

**Event Title:** The Northern Imagination: A Reading

**Event Description:** Alaska's contemporary literature reflects richness of experience, ancestral ties to the land, and appreciations for history and heritage, culture, and the complexities of our modern world. It also relies on creativity and imaginative leaps to make life in the north "real." Five Alaskan writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry will briefly put their recent work into context before reading from it.

**Event Category:** Multiple Literary Genres Reading

**Event Organizer and Moderator: Daryl Farmer** is the author of two books: *Bicycling beyond the Divide* and *Where We Land*. His recent work has appeared in *Terrain.org*, *Ploughshares*, and *Natural Bridges*. He is an associate professor at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks where he previously served as director of the MFA program. He is also affiliated faculty for the Northern Studies program, and for six years was a faculty member in the University of Alaska Anchorage low-residency MFA program.

**Event Participants:**

**Nancy Lord** is the author of environmentally- and science-related books including the nonfiction *Early Warming and Beluga Days* and the novel *pH*. She teaches science writing for Johns Hopkins University and is a former Alaska Writer Laureate.

**Annie Wenstrup** received her MFA in creative writing from Stonecoast (Summer 2022). She's a Smithsonian Arctic Studies Fellow and an Indigenous Nations Poetry Fellow. She serves on the Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference Advisory Committee.

An award-winning journalist and columnist, **Laureli Ivanoff** writes from her hometown in Unalakleet. Published in *The New York Times* with a current *High Country News* column, she is writing a memoir sharing history of settler colonialism in Alaska and how it ripples into her life as an Inupiaq woman today.

**Tom Kizzia** is author of three non-fiction books set in Alaska: *Cold Mountain Path*, *Pilgrim's Wilderness* and *The Wake of the Unseen Object*. He has written for *The New Yorker* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and was an *Anchorage Daily News* reporter for 25 years. He lives in Homer, Alaska.

## **Opening Remarks and Announcements**

Good afternoon, and welcome. This panel is titled The Northern Imagination and examines the complex ecotone that exists between the authentic and imagined Alaska. Thank you all for being here. I know a lot of you have traveled many miles to be here. In Alaska, we consider Seattle to be our own largest city, as it's only 2000 miles away.

{Insert required AWP statements}

{Land Acknowledgements}

I first moved to Alaska in 1999, when my wife and I traveled up the Alacan to Anchorage, where she had procured a job and I had not. People like to say that Anchorage is only an hour's drive from Alaska. This is probably unfair – Anchorage is a uniquely Alaskan city – and yet I floundered there, in part because my wife's job had her flying to villages throughout the state, gone for days, and returning home with stories and photographs of an Alaska I could only imagine. Once, she saw a grizzly bear emerge from its winter den and move across a hillside in the snow. Meanwhile, I ate dinner alone at a Village Inn. You might say I was jealous. So, when a teaching job opportunity in the Athabascan village of Nondalton presented itself, despite meaning living apart from her, I jumped on a plane. It was November. I stayed until May. I don't think it's right to claim some kind of authentic insight into Alaska based on those five months. Education in Alaska villages is a complex, often problematic issue. I'm not sure I did great. I don't hunt or fish, and mostly I felt lost. Once I slipped and fell hard on the ice, and heard reverberating laughter, so I can say I provided some amusement. I hope I did no harm. I can say that I was changed, and that I at least have a rudimentary understanding of life in a village where there is no access by road. Where the landscape and the sustenance it provides is not separate from life. I'm forever grateful for that experience. Were it not for the whole marriage thing, I would have stayed.

Writers in Alaska are confronted with a history of writing that has overly romanticized the state, sometimes creating a place that is only imagined: descriptions of cold, individual survival, bear attacks, and northern lights reign. Look, Jack London, I have been out in 50 below. It was neither romantic, nor wise. And yet, when I travel, I flash my Alaska ID with pride. I regale people with stories about such cold, about wildlife, and northern lights, none of which ever gets old. I always know when I have missed the aurora, because the morning after, EVERYONE, cliché be damned, posts them on Instagram.

How then, as a writer, to explain: Alaska is everything you think it is, and not at all what you think it is. How to balance this is the question we all face, and the question we will address here today.

I am very happy to share this space with four of Alaska's most prominent and emerging writers. I will introduce them now in the order they will read, and we should have time for a brief discussion and Q&A at the end:

(Introduce with above bios: Annie Wenstrup, Nancy Lord, Laurelli Ivanoff, and Tom Kizzia)

### **Participant Reading Summaries:**

#### **Daryl Farmer**

I will read a very short section from a novel in progress. The character is a wildlife biologist who manages the wood bison restoration project. The scene is set in the winter boreal forest during the pandemic. The story deals with grief and eco-grief, fatherhood, and ultimately hope with the idea of restoration.

#### **Annie Westrup**

I'll talk about how foregrounding a text's chronotope reframes how a text considers the relationship between the environment and its inhabitants. In my essay "From Here," I use an expanded timeframe embodied by the phrase "from time immemorial" to explore the different ways that my family and I belong to the land. Time immemorial represents a pre- and post-colonial worldview that embraces a recursive understanding of time, one that reflects the reciprocal relationship between the more-than-human-world and the people who inhabit it. The essay's recursive timeline allows me to tell a more thorough story about living in Alaska, one that details how the land has shaped me as I move through it.

#### **Nancy Lord**

After a brief introduction, I will read short excerpts from two related works--one nonfiction and one fiction--about people and bears watching one another.

#### **Laurelli Ivanoff**

I will read a chapter from a memoir, in progress, about returning home. After living 20 years elsewhere moving home has forced me to take an honest look at community and family history and how that history tangibly affects my life today.

In the chapter I will read from, I'm reconstructing my idea of a sanctuary. I explore a bit of the community's history of the church I grew up in in Unalakleet, along with my own personal history in the church.

### **Tom Kizzia**

I'll be reading from my new non-fiction book, *Cold Mountain Path*, the history of an unusual community that grew back in the carapace of an iconic Alaska ghost town. The book is a "local history" and "true crime account" with literary aspirations.

### **Moderator Questions**

- 1) Let's start with the question I posed at the beginning: How do you balance the idealized Alaska with the reality of it?
- 2) Alaska is simultaneously a big state, and a small state. Small, in that there are a lot of readers knowledgeable about the state, which can be daunting. How did you first go about writing about the state? And were there pitfalls you became immediately aware of?
- 3) What do you see as a writer's responsibility in representing Alaska on the page?
- 4) Several years ago when AWP was in Washington D.C., everytime I showed my ID, people would ask me about Sarah Palin. Now, it seems that the reference is often reality TV. In your work, do you ever feel yourself pushing against common perceptions about the state?