

WRITERS REFLECT ON LIFE-CHANGING AWARD

EACH YEAR, WE INVITE WRITERS FROM ONE STATE to apply for the Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award, a contest with a unique prize. The winners—one poet and one fiction writer—are given an all-expenses-paid trip to New York City, during which they meet with agents, editors, publishers, and writers. “The award changed my writing life and affirmed and encouraged me beyond measure,” said **Carolyn Coman**, a 1991 winner from Massachusetts, who has twice been nominated for the National Book Award.

Since the program’s inception in 1984, the particulars have changed from time to time, but the purpose has remained the same: to help emerging writers build a network for professional advancement. The prize is generously supported by Maureen Egen, a member of Poets & Writers’ Board of Directors. We recently asked past winners—ninety-three writers from thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have participated to date—to reflect on the impact of the Writers Exchange Award, sometimes called the WEX Award.

In 1996, when the contest was open to writers from South Carolina, **Sue Monk Kidd** was selected as the fiction winner. Among the agents she met while in New York was the late Ginger Barber, who encouraged her to turn a short story she had written into a novel. Kidd heeded the advice and Barber sold the manuscript to Penguin. It was *The Secret Life of Bees*, which remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for two and a half years.

Washington, D.C.–based poet **Sandra Beasley** told us that the WEX experience helped her understand how to approach writing as a profession. A 2008 winner for poetry, she wound up with a book deal for her memoir, *Don’t Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life*. (She has since published three volumes of poetry as well.) For Maryland winner

Adam Schwartz, a short-story writer and Baltimore City Public School teacher, the impact of his 2012 visit to New York was “massive.” “[I]t was a sudden immersion into the nuts and bolts of how the publishing world works—a thing I had hitherto more or less ignored,” said Schwartz. “The first Saturday after I got back I went to Barnes & Noble and I had a totally different impression of the place,” he recalled. “I had a much fuller picture of where these books came from and the evolution they went through—which in many cases probably included various setbacks—to arrive glossily finished on a bookstore shelf.”

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—Carolyn Coman, 1991 WEX Award winner

Bryn Chancellor met her agent, Henry Dunow, during her WEX visit. The 2014 winner from Alabama also chose to spend a month at the Jentel Artist Residency Program in Wyoming—an opportunity extended to WEX winners since 2004, thanks to the generosity of Neltje, founder of Jentel and a former Poets & Writers board member. While at Jentel, Chancellor finished the first draft of her novel *Sycamore*, and Dunow subsequently sold it to HarperCollins, where it is slated for release in 2017. Winning the WEX Award was, Chancellor said, “a real, honest-to-god life changer.”

Beyond the introduction to agents, the award has yielded other benefits to its recipients as well. For **Charlotte Holmes**, winning the WEX Award in 1991 was “the last piece of the puzzle” in securing a tenured professorship. “I had everything but ‘national recognition,’ and winning

POETS & WRITERS IS CURRENTLY
ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FOR THE
2017 WRITERS EXCHANGE AWARD

Writers from Maine are eligible to apply. This year’s judges are Tania James for fiction and Cynthia Cruz for poetry. The submission deadline is January 9, 2017. To download guidelines and the application form, go to at.pw.org/wexaward.

this contest provided it,” Holmes said. “Having a tenured position at [Penn State] during the last three decades has been challenging, but it has given me a secure base of operations from which to write.” Poet **Michael Chitwood**, a 1989 winner from North Carolina, met Wendy Lesser, the editor of *Threepenny Review*, who has since published many of his poems over the years.

For some, the impact of the award is intense, but takes a longer time to be fully realized. **Lydia Yuknavitch**, a 1997 winner from Oregon, said that the award changed her life... eventually. “The writers I met during the visit to New York inspired me to embrace my own intellect and creativity,” said Yuknavitch, “although it took me a while to manifest that hope because I’m a hard case.” (She describes the important role that WEX played in her evolution as a writer in a TED talk called the Beauty of Being a Misfit.) Yuknavitch now seems to be making up for lost time. Her books *The Chronology of Water* and *The Small Backs of Children* have developed a devoted following, and her next novel, *The Book of Joan*, is forthcoming from HarperCollins.

“[Winning] lifted my confidence, deepened my faith, and kept me going when things got dark—and they really did, for a while,” said **Dylan Landis**, a 2004 WEX winner from California. The author of two acclaimed novels, *Rainy Royal* and *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*, Landis recalled people who made a lasting impression, such as “Richard Howard leaning toward me at lunch and saying, ‘Your work gives me news that I need’—this was rocket fuel, still is.”

For some, the opportunity to visit New York is, in itself, an invaluable aspect of the award. Poet **Brad Richard**, a 2002 winner from Louisiana, recalled, “On my WEX Award trip (that fairy tale time!), I saw the Thomas Eakins retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which led to my second book, *Motion Studies*.” On the other hand, **C. L. Rawlins**, a 1989 winner from Wyoming, said, “I got a glimpse of the New York literary scene—for me as distant as the moon—and realized that I was better off in the mountains and deserts of the West.” Nevertheless, an agent he met agreed to represent his nonfiction, which led to the publication of a number of his books.

Many of the writers we heard from confirmed that winning the award helped them to create a sustaining community. “I’d published a lot before I received the Writers Exchange Award, but I didn’t know that many other writers,” said **David Galef**, a 1991 winner from Mississippi. “I met a lot of them on the tour that was part of the award. The prize was an affirmation that my work mattered to a bigger circle

of readers than I’d thought, and afterward I decided to take more chances in my writing.” Galef, now an English professor and creative writing program director at Montclair State University, has published sixteen books including essays, poetry, and short stories.

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—*Dylan Landis, 2004 WEX Award winner*

The 2005 fiction winner from Georgia, **Lauren Watel**, offered a similar perspective. “I was writing in isolation from other writers,” she said, “and winning the award gave me a sense that I was part of a literary community.” Watel writes flash fiction and short stories, and won the 2012 Mississippi Review Prize in Fiction. Poet **Claudia Burbank**, a 2010 winner from New Jersey whose work has appeared in numerous journals, said, “As one who did not have the opportunity to pursue an MFA, it gave me the encouragement and validation of the writer’s community to pursue my dreams.”

Allison Benis White, a 2004 poetry winner from California, recalled meeting the poet Sophie Cabot Black. “[She] told me that I needed to change my definition of success, which was attached at the time only to external markers of value—she said that success was writing well. And that only I could determine if I was writing ‘well’—this measure was internal and rigorous, and concerned my own vision of what was genuine, valuable, and beautiful on the page.” White is now an assistant professor in the Department of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside; her third volume of poetry is forthcoming from Four Way Books.

In October, Bonnie Rose Marcus, director of the Writers Exchange Program, was once again conducting a pair of writers through a busy week of meetings and lunches. This time the winners were from Hawai‘i. **Kimo Armitage** (selected by Sarah Gambito, this year’s judge for poetry) and **Alicia Upano** (selected by Alexander Chee, judge for fiction) met editors from Penguin Random House, Four Way Books, and Ugly Duckling Presse, along with agents from Wylie and Curtis Brown. They were also able to meet writers and the leaders of literary organizations. In addition, they gave a reading at McNally Jackson Books in Manhattan. We cannot wait to read what comes of it all!

NEW BOOKS BY FRIENDS

FICTION

HUEY ALCARO

In the Land of Two-Legged Women
Inanna Publications: May 2016

PAUL ATREIDES

Marvin's World of Deadheads
Wild Rose Press: September 2016

SUSAN BREEN

Maggie Dove's Detective Agency
Random House/Alibi: November 2016

LUCAS CARPENTER

Mind and Body: And Other Stories
Anaphora Literary Press: April 2016

MARY HIGGINS CLARK

As Time Goes By
Simon & Schuster: April 2016

PAUL CLAYTON

Van Ripplewink: You Can't Go Home Again
CreateSpace: July 2016

JAIMEE WRISTON COLBERT

Wild Things
BkMk Press: October 2016

SUZANNE FELDMAN

Absalom's Daughters
Henry Holt: July 2016

S. J. FRANCIS

Shattered Lies
Black Opal Books: October 2015

LIZBETH GRIMM

Grimm's American Macabre
All Things That Matter Press:
October 2016

RONALD HOLTMAN

Hawk's Flight
CreateSpace: September 2016

MICHAEL R. LANE

The Gem Connection
Bare Bones Press: April 2016

UFOs and God
Bare Bones Press: October 2016

JACK MAYER

Before the Court of Heaven
Long Trail Press: October 2015

DIANA McCAULAY

Gone to Drift
Papillote Press: February 2016

DENNIS MUST

Going Dark: Selected Stories
Coffeetown Press: August 2016

SUZANNE SANDERS OVERSTREET

Wait For Me
eLectio Publishing: August 2016

ROBERTA PARRY

Killing Time
Mill City Press: January 2016

SUSAN HARRISON RASHID

Beneath a Shooting Star
Mill City Press: September 2016

ETHEL ROHAN

The Weight of Him
St. Martin's Press: February 2017

JAMES SIE

Still Life Las Vegas
St. Martin's Press: August 2015

PETER STRAUB

Interior Darkness
Doubleday: February 2016

FRANCES WEBB

Come to Memory: Joab's Story/Lila's Story
Strategic Book Publishing & Rights
Agency: July 2016

PAULA WHYMAN

You May See a Stranger: Stories
TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern
University Press: May 2016

GARY WILSON

Getting Right
Roundfire Books: January 2016

KIM DREW WRIGHT

The Strangeness of Men
Quick Wit Lit: June 2015

POETRY

JOHN ASHBERY

Commotion of the Birds: New Poems
Ecco: November 2016

KAYE BARTHOLOMEW

*We Didn't Know Any Better: Poems
About Life*
Gray Dog Press: September 2015

MICHELLE BITTING

The Couple Who Fell to Earth
C&R Press: May 2016

KWAME DAWES

City of Bones: A Testament
TriQuarterly Books:
January 2017

Speak from Here to There

Peepal Tree Press: July 2016

SALLY DeJESUS

The Moment Everything Changes
Self-Published: June 2016

GEORGE DREW

Pastoral Habits: New and Selected Poems
Texas Review Press: June 2016

CHARLES FISHMAN, Coeditor

*Veils, Halos & Shackles: International Poetry on
the Oppression and Empowerment of Women*
Kasva Press: April 2016

MARIA MAZZIOTTI GILLAN

What Blooms in Winter
NYQ Books: October 2016

TIM HUNT

Poem's Poems and Other Poems
CW Books: June 2016

MAJOR JACKSON

Roll Deep: Poems
Norton: August 2015

ALISON JARVIS

Where Is North
Silverfish Review Press: February 2017

LARRY JONES

A Poem of Common Prayer
Rogue Scholars Press: December 2016

PAULA AMEN JUDAH

Añoranza
Fithian Press: September 2016

ANTOINETTE LIBRO

The Carpenter's Lament in Winter
Finishing Line Press: February 2016

IRIS LITT

Snowbird
Finishing Line Press: October 2016

PATRICIA COLLEEN MURPHY

Hemming Flames
Utah State University Press: July 2016

TOM PLANTE

Atlas Apothecary
Finishing Line Press: March 2016

MARJORIE POWER

Seven Parts Woman
WordTech Communications:
August 2016

PHYLLIS PRICE

Quarry Song
Finishing Line Press: September 2016

JOHN RONAN

*Taking the Train of Singularity South
from Midtown*
The Backwaters Press: January 2017

SAMANTHA TERRELL

Compartmentalize This
Smashwords.com: August 2016

THOMAS THOMPSON

Tiger Mountain Medley
Kindle Direct Publishing:
December 2016

GENE TWARONITE

Trash Picker on Mars
Aldrich Press/Kelsay Books: August 2016

S. A. WARMACK

Blossoming Everywhere Like Sunlight
Nook Press: July 2016

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ANTHONY BARILLA

Disputed Territories: An Atlas
Self-Published: December 2015

RACHEL BERGHASH, Coauthor

*Psyche, Soul, and Spirit: Interdisciplinary
Essays*
Resource Publications: April 2016

NANCY DAVIDOFF KELTON

Finding Mr. Rightstein
Passager Books: April 2016

LESLIE LAWRENCE

*The Death of Fred Astaire and Other
Essays From a Life Outside the Lines*
State University of New York Press:
May 2016

DONALD HOLMES LEWIS

*A Wonderful Run at Life: The Stories
of Pandel Savic*
Orange Fraser Press: October 2016

M. L. LIEBLER, Editor

*Heaven Was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-Hop
and Beyond*
Wayne State University Press:
October 2016

RON SINGER

*Betty & Estelle/A Voice for My
Grandmother: Two Memoirs*
Akorin Books: July 2016

JASON WEISS

Cloud Therapy: A Book About Swimming
Talisman House Publishers:
October 2015

KATHY WILSON

Out of the Rabbit Hole
Fulton Books: September 2015

XU XI, Coauthor

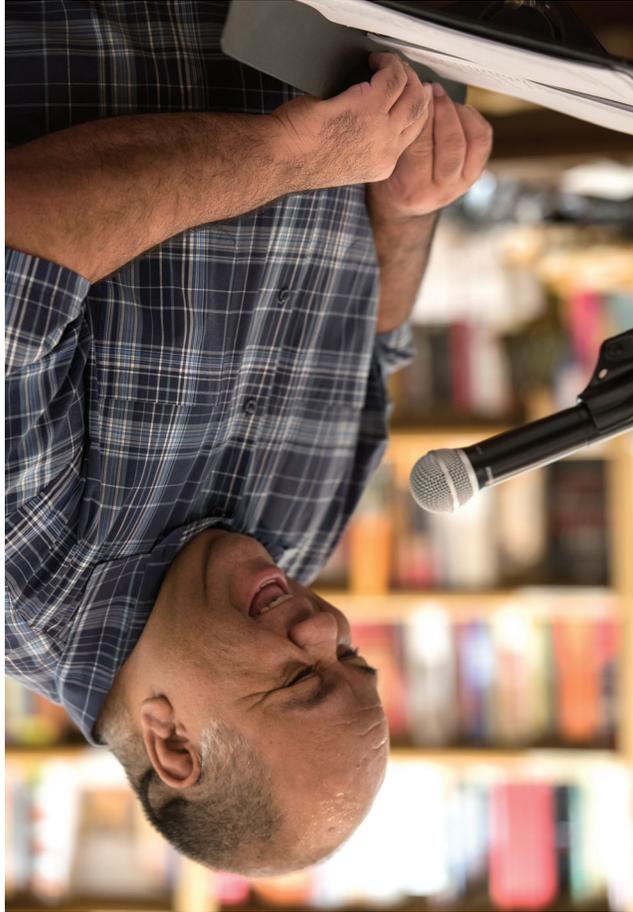
Interruptions
University of Hong Kong Press:
September 2016

E-MAIL friends@pw.org

*to have your publication included in
the next issue of Friends News. We list
books authored or edited by Friends
that have been published within the past
eighteen months or are forthcoming.*

Poets & Writers' work is rooted in the belief that literature is vital to sustaining a vibrant culture. We focus on nurturing literature's source: creative writers. Founded in 1970, the organization's mission is to foster the professional development of poets and writers, to promote communication throughout the literary community, and to help create an environment in which literature can be appreciated by the widest possible public. The Friends of Poets & Writers help support all our programs—making it possible for P&W to each year pay hundreds of writers fees for giving readings and conducting writing workshops, and to keep our extensive online resources free for all.

CONTACT US AT FRIENDS@PW.ORG



Poet Kimmo Armitage and fiction writer Alicia Upano, winners of the 2016 Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award, read from their manuscripts at McNally Jackson Books in New York City on October 30.

Photos by Alycia Kravitz.