

# SPARK

*The Magazine of Humanities Washington*

humanities  
WASHINGTON |  $\frac{h}{w}$

WINTER/SPRING 2017

## *Looking for Betty MacDonald*

*The Northwest author of Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle and The Egg and I wrote about illness and poverty as though they were the funniest things in the world.*



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Governor Inslee's Reading Habits | Conspiracy Theory Politics | Understanding Islam

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**h**  
**w** | *From the Executive Director*

## THE HUMANITIES UNDER THREAT

*What will be lost if Congress  
cuts funding for the NEH?*

By Julie Ziegler

Photo of Julie Ziegler by Devin Kearns Hamid



By now you have likely heard reports that federal funding is at risk for the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts.

People are speaking out on social media and circulating online petitions, but they are a mere whisper of the monumental backlash that is to come. Are you ready?

Contrary to the beliefs of some, the humanities do not reside merely in ivory towers. Humanities programs—made possible by federal dollars—flow into small-town libraries, tiny cultural centers, and hometown fairs and festivals from Port Angeles to the Palouse. We know because that's where Humanities Washington does the majority of its work: not in big cities, but the rural, coastal, and mid-sized towns from inland Washington to the coast. We reach communities without universities or major cultural hubs, but who are excited to come together to learn about, discuss, and debate our shared history and future. Everyone deserves access to thought-provoking cultural programs that build community. To dismantle the Endowments would put these community-building efforts at significant risk and further polarize our country.

I was raised in Yakima, and understand the perception that the humanities reside in musty university libraries or poetry slams for the uber-hip in urban coffeehouses. The humanities can seem far removed from the farms, factories, and storefronts of our small





towns. But take a quick look around many main streets and you will likely see a poster advertising an upcoming Speakers Bureau talk at the community center; children in a library after hours whose hands wave in the air as they wait to ask questions of their Prime Time Family Reading storyteller; or an outdoor festival showcasing local Latino, Russian, Native American or other cultural traditions. This is Humanities Washington at work.

Regardless of where you live or your political beliefs, we hope we can count on you to fight for cultural programs in our communities. For children. For seniors. For new immigrants. For communities of color. For veterans. For ALL OF US.

Since they were founded 50 years ago, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts

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have, through involvement at the most grassroots levels, touched nearly every American. They are not a luxury. They are not a partisan issue. The humanities enable us to learn about and tell the stories of our communities and our nation.

In the coming weeks, when the time is right, we will ask you to advocate. We will give you the talking points, and simply ask that you help spread the word. We have supported the people of Washington State for 43 years, and we're hopeful you will support us in return. To stay in

touch with us, sign up for our email list at [humanities.org](http://humanities.org) and “like” us on Facebook or Twitter. Encourage your friends and others in your community who value the humanities and the arts to do the same.

Stay tuned and get ready.

With sincere appreciation,

Julie Ziegler, Executive Director  
Humanities Washington





Eye from the dollar bill | Photo by Mark Turnaukas

# UNTRUTH TO POWER

*The surprisingly long history of conspiracy theories in US politics.*

By Jefferson Robbins



**IF IT SEEMS** that more and more of your Facebook friends are consumed by dark theories about who's really running things, Cornell Clayton would like to remind you that it's not a new fascination.

"Depending on the iteration of this conspiracy, it's the Rothschilds, it's Jewish bankers, it's any one of a number of different elites," says Clayton, a public policy scholar at Washington State University. "That notion has been around a very long time — and was recently embraced by our new President."

It was well before the 2016 election when Clayton came up with the concept for his latest Humanities Washington Speakers Bureau presentation, but talk about capturing the zeitgeist. "Crazy Politics: Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Paranoia in America" delves into the ways charismatic politicians including Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and their forebears have seized on voters' dark suspicions — fact-based and otherwise — to angle for power and prominence. The practice goes back practically to the Founders, Clayton says, and has historically forked in two directions.

"Populism is simply a Manichaeian view of politics," Clayton says. "It's the belief that there's a malevolent elite out there that, either in secret or openly, dominates our political and economic systems at the expense of 'real' Americans, and there's this struggle going on between the two. [...] The 'paranoid style' goes a bit further, because it embraces the conspiratorial and apocalyptic mentality, and talks about a secret force that attacks our very way of life."

**Humanities Washington: Who in presidential politics stand out as populist figures?**

**Cornell Clayton:** Thomas Jefferson was clearly a populist, who railed against the Eastern mercantile elite, and argued for the small farmer. He was attacked as being a populist by John Adams and others, and along with that, lots of conspiracy theorizing emerged around the Jeffersonian presidency. This was when the Illuminati conspiracy was popular: that there was a secretive group—and Jefferson was part of it—that was conspiring to create a global one-world government and take away American customs, especially some of our religious traditions. Andrew Jackson was another populist leader who railed against the elites in the East and was seen as a champion of people without property. He was attacked as a populist, and was even called "Andrew Jackass," which is why the Democratic Party is represented by a donkey. At that time, we also got the Anti-Masonic Society. It formed the seed bed for what became the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s. They were a deeply anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant party, and again, had lots of populist rhetoric. Of course, the populist era is usually associated with the 1880s and 1890s, and that's when the Populist Party emerged. During the first two elections of the 1890s, the Populist Party joined with the Democratic Party to run William Jennings Bryan. Huey Long is a classic populist — if you listen to some of his speeches, the elites were the Rockefellers and others who were exploiting Americans, and there was this deep conspiracy going on to screw the American worker.

**What gives rise to a populist or conspiratorial thread in national elections?**

To some extent, there is populist rhetoric in almost every election. Whoever is out of power, they usually run an

anti-establishment campaign. But it really is a matter of degree, and during periods when you see rapid economic and cultural transformations taking place, populism and conspiratorial thinking get really teed up. They resonate with more Americans, because many are experiencing the changes taking place in our culture and our economy and our identity as a nation. Today we have the same forces in play. The globalization of the economy has fundamentally restructured the way Americans work. We have more foreign-born Americans than at any time since the 1890s. And we also have the new Gilded Age—the polarization of income and wealth that's greater than at any time since the 1890s. That's what populist rhetoric, on both the political left and political right, is tapping into. And that can easily tap into the paranoid style, and that's being helped even more today with new forms of media. Conspiracy theories are given great immediacy and can be circulated very quickly [now].

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*During periods when we see rapid economic and cultural transformations taking place, populism and conspiratorial thinking get really teed up.*

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**When fringe theories try to take hold in politics, is it better to ignore them or to hold them up to the light?**

It's not that simple. The people who embrace the paranoid style (and I use the term not in the clinical meaning of paranoid, but in the way Richard Hofstadter used it to refer to a certain form of discourse that sees deep-seated



Westboro Baptist Church | Photo by John Lemieux



Cornell Clayton | Photo by Young Kwak

conspiratorial actors working to undermine the American system or the American people) usually embrace these apocalyptic visions of the end of American civilization as we know it. But there's a broad swath of Americans who have a paranoid predisposition to believe some form of conspiracy theories. Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent wrote a book on this. They did some polling and they simply asked questions like, "Do you agree that much of our lives are guided by plots hatched in secretive places?" Thirty-seven percent of people believe that. "Do you agree the people that really run the country are not known to voters?" Fifty percent of Americans believe that.

**Aren't both populist and paranoid rhetoric easily adapted to spread hateful messages? Anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, anti-Muslim sentiment?**

There's no question. And I think to understand how and why that happens,

you have to understand that both populist rhetoric and conspiratorial styles of discourse are born out of something. Where you've seen populist movements in the past, and oftentimes conspiratorial styles of thinking, are the 1850s, the 1890s, the 1930s, when you're seeing dramatic transformation in our culture and our economy, and those changes are producing winners and losers. The same thing is happening with globalization today. What both styles of political discourse do is they provide explanations for why their group is losing. Oftentimes during these periods, immigrants or minorities become scapegoated. If you look at the rhetoric right now, the idea is that average hardworking men, white males mostly, used to support their families on factory jobs. Those jobs are gone now. Why? Because these elites have conspired to create a borderless country where immigrants drive down wages.

**Many voters embraced conspiratorial thinking in this last election, and many media watchdogs and political insiders turned their heads. What's that mean for American politics going forward?**

Our social identity as partisans has become so powerful that we are much more willing to adjust our political views to fit our party platform, rather than the other way around. What I'm looking at mostly over the next year is not the debate between Democrats and Republicans, but the debate within the Republican Party — between the Trump wing and the establishment wing, which is where I think a lot of the action is going to be taking place. <sup>h</sup><sub>w</sub>

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*WSU professor Cornell Clayton is giving his free Speakers Bureau talk, "Crazy Politics: Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Paranoia in America," in venues around the state. Visit [humanities.org/events](http://humanities.org/events) to find a presentation near you.*



*We're all over the place.*



*From big cities to small towns throughout Washington, you'll find free public talks and discussions on everything from veterans to vegetarianism.*

Find an event near you at [humanities.org/events](https://humanities.org/events)

# *I Would Drink Deeper*

*Yes, words can provide comfort. But immense power lies in how they point us to uncertainty—  
“a space within us being made ready for the stars.”*

By Tod Marshall, Washington State Poet Laureate



**LAST YEAR**, I bounced around the state—from eastside to west and back home again to Spokane. I visited libraries, schools, cultural centers, and community museums. I wrote poems in the creative company of adults and children, at workshops surrounded by Bonsai trees and cinder blocks. I met the governor, went on a local TV show to talk about the importance of art, and drove thousands of miles and flew a few thousand, too. Everywhere that I went, people met me with enthusiasm and hospitality. I am grateful and eager to continue that journey.

Doing this work wasn't a labor, though. Here's why: I believe in the importance of poetry; more generally, I believe in the importance of the arts and the humanities. I want to be precise, though, about what I understand that to mean. I don't think that poetry is balm, something to relieve the pain of troubled times, an anguished cry. Sure, like any of the creative endeavors we pursue (dance, song, painting), poetry can offer some song of solace or witness when the daily death toll seems too much, when the most recent brutal bend in the divining rod that searches out our faith in humanity (*oh, please do not let it break!*) horseshoes beyond a return to everydayness. This last year had far too many instances when, I imagine, many of us felt that strain toward snapping. And sometimes, well-crafted words provided relief.

I think, though, that the arts work more subtly; their unknowability—the great mystery of how Cezanne captures a certain slant of light *just so*, how Faulkner takes us into the tortured psyche of Southerners trying to come to grips with the past (which is never the past), how Claudia Rankine simultaneously asks us to think about *what* poetry is while also asking us

to consider the potential violence that might lurk in our definition. And so on: all of the wonderfully ambiguous and difficult to define gestures that art and the humanities urge us to inhabit.

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*The only thing that can save us  
is the cultivation of uncertainty,  
of questioning, of openness to the  
possibility of being mistaken.*

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As the politics and conflicts in our country and in our world become more and more fractious rife with the rhetoric of absolutism and the threat of violences, I find myself more and more confident that the only thing that can save us is the cultivation of uncertainty, of questioning, of openness to the possibility of being mistaken. Is there a more poetic moment than when someone says to someone else—with feeling, with sincerity—"I'm sorry. I was wrong. I'll try harder to understand how you see things." To be able to do that, each of us has to cultivate space for the mysterious, for unknowing. Call it an inner life; call it whatever works for you—perhaps it's a space within us being made ready for the stars.

At the end of the second chapter of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, after laying out the economics of his venture in the first chapter and stating his reasons for going "to the woods to live deliberately," writes this oft-quoted but mysterious passage: "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born." Skip the opening line so easily printed on postcards and look at how, when Thoreau confronts the stars and eternity, he loses his ability to count, to communicate; he's taken to a place beyond language, a place of uncertainty, that, it seems, is paradoxically closer to the wisdom that came with him into this world. Heavy stuff (I'm dizzy just writing about it).

And this space shares a kinship with what I feel sometimes in the air at the end of a good discussion about the arts, at the end of a community open-mic where the poets brought what mattered to them, at the end of a workshop where sometimes seven or eight of us, sometimes thirty or forty, sat around a table and tried to bring something into being. I'm glad when this happens, and I'm grateful for all of my future rendezvous with mystery, unknowing, that vast potentiality in which beautiful things can be made. <sup>h</sup><sub>w</sub>



Photo by Amy Sinisterra

Tod Marshall is the current poet laureate of Washington State. The poet laureate program is sponsored by Humanities Washington and the Washington State Arts Commission. More at [wapoetlaureate.org](http://wapoetlaureate.org).

# LOOKING FOR *Betty MacDonald*



A HISTORIAN SEEKS TO UNCOVER MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF *THE EGG AND I* AND *MRS. PIGGLE-WIGGLE* AND BECOMES LOST IN BETTY'S WORLD—A PLACE WHERE HUMOR OVERCOMES TRAGEDY, AND A STORY DEEPLY ROOTED IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST.

By Paula Becker



**WAS IT THE HOUSE** I fell for first? Or was it Betty Bard MacDonald, who wrote *The Egg and I* and *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*, and who described the house with such affection?

“According to real estate standards, Mother’s eight-room brown-shingled house in the University district was just a modest dwelling in a respectable neighborhood, near good schools and adequate for an ordinary family. To me that night, and always, that shabby house with its broad welcoming porch, dark wood-work, cluttered dining-room plate rail, large fragrant kitchen, easy book-filled firelit living room, four elastic bedrooms—one of them always ice-cold—roomy old-fashioned bathrooms and huge cluttered basement, represents the ultimate in charm, warmth, and luxury.” [Betty MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything*]

The house that Betty wrote about was in Seattle, but it could have been anywhere. For her millions of readers, it *was* anywhere, or rather it was our own place, a memory we had—or wished we’d had. It evoked that place of shelter and acceptance we spend our lives trying to find our way back to, a home both actual and iconic.

I knew about the house because I’d recently stumbled on Betty MacDonald again after a whirlwind acquaintance with her books in childhood. I was beginning to learn about Betty’s world, to slip into her books, thinking and daydreaming about her life, about her family, and especially about her houses. Betty MacDonald’s books describe almost all of her homes and what those places meant to her. This house, in Seattle’s Roosevelt neighborhood, sheltered her family during the 1930s, the period described in her books *The Plague and I* and *Anybody Can Do Anything*. More than any of Betty’s houses, I’d tried to picture this one. Perusing old Seattle

city directories—those dusty volumes languishing in libraries and historical archives that record who lived where, year by year—I came upon the listing for “Bard” with a jolt: 6317 15th Avenue Northeast, Seattle. I knew that house. It was six blocks from my own address, on a busy arterial street I drove down many times each day.

It was a hunch, but I thought this house might have been Betty’s inspiration for the upside-down cottage where her beloved character Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle lived. I could imagine it from Betty’s description:

“The most remarkable thing about Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is her house, which is upside down. It is a little brown house, and sitting there in its tangly garden it looks like a small brown puppy lying on its back with its feet in the air.” [Betty MacDonald, *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*]

The house on 15th Avenue Northeast was right side up. But it was comfortably slouchy, faded and worn in a favorite-sweater kind of way. It looked like someone had once cared for it, and maybe still did. Children who clattered across the



Photo courtesy of University of Washington

broad wooden front porch would not be damaging anything. The house just felt Piggle-Wiggly. So did the neighborhood, full of old Craftsman-style houses set far enough back from the sidewalks to showcase those tangly gardens, full of tall hollyhocks, overgrown and deeply scented rose bushes, snapdragons like the ones my cousins and I played with in my grandma's backyard, pinching and releasing the blossoms' bases to make them "talk" to one another.

It was in El Paso, Texas, in 1971, that I first encountered Betty Bard MacDonald, on the dust jacket of a Piggle-Wiggle book. I was eight years old. The book was from my classroom's tiny library, and I had carried it in my turquoise-flowered suitcase to Grandma's house.

I had been trying and failing to learn to ride my big new red bicycle, finally giving up for the day. I opened the book in Grandma's shady guest room. The book was cheering. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle seemed to understand that children had complicated feelings, that doing new things well sometimes took time. She was so wise and kind that even the parents in the book sought her advice. I felt almost as if I knew her—as if we would be friends if I could visit her. I read all four of the Piggle-Wiggle books as quickly as I could find them and longed for more.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's last page told me that its author, Betty MacDonald, had been born in Boulder, Colorado, and had grown up in Butte, Montana, and Seattle, Washington. It was the first I'd heard of any of those places, but the names stayed with me. Washington was the state that put stickers on my sack-lunch apples: "Grown in Washington." When I moved to Seattle twenty-two years later, I thought about those stickers, and I remembered

that long-ago author description. Betty MacDonald lived here, I thought idly sometimes. I wondered where she might have lived, and what became of her.

People in Seattle knew Betty's name, but many of them knew her best for writing a different book—a best seller whose catchy title I recognized, although I'd never read it: *The Egg and I*. I found the book easily and started reading.

"Critics are cackling over *The Egg and I*," proclaimed a blurb on the cover. "She has a hilarious sense of the ridiculous. If you've forgotten how to laugh, this book is what the doctor ordered!"

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*Her books all magnify the Bard  
motto "Don't be a saddo."  
Life is hard. All we can control  
is our response to it, and  
laughing beats crying.*

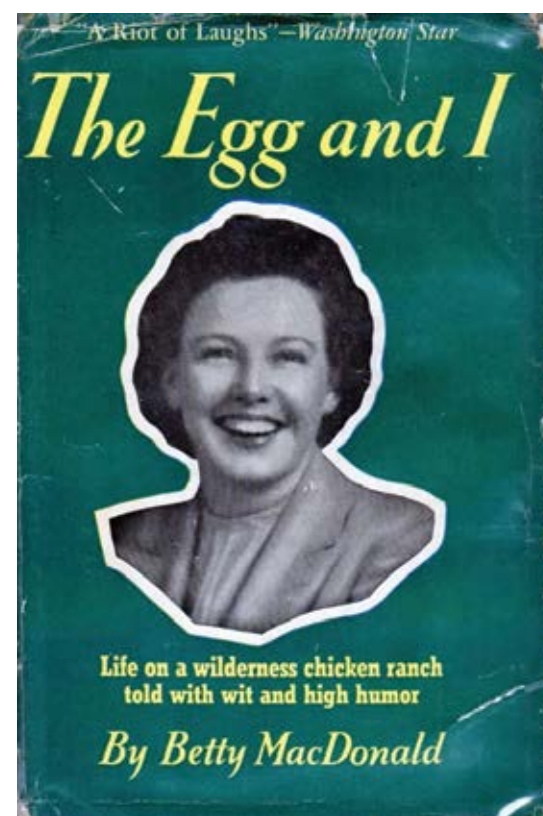
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*The Egg and I* was published on October 3, 1945, and American readers—parched for laughter after enduring World War II—instantly embraced its tart, self-deprecatory humor. Before a year was up, *The Egg and I* had sold more than a million copies and was topping nonfiction best-seller lists, showing no sign at all of slowing down.

The book was Betty's story, or a version of her story: a childhood in a warm, rowdily eccentric family and her marriage in the 1920s to an insurance salesman turned chicken rancher named Bob, who whisked

her off into the boondocks of Washington's Olympic Peninsula. There she endured the ceaseless rain and learned "to hate even baby chickens." [Betty MacDonald, *The Egg and I*] She was forced to rely on the dubious assistance of her nearest neighbors, a slapdash couple with a brood of a dozen-plus children. Betty dubbed the pair Ma and Pa Kettle. Hundreds of chickens, one burst water tower, a baby, and several years later, Betty and Bob decamped to a more modern farm. Or so the story went in *The Egg and I*.

I found *The Egg and I* hilarious and bracing, but kind of mean. I learned there was another book, *The Plague and I*, about Betty's yearlong battle with tuberculosis nearly a decade after leaving the egg farm. *The Plague and I* intrigued me, both with





the story Betty told and with the way she told it. What kind of person wrote about tuberculosis with such twist, such quirkiness, that the fear of death was beaten down with laughter? By the time I read Betty's next book, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, I was hers. Betty MacDonald not only made me laugh, she transported me. I didn't know it yet, but those dual qualities were Betty's special magic, part of the reason so many readers treasured her books and frequently reread them.

*Anybody* vividly describes a 1930s Seattle. It recounts Betty's hardscrabble years as a single mother during the Great Depression, frequently desperate but buoyed by the support and companionship of her mother and siblings and by her own dark sense of humor. Betty's description of the way her idiosyncratic family's sense of humor and hyperbole shaped every situation hung in the air as if Betty had just left the room.

Betty's final autobiographical book, *Onions in the Stew*, tells of her second marriage and of the pratfalls and pitfalls she encountered while raising teenagers on Vashon Island, a mostly rural outpost a short ferry ride from Seattle. This book was different from its predecessors: slicker, more restrained and constricted, as if molded by one of those 1950s girdles. For me, though, that was a minor point. Through Betty's words, I was starting to see the past—her life, lived decades ago in many of the places where I was living my present. I was beginning to catch glimpses of Betty's 1930s, '40s, '50s—shimmering through my 1990s and 2000s.

Betty's quick wit and acid humor laced through her four works of autobiography, four sparkling Piggie-Wiggle books for children, and the fairytale-like *Nancy and Plum*. Her books all magnify the Bard

motto "Don't be a saddy." Life is hard. All we can control is our response to it, and laughing beats crying. This sentiment cheered and encouraged readers worldwide. Betty—her fresh, smiling face made globally famous by its presence on all but the very earliest editions of *Egg*'s front cover—was a celebrity. When Universal-International Pictures released the film version of *Egg* in 1947, Betty's character was played by the glamorous movie star Claudette Colbert.

Five decades after Betty MacDonald published *Egg*, I read her books and was entranced by her rendering of our shared metropolis. I read the books again and again, as if hoping that reaching back into Betty's stories would let me somehow graze fingertips with her. I wanted more and more to really know, in whatever way it might be possible, the woman behind the books.

I often sat in traffic in front of the house on 15th Avenue Northeast (which I thought of as the *Anybody* house), wondering about Betty's family. Betty's books painted her family broadly as eccentric but added finely detailed touches about each individual. Her paternal grand-mother, Gammy, wore her corsets upside down and baked her grand-children frugal cookies that combined every ingredient lurking in the corners of the icebox. These inedible rocks were slipped to unsuspecting neighbors when Gammy's head was turned. Betty's mother, Elsie Bard, was known to everyone—even her children—as Sydney. In Betty's books, Sydney is silent, implacable, a cipher, like the ghost light left burning overnight at every theater to keep stagehands and others from the peril of total darkness. And what of Darsie Bard, Betty's father, a professional mining engineer to whose premature death she allocated but a single

line, as if to further probe the story might precipitate hemorrhage?

Above all the other family members glistened Betty's older sister. Mary was the sun around which other family members revolved, whether they wanted to or not. She was feisty, bossy, opinionated, never without a plan. Betty had three younger siblings as well: Cleve, the only boy; Dede, the only small, dark-haired one among tall, ginger-tressed sisters, droll and quick-witted; and Alison, the youngest, brought up helter-skelter by the rest. In the corners, darting through the stories, squabbling like the children in need of Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle's cures, were Betty's own daughters, Anne and Joan. And telling the tale was Betty, her words carrying me into the past.

By journey's end, I wanted others to find her, this young woman whose face was as familiar during the 1940s and 1950s as any movie star's, whose voice was the first—male or female—to entrance readers around the planet with a story deeply rooted in the great Pacific Northwest.

I began dipping into history books and photography archives, trying to see Betty's world when the *Anybody* house was hers. I wrote an article about the *Anybody* house, "Time-Traveling the Roosevelt District with Betty MacDonald," for the weekly *Seattle Press*. I wondered frequently what that house looked like from the inside.

When I was near the house, I sometimes lurked in the car, the engine idling. One summer morning in 2005, as I was parked in the alley behind the house, trying to picture the kitchen, a woman pulled her car up beside mine and looked at me quizzically. "Do you live here?" I asked. "I'm interested in an author named Betty MacDonald, who lived here in the 1930s."

“Oh, I know about her,” the woman said, “I have a newspaper article.” Her name was Tanya, and she invited me in.

The house was very nearly as Betty had described it in her books: the ample living room with a fireplace, where the Bards played Chinese checkers and piano and listened to football and dance marathons on the radio; the main-floor back bedroom that was always cold. The house felt worn but tended to, with a carelessly eccentric air that I think the Bards would have appreciated.

Tanya led me up the tight front stairs to a small hallway with three bedrooms. Tanya slept in the front bedroom, which Betty had said was Sydney’s room. When I saw the issue of the *Seattle Press* containing my article next to the bed, time bent for me. For just a moment, I felt I was reaching through the temporal boundaries separating me from the Bards and their life in that house. I felt their echo, and it thrilled me.

After that day, I felt the *Anybody* house had somehow given itself to me, bestowed the gift of retrospective clairvoyance, its cheerful, shabby rooms revealing the past. Going inside the house fully ignited my quest to find Betty. I started traveling beyond Seattle. I called these research trips, but they were pilgrimages.

I traced Betty to the solitary old house in Boulder, Colorado, where her life began. I followed her to a modest house set high above a quiet street in Butte, Montana. I found an empty road in Placerville, Idaho, where a small cabin once endured the bitter winters. I found homes in Seattle: a grand place overlooking Lake Washington that said, “We have arrived”; a sprawling, comfortable country house that told the world, “We’re staying, and we welcome you”;

and the much more modest *Anybody* house on its busy street, which sighed, “Things didn’t quite turn out as we’d planned.”

There was an empty field along a winding road in Chimacum, Washington, where a small farmhouse once nestled. Betty never loved that house, but people around the globe read what she wrote about it and traveled long distances to see it, to walk around and through it, tell friends they’d been there.

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*By journey’s end, I wanted others to find her, this young woman whose face was as familiar during the 1940s and 1950s as any movie star’s, whose voice was the first—male or female—to entrance readers around the planet with a story deeply rooted in the great Pacific Northwest.*


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There was an island home clinging to Vashon’s steep slope, smelling of wood smoke and salt air and echoing with ferryboat whistles. And finally, there was a sprawling ranch in Carmel Valley, California, with slopes of sagebrush that rolled on and on beneath a powder-blue sky, as if the land was telling its own story.

At the beginning of this treasure hunt, I wanted to find Betty. By journey’s end, I wanted others to find her, this young woman whose face was as familiar during the 1940s and 1950s as any movie star’s, whose voice was the first—male or female—to entrance readers around the planet with a story deeply rooted in the great Pacific Northwest. I wanted none of her story lost. And I wanted modern readers—who knew

her for the Piggie-Wiggles, if they knew her at all—to understand how richly Betty MacDonald deserved to be found.

Betty MacDonald died in 1958. She was 50 years old. Her books, starting with *Egg*, had tumbled out of her at break-neck speed: nine published volumes in just thirteen years. Nearly six decades after Betty’s death, *Egg* remains one of the most successful first books of all time. Betty’s work paved the way for humorists who followed her: Erma Bombeck, Judith Viorst, even Tina Fey and Amy Poehler.

Betty’s work came from a deep complicated well. Her contemporary readers valued that, and modern readers—finding Betty through a mother, grandmother, or through the newly-available reprints of her classic memoirs—still treasure her ability to drain some of the venom from adversity and to make them laugh. 



*Excerpted from Looking For Betty MacDonald: The Egg, the Plague, Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle and I by Paula Becker (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016) and used with the permission of the publisher.*

*Paula Becker is traveling around the state giving free talks on Betty MacDonald as part of Humanities Washington’s Speakers Bureau program. Find her talk, “The Truth and I: Reading Betty MacDonald in the Age of Memoir” near you at [humanities.org/events](http://humanities.org/events).*





# UNDERSTANDING مستقل

Photo by Meena Kadri

*Islam is paradoxically one of the most hotly discussed—and least understood—religions today. A professor discusses its history and current state.*

By Jefferson Robbins

**TEACHING THE HISTORY** of the world's second-largest religion, Sarah Eltantawi spends a lot of her time confronting preconceived notions — and often plain ignorance.

"I'm obviously aware that the study of Islam is one of the most fraught and controversial and least understood subjects in the country today," says Eltantawi, a Harvard-educated professor of religious studies at the Evergreen State College. "I'm always amazed as a professor that my students know more about Hinduism and Buddhism than they do about Islam, even though they have grown up in a monotheistic tradition."

Eltantawi brings her overview of Islam and its faithful to a traveling Humanities Washington lecture series, "State of a Civilization: Islam and Muslims in the 21st Century." She's written and lectured broadly on the subject, and her book, *Shari'ah on Trial: Northern Nigeria's Islamic Revolution*, is due for publication in 2017. Her talk starts with the seeds of Islam in 7th-century Arabia, the revelation of the Koran to the Prophet Muhammad, its spread through the desert states, and its evolution to the present.

It's not a simple topic, as Eltantawi says: "You're dealing with human civilization at the end of the day." Muslims draw faith from the Koran, while also drawing lessons for life and society from the Hadith, the collected deeds and sayings of the Prophet. Like adherents of every other religion, Muslims' faith has been tested in ways that have led to schism — the divide between Sunni and Shi'a, for instance — and Muslim-majority nations have spent decades recovering from colonialism.

All these threads feed into current conflicts, which have led American



Photo by Andrew Moore

politicians and critics to demonize Islam itself as a root of violence, and Muslims as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Multiple aspects of Islam—such as Sufism, the ascetic tradition of worship—have been shunted aside to make room for these characterizations.

"I find it very important to contextualize political Islam as just one recent strain in a very long history," Eltantawi says.

**Humanities Washington: From what basis did the Prophet Muhammad arise? What was pre-Islamic Arabia like?**

**Sarah Eltantawi:** Seventh century Arabia was mostly an idolatrous society. It was a tribal culture, so one swore their allegiance to a tribe and a tribal elder.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the *shahada*, or oath of faith, to me, is that the syntax of this oath parallels that of what you would swear to a leader — Mohammed urged his followers to swear their oath not to a tribal elder, but to an unseen God. This was Mohammed's great cosmological revolution. There were, of course, in addition, some Christian and Jewish influences and tribes in the region. But the monotheism of Islam was in many ways unique. This is why he and the nascent Muslim community were persecuted at first, because he was saying something different. At the same time, the God of Islam is the god of Abraham. It's the same concept. How Mohammad keyed in on this, through the Angel Gabriel's intercession, is one of the main mysteries of Islam.



**Humanities Washington: How did this faith take off the way it did, arising in that context?**

**Sarah Eltantawi:** I think there are several answers. First, Islam offered people a social structure in which one is being evaluated not by ethnicity or tribal background, but by degrees of piety. It's kind of a different way of evaluating a person's character, and that may have been attractive to some people. Then there were personal relationships with the Prophet — he was considered a very honest, good man, and that may have had some effect. Early Islamic political authorities were also quite pragmatic. As they expanded, they allowed local populations to keep their languages and practices. In many places where Islam spread, the move to Arabization was very slow. It took 500 years in Egypt, for example, for Arabic to become the *lingua franca* of the country. I think if we were to study how Islam entered Iran versus how it entered West Africa, we're talking about very different stories. And so on for the rest of today's Muslim-majority world.

**Humanities Washington: The poet Rumi is probably the best-known Sufi writer, and I've heard him quoted at length at Christian weddings. Why is Sufism often viewed as distinct from Islam as a whole?**

**Sarah Eltantawi:** There's actually a history of kind of decoupling Rumi from Islam. The *Masnavi*, his major magnum opus, is the most widely read text in the Islamic world. Historically, Sufism kind of came of age in the U.S. in the '60s, when people were casting about for spiritual but not necessarily religious ways of relating to the divine. People encountered Rumi's poetry, but didn't have any intention or understanding or will to convert to Islam.

On the other side of the ledger, Sufism has been under attack by certain salafi forces since at least the turn of the 20th century, if not before. Hence, some of the strongest voices in contemporary Islam themselves disavow Sufi traditions. And I think, Sufi movements — really, they're tremendously complicated also, they vary quiet a bit — but there's a certain strain of Sufism that's politically quietist. America has been, quote-unquote, “at war” with Muslim-majority nations for quite a while now, and thus there's a political need to construct a Muslim enemy that is uni-dimensional. Sufism doesn't really serve that agenda.

**Humanities Washington: What do non-Muslims most often get wrong about Islam?**

**Sarah Eltantawi:** There's a lot to choose from, unfortunately. I think many people fundamentally do not understand that Islam is a very complex religious-historical movement, with a lot of strains. I think most Christians would find it absurd to make the kind of huge generalizations about Christianity that people do about Islam. I think another preconception they have is that Islamic texts are uniquely violent, and it's just not true. If you compare references in the Hebrew Bible and the Koran, the Hebrew Bible (in the Christian tradition known as the Old Testament) is much more violent. Smiting villages and stoning people — there's far more of that in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. You cannot evaluate an entire religious complex from some verses you read in the Koran. You can't put in a pinch of that verse and a dash of that verse, and get a Muslim.

**Humanities Washington: For the benefit of those same non-Muslims, can you define “sharia?”**

**Sarah Eltantawi:** Sharia is God's ideal law, as spelled out in the Koran. And it's fundamentally unknowable by human beings, because it's God's law. It literally means, in Arabic, “the way to the watering hole.” Because we as human beings are imperfect and don't understand God's wisdom, all we can do is attempt to understand and emulate in our own laws, which as we all know are man-made. The only laws regarding sharia that have been passed in this country are these preemptive anti-sharia laws. There's no attempts I can find to actually pass so-called “sharia” anywhere in the western world. There are some radicalized areas in parts of London, but they're mostly just clownish dudes trying to enforce their idea of sharia on a mostly bewildered and bemused public who ignores them. I'm not saying there aren't people who have an idea of doing things like that, but they're generally not successful. I call it postmodern sharia — these kind of makeshift ideas of sharia which come out of the immediate existential needs of a fractured and post-colonial present. I work in part to remind Muslims: You can't just think you know what sharia is and attempt to impose it on other people — to say nothing doing so violently. <sup>h</sup><sub>w</sub>

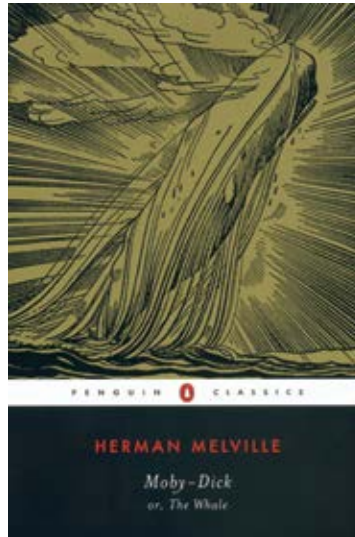


# READING HABITS: GOVERNOR JAY INSLEE

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







**A book you're reading right now.**

I am currently reading a biography of Winston Churchill. I'm on the part where he tries to warn England of the fascist menace in the 1920s, yet the country was unresponsive. It reminds me how we are failing to heed the coming catastrophe of climate change.

**Your favorite place to read.**

In a 42-year-old leather chair.

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

In the car going to meetings.

**A book you've read more than once.**

*Moby Dick.*

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

Paper book—there's nothing like turning a page.

**A book that changed your life in a significant way.**

When I was 12 years old, I broke my leg. I was laid up all summer and I read a book on the science of the atom. It was fascinating and it made me think that maybe I wanted to be a scientist. Even though that didn't happen, it informed the interest in science that I still have. That visual image of an atom still sticks with me.

**Do you read with music on? If so, what kind?**

I play whatever my electronic device will pull up.

**Do you fold the page corners?**

In the answer to this question, my only safe response is to indulge in the luxury of alternative facts—of course I only use a bookmark made from the finest Corinthian leather. Although I think most people will admit to having folded page corners at one time or another in their lives... <sup>in</sup> <sub>my</sub>



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*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 could 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.*

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# NEWS & NOTES

*Humanities Washington announcements and activities*

## 2017 Think & Drink events and an exhibit to explore the Bill of Rights



Photo by Young Kwok

In these polarized times, we're celebrating one of our nation's foundational documents—one both widely beloved and hotly debated.

"A More Perfect Union" will be the theme of all 2017 Think and Drink events, with each event dedicated to a topic addressed by the Bill of Rights. Experts and scholars will go to pubs and tasting rooms in Yakima, Spokane, Seattle, and Tacoma to speak on issues including freedom of speech, the Second Amendment, criminal justice, and more. Event dates will be announced in early spring. Visit [humanities.org/events](http://humanities.org/events) to find out more.

We've also joined with museums and libraries across Washington State—and even Congressman Dave Reichert—to present a mini-exhibit on the Bill of Rights. The exhibit, from the National Archives, will be on display at most venues through March.

## New year, new Speakers Bureau

Announcing Humanities Washington's new 2017-2018 Speakers Bureau roster! Join us throughout the state for free public presentation from one of 35 cultural experts. Explore Washington in World War One, Northwest hip-hop, the facts behind the Sasquatch myth, the ethics of eating meat, how the humanities help veterans, and other topics. Find a talk near you at [humanities.org/events](http://humanities.org/events).

## New grants cycle

Deadlines and information on how to apply for our Spark and Washington Stories Fund grants in 2017 will be available by February 28. Go to [humanities.org](http://humanities.org) and sign up for our email list for updates.

## Take an online survey to help us create a new Center for Washington Cultural Traditions

What cultural activities and traditions are happening in your area? From crafts to storytelling; unique foods to music; dance, traditional occupations, and more, we'd love to hear about the skills and celebrations that enrich your community. Head to [humanities.org/survey](http://humanities.org/survey) to take the survey, which will take just a couple of minutes. Your responses will be used to help launch a new Center for Washington Cultural Traditions in winter of 2017.

## Washington 129

In April—National Poetry Month—Washington State Poet Laureate Tod Marshall will publish *Washington 129*, an anthology of poems gathered from the people of Washington State. Published by Sage Hill Press, the book will launch on April 13 and a celebration will be held at the State Capitol. More details at [wapoetlaureate.org](http://wapoetlaureate.org). The poet laureate program is sponsored by Humanities Washington and the Washington State Arts Commission.

# IN MEMORIAM: WILLIS KONICK

*Remembering the University of Washington professor whose lighthearted lessons sparked profound insights.*

by Karen Hanson Ellick

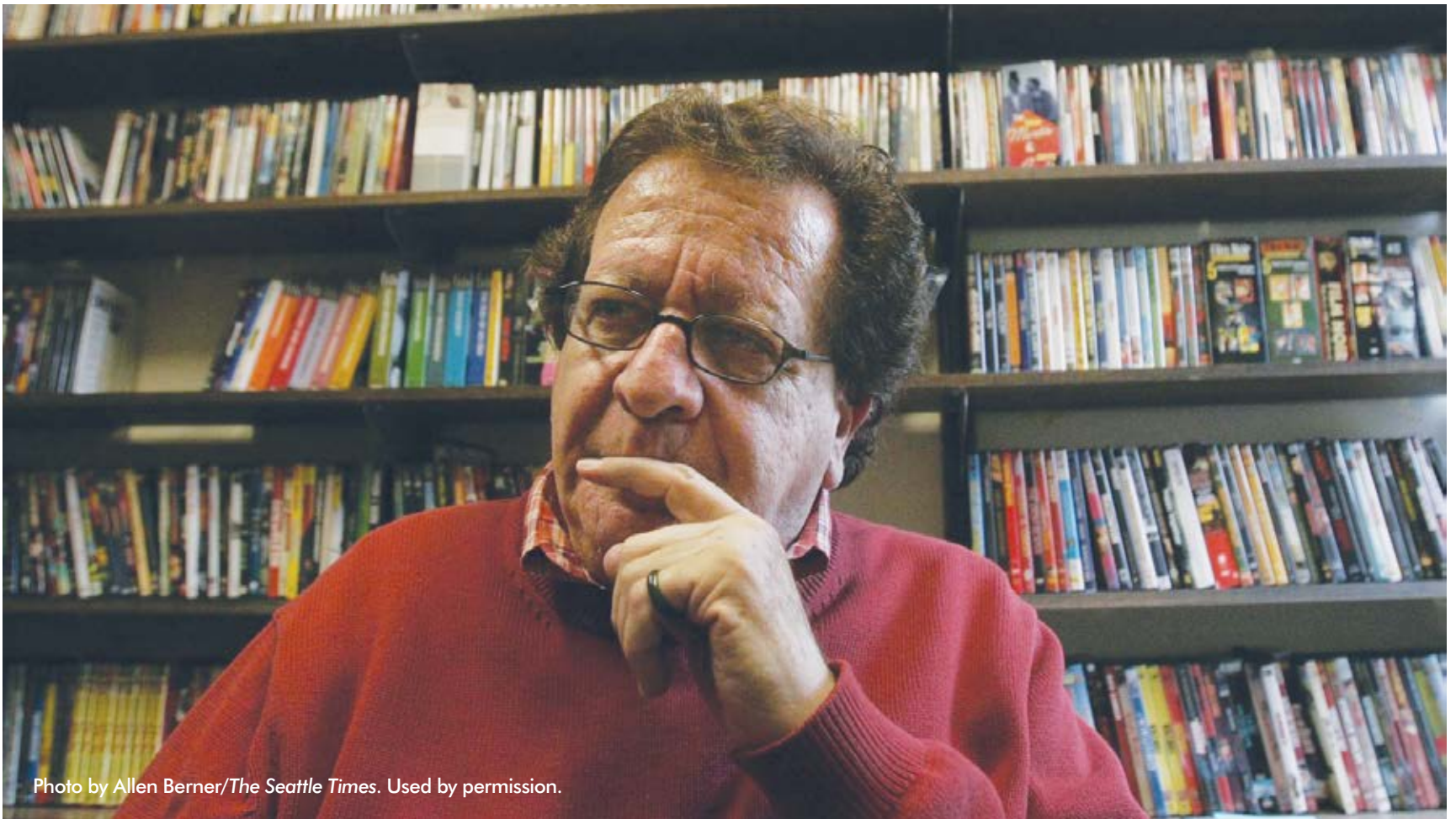


Photo by Allen Berner/The Seattle Times. Used by permission.



**ASK ANYONE** who attended the University of Washington sometime between 1962 and 2007, “Do you remember Willis?”, and the answer is likely to be, “Of course, he was one of my favorite professors!” Willis Konick, who died of heart failure on November 30, 2016, was famous for his classes in comparative literature, and also taught Russian language and film studies courses. His former students (myself included) remember him for the way he not only made complex Russian novels such as *War and Peace* or *Brothers Karamazov* understandable, but how he brought the characters to life and made their joys, sorrows, and conflicts as real as our own.

Willis (never “Dr.” or “Professor Konick,” he warned) was known for his theatrical teaching style, which sometimes involved standing on desks and staging impromptu skits with students he would call to join him in front of the class—and he knew his hundreds of students by name. A lecture on Anna Karenina, for instance, would involve Willis calling on a random man and woman to come up to the front of the classroom, telling them, “You two have been in love since high school, right?” and humorously building out the scenario of the two “lovers” to reflect the dilemma faced by Anna Karenina and Vronsky. (For a more detailed description of one such skit, see this blog post of a former student: [jkkelley.org/2013/01/01/professor.willis.konick](http://jkkelley.org/2013/01/01/professor.willis.konick))

His talents were widely recognized when Willis was named the UW’s most distinguished teacher for 1977. Seattle author and *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan, a former student, said in a *Seattle Times* interview that Willis “has literally changed people’s thinking about literature and life,” adding, “But first off, he’s terribly entertaining.”

Willis was a board member of the Washington Commission for the Humanities (WCH, now Humanities Washington) for two terms in the 1980’s, providing valuable insight during grant reviews, long range planning sessions, and all our deliberations. He developed and starred in the WCH program “Out of Fiction, Into Real Time” in which he and three Repertory Theater actors portrayed well-known characters from classic novels, stepping out of those roles to discuss contemporary issues. He also led two very popular cultural tours to the then-Soviet Union for the WCH.

Willis is survived by his husband, Paul Jezick, with whom he enjoyed watching vintage films and listening to classical music at their Pike Place Market area condo, attending Seattle cultural events, and traveling to Russia and various European countries. He also leaves his daughters Lisa Konick and Lara

Konick, sons-in-law Leland Seese and Bob Thurman, and nine grandchildren. One grandson, Jeremy Konick, is now obtaining a PhD. at UC Davis, with plans to be a college professor. His field? Comparative literature. <sup>h</sup><sub>w</sub>

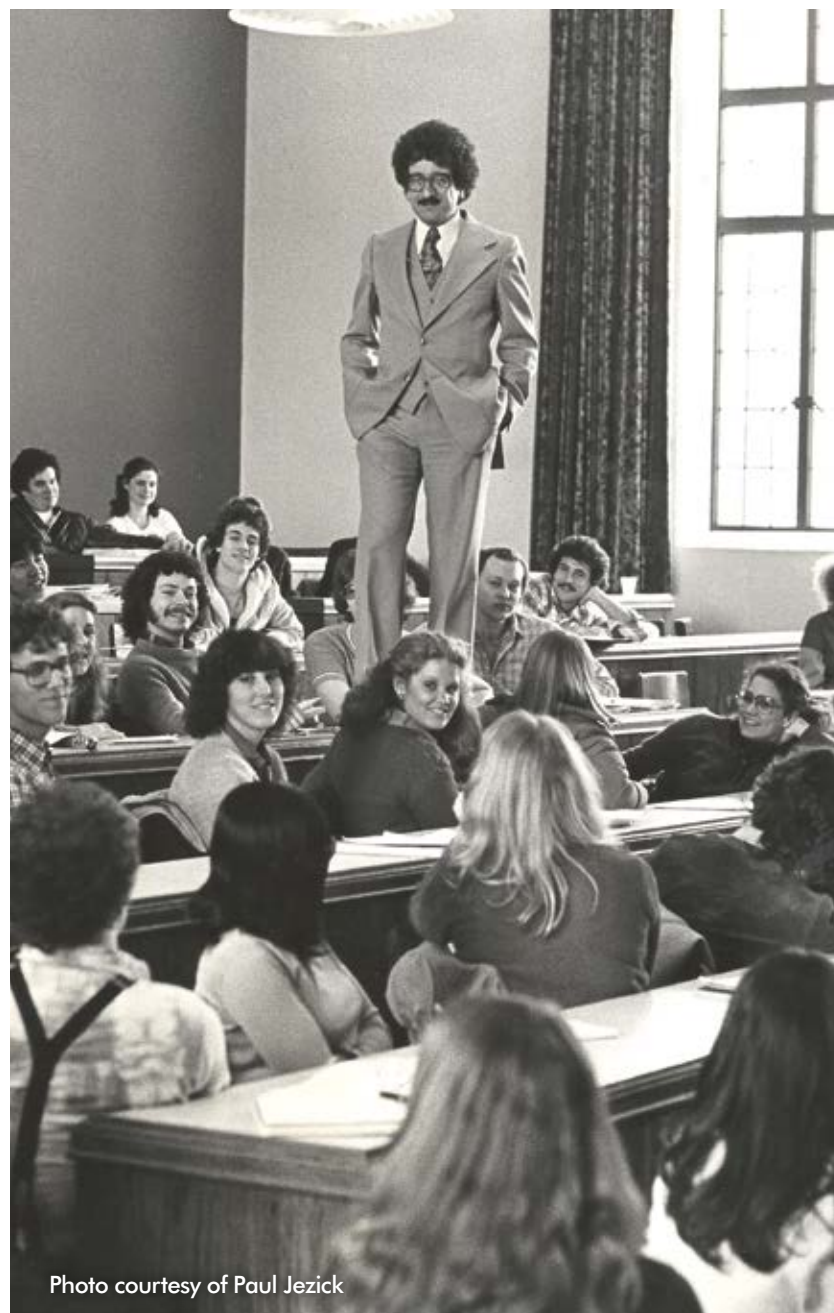


Photo courtesy of Paul Jezick

# JOIN US!

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

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## RITZVILLE

MARCH 25, 1:00 P.M.  
RITZVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY

### Sasquatch: Man-ape or Myth?

Throughout the Northwest, people have been reporting encounters with the Sasquatch—a hairy, eight- to ten-foot-tall hominid—for hundreds of years. Author David George Gordon evaluates the data gathered about the legendary Northwest icon, discusses the rules of critical thinking and the workings of the scientific method, and explains how one can become an effective “citizen scientist” by gathering credible evidence that can be used to substantiate the Sasquatch’s status as either Man-Ape or Myth. Attendees are encouraged to tell their tales and share their experiences with this mysterious creature.

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## LANGLEY

MARCH 27, 6:30 P.M.  
LANGLEY LIBRARY

### Crazy Politics: Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Paranoia in America

With political science professor Cornell Clayton, explore how American politics has become an arena for suspicious and angry minds. Rather than debunking today’s conspiratorial claims, Clayton argues that both populism and a paranoid thinking have always played important roles in American politics. Clayton’s talk explains the rise of today’s populist and conspiratorial politics, draws parallels to earlier periods, and describes how populism on the left and right differ today.

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## SEATTLE

APRIL 5, 12:00 P.M.  
MAGNUSON PARK

### Washington at War: The Evergreen State in World War One

One-hundred years ago in 1917, the US entered The Great War to fight alongside our European allies. But Washington’s homefront experience began long before the country entered the war, and continued afterward.

Led by historian Lorraine McConaghy, the program begins with an illustrated introduction to the war’s themes before offering a “Readers’ Theater:” a script that is read aloud together, allowing participants to speak the history they are discovering.

Learn about and discuss this dramatic period of immigration, wartime industrialization, women’s rights, social change, radical labor, epidemic disease, and worldwide turmoil.



## MORE ONLINE

FIND A HUMANITIES WASHINGTON EVENT NEAR YOU:  
[humanities.org/events](http://humanities.org/events)



Speakers Bureau presenter Shin Yu Pai's 'Heirloom' art installation | Photo by Katy Tuttle

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**SPOKANE**  
APRIL 21, 11:00 A.M.  
GET LIT! FESTIVAL

### The Written Image: Blending Poetry with the Visual Arts

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Discover the fascinating work that can result when visual arts and poetry collide. Poet Shin Yu Pai discusses the history of artist-poet collaborations and creative innovation in American literature. During the talk, she shows her work as a writer, her commissions for both art and cultural museums, and her work with painters, photographers, installation artists, composers, and video artists on collaborative work.

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**YAKIMA**  
MAY 3, 12:00 P.M.  
YAKIMA VALLEY MUSEUM

### American Muslims: History, Culture, and Politics

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Too often, Muslims are still discussed as “the other” in American society—a group confined to discussions about marginalization or radicalization. But these discussions have largely ignored that the American Muslim experience is an American experience. Touching on issues such as the interaction of racial, cultural, and religious identities; the politics of immigration and citizenship; history; and interfaith and religious dialogue; this talk uncovers how American Muslims have been integral to the American experience. This talk is presented by Turan Kayaoglu, professor at University of Washington, Tacoma.

# 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



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



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



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



**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.)



**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.

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Photo by Mike Hipple

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