of your creative process?
I’m working on a novel set on a cattle ranch in Hawaii. My routine is to get morning light, exercise, and if I’m writing something new, to write three pages at least per week day. I also need to be reading something. If I’m revising, I try to do ninety minutes of work, uninterrupted—no checking email, but with revisions, I usually want to keep going. There are also months when I’ve finished something and I’m waiting for feedback and I’m not writing, but a writer is always writing even when they’re not (or so I tell myself).

Your writing spans a variety of voices (male, female, mother, teenager:) How do you determine which character will tell the story? Does one feel more rooted in your life experiences, than another? If so, how?
I have written an entire novel in one voice, then switched to another POV. I’ve also added a new character and another POV after completing a draft, so sometimes I don’t know until I’ve failed somehow. All voices, however—man, woman, teenager, etc. feel rooted in my experience, whether I’ve experienced the life I’ve given them or not. Sometimes it’s easier for me to access a character who isn’t like me at all. It feels like I’m stepping into a role.

Of all the books you’ve written, do you have a favorite? Please tell us why, reflecting on the process of writing it?
I don’t have a favorite, but I did enjoy the process of writing How to Party with an Infant because I actively immersed myself into an environment that was completely foreign to me, and I wouldn’t have been able to do it without my infant daughter who just turned eighteen. I love to listen and collect dialogue, and so many things I overheard made it into this novel. It felt a bit scandalous.

Why do you write? Do you have a greater purpose with your stories, or a message that you hope your writing will bring to the world?
I can’t help myself. It’s my way of engagement, of talking back to the world, and organizing what I find to be beautiful or absurd, moving, true. I don’t really think about bringing anything to the world (I’m nowhere near those kind of sales). My purpose is pretty simple. I want to show you a different place, I want you to feel something, laugh at something, relate to something, and I want you to turn the page.

What author/literary figure has influenced your work? How?
If any, who are your mentors? I’m not saying you’ll see the influence of these writers in my work, but they’ve compelled me to write and their work makes me swoon: John Cheever, Tobias Wolff, Wallace Stegner, Lorrie Moore.

Is there a book that you like to gift to people? Which one, why?
Crossing to Safety by Wallace Stegner. I’ll cry if I say why—so maybe that’s why.

What is your favorite and least favorite word, and why?
Hubby. There are many ways to refer to your spouse, and this choice makes me cringe.
New Term, new students. We’re excited to introduce the new roster of grad students into the Low Residency MFA Program. We hope they’re ready to dive in and dig deep. Did you see that reading list in Raquel’s class, Reading for Writers? Wow! (see page 6)

Anyway, to the task at hand. Four of the nine students weighed in with a few answers to some questions we posed. Pleased to meet you.

Hi, I’m Holly! I am 34 and begrudgingly live in Texas because my family, whom I love, lives here. I live with my very spoiled dog and emotional support animal Jack. I am the Executive Director for a non-profit that connects women to each other and supports the good work they are doing in the world. My MFA is for me—an intentional choice to pursue something that doesn’t involve me doing it for other people.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Unrushed meals on cool evening patios with fancy delicious food. Hours of sharing each other’s plates with people I love with no place we have to be.

Which living person do you most admire?
It is cliche, and I’m lucky no doubt, but my mom. She hasn’t stopped learning and changing. She does work she believes in. She loves people the best she knows how to on any given day.

What is your greatest extravagance?
A couple of times friends have given me gift cards for fancy spa days and every time I am beside myself at a seaweed bath and cucumber water.

On what occasion do you lie?
Just today, I told a friend I might lie in class if I can’t remember something basic like what an adverb is.

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?
I use “like” as often as you would assume a girl like me says it. Like a lot. (People might find this article on the origin of “like” interesting: [https://www.thelily.com/think-like-began-with-valley-girls-guess-again/](https://www.thelily.com/think-like-began-with-valley-girls-guess-again/))

Where would you most like to live?
On a street with old shade trees that made even summer walks bearable, lined with interesting houses filled with all my favorite people.

Three things you do every day:
flip back bed sheet, deadhead flowers, make a list

Is there a word you love? Scour
One that you dislike? Cleanse

Favorite book, film, or artwork?
Film: A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night. I don’t think I can have a favorite book or artwork. I oversimplify film and overcomplicate books and non-digital art. My comfortable nescience permits me to elevate one film work over others *said with a flit wave of hand*

What do you consider the most overrated virtue? chastity, the most literal of low-hanging fruit answers.

Which words or phrases do you most overuse? Cool.

What is your greatest regret?
Having regrets. After that, not taking myself seriously enough to care more or try.
What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
To beg.

What is your most marked characteristic?
My propensity for making terrible first impressions.

Three words that describe you:
Sleepy, scatterbrained, and introspective

Three things you do every day:
Drink coffee, journal, and obsess over my skin care routine.

Who in the literary world has left an impression on you and why?
David Mitchell. His books introduced me to the world of speculative adult fiction and taught me all the ways in which I can write about the world around me through a different lens.

Do you have a writing practice? If so, what is it?
Oh yeah. I'm an obsessive plotter, which can be my downfall at points, but we're all learning about ourselves, aren't we? Since I was a writer at my old job and am currently freelancing full time, I write everyday so some of my processes have become mechanical. For my personal writing, though, I take my time with it. While I give myself deadlines, I prefer to taste every word and not churn things out mindlessly to meet a quota.

What is your favorite smell? Sound?
Homemade pasta sauce. My partner's voice.

If you could spend the day with anyone, who would that be and why?
Younger me. Is that lame? I just want to hug her. Tell her it'll be alright. Maybe smack her upside the head a little bit.

On what occasion do you lie?
I, like many others, want to believe that I’m an honest person who sticks to their morals, but also like most people, I lie a lot. Not just the simple, “How are you?” “I’m okay,” kind of lie. The lie of listening or appearing interested. The lie of forced getting along, of sticking to a certain idea of what is socially acceptable. I lie to myself, too. Mostly the lie of, “You’ll be okay, Melissa.” “It’s just a phase, Melissa.” Stupid stuff like that.

When and where were you happiest?
In this moment, now. I haven’t been happy for a long time. But I am now, and the force of it saturates my life like the film of a photo. I don’t know. Life is about to get difficult. But I’m happy in this little life I’ve built so far.

Three words that describe you:
Strong, bubbly, and thoughtful.

I love the word serendipitous (though I can’t seem to ever spell it), and hate the word squelch.

My favorite book is Einstein’s Dreams by Alan Lightman, which I read at 14 and immediately fell in love with. I had never really contemplated time in different ways before, and I love how Lightman describes theories of time with very palatable, poetic snapshots.

Writing has always felt very innate to me, and I feel very grateful I was raised in a way that encouraged and fostered my creativity. I grew up in Anchorage, Alaska, and most of my childhood was filled with me
playing outdoors; building snow forts in the 4pm darkness with my neighbors, or riding my bike around in the midnight sun (with, more than likely, a moose or two looming in the distance). I am incredibly grateful for this unique experience, especially after moving out of Alaska and into a “big” city.

Immersing myself in nature has always been an experience that is both grounding and joyful. So, my writing inspiration usually involves being outdoors—it can be something as simple as a walk through town or a more isolated trek, but I’ll see little details that get stuck in my head and later become parts of stories or poems. Recently, I’ve been trying to be more intentional with my writing, which means some days it’s a chunk of a story or a poem, and other days it’s a chaotic stream of consciousness. I’m practicing being patient and kind with my writing, because I can be too much of a perfectionist. I want to change that!

Overall, though, I’m really just looking forward to growing more as a writer and learning how to keep myself scheduled and accountable. I also am excited to get to know my cohort and and read their writing/support their journeys, too!

* * *

If there’s one thing I have learned in this program, (besides writing of course), nothing improves your writing more than reading. Diversify your reading. Read, read, read! Here’s Raquel’s awesome book list I was raving about earlier:

- The Sentence, by Louise Erdrich
- Almanac of the Dead, by Leslie Marmon Silko
- Rings of Saturn, by W.G. Sebald
- Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old by Rubén Martínez
- Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style, by Virginia Tufte
- Jesus’ Son, by Denis Johnson
- Citizen, by Claudia Rankine

The MSU Roadrunner Review seeks submissions for its fourth edition, which will launch in December 2022. We are a student-driven journal out of the Creative Writing program at Metropolitan State University of Denver. You may access our first three editions here: [https://sites.msudenver.edu/roadrunnerreview/](https://sites.msudenver.edu/roadrunnerreview/)

**Our reading period is September 9 through November 13, 2022.** We accept work from all writers, not only students. We consider:

- Fiction – 3,500 words or less
- Flash fiction -550 words or less
- Creative Nonfiction –3,200 words or less
- Poetry – of no more than two single spaced pages
- Visual art – a single image with a meaningful title
- Graphic Short Story – of no more than seven pages

Prose and poetry should be sent as a properly formatted Word document to roadrunnerreview@msudenver.edu, with the genre and word count (for prose pieces) in the subject line. Pieces that come in without this information in the subject line may not be considered. Image oriented work (including graphic short stories) should be submitted as an attachment in an easily accessible format to roadrunnerreview@msudenver.edu.

Multiple submissions are fine, but each must come in its own email. Please include a short bio.
I have unknowingly been sweeping the darkness like a mole, trying to find the light and making my way towards the book, Belonging - A German Reckons with History and Home, for the past year. The 2018 Book Critics Circle Award winner Nora Krug and her autobiography feel like kindred spirits. I’d like to think it is her exploration of words and their meanings, not just that we share an origin country.

Belonging is an illustrated autobiography, a graphic novel, telling the story of Nora Krug, a German woman who immigrated to America as an adult, and found herself questioning, rediscovering, and reconciling her identity as a German. She explores what it means to inherit your History, the burden of it, to learn how to carry, define, and redefine what Home means.

Krug weaves the story of her family history through cut and collaged photos, color illustrations, watercolor depictions, sketches, old documents, and personal and official government documents. The historical story is interwoven with two repeating styles of pages (see small images to the right), that support the overall story, her memories of childhood, and her reflection of being German in a foreign country.

The first, is a series of drawings she makes, of everyday items that most people living in Germany would instantly recognize. She refers to these pages, interspersed throughout the book, as ‘from the notebook of a homesick émigré.’ The book opens with one of these notebook pages, depicting a brand of bandage that immediately took me to my first memory of skimming my knee. Upon seeing it, I remembered the longevity of those bandages and how they hurt to pull off even after weeks of wear, because their stickiness was so strong.

The second style of page she repeats throughout is ‘from the archivist notebook: fleamarket find.’ These pages are photos, collages of photographed items she has bought at fleamarkets during her travels, rounding out all things German, whether nostalgic, brutal, or historical.

Reading this book was an emotional, whole-body experience for me. Readers may not share this experience, but I think many writers will find it useful to examine her creative choices and the massive undertaking of putting together all the ‘pieces’ of a life and a family history. Nora Krug’s story tells a thoughtful account of an entire generation that experiences love, hardship, and shame in all its colorful fragments.

Through writing about her German heritage, the Holocaust, and her family’s place among it, Nora finds some healing without allowing complacency for herself or the reader. Also, because it is illustrated and often reads like someone’s sketch/photo/everything journal, it is an enjoyable read, even though the subject matter is often dark, shocking and deeply honest.

Although my story as a German immigrant differs from hers, the notebook pages were especially moving, because they gave me a sense of belonging, a recognition of something that always seems just beyond my grasp.

What is most profound, is the way that Nora Krug lays bare all the dark secrets in her family history, illustrating the weight of her catastrophic history, and demonstrating that acceptance can bring understanding and hope.

Ultimately, she shows us the need to reflect on the 'responsibility we all have as inheritors of our countries' past.'

Have a book you want to share? Send us your review. We appreciate your participation, and it looks great on your CV. Email Imke at: wernicki@oregonstate.edu
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Aug 15 - Dec 15
Jennifer Obbard, having successfully defended her thesis at the end of August has shared some of her experience of her process.

**Tell me a little about what you do, day to day, and how that may or may not influence or inspire your writing.**

Most days I am working as the Associate Dean of Health Sciences, as the head of a nursing education program. It is extremely busy with meetings and troubleshooting and doesn’t leave any time for creativity. I write policies based on standards of practice, rules and laws. I have also written academically, completing a master’s degree in nursing with a focus on community, population health and leadership. I wouldn’t say that my nursing education work is informing my creative writing. However, I am in the final stages of a PhD by research. The completion has been delayed by the demands of the pandemic. My PhD has certainly influenced my creative writing. The method of inquiry for my PhD is micro-phenomenology as developed by Claire Petitmegin. The method uncovers the structural processes associated with lived experience, particular singular moments, how such experience emerges and becoming aware. My research focused on becoming aware of the experience of nature. I conducted embodied elicitation interviews, where the participants described in fine grained detail the subtle and trans-modal elements of their experiences, where often much of what they described was not within their awareness prior to the interview. It’s about coming into contact with life, the intimacy and joy, present in moments of emergence.

**Why did you pursue your MFA?**

I began writing unexpectedly. When I moved to New Mexico in my thirties, I walked in the bosque of the Rio Grande every day. Every day I received the gift of one poem. It showed up in single words and short phrases. When I got home, I would write the poem. This happened for 100 days. Even at this point, I denied I was a writer. I have been pushing it away for reasons I am not completely conscious or aware of. Given this, I felt like I needed the structure and mentors to push me to writer more “dangerously”. When I say “dangerous” I only mean outside of the conformity that has been embedded in my psyche and reinforced by the underlying misogyny and subjugation that women have endured through history.

I was very drawn to the community of writers created by the residency. When I applied the residencies were still being held at the Caldera Arts Center and by the first residency, we were in the pandemic.

**Tell me a story/event about when you were little that might be relevant in discovering something about who you are.**

I have always been a vivid nighttime dreamer. I had a recurring dream as a child. Steel plates in a triangle shape would meet and then move again. Every time the plates meet, a daisy would pop up and bloom. This happened over and over in the dream. The dream always left me with a creepy feeling of inner softness under the impenetrable shell of steel. A few years ago, during an embodied experience in the desert, I realized that the daisy symbolized the hope that I could one day be my true self, who I am.

**Do you have a writing practice now, or is it just a push to get the MFA done?**

I am committed to developing a writing practice. My most inspired times of writing are when I am in nature. I was not successful in doing so during my MFA. I regret that this is so, however, there was the pandemic and other things that seemed to keep me from this. I gathered up the writing I had done during each of the workshops and mentorships. This turned out to be enough. I did rent cabins in remote locations and traveled to various locations for quietness and writing immersed in nature and the places that inspire me.

**Where do you envision yourself in five years?**

I plan to retire from my academic career in nursing and be primarily writing, coaching (Jungian) and guiding wilderness- based programs. I hope to have at least one published book. Hopefully I will be living in New Mexico or some high desert on a large plot of land, 10 or more acres and spending time with my granddaughters and my sons.

**Which writer’s influence writing and/or influenced your decision to pursue writing? And has that changed since embarking on the MFA?**

David Whyte, although he actually discourages writers from pursuing MFA’s. He believes they take all the creativity and originality out of the writer due to the structures imbedded in academia and such programs. It is his writing and my own experiences that led me to pursue an MFA. I knew I needed others to push me to write more...
“dangerously” and I wanted to learn the craft of writing. David’s influenced me through his poetic style, inspired by his experiences and travels, and his artistry of inviting readers into the depths of their own being and experience. What has changed since starting my MFA, is a validation that writing is a primary means for me to express myself and I have my own artistry with a purpose of its own. It’s been humbling, surprising and delightful!

How has your view of the world changed because of your learning?

I really appreciate the faculty who required or recommended reading that I likely would not have found on my own. Particularly poems and stories from the borderlands and from writers with lived experience that is very different than my own, those that have been erased and dismissed. I am distressed by the suffering and injustice that individuals and groups have endured, and how many have not only endured, they have found their own ways to flourish and create meaning in their lives. My understanding about voice (voice and voicelessness) and points of view has expanded. I am still in the process of expanding my perspective and understanding of writing “other” and the responsibilities and opportunities a writer has in relation to cultural appropriation.

Have you learned anything new about yourself while pursuing this, Master’s? Please share.

One amazing thing I discovered about myself during the MFA program is that my writing is in service to delight. That the reader feels invited into an experience of delight within their own depths. This service includes delight in darkness and decay; in the erotic; in disrupting language to return the many ways of knowing that have been forgotten, mislabelled and dismissed; delight in the unknown and mystery of being.

How do you want to be remembered?

As a writer who made a contribution to the literary topography, that I brought new and meaningful contours, shapes and possibility into form in both poetry and memoir. That live performances of my work provoke and inspire women find their own authentic expression. That I helped writer anew, the stories of women, power and sensuality.

Many years ago, I saw a film by Hirokazu Kore-edo entitled After Life (1988). The basic premise of the film was: If you could choose only one memory to hold on to for eternity, what would it be?

It would be the moment my heart rippled open in waves of ecstasy as described in a chapter I wrote called Heart Blossom. Through a number of emerging synchronicities, I met a young man, at least 10 years younger than myself, and without knowing him at all, I asked him to tell me a story. This request was prompted by an inner directive that emerged from seemingly nowhere. The young man said yes. When he told me the story I was so present and attentive, it felt like I was in the story he was telling as if it was happening the moment he relayed it to me. At the end of the story, the last thing he said was “I forgave myself”. In that moment, my physical heart rippled open in waves of ecstasy, like an orgasm, outside the boarders of my body. It was incredible. It kept happening every time I saw him. He taught me a lot about love even though we were never lovers in this life.

calling all writers

This newsletter is for you, the grad student, alumni, and readers of the writing program. We're changing things up! No more themes, just open call! Please send something to be published in the newsletter. You'll be glad you did.

GUIDELINES: Student, faculty, and alumni original works are welcome. Please share your thoughts, work, unfinished or not.

Prose: 500 words max (excerpts from larger works welcome)

Poetry: No more than two poems.

PLEASE Share your offering by Oct 15th, 2022, by emailing it to: wernicki@oregonstate.edu