

2022 AWP/EVENT OUTLINE

TITLE: Expanding the Fictional Terrain: Four Writers, Four Collections, Four Awards

Event Description: From social realism to speculative fiction, from American tales to immigrant lit, from heterosexual narratives to LGBTQ stories—Caroline Kim (the 2020 Drue Heinz Literature Prize), Michael X. Wang (the 2021 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize), Rachel Swearingen (the 2018 New American Fiction Prize), and Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry (the 2020 Raz/Shumaker Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction) will read from their award-winning collections on themes of love, loss, and cultural identity.

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction/Readings

Event Organizer & Moderator

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry: A Russian-Armenian émigré, Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry published over fifty stories and received eight Pushcart nominations. She's the winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction, the Tennessee Williams scholarship from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the Raz/Shumaker Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction for her first collection of stories, *What Isn't Remembered*, long-listed for the 2022 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize. Her debut novel, *The Orchard*, is forthcoming in March from Ballantine Books.

Event Participants

Michael X. Wang: Michael X. Wang was born in Fenyang, a coal-mining city in China's mountainous Shanxi Province. He immigrated to the United States when he was six. His story collection, *Further News of Defeat*, won the 2021 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize and the 2022 GLCA New Writers Award. It was also a finalist for the CLMP Firecracker Award. His debut novel, *Lost in the Long March*, comes out later this year from The Overlook Press. He holds a Ph.D. in Literature from Florida State University and an M.F.A. in Fiction from Purdue.

Rachel Swearingen: Rachel Swearingen is the author of *How to Walk on Water and Other Stories*, winner of the New American Press Fiction Prize, chosen by *The New York Times* as "New & Noteworthy" and by the Chicago Writers Association as a 2021 Book of the Year. Her writing has won the Missouri Review Jeffrey E. Smith Editors' Prize in Fiction, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, and the Mississippi Review Prize in Fiction. She lives in Chicago and teaches for the graduate creative writing programs of Cornell College and the University of Arkansas - Monticello.

Caroline Kim: Caroline Kim is the author of a collection of short stories about the Korean diaspora, *The Prince of Mournful Thoughts and Other Stories*, which won the 2020 Drue Heinz Prize in Literature, was a finalist for a Northern California Book Award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize in Fiction, and was long listed for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize and The Story Prize. She has an MFA in Poetry from the University of Michigan and an MA in Fiction from the University of Texas at Austin where she was a Michener Fellow.

Opening Remarks

Hello! Thank you for coming to our reading. I hope you're as excited as we are to be able to gather in-person for this conference and this event. None of the participants have met before, only on zoom, when we discussed our initial submission to AWP. However, we have one thing in common. We all published our first collections in the past two-three years, and those collections won prestigious national prizes. I read all of the magnificent stories before reaching out to their authors about a possible reading event. What struck me about those works of fiction was their cultural diversity, as well as the use of language. It varied not only from writer to writer, but from story to story, from one character to the next. All four collections, no matter how different in context and story-telling, though, still share certain similarities in themes—those of love, loss, and cultural displacement, a search for a home, a desire to belong. Please welcome these gifted writers, as they take turns introducing their work and reading from their award-winning collections.

Participant Initial Remarks

Michael X. Wang: *Further News of Defeat* came about as a cohesive story collection when I realized that many of the stories revolved around the fictional village of Xinchun. I think I tend to see China through a different lens than many other Chinese American authors, who predominantly write about it through an urban vantage point, but it's often forgotten that about 40% of the population is rural, and this doesn't account for migrant workers who travel back and forth from the countryside to the city annually, and the Chinese government likely skews the figures to make the country seem more developed. Most of my protagonists come from this neglected rural demographic, and it's very important to me that their stories are told.

Rachel Swearingen: Born and raised in rural Wisconsin, I've lived in many different cities within the US and Germany, and I've been writing short fiction for almost two decades. The Midwest figures prominently in *How to Walk on Water*, as do my lifelong interests in visual art, theater, film, and ghost stories. Originally, the book was going to be entirely inspired by art and art installations, but the process of assembling the stories caused me to see deeper connections, to cut stories that no longer fit and to invent new ones that were more in conversation with the other pieces. By the end I had a shorter, more curated collection that spoke to larger questions of survival, friendship and belonging.

Caroline Kim: The stories in my collection all revolve around Korea in some way — either they're set historically in Korea or are about the Korean diaspora. Because I wrote them over 20 years, they are written in many different styles, changing as I changed — learning, experimenting, playing with voice, form, and perspective. This is what I love about the short story; you can do something completely different from one story to the next. Because they are stylistically different, I worried they wouldn't hold together in a collection. But eventually, I saw that what united them was that they all asked "What does it mean to be Korean?" which I realized I was constantly asking myself because of my experience as an emigrant.

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry: I grew up in Soviet Russia, moving to the U.S. in 1995, after having witnessed perestroika and the fall of the Iron Curtain. A lot of my stories are set in the U.S.S.R during that time, and a lot of my characters struggle with their newly found identity in the country, where they no longer have a home. Other stories in the collection take place in the U.S., and most characters are Soviet immigrants, who feel their cultural displacement and struggle to survive, to reconcile their past with their present.

Moderator Questions:

- 1) Can each of you comment on her or his creative process and how your cultural heritage informs, challenges, or aids your fiction writing?
- 2) What was the most surprising thing that happened during the process of putting together your collection?
- 3) How important (or unimportant) is it for a collection to have a unifying theme, style, or world view? Should the individual stories together add up to something greater than themselves alone?
- 4) Can you tell us what you're working on next?

Audience Q &A (time permitting)