

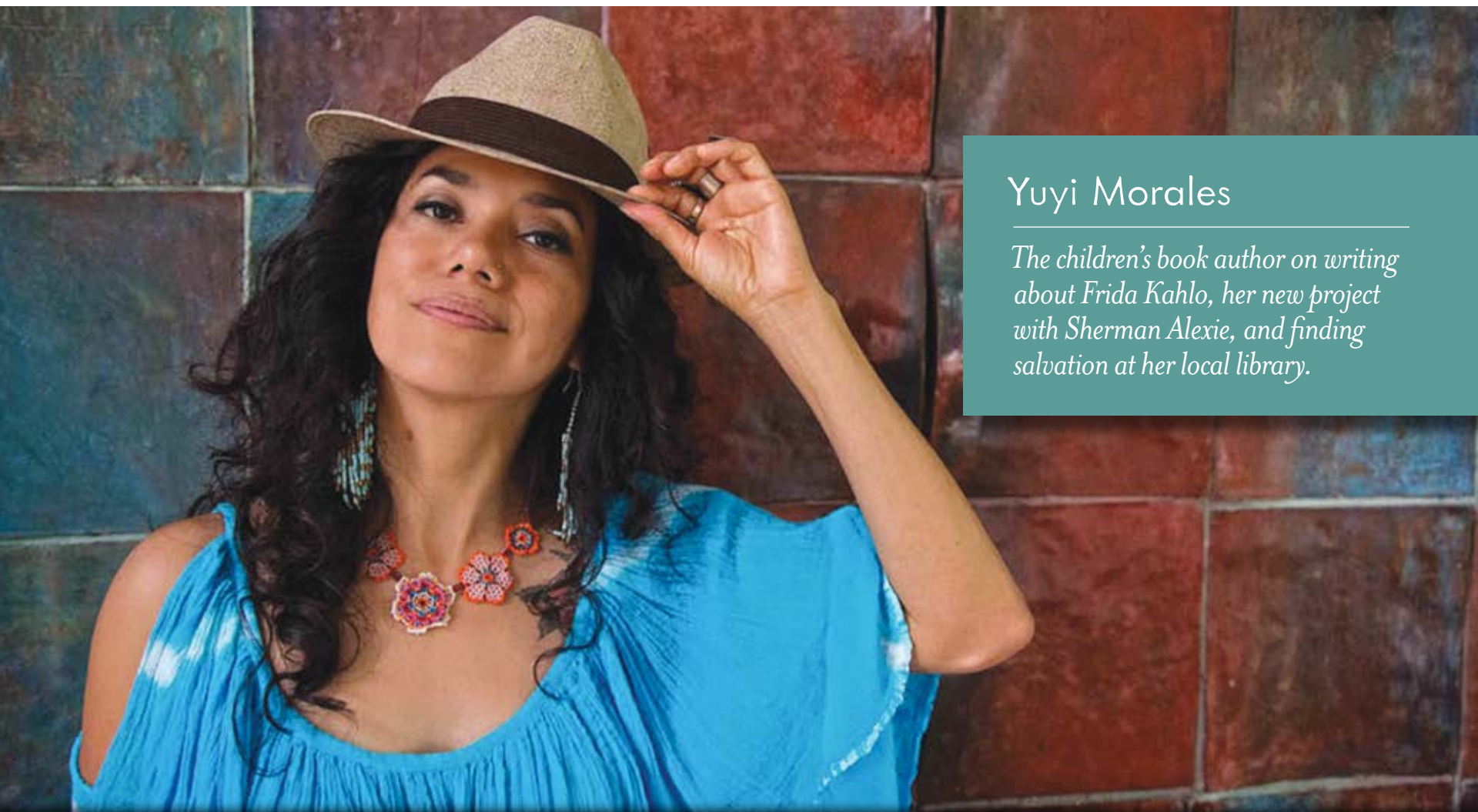
SPARK

The Magazine of Humanities Washington

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WASHINGTON

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FALL/WINTER 2015



Yuyi Morales

The children's book author on writing about Frida Kahlo, her new project with Sherman Alexie, and finding salvation at her local library.

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The Geek Culture Wars | Why America is Polarized | Sharma Shields's Reading Habits

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LISTENING TO EACH OTHER IN THE AGE OF DISTRACTION

*We're spending more time
online than ever. Is this good
for our discourse?*

By Julie Ziegler

Photo of Julie Ziegler by Devin Kearns Hamid



AMERICANS NOW SPEND an average of 11 hours per day in front of screens, according to a recent Nielsen study. Or as a headline in the satirical paper *The Onion* put it: “90% of Waking Hours Are Spent Staring at Glowing Rectangles.”

The clacking of a keyboard is replacing the sound of the human voice (and no, Siri doesn’t count). I, too, am guilty of relying heavily on texts and Facebook to keep in touch with people, and I also get the majority of my news online. I love the convenience but loathe the distance it puts between me and other human beings. In fact, I’m so reliant on these new forms of communication that I was genuinely surprised the other day when my phone rang with a voice call. All of this time spent online in our highly personalized and often narrow networks means we’re turning less to each other to discuss important issues, and we don’t often come in contact with perspectives different than our own.

The internet has brought us a staggering number of benefits. It provides us access to information on virtually anything, anytime, anywhere, and has given voice to previously marginalized social movements in ways that are inarguably powerful. However, this megabyte-a-minute mentality often means we sacrifice the space to contemplate—to



Photo by Michael Davis-Burchat, via Flickr/Creative Commons

step back, pause, truly listen, and let the machinery of our minds synthesize the knowledge we've gained. In the words of biologist E. O. Wilson, "We are drowning in information while starving for wisdom."

Research shows that the company of other people remains a potent factor in our health and happiness, so it stands to reason that it's a potent factor in the quality and civility of our discourse as well. Face-to-face communication—seeing the spark in someone's eyes or the quiver in their voice—is how we've understood each other and solved problems for millennia.

Much of this issue of *Spark* explores the problems and promise of our digital and physical spaces. Cultural critic Jennifer K. Stuller explains how the

internet has intensified the fight for the soul of geek culture. Washington State University professor Cornell Clayton discusses political polarization in the U.S. and how online and on-demand media has—and hasn't—intensified this trend. In "Viva Yuyi," children's book author Yuyi Morales speaks of the lifeline she found as a new immigrant from Mexico in the offline environment of her local public library.

Humanities Washington remains committed to creating space for in-depth discussions and consideration of issues. While we utilize technology—a website, blog, and active Facebook and Twitter networks, we intend it as a tool to inspire in-person conversations. We provide

places throughout the state for people to come together, talk about important issues, hear from experts, and listen to the stories of others. Nothing will ever replace the gratification that comes from human connection, and the sparkle you see in someone's eye when they learn something or have a new idea. We remain committed to providing these opportunities—it is Humanities Washington's heart and soul. Please answer our "call" and join us very soon for a program in a community near you.

With sincere appreciation,

Julie Ziegler, Executive Director

HOW POETRY CAN HELP US SAY THE UNSAYABLE

A good poem connects us to the world outside ourselves, says the Washington State Poet Laureate.

By Elizabeth Austen

WE MAKE OUR world by
what we choose to see.

I wrote that line years ago, and have copied it from notebook to notebook, waiting for the rest of the poem to arrive. But lately I've begun wondering if maybe it's less a fragment of a future poem and more a manifesto.

At first glance, it might seem like an endorsement of confirmation bias, that all-too-human tendency to only value evidence that confirms our existing ideas and opinions.

Confirmation bias is most insidious as it relates to beliefs

we're not conscious of: We filter the world around us, selectively noticing, believing and remembering things that affirm our ideas, all the while unaware of the unconscious editing we're doing moment by moment.

We make our world by what we choose to see.

The operative word is "choose." We can actively cultivate — seek out, take in, consider — perspectives that complicate and expand our view and, thus, our world. Or not.

Remember Starbucks's recent "Race Together" campaign? No matter how you felt about it, one thing it illustrated is just how fraught even suggesting a conversation about race can be.

The night the decision not to charge Officer Darryl Wilson in the death of Michael Brown was announced, I sat in

Washington State Poet Laureate Elizabeth Austen | Illustration by Gabriel Campanario / *The Seattle Times*

my house and read the news, feeling powerless and angry and ashamed.

As we struggle — as a country, as individuals — to reckon with racial inequality, we must first be willing to see what needs to change around us and within us.

This is where art — especially literature and poetry — can help us.

Over the past year, I've returned again and again to one particular book of poems: *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The author, Claudia Rankine, writes in response to racism's many forms, from the "wrongfully ordinary" beatings, deaths, and imprisonment, to the physiological and psychological toll that casual racism exacts.

What makes *Citizen* transformative is that Rankine takes the reader inside the experience. As I read, I feel how "the wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth" and how, "That time and that time and that time the outside blistered the inside of you, words outmaneuvered years, had you in a chokehold, every part roughed up, the eyes dripping."

Rankine said in an interview with NPR that the book's anecdotes reflect experiences of her own, and of her friends: "...when racism surprisingly entered in when you were among friends or colleagues or just doing some ordinary thing in your day."

We make our world by what we choose to see.

Poet Marie Howe defines poetry as "a cup of language to hold what can't be said." This is why poems are spoken at funerals and weddings, moments of heightened emotion, when we reach for language to carry us beyond the limits of ordinary speech to say the unsayable.

*[Poetry is] the closest thing
we can get to truly understanding
what it's like to see the world
as someone else does,
to live inside another's skin.*

I believe poetry is also a bridge between solitudes. At its best, it transports us — through the nonlinear and irresistible persuasion of music and metaphor — into a state of receptive empathy, the closest thing we can get to truly understanding what it's like to see the world as someone else does, to live inside another's skin.

Poetry doesn't substitute for relationships with actual people. But just as poem X might help me empathize with what it's like to lose a spouse, poem Y might help me understand what a particular person of color (one writer) experiences that I, a particular white person (one reader), do not.

The late Lucille Clifton, Tim Seibles, Natasha Trethewey, and Terrance Hayes are a few more poets, like Rankine, who have challenged and changed me,

remaking my world by shifting what I see. You'll find their poems online, at the library, and in your local bookstore.

We make our world by what we choose to see. 



Photo by Amanda Castleman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Austen is Washington State's Poet Laureate for 2014-16 and the author of *Every Dress a Decision*. The Washington State Poet Laureate program is sponsored by Humanities Washington and ArtsWA.

A pixel art illustration depicting a city gate. In the foreground, a group of diverse, colorful characters are gathered near a stone gate. A large, vibrant rainbow key is shown, with its handle on the right and its shaft extending towards the gate. The background features a city skyline with several buildings, each topped with a television set displaying the letter 'T'. The scene is set against a dark, stylized background with vertical light beams.

#GateCrashers

The culture wars have come to geekdom. How groups once locked out of geek culture are coming together and fighting back.

By Jennifer K. Stuller

Illustration by Brendan Gill and Laura Hudson



RECENTLY, I WAS picking up some whole bean coffee at my local grocery store—the kind that caters to families living in quiet urban neighborhoods. And right there, amidst

the organic French Roast and Fair Trade blends, was a shelf stocked with *Doctor Who*-themed mugs. British sci-fi-themed paraphernalia at the grocery store?!

Geek culture really is everywhere these days.

Another example: superheroes dominate screens both big and small. San Diego Comic-Con International (SDCCI), an annual convention born in 1970 with an attendance of 300, is now a cultural institution drawing over 130,000 people. The “Celebration of the Popular Arts”—as it’s tagged—is a fan event, an industry juggernaut, and an entertainment media marketing machine-cum-pop cultural barometer. SDCCI has become Mecca for geeks—and is mainstream enough to be reported on by national nightly news.

Yet while geek culture has been enthusiastically embraced by the masses, from moms who identify as “Tw-Hards” (fans of the *Twilight* book and film series), to cosplayers (a combination of costume and play), to gamers playing the smartphone- and tablet-based *Words With Friends*, some old school geeks are bitter about this perceived intrusion into their territory.

Why? Because historically, nerds’ obsessive devotion to fandom, and the detailed and labyrinthine knowledge of geek culture’s minutia that makes them “fanatic,” was met with harassment from the “cool kids.” Now that their subcultures (gaming, comics, genre, coding, etc.) are mainstream culture, it’s understandable that there might be some tension. What was previously an identity that marked them as outsiders, and thus connected them through a shared and unique differentness, is now embraced by most everyone. And some geeks (mostly straight, white, male ones) are taking up arms against this alien invasion with an alarming intensity.

This fear of cultural evolution is compounded by a cultural fear of the female/feminine that manifests in sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. Add in racism, and you have a recipe for a culture war. Or, at least one being fought by a small, but vocal, faction of geek traditionalists, who insist that they are entitled to a non-existent One True Ring of fandom. They are gatekeepers declaring in their best Gandalf impression: “You shall not pass.”

Sound familiar? Subcultural tensions echo mainstream culture wars — and nothing exists in a vacuum. The vile, combative, threatening language used by proponents of #GamerGate—a small, but vicious, movement of these geek traditionalists that claims to be about ethics in gaming journalism but is in fact a coordinated assault on female cultural

critics and female game designers—is echoed in the language used daily by men on the internet to intimidate women. The intimidation ranges from taunting to sexual harassment to death threats, and even talks by female cultural critics have had to be canceled because of threats of a massacre.

What was previously an identity that marked them as outsiders [...] is now embraced by most everyone. And some geeks (mostly straight, white, male ones) are taking up arms against this alien invasion with an alarming intensity.

For the women targeted, these actions can have a profound effect. Anita Sarkeesian, a media critic and prominent target of #GamerGate proponents, had to flee her home because the threats became so dire. “Harassment is the background radiation of my life,” she has said. Other women have been forced offline, silenced and shamed for having a public voice. Many live in fear, ineffectively protected by the police and other authorities, and out of a job.

(And yes, this intimidation stems to men as well—but most of the time, the stakes are not the same. As Danielle Citron points out in her book, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*,



Panel discussion at GeekGirlCon | Photo via Flickr/
Creative Commons

cyber-harassment disproportionately impacts women—and in ways that make it difficult to participate in, or benefit from, the economic, political, and social opportunities afforded by the internet.)

However the internet, while often dark and full of terrors (to borrow from *Game of Thrones*'s Red Priestess), is simultaneously a facilitator that brings like-minded individuals together to use their powers for good. Because there is no longer a great divide between “online” and “IRL” (In Real Life), positive change online can mean positive change everywhere.

Geek girls have always been drivers of geek culture. But they were relatively isolated until they found each other via social media platforms such as

LiveJournal, Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. Once connected, they formed local, international, and online communities that inspire conversation, cultural critique, political action, and celebration. Using the semiotics of the internet, they push back on industry standards, and create new language out of popular culture itself to provoke dialogue about sexism, harassment, and representation. Memes, particularly hashtags and image-and-text combinations, are not only a cathartic reaction to their own frustrations, but are an active response. The “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme can be reclaimed in ways that mock and expose the shaming intent of the original content. Exploitative comic book covers featuring women in sexualized acrobatic positions (rather than active, heroic ones) are exposed through viral consciousness-raising tactics like “The Hawkeye Initiative,” where contributors replace those ridiculous illustrations of female superheroes with drawings of The Avengers's Hawkeye. The result is a space to talk about double standards in representation in comics, media representation, and even media-making industries.

Geektivists, geek girls, and gaymers' blending of identity politics and fandom with digital participation is as fascinating as it is innovative. Activism manifests as both critical social justice work and playful intervention.

Some geektivists use their own bodies through costuming and performance to subvert assumptions about body size,

gender, ability, and race. Crossplay, the act of gender-swapping a character through costuming, and nerdlesque, or “nerdy burlesque,” challenge dominant cultural notions about bodies and are a form of performative fan fiction in which the players get to tell their own stories—ones in which they are represented instead of marginalized or made invisible. In 2015, black nerds—sometimes referred to as “blerds”—further challenged assumptions with a coordinated #28DaysofBlackCosplay hashtag during Black History Month to help celebrate and promote diversity in the community. Throughout the month of February, enthusiastic blerds shared images of themselves, often in handmade and detailed costuming in a joyous geektivist moment. The use of social media amplified their visibility.

Inclusion in geek spaces must come with safety for marginalized people, and geektivists, geek girls, and gaymers make interventions in physical spaces like Comic-Con International by advocating for clear anti-harassment policies. The organization Cosplay Does Not Equal Consent, in particular, suggests that street harassment has its own iteration in convention spaces, and they petition cons to actively and officially





Suited-up GeekGirl-style at GeekGirlCon | Photo via Flickr/Creative Commons



Jennifer K. Stuller | Photo by Nate Watters

prevent verbal harassment, groping, and non-consensual photography through publicly posted and duly enforced guidelines.

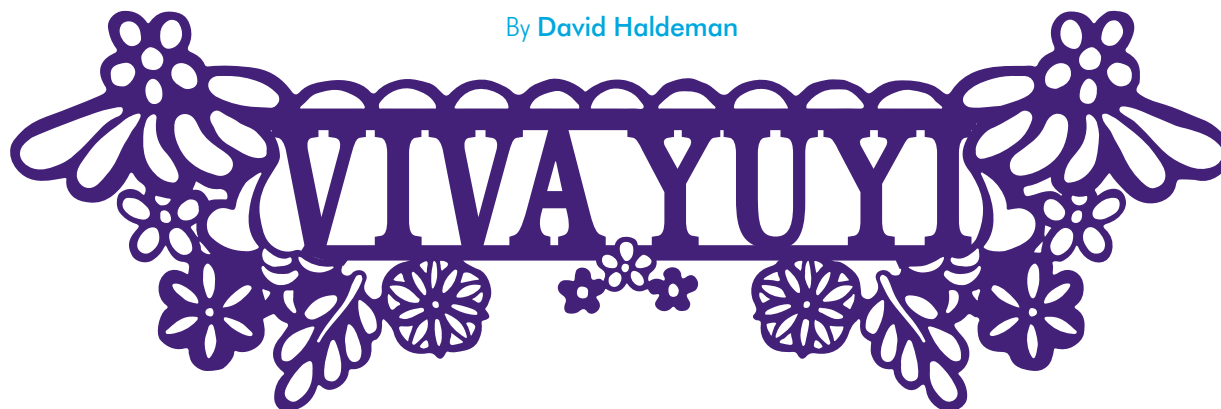
While the masses embrace geekdom as never before, there are still niche audiences who wish to come together. They may feel left out, uncomfortable, or harassed at larger events. Alternative events offer safe(r) spaces, and have the potential to influence established cons. Celebrating its fifth year in October 2015, GeekGirlCon draws an attendance of over 7,000 individuals to celebrate, support, and empower women in the community. Bent-Con, GX3: Everyone Games, and Flame Con are all LGBTQ-focused conventions funded through Kickstarter. Crowd-funding has become a critical tool in empowering community-organizers, as well as writers, makers, and artists, to do their work.

In my own feminist geek work, I vow to use my powers for good. J.K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter, said in her commencement address to Harvard graduates in 2008, “We do not need magic to transform the world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already. We have the power to imagine better.” Geeks have this power, and will continue to evolve the culture with our imaginations. Accio community. Accio change. May we all live long and prosper. ^h_w

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer K. Stuller is a culture writer, speaker, and the co-founder of GeekGirlCon. She is a member of Humanities Washington’s Speakers Bureau, and delivers her talk, “Using Their Powers for Good: How Geektivists, Geek Grrls, and Gaymers are Creating More Inclusive Communities,” in community venues throughout the state.

By David Haldeman



When Yuyi Morales first arrived in the U.S., she was unemployed, caring for a new baby, and struggling to learn English. Then children's books proved her salvation.



Photo by Antonio Turok

AN OLD WOMAN finds death at her door, telling her it's time to leave.

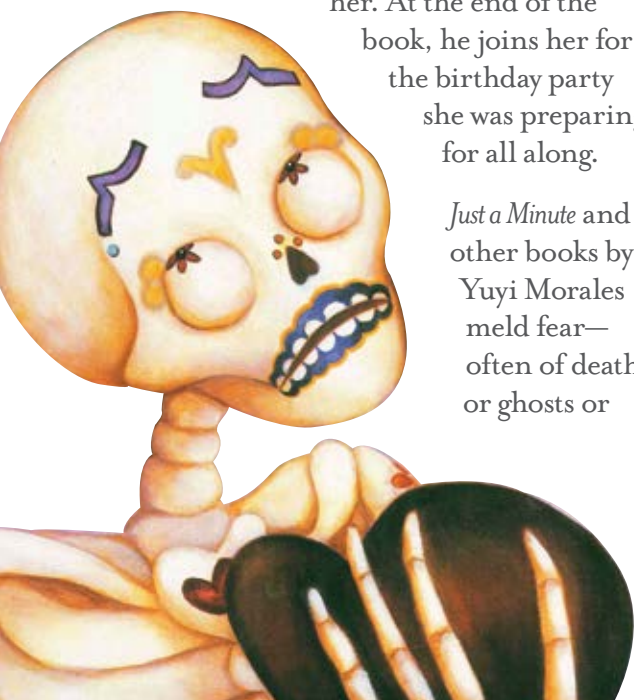
"Just a minute," she says. "I will go with you right away, I have just ONE house to sweep."

The delaying tactic works. Death waits, and the woman performs other tasks in incremental numbers: boiling two pots of tea, making three pounds of corn into tortillas, slicing four fruits. On each page of *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book*, the requisite numerals are written in English and Spanish in large, wavy block letters that could have been culled from a carnival sign. ONE/UNO, TWO/DOS, THREE/TRES.

In this way humankind's greatest fear, in the form of a skeleton in a top hat, is not only defeated by a woman's hard work and creativity, but is won over by her. At the end of the

book, he joins her for the birthday party she was preparing for all along.

Just a Minute and other books by Yuyi Morales meld fear—often of death or ghosts or



monsters—with language lessons and messages about determination, creativity, and storytelling, qualities that reveal as much about their creator as the books she creates.

Language, learning, and fear provided a creative spark for Morales. The four-time Pura Belpré award winner and author of numerous books including *Niño Wrestles the World*, *Just a Minute*, and the recently released *Viva Frida*, was born in Xalapa, Mexico. After meeting her husband, she immigrated to the U.S. speaking almost no English.

"It was very hard at first, because I lived a whole year in my mother-in-law's house and they spoke only English," Morales told *Publisher's Weekly*. "I became terrified of answering the telephone, worried I would not understand what the caller was asking."

The local library—the children's section in particular—proved her salvation. She found comfort in the simple juxtaposition of words and images, and used children's books to grow her English skills. She eventually became fascinated enough with the medium to become a children's book author herself.

Her latest book, *Viva Frida*, about the life of Frida Kahlo, has taken her career to new heights: In February, it won a Caldecott honor.

Humanities Washington brought Morales to Washington State in late February,

where she gave presentations at libraries in Walla Walla, the Tri-Cities, Sunnyside, Yakima, and Bellingham.

Were children's books a large part of your childhood growing up in Mexico, and was that what led you to your career as a children's illustrator?

No, not at all actually. Back in Mexico when I was growing up they didn't really have books for children. It wasn't part of my childhood at all. I read some of the books that my parents had which were adult books, though I didn't really understand them. When I was growing up I would have never ever imagined that making, writing, and illustrating children's books could be a career or even a possibility. It wasn't until I was an adult and came to the United States.

Do you think the absence of children's books is what intrigued you about them later on?

Yes definitely. Comic books were what I was reading. I read a lot of Spanish language translations of American comic books. I read also a lot of Mexican productions. There were a lot of artists doing these comic magazines, graphic magazines I guess you'd call them.

It sounds like you're particularly attracted to visual narratives.

I love the visual narrative.

Illustration from *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book* by Yuyi Morales

and just know they were there—but I was unable to make sense of the rest of the story. But because the text was spare, that could be very helpful.

*everything
to sun*

I had a ba
Unite
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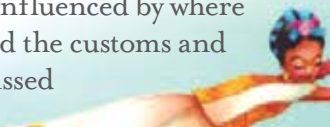
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My books are a combination of my culture growing up, but also my entering a new culture as an immigrant and having to learn—to re-learn—everything so that I'd actually be able to survive in a new country.

I learned how to read and then I decided I wanted to try to make them. They just became an important part of my life. But you are right that it is because of the visual narrative they gave me.

Yes, yes. Absolutely. I didn't speak much English at all. I was a new mother. I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't have a job. Everything I studied back in Mexico was good for nothing, especially if I didn't speak English. That was part of my experience. So it was partly about the language barrier with books but also the fact that I needed to feel like there were familiar things [from Mexico] around me, of which there were very few. A way to bring them into my life was through making stories and illustrations. So my books are very influenced by where I come from and the customs and things that I missed at the time.



My books are a combination of my culture growing up, but also my entering a new culture as an immigrant and having to learn—to re-learn—everything so that I’d actually be able to survive in a new country.

How did the idea for *Viva Frida* come about?

It came from many places, but one of them was from when I was a kid. I knew about Frida Kahlo the painter, but it was hard to relate to her—to understand her—and her artwork. But I knew that she loved to paint self-portraits. I like to do the same too. I’m not great, but I loved learning to draw by drawing my own face, and sometimes when I did it I thought about Frida Kahlo. I imagined this

well-known artist. I thought, “If she could do it, why can’t I do it myself?”

The other thing was when I came to the United States many years later. Although I knew about Frida Kahlo back in Mexico, she really wasn’t that famous back home. But in the U.S. she was a superhero. Everyone used her as a symbol for many different things. And I started realizing that I wasn’t sure that the sense some people have about Frida in the U.S. was the one I had from her, and I wanted to learn more about Frida Kahlo and learn who she was through me.

So I had this idea for a while about creating a book about her. I also wanted to because she was a woman who, in the creation of her own identity, from how she dressed to what she did to her political activities—all of those things, were part of a pride in who she was. And it was through creating this identity that she also was creating art.

It wasn’t only because of her painting [that I was inspired]. She was very proud of her Mexican heritage, and she showed it in the way she dressed and all sorts of other things. I had just come to the United States, a place where I didn’t know how I felt about my identity as a Mexican woman, and it was her pride that had an impact on me and made me realize that I had things to be proud of too.

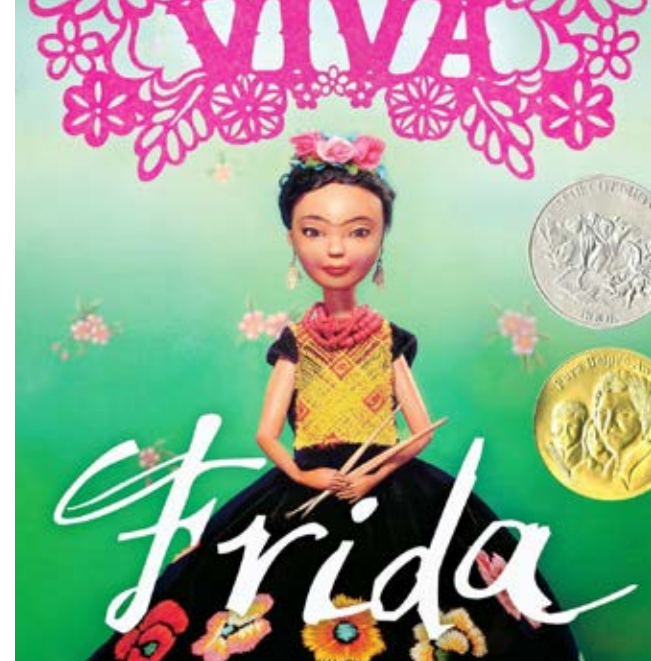
I understand that you’ve had this idea for a while, but the book itself came because you drew the idea out of a hat?

Yes! [laughs] In my writer’s group every year at the end of the year we give ourselves an assignment. We put some words and ideas

Illustrations (left and right) from *Viva Frida* by Yuyi Morales



Morales performing for children at Sunnyside Library. | Photo courtesy of Sunnyside Daily Sun News



Caldecott-winning Viva Frida.

for books on pieces of paper and draw them from inside a hat. Whatever those words are, we use them to create a new story, and at the last meeting of the year we have to come up with that story. We can use the words any way we want—we can use those words in the story, or we can use them to give you an idea—anything. And the words I drew that year were “baby book.”


So I had been wanting to create this book about Frida Kahlo and I thought, “Ok, I’m going to use this frame, and the frame is ‘baby book.’” So I started to think: How could I create a book about someone as complex as Frida Kahlo—one that could become a baby book, a book that a baby might relate to and understand? I came to this place where I wanted to show in this book something simple but meaningful, and that also related to little kids. So [the

book] developed a message: *we have everything we need to be creative*. The text became about how we all see, we all search, we all play. The idea of the story comes from the simple things we are all capable of doing that can lead us to be creative people just like Frida Kahlo.

What’s your next project?

I have a book that I’m about finished with. It’s a picture book written by Sherman Alexie, and it’s his first picture book. It’s a book about a boy, and the title so far is *Thunder Boy, Jr.* It’s about a boy and his name—how he’s named after his father, and how they both have the same name. He’s searching for a self; he’s trying to come up with a name that reflects what he’s good at and what he does, and in the process, he also finds a connection to his father. It’s great—beautiful.

You just completed a tour of Eastern Washington and Bellingham. What message do you hope kids took away from your presentations?

I hope they fall in love with books. I loved seeing this special time where parents come and bring their children and look at books—it’s like a party. I hope that what happens is the children see that reading books, creating books, and loving books, is a celebration. And that books can be a part of everything beautiful in life. And that hopefully they’ll have them next to their beds, on tiny tables in their bedrooms, everywhere they end up in life. And also that they can use these books to practice being heroes in their own lives. I’d love that. 

MAD AS HELL

WHY AMERICA IS POLARIZED

Politics gets uglier when there are real, important differences between the parties, says Cornell Clayton.

By **Jefferson Robbins**



Woman at an anti-war protest. | Photo by Nestor Lacle, via Flickr/Creative Commons

CORNELL CLAYTON HAS made a study of American rudeness.

When political debate reaches a fever pitch, often it's because the nation is nearing a turning point when change has become necessary, but that change is being held back by entrenched forces. This is the perspective that Clayton offers in his Speakers Bureau presentation, "Political Incivility and Polarization in America."

In his talks, Clayton compares the current period of political incivility with other flashpoints in American history to prove how incivility has served as a catalyst to move the nation forward when other means have failed.

Clayton is director of the Thomas S. Foley Institute for Public Policy and Public Service at Washington State University. He holds a doctorate in philosophy from

the University of Oxford and co-edited a book of collected essays, *Civility and Democracy in America: A Reasonable Understanding*.

When does incivility become a threat in the American political arena?

Not all acts of political incivility are by nature undemocratic.

In the past, acts of incivility have often served to advance democratic causes. Think

of the original Tea Party in Boston, or the perceived behavior of women suffragists during the latter nineteenth century, or even the perceived behavior of civil rights activists during the 1950s and 1960s. All of these groups engaged in “uncivil” behavior that violated social norms, customs, and even the laws of their day.

It is also true that certain forms of civil discourse are essential in order for democracy to function properly. There are acts of incivility that clearly threaten democracy and make democratic discourse impossible—for example, intimidation and acts of physical violence.

What are examples of uncivil or undemocratic behavior?

The presidential campaign in 1800 between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams was one of the most vicious and vile on record. Partisan politics became so bitter during that period that it led to a duel between two of the foremost political leaders—Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr—in which Hamilton was killed.

During the 1930s, political opponents called Franklin Roosevelt a Communist, a Fascist, and a dictator. Father Charles Coughlin pioneered the use of talk radio as a platform to launch bombastic, personal assaults against President Roosevelt and others.

The 1960s began with massive civil disobedience by Civil Rights protesters, and ended with violent anti-war demonstrations across the country.



Conservative media personality Glenn Beck. | Photo by Gage Skidmore, via Flickr/Creative Commons

Three towering political figures during that decade—John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy—were assassinated.

So clearly politics today are not as bad as they were from a civility standpoint as they were in previous periods, but they are not the norm, either.

To what extent do partisan media outlets contribute to incivility?

Numerous empirical studies have examined this question, and the evidence is mixed. It is safe to say that media is not the primary driver of polarized politics.

There is little evidence, for example, that watching Fox News makes someone more conservative, or that watching MSNBC makes anyone more liberal. Rather, people who already hold strongly conservative

It is safe to say that media is not the primary driver of polarized politics.

views will tune in to Fox News, and those with strong liberal values will watch MSNBC. Is that good or bad? Activists on both sides will be exposed to only the views that reinforce their preconceptions, and rarely have their views challenged in open and thoughtful ways that might lead them to better understand the other side.

It is also important to keep in mind that people who regularly watch cable news programs or listen to political talk radio represent a small minority of the populace—less than maybe 15 to 20 percent. Far



Top: Protestors flood the Wisconsin state house over Gov. Scott Walker's budget bill. | Photo by Emily Mills, via Flickr/Creative Commons **Bottom:** A patriotic demonstration turns to anger. | Photo by Danny Hammontree, via Flickr/Creative Commons

more Americans watch programs like “Wheel of Fortune” every night than shows hosted by Bill O’Reilly or Rachel Maddow combined. Those who do watch political programs are usually better informed about politics and tend to be more politically engaged — so that is good.

New media are transforming the way our democracy works. Shortened news cycles; the decline of serious network news bureaus; the decimation of print media and newspapers as a source of political information; and the more casual, less controlled forms of discussions that take place online—all of these impact the nature of politics and democratic deliberation in the United States.

Where does incivility begin? Is it with the political parties and their candidates, or with the mood of the electorate?

Political incivility begins with partisan polarization and a closely divided electorate. It is a *consequence*, not a cause, of political division.

Politics become more passionate—and less civil—when there are real, important differences between the parties. Political parties have become ideologically more monolithic and polarized in recent years, and the American electorate has remained evenly divided since at least the late 1960s. This has led to less civility among elected elites and the public.

American society is clearly in the midst of major economic, demographic, and cultural transformations that are having a polarizing effect on our society. Partisan entrepreneurs capitalize on these divisions through the use of “wedge issues” in order to build their electoral coalitions and maintain a continuous campaign in which actual policymaking takes a backseat to partisan political calculations.

Does ever-poorer voter turnout reflect dissatisfaction with the way politics is conducted now?

No. People are more motivated to vote when they perceive real differences between the parties. Voter turnout has actually increased in recent years. During the 1980s through the 1990s, voter turnout in presidential elections hovered at or below 50 percent. During the last three presidential elections it has been much closer to 55 and 60 percent.

Political polarization usually leads to greater political participation (such as in voting, contributing to campaigns, or going to political meetings). The periods historically that have had the deepest political divisions—the 1890s, 1930s, and the 1960s, also have had the highest election turnout rates! If parties have similar policy views, it is difficult for voters to get motivated.

Despite the increased levels of participation, however, there is evidence that the gridlock caused by divided government and a closely divided electorate over such a long period of time is leading to a decline in the confidence and trust Americans have in their democratic institutions. The growing cynicism about politics and the loss of faith in elections and political action to resolve major problems is, I think, a cause for concern and something that requires more focus and attention. ^{hw}

READING HABITS: SHARMA SHIELDS

Sharma Shields on taking the works of James Joyce to a desert island, marrying Helen Phillips's The Beautiful Bureaucrat, and the strange comfort of HGTV Magazine.

by David Haldeman



Reading Habits is a series that asks authors, artists, community leaders, and others about their lives as readers.

Sharma Shields is the author of the short story collection Favorite Monster (winner of the 2011 Autumn House Fiction Prize), and the novel The Sasquatch Hunter's Almanac. She lives in Spokane.

A book you're reading right now.

I'm reading Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*. I just finished *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* by Helen Phillips, which I love and want to marry.

Your favorite place to read.

I love reading anywhere, really, but usually I read in bed. I rest quite a lot because I have multiple sclerosis and I tire out easily. It's a great excuse to read.

Your least favorite place to read but you often end up reading there anyway.

I always pretend to read in a doctor's office, but the truth is, I'm usually distracted by people-watching. I'll read a paragraph and then listen in on a woman's cell phone conversation. I'll pretend to read another paragraph and surreptitiously spy on a couple having a quiet argument in the corner. Hard to get any reading done in those transitory spaces.

You're banished to a desert island. For reading material you're allowed to take the complete works of just one author. Who is it?

ACK. Only one? That's a difficult choice. Authors I love to read and re-read include Shirley Jackson and graphic novelist Chris Ware, but I think if I was sequestered on an island, I would choose James Joyce. Or Iris Murdoch, since I've only read one of her books and now I want to read them all.

What you're holding when you read: a paper book or an e-reader. Why?

I use both. I get fatigue in my hands from time to time (again: multiple sclerosis) and an e-reader is easier to hold when my fingers tremble. E-readers can be great for people with hand fatigue or vision issues; they are lightweight and you can adjust the type size. But like most people, I love the feel and sight and smell of a paper book above all else. Library books are my very favorites. I love the glossy protective covers and the sensation that the book has been and will soon be passed onto someone else. The truth is, whether its audio or visual, once I get into a story, the medium hardly matters. It's the story that transports me, not the paper or screen.

What I loved about working in the library was witnessing the disparities within everyone's reading taste. That was a liberating thing for me to realize as a writer, that there millions of readers out there, and that no matter what you're writing, you'll likely be able to connect with a handful of them.

A book that changed your life in a significant way.

W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* affected me powerfully. When I read it, I was in my mid-twenties, a time in my life when I felt quite a lot of guilt for

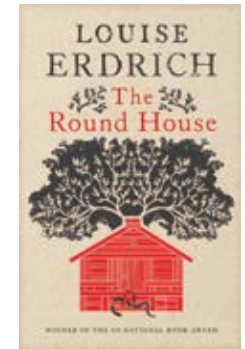
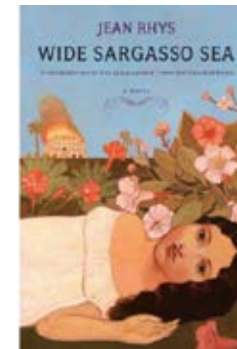
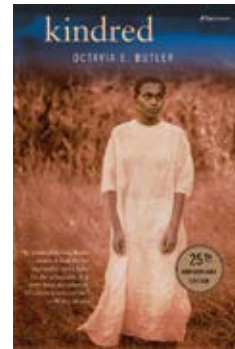
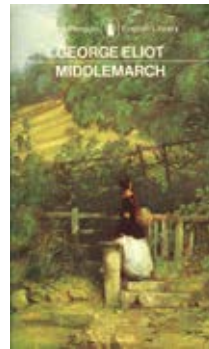
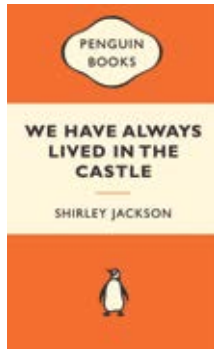
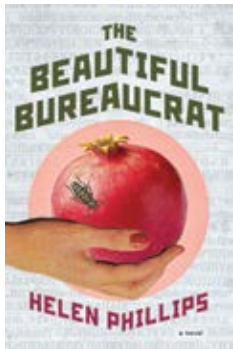
becoming my own person and cleaving my beliefs from the beliefs of my family. The main character struggles and then triumphs with a similar dilemma. It was like a slap in the face: Become who you are, unapologetically. I'm still working on the unapologetically part, but that book was very life-affirming for me.

You become the librarian for the entire world. As part of your newfound powers, you get to require everyone on earth to read one book. Which one?

All librarians are superheroes, that's for sure. But boy, I'm not sure I'd want everyone to read the same book. I'm sort of anti mob-mentality in that sense. What I loved about working in the library was witnessing the disparities within everyone's reading taste. That was a liberating thing for me to realize as a writer, that there millions of readers out there, and that no matter what you're writing, you'll likely be able to connect with a handful of them. But I suppose if I had to *suggest* one book (and people would be absolutely allowed to openly hate it), I would suggest Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, if only because I'd enjoy hearing all of the different opinions about Jackson's wonderfully slippery narrator.

A book you found too disturbing to finish.

I'm not easily disturbed. I like horror and I like dark. But especially since becoming a mom, I loathe when fiction writers harm kids in their work for no other reason than shock value. I quit reading *The Walking*



Dead series because of that very thing: the abrupt violence against an infant felt entirely unearned to me. That said, I realize this is just a personal sensitivity I've developed; it's something that happens in the real world, after all. I'm just incredibly disturbed by it these days.

Do you write in the margins?

Nope.

Do you fold the page corners?

No, sir! These are usually library books, and writing on/folding the pages is blasphemous.

A book you think should be considered a classic, but isn't.

I would love for more women to be included in the literary canon. Just a few that come to mind include Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*, Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. I want to hear more about authors like Iris Murdoch and Mercè Rodoreda and Daphne du Maurier.

Where you buy most of your books.

Auntie's Bookstore here in Spokane. Atticus has a wonderful book selection, and Boo Radley's has arguably the best graphic novel selection in town. We also have a great used store near my home called Second Look Books.

Longest number of hours you've ever spent reading something. What was it?

I'm not sure about the number of hours, but I've never read anything with greater concentration than *Ulysses*. I love the humor and heart and ingenuity in that book, and nothing is better to me than a huge tome that engages me both intellectually and emotionally. Although when I tried *Finnegan's Wake*, I absolutely failed. Couldn't even make it through the first chapter. I once heard that Ezra Pound told Joyce he hated *FW*, and that Joyce reacted by taking the manuscript to bed with him and weeping over it for days on end. That story makes me love Joyce all the more...

Second on the list would be *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot. That book had some

outstanding plot twists. It's always fun to learn from the geniuses of the genre.

A book you're embarrassed to admit you like.

I've read it all, Janette Oke, Sweet Valley High, Jackie Collins, Mary Higgins Clark, Christopher Pike and whatnot. Being an agnostic, it's probably weird that I've read Janette Oke, but I used to devour those books as a kid. Back then, I happily read everything my grandma sent to me.

That said, my guiltiest pleasure right now is HGTV Magazine. It's soothing for me but it has absolutely zero impact on the mental health of the world.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Sharma Shields will be reading an original short story written specially for Humanities Washington's Bedtime Stories literary gala in Spokane on October 23. For details, visit humanities.org.

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17TH ANNUAL BEDTIME STORIES SEATTLE

OCTOBER 2, 2015

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*A selection of upcoming
Humanities Washington
events around the state*

OCTOBER 20 – FREELAND

Adventures In Entomophagy – Waiter, There's No Fly In My Soup!

Renowned author and “Bug Chef” David George Gordon leads an exciting presentation about the major benefits of entomophagy (a.k.a. eating bugs) and how this alternative to meat could be the solution to some of the global problems we face today.

OCTOBER 24 – BAINBRIDGE ISLAND

I'll Fly Away: A Sojourn Through Poetry and Spirituals

Through an interactive presentation, Gloria Burgess explores the beautiful heritage of spirituals and poetry from the African American tradition and explains how art can help people cope with being transported to a new culture.

OCTOBER 26 – ABERDEEN

Poetry Workshop with Poet Laureate Elizabeth Austen

Austen leads a free, hands-on poetry workshop designed to engage participants' imaginations, life histories, and sense of empathy through language. The class includes close reading of a few contemporary poems, then using one as a model for a first draft. No previous writing experience needed, and all are welcome.

NOVEMBER 5 – TWISP

Theodore Roosevelt: Wilderness Warrior in Washington State



In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt made a stop in Washington state as part of a 17-city national tour, inspiring thousands of Washington residents on both sides of the Cascades. The wilderness legacy that ensued from this visit guarantees our sense of place in Washington state today with the formation of national wildlife refuges, national forests and parks, and national monuments. Scott Woodward explores how this legacy resulted from the particular leadership methods used by Roosevelt and his personal mission to preserve natural resources.

OCTOBER – NOVEMBER: SEATTLE, TACOMA, AND YAKIMA

Fall Think & Drink Series

Humanities Washington's series of hosted conversations on provocative topics is coming to pubs and tasting rooms throughout the state.

OCTOBER 21, YAKIMA:

Who Writes History? Perspectives on the Confederate Flag

OCTOBER 27, SEATTLE:

Black and Blue: A Conversation about Policing and Race

OCTOBER 28, TACOMA:

Last Rights: The Ethics of the Death Penalty

NOVEMBER 10, SEATTLE:

Seattle Skin: Being Black in a Liberal City

NOVEMBER 11, YAKIMA:

Finding Hope in America: A Refugee's Story

NOVEMBER 19, TACOMA:

America Behind Bars: Mass Incarceration and Civil Rights

NOVEMBER 14-15 – SPOKANE

Fall Folk Festival 2015

Celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Spokane Folklore Society's Fall Folk Festival by experiencing over 100 traditional/ethnic music, song, dance, and storytelling performance groups.

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OF HUMANITIES WASHINGTON
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Don't think about giving.



Think & Drink photo by Mark Hipple

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NEWS & NOTES

Humanities Washington announcements and activities

Compiled by **Humanities Washington staff**

Tod Marshall and Ellen Ferguson Honored with 2015 Humanities Washington Awards



Left: Tod Marshall | Photo provided
Right: Ellen Ferguson | Image courtesy ICHS

Philanthropist Ellen Ferguson and poet Tod Marshall are the winners of the 2015 Humanities Washington Award. The awards are presented annually to two individuals or organizations whose time and talents enlarge the meaning of the humanities in our lives and whose work reflects the spirit and programs of Humanities Washington. Ferguson is the winner in the Philanthropy and Leadership category, and Marshall in Scholarship and Service.

Tod Marshall is a professor at Gonzaga and the author of the poetry collections *Dare Say*, *The Tangled Line* (a finalist for the Washington Book Award), and the recently published *Bugle*. Ferguson is president of the Hugh and Jane Ferguson Foundation and former community relations director at Seattle's Burke Museum.

The awards will be presented at the two Bedtime Stories fundraising events held by Humanities Washington on October 2 in Seattle and October 23 in Spokane.

Travel Stipends Available for Speakers Bureau Presentations

For organizations that are geographically isolated or who have limited funds, paying the travel expenses for a Speakers Bureau presenter can be challenging. That's why we've introduced a Speakers Bureau travel stipend for qualifying organizations.

For details, visit the *Speakers Bureau Host Guidelines* page on our website, humanities.org.

First Statewide Prime Time Training Held

Over two days in September, teachers, scholars, storytellers, and librarians from across Washington State gathered for the first ever training for communities hosting Prime Time Family Reading programs. With the program expanding rapidly—14 Prime Time events were held in all of 2015, and 11 are scheduled for next spring alone—Humanities Washington gathered 45 people to learn from each other and share experiences.



SUPPORT HUMANITIES WASHINGTON THROUGH A PLANNED GIFT

Leave a legacy for Washington State that promotes a deeper understanding of the self, of others, and the human experience in order to promote the common good. Planned giving may allow you to make a more substantial charitable gift than is possible during your lifetime, and can offer significant tax advantages for you and/or your heirs.

For more information about planned gifts, please contact contact
Julie Ziegler, executive director, at 206-682-1770 x110 or via email at julie@humanities.org

Information on gift planning provided by Humanities Washington is not intended as financial, legal, or tax advice.
Please consult an attorney or other professional advisor before taking action.

ABOUT HUMANITIES WASHINGTON

Founded in 1973, Humanities Washington is the state's flagship nonprofit for public humanities programming, our work brings people together to learn about their unique pasts and shared present, promotes respect for other perspectives, encourages community dialogue and nurtures relationships that enable us to move toward a more prosperous future.

By acting as a catalyst and facilitator, we support and partner with a wide network of communities, organizations and individuals across the state. Together, we provide low- or no-cost, high-quality cultural and educational programs that engage audiences in conversation, civil discourse, critical thinking and the democratic process.

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OUR MISSION

Humanities Washington sparks conversation and critical thinking using story as a catalyst, nurturing thoughtful and engaged communities across our state.

OUR PROGRAMS



BEDTIME STORIES is an annual fundraiser featuring critically acclaimed Northwest writers unveiling new short stories created specifically for events in Seattle and Spokane.



FAMILY READING uses storytelling and discussion to explore cultural and ethical themes in children's literature and emphasizes the importance of families reading together.



GRANTS assist local organizations in creating opportunities for their community to come together to discuss important issues using the humanities.



SPEAKERS BUREAU draws from a pool of leading cultural experts and scholars to provide free conversational lecture events for community partners to offer local audiences throughout the state.



THINK & DRINK brings hosted conversations on provocative topics and new ideas to pubs and tasting rooms around the state.



WASHINGTON STATE POET LAUREATE builds awareness and appreciation of poetry – including the state's legacy of poetry – through public readings, workshops, lectures, and presentations throughout the state. (In partnership with ArtsWA.)

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Photo by Mike Hipple

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