

**Description:** While Emily Dickinson made poetry in near isolation, most writers find that mentorship is a necessary part of the creative process. But how do emerging writers find mentors, much less develop and sustain such relationships? Academic programs offer mentorship opportunities that can last a lifetime, and AWP has its Writers to Writers mentorship program. This panel of former AWP Writer to Writer mentees discuss the ins and outs of finding mentors and nurturing mentoring partnerships.

**Category:** Artistic and Professional Stewardship

**Moderator:**

**Laura Laing** is a queer journalist, essayist and author. A graduate of Goucher's MFA in creative nonfiction, she is the vice president of ASJA. Her essays have appeared in a number of literary journals, and she is working on a memoir, weaving narrative with explorations of abstract mathematics.

**Participants:**

**Naomi Ulsted** writes young adult fiction, memoir and screenplays. Her work has been published in multiple venues. She's currently at work on a young adult novel. She was the winner of a 2017 Literary Fellowship from Oregon Literary Arts in the drama category.

**Preeti Parikh** is a poet, essayist, and current MFA candidate at the Rainier Writing Workshop where she is also a recipient of the Bierds-Smith Graduate Scholarship. Her poems have been published in various journals and anthologies. Preeti's earlier academic training was in the field of medicine.

**Manisha Sharma** is a lecturer, teaching English and Yoga at a community College. She is a multi-genre writer who collaborates across different disciplines such as music, design, computers, and virtual reality. A Vermont Studio Center, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference alumna, Manisha earned an MFA from Virginia Tech. Besides being awarded and published in literary journals and magazines, her work has been installed and aired. Sharma is also a yoga, mindfulness expert. Check out her work at [www.manisha-sharma.com](http://www.manisha-sharma.com)

**Sarah Dalton** is a Panamanian-American writer and teacher from the San Francisco East Bay. She is a member of the Macondo Writers' Community and has been a writer-resident at Hypatia-in-the-Woods. She is a second year MFA student in Creative Nonfiction at San José State University.

### **Event Organizer:**

**P.D. Keenen** is a writer and empathy activist. They write memoir and poetry. As an organizer, they once spent a summer managing over four hundred events while making time to write. Their work focuses on our shared humanity, points of cognitive dissonance and advocating for the less visible. [pdkeenen.com](http://pdkeenen.com)

## EVENT OUTLINE:

### **Opening moderator remarks and housekeeping announcements**

Welcome to Finding and Keeping a Solid Mentorship: A Guide for the Writing Odyssey. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel (identify moderator) know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
- We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation. Please also be aware family restrooms located on level 2 are reserved for those with disabilities or those wishing to use a single-stall restroom.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline (503) 455-4127 or email [events@awpwriter.org](mailto:events@awpwriter.org).
- Introduce & identify all speakers in the order in which they are sitting.

To start, if each of you could introduce yourself and give a brief overview of your personal experience with having a writing mentor.

### **Naomi Ulsted**

Good Morning! I'm excited to be here and I wouldn't be here at all without the help of some incredible mentors. I came to write seriously later in life, relatively speaking, and when I did, I pretty much did it on my own, in a vacuum, for 10 years. I don't have an MFA and I also work full time outside of the writing industry, so for a long time it was really just me and my laptop. But when I came out of my

cave, and attended my first conference, I started to realize there was a whole community out here and I was ready for it. It was a couple years later that I was selected to participate in the Writer to Writer program, where I was paired with Ken Waldman. That experience helped to build my community and I expanded my local network as well as my distant connections through social media and online classes. It's a constant journey, but I hope that some of my personal experience can help some of you. At least to know that you're not alone!

### **Preeti Parikh**

Hello everyone! I'm happy to be here talking about mentorship—a fortuitous and much-welcomed aspect of my somewhat circuitous life path towards creative writing. I will frame my experience as that of being an immigrant, both in terms of nationality as well as vocation.

Growing up in India, I was always drawn to the page, primarily as a reader but often times and urgently so, as a writer too. Right out of high school, I followed a career path that was, in many ways, expected of me—medical school and so on. Writing became a private activity, something that was important but seemed dissonant with my public and professional life. Soon after my training was finished, my life took a drastic turn—I followed my spouse to a new country, and later on, due to multiple reasons, became a stay-at-home parent.

That was fifteen years ago, and in the interim towards finding my identity as a writer, I've also found community—encouraging teachers and like-minded peers—in many places: online MOOCs and university continuing studies courses; local libraries, classes, and writing seminars; and various writers' conferences. The W2W program and my low-res MFA have additionally shown me how affirming one-on-one mentoring can be. Here, I've found trusted mentors who help address my many questions, who share their own perspectives and experiences of the daily work of living and writing, and who encourage me to “integrate my way of being in the world with my way of being a poet.”

### **Manisha Sharma**

Hi Everyone, A huge thanks to Laura, Peace, and my fellow panelists. Having a writing mentor has been an ongoing process for me, and one that has kept my writing alive, helped it develop, and given me confidence in my own work. As I reflect, mentors have come and gone in all sorts of roles since the moment I was willing to share my work as a teenager. There were those that encouraged me to keep writing, those who were willing to critique and discuss my work, way back in India over 20 years ago, doing a fruitless job where they never expected anything in return. Things took a serious turn since I started an MFA in creative writing in the United States. It is said that you develop a community of writers with

an MFA. Post MFA, none of those relationships lasted, maybe because of the drastically different material we worked on, or because of the stage of being a writer that we were at. However, it is at this stage that I found a mentor in one of the faculty members. Later with the AWP-provided mentor, I actually switched genres and finished a manuscript, and currently a friend with whom I write regularly. They are all my mentors in various capacities, and I owe a large part of me being a writer to them. Sometimes all you need is someone by your side.

### **Sarah Dalton**

Hello everyone, thanks for being here and thanks to Laura for organizing this fantastic and important panel.

I'll be focusing on my experiences as a Latina writer and first generation student. Resourcefulness and self reliance are two of the most powerful strengths first gen students and writers of color bring to our work and our lives. Speaking for myself, I learned these strengths watching my mom who immigrated to the US, raised my sister and I as a single mom, and is the most business-savvy person I know. My self reliance has buttressed my educational and professional pursuits, but it has also isolated me and hindered my outreach to potential mentors, colleagues, and meaningful relationships.

The Writer to Writer Program and my mentor Alex Lemon pushed me to examine the positive and negative effects of my tendency towards self reliance. Every week, Alex and I talked about craft and professional development, but, more importantly, Alex has such a generous heart. With him, I could be vulnerable and honest about difficult emotional experiences including imposter syndrome, insecurities going to office hours, and rampant microaggressions at conferences and workshops.

The Writer to Writer program and my experience at the Macondo Writers' Workshop in Texas helped me realize that to create meaningful relationships in the writing community, I had to think of it as creating a family. Through trust, confidence, vulnerability, honesty, and time, I've cultivated and continue to cultivate a fierce loyalty to my literary family.

### **Moderator questions:**

- 1) A mentor is a "wise advisor" or "an intimate friend who is also a sage counselor." Why do you think that creative writers often depend on developing mentoring relationships?
- 2) In your opinion, when is it a good time to seek a mentor?

- 3) Talk a bit about what goes into a successful mentor/mentee relationship, from your perspective. What are the qualities of a good mentor? And what is the role of the mentee in maintaining these partnerships?
- 4) AWP offers the Writer to Writer program, which matches mentors and mentees over a four-month period. Can you share some advice to those who are considering applying to the program as mentees?
- 5) What suggestions do you have for finding mentors outside of AWP?
- 6) How have you nurtured your relationship with mentors outside of the Writer to Writer program? Describe your relationship with your mentor now that the program has ended for you.
- 7) How do you spot who is the right mentor for you? How much do/must you rely on a mentor. In all earnestness, a mentor is also a human being with all the goods and the bads that come with being human. So how do people know who is the right mentor for them? I h

### **Q&A session:**

We will now open the discussion for questions. I will come around with a wireless microphone so that you can be heard clearly. Please use the microphone, even if you feel you don't need to. We have about five to 10 minutes.

### **Final activity:**

We'd like to end this session with a little time for you to think about mentorship. Whether you're considering your role as a mentor or a mentee, take the last three minutes of our time together to consider the following questions. You can write down your responses or just think about your answers.

- 1) What do you need from a mentor at this time? Or if you want to be a mentor, what can you offer to a mentee?
- 2) List at least five names of potential mentors or specific places (AWP, local writing centers, MFA programs, etc.) where you might find a mentor or a mentee.
- 3) If you've had a mentor or a mentee before, what can you do this week to reconnect with this person or bolster the relationship?