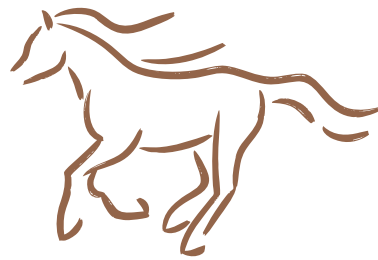


The Mari Sandoz Society



Mari Sandoz
SOCIETY

marisandozsociety.org

And Western Colorado University

Present the

2026 Story Catcher Festival

April 8-10 – Gunnison, Colorado

western.edu/academics/story-catcher-festival



WESTERN

COLORADO UNIVERSITY

ENGLISH



MASTER OF ARTS | MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

WESTERN COLORADO UNIVERSITY

DAY ONE – Wednesday, April 8

7 to 9 p.m. Evening Reading: RADY Center Auditorium 109

- *Joe Wilkins, Claire Boyles and Sean Prentiss*
 - Introduction and Welcome by Steve Coughlin
 - (Book Signing Following the Readings)

LIVESTREAM RECORDING:

- <https://western.zoom.us/rec/share/A1bukHz0UpiHGRByfp0Wpb-nahXP-n4kDsLrjzmYuyziiFkWpPPyVXJYkK2RAWsZ.sjPagwuuO9TAvgiv?startTime=1775695488000>
- Passcode: v\$Hg4i0Z

DAY TWO – Thursday, April 9

9 to 11 a.m. RADY Center Auditorium 109

- *Emerging Writers*
 - *Sandoz Emerging Writer Scholarship Honorees (GPCW)*
 - Lizbeth Bárcena
 - Claire Thompson
 - *Story Catcher Emerging Writers*
 - Brandi Blaisdell
 - Stephanie Johnson
 - Laura Mahal

LIVESTREAM RECORDING

- <https://western.zoom.us/rec/share/e0z6ksmHWKcAeDrNn-NBMXpOlxBPLJZG7O8TpCT-vIJz7MpZebSTCYPxO1xnmf8.6T8q3EI2b6T6BakS?startTime=1775745951000>
- Passcode: xkR+!^1W

2 to 4 p.m. RADY Center Auditorium 109

- *Workshop with Aimee Nezhukumatathil*
 - *How to Fall Down Into the Grass: Writing from Astonishment*
 - Taking inspiration from Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer Day," we will look to our sense of awe and astonishment for observation and inspiration. Ever get stuck in your writing and put it away, only to never return to it? In this workshop we will take a look at various hybrid forms (all while focusing on non-fiction) as a way to find a beginning (and end) to a project that may have previously given you roadblocks.

LIVESTREAM RECORDING

- https://western.zoom.us/rec/share/G_tZcwlAOAZAgj6K71M3ODPucCQJme4ppdDr6DUdOLhPNwevutD7KxjuuS9xSB3P.NToyODPbMVsz3XQB?startTime=1775766170000
- Passcode: JN+=41+3

7 to 9 p.m. Quigley/Kincaid Concert Hall

- *An Evening With Aimee Nezhukumatathil*
 - Western Welcome by Kelsey L. Bennett, Associate Provost
 - Introduction by Laura Pritchett
 - Moderated discussion with Laura Pritchett. Book signing to follow

LIVESTREAM

- https://western.zoom.us/rec/share/hNC2M-3c4DrSuW6RTDKRzwEtqDAs_Sq6JwB3IP3EpSFn8-OqvT8Ff2Pyr9EmVA29.qSHvi8-HOHODyL5w?startTime=1775780040000
- Passcode: qH7nJ.?*

DAY THREE – Friday, April 10

Interdisciplinary Nature & Writing Workshops: Laura Pritchett

The following sessions, organized and led by Laura Pritchett, are in partnership with the Clark Family School of Environment and Sustainability, ENVS 200 “Writing the Environment” and ENG 230 “Environmental Literature.” All student, faculty, staff, and public are welcome!

LIVESTREAM FOR ALL MORNING SESSIONS:

- https://western.zoom.us/rec/share/QpmbWJ8u4Q2qeeP6-M5fFE1GZFhltLIG_ZDPPi2VUlbju8cMsR3OIzC_9YN2QTKB.w36e7zunw3bg-Szm?startTime=1775831164000
- Passcode: 0=.YOpch

9 to 10 a.m. RADY Center Auditorium 109

- *The Intersection of Journalism, Writing, and the Natural World.*
 - Join Gretchen King, executive editor at *High Country News*, Alyssa Pinkerton of *The Colorado Sun*, and Laura Pritchett, who has published pieces in both publications and who directs the MFA in Nature Writing. At this panel, we’ll learn more about the intersection of journalism, the environment, and writing. These two publications are often considered to be the best Colorado has to offer — come hear what's going on in the world of environmental writing today!

10 to 11 a.m. RADY Center Auditorium 109

- *Overview and Explorations into Environmental Writing Now*
 - With Laura Pritchett. Come learn about what's going on in the world of environmental writing today — and then sink into a short nature-based writing exercise that's sure to inspire new words. We'll venture outside if the weather is nice and stay inside if not.

11 to NOON RADY Center Auditorium 109

- *Writing for Planet Earth, continued.*
 - Writers who wish to extend their writing time or have questions can stay afterwards.

2026 Story Catcher Festival Faculty & Speakers



Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Born to a Filipino mother and Malayali Indian father, Aimee Nezhukumatathil is the author of five books of poetry: *Night Owl: poems* (Ecco, 2026); *Oceanic* (Copper Canyon 2018); *Lucky Fish* (2011), winner of the Hoffer Grand Prize for Prose and Independent Books; *At the Drive-In Volcano* (2007); and *Miracle Fruit* (2003), all from Tupelo Press. With Ross Gay, she co-authored *Lace & Pyrite* (Organic Weapon Arts, 2014), a chapbook of nature poems. She is also the author of the collection of nature essays, *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments* (Milkweed, 2020), which was a Barnes & Noble 2022 Book of the Year. Most recently, she authored her second essay collection, *Bite by Bite: Nourishments and Jamborees* (Ecco, 2024), which was named a Barnes & Noble Best Book of 2024. Other awards

for her writing include the Pushcart Prize, a poetry fellowship to the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Boatwright Prize from Shenandoah, and the Richard Hugo Prize from Poetry Northwest. Nezhukumatathil won the NAAEE's 2024 Pepe Marcos-Iga Award for Innovation in Environmental Education.

Her poems and essays have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *Quarterly West*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *FIELD*, *Antioch Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Tin House*. Poems and essays have been widely anthologized in such venues as *The Best American Poetry series*, Billy Collins' second edition of Random House's *Poetry 180: A Poem a Day* and *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Asian American Poetry* from W.W. Norton. A number of essays and poems have also been published in several high school AP English textbooks and college textbooks

For a decade, she served as the poetry editor for *Orion* and *Sierra* magazines. A professor of English and Creative Writing for over twenty-five years, she also serves as a firefly guide for Mississippi State Parks.

LEARN MORE:

- **Author's Website:** aimeenez.net
- **Poetry Foundation Page:** www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/aimee-nezhukumatathil
- **ORION author's page:** orionmagazine.org/?s=Aimee+Nezhukumatathil

"Nezhukumatathil speaks with resonance and fierceness." —Publishers Weekly

"Aimee Nezhukumatathil's poems are as ripe, funny, and fresh as a precious friendship. They're the fullness of days, deliciously woven of heart and verve....Poems like these revive our souls." —Naomi Shihab Nye

"Nezhukumatathil's poems contain elegant twists of a very sharp knife. She writes about the natural world and how we live in it, filling each poem, each page with a true sense of wonder."—Roxane Gay



Joe Wilkins

Joe Wilkins is the author of two novels, *The Entire Sky* and *Fall Back Down When I Die*, both of which have garnered wide critical acclaim. Wilkins is also the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers*, and five collections of poetry, including *Pastoral, 1994*, a finalist for the 2026 Stafford/Hall Oregon Book Award for Poetry. Wilkins has also been a finalist for the First Novel Prize from the Center for Fiction, the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, and the Orion Book Award and has won the Oregon Book Award, the Montana Book Award, the GLCA New Writers Award, the Pushcart Prize, and four High Plains Book Awards. Born and

raised on a sheep ranch north of the Bull Mountains of eastern Montana, he lives with his family in the foothills of the Coast Range of Oregon.

Discover more: <https://joewilkins.org/> and <https://joewilkinswriter.substack.com/>.



Claire Boyles

Claire Boyles (she/her) is a writer and former farmer. A 2022 Whiting Award winner in fiction, she is the author of *Site Fidelity*, which won the High Plains Book Award and was longlisted for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Award, the Colorado Book Award, and the Reading the West Award. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Sierra Magazine* and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among other journals, and she is a screenwriter with multiple credits on the Hallmark Channel. She teaches in low-residency MFA programs at both Eastern Oregon University and Western Colorado University. Her debut novel, *Appraisals*, is forthcoming in August 2026.

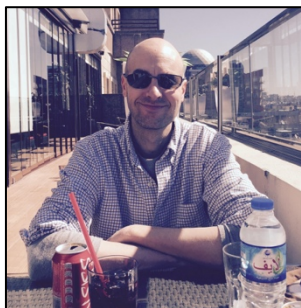
Discover more: <https://claireboyleswrites.com>



Sean Prentiss

Sean Prentiss is the award-winning author of *Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave*, which won the National Outdoor Book Award, Utah Book Award, and the New Mexico-Arizona Book Award, and the author of *Crosscut: Poems*. He is the series editor for the Bloomsbury Writers Guide and Anthologies Series. Two books, *Environmental and Nature Writing* and *Advanced Creative Nonfiction* are written by Prentiss. Prentiss is co-editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction* and co-editor of *The Science of Story: The Brain Behind Creative Nonfiction*. He and his family live on a small lake in northern

Vermont, and he serves as an associate professor at Norwich University. A Western Graduate, he maintains a hand-built cabin just outside of Gunnison. Discover more: <https://www.seanprentiss.com>



Jonathan Rovner

Jonathan Rovner has taught in Idaho, Kentucky, Nebraska, Colorado, and Iraq. His first collection, *All the Old Stories*, is forthcoming from Western Press Books. He works in the Office of Undergraduate Research at the University of Iowa and lives in Coralville, Iowa with his special-needs dog and others.



Laura Pritchett

Dr. Laura Pritchett directs the MFA in Nature Writing at Western Colorado University. She's a widely-published author of seven novels, two nonfiction books, and has had over 400 pieces published in places such as *Orion*, *The LA Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Sun*, *Terrain*, *Ecotone*, *Salon*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *High Country News*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Normal School*, *Writers on the Range*, and many others. She's editor of three anthologies about conservation, and her play, *Dirt: A Terra Nova Expedition*, was produced in 2018.

When not writing or teaching, she's generally found exploring the mountains of her home state of Colorado. Discover more: www.laurapritchett.com



Gretchen King

Gretchen King is the executive editor of *High Country News* where she helps orchestrate the flow of the magazine's journalism, manages its fellowship program, oversees digital content, including its website, social media and newsletters, and commissions and edits stories. She holds a B.S. in journalism and master's in professional communications and has worked in a variety of journalism, multimedia and public relations roles before landing at the magazine. Raised on the Western Slope of Colorado, Gretchen has lived in Boulder, Indiana, Oregon and

Fairbanks, Alaska. Now in Gunnison, Colorado, she loves any mountain experience, chocolate and spending time with her husband, Mike, her son, Riley, their two dogs and fat cat.



Alyssa Pinkerton

Alyssa Pinkerton has spent the last 17 years raising money for nonprofit news across the West--because strong journalism doesn't fund itself, and democracy isn't a DIY project. Before joining *The Colorado Sun*, she served as Director of Development at *High Country News* in Paonia, Colo., and has supported mission-driven organizations as both a contract and volunteer fundraiser. In short: she knows how to rally people who care and turn passion into impact.

Alyssa loves connecting big-hearted donors and visionary funders with

The *Sun's* mission: producing independent, high-quality journalism so every Coloradan can be informed, engaged and empowered. She believes giving isn't transactional, but an investment in truth, accountability and community. She lives in Fort Collins with her aggressively affectionate, longhair cat and her singer-songwriter spouse, Mike -- which means there's usually either live music or a lap full of fur.



Lizbeth Bárcena

Sandoz Emerging Writer Scholarship Honoree (GPCW)

Lizbeth Bárcena is a writer, naturalist, and architectural designer from Southern California, currently pursuing an MFA in Nature Writing at Western Colorado University. Originally from Guadalajara, Mexico, she grew up in a quiet San Joaquin Valley town in Alta California. A desert lover at heart, you'll find her in desert canyons and washes volunteering for the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and nonprofits in the Colorado and Mojave Deserts. A 2026 Literary Award Winner for Tucson Festival of Books in nonfiction, and a Semi-Finalist for the 2024 North American Review Terry Tempest Williams Creative Nonfiction Contest, her work has appeared/is forthcoming in *Witness Magazine*, *Writers on the Range*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, and *El Portal*.



Claire Thompson

Sandoz Emerging Writer Scholarship Honoree (GPCW)

Claire Thompson is a former longtime Forest Service trail worker, now pursuing an MFA in Nature Writing from Western Colorado University. With an MS in Environmental Studies and a graduate certificate in Natural Resources Conflict Resolution from the University of Montana, Claire has always been interested in the intersection of policy, ecology, and labor on public lands. Her work has appeared in, among others, *Lit Hub*, *High Country News*, *Qu*, *Camas*, and [Terrain.org](https://terrain.org), where she was a featured contributor to the 2022 "Lookout: Writing + Art About Wildfire" series and a finalist in the 2021 nonfiction contest. She teaches English at Wenatchee Valley College and calls the mountains of North Central Washington home.



Brandi Blaisdell

Story Catcher Festival Emerging Writer

Brandi Blaisdell (she/her) is a poet, gardener, and photographer living in Southwestern Colorado. Brandi's poems have been published in *3 Panel Poetry*, *Word Honey*, and *Utopian Futures* zines; exhibited in the interactive multimedia art collaborations with Tad Smith *Voices Inside My Head* and *Voices Inside My Head: Echo*; and Four Corners Writers Anthology *Four Corners Voices Vol. 2*. Brandi currently works for a multinational consulting firm as a project manager writing and managing proposals and engineering technical documents. As an emerging writer, Brandi has the goal of publishing a book of poetry.



Stephanie Johnson

Story Catcher Festival Emerging Writer

Stephanie Johnson (she/her) is a writer and poet, currently pursuing an MFA in Nature Writing from Western Colorado University. Stephanie's roots wind beneath her family's 100-year-old farm in Indiana and her current home in Kentucky. Her writing is saturated with equal parts nostalgia and discovery and explores themes of home, sustainability, and reciprocal relationships between self and place. Her work has appeared in *Pegasus*, the literary journal for the Kentucky State Poetry Society, *The Hanoverian*, and *Gravity Magazine*. Discover more: <https://substack.com/@earthistephi>



Laura Mahal

Story Catcher Festival Emerging Writer

Laura Mahal (she/her) is a prolific writer, poet, copy editor, veterans' advocate and mom, based in Northern Colorado. She's wrapping up an MFA in Nature Writing at Western Colorado University this July with a host of talented save-this-earth peers. Laura's a two-time winner of the Hecla Award for Speculative Fiction and a 2023 graduate of Lighthouse Writers Book Project. She's currently working on an absurdist novel aiming to put metaphorical David Lynch movies and Tom Waits' songs into complex conversations about motherhood. Her most recent poetry appears in *Quarter After Eight*, with upcoming essays and poetry in *Veterans' Voices*, but you can take a gander at her out-of-date author's page at www.lauramahalwriter.com.

With Gratitude to the Following:

Our Generous Donors:

- **The Mari Sandoz Society**
- **Western Colorado University**
 - Department of Communication Arts, Languages and Literature (CALL)
 - The English Program
 - The Graduate Program in Creative Writing
 - WordHorde Creative Writing Club
 - The Council for Creative Expression
 - The Resiliency Studies Fund
 - Offices of the President, the Provost and Student Affairs

With Crucial Assistance from:

- Elizabeth Chase – *Executive Secretary, Mari Sandoz Society*
- Shannon Smith – *President, Mari Sandoz Society*
- Cindy Petitio – *Administrative Assistant, CALL Department, WCU*
- Tamara Toomey – *Chair, CALL Department, WCU*
- Seth Mensing – *Media & Communications Manager, WCU*
- Reilly Selinger – *Annual Giving Coordinator, WCU Foundation*
- Benjamin Justice – *Chair of Music and Kinkaid Concert Hall Maestro, WCU*
- Kelley Jones – *Administrative Assistant, RADY manager, WCU/CU Boulder*
- Andrew Flebbe – *Campus AV Manager, WCU*
- Arvin Ramgoolam – *Owner, Townie Books (Crested Butte) and Organizer of the Mountain Words Festival (May 21-24) mtnwords.org*

And so many others! Thank you to the Western Community for all your Support!