

Presenters
2025 West Virginia Writers Fall Conference
Charles Town, Jefferson County, WV
November 15, 2025

West Virginia Poet Laureate, Marc Harshman – Wheeling, WV



KEYNOTE PRESENTATION: “INSIDE A LAUREATE’S LIFE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARC HARSHMAN”

[from an interview originally conducted by David O. Hoffman and S. Bailey Shurbutt for the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, Volume 17] and moderated by Tom Donlon

In this presentation-interview Harshman will discuss not only his life-long love affair with poetry, but also his work as a distinguished author of nationally acclaimed children’s books. Unlike more formal lectures he intends a more personal and revealing look at some of the influences that have impacted his career. He plans also to discuss some of the idiosyncrasies of his vocation including his religious studies and the many years spent teaching children in public schools. Additionally, he will describe some of the details of his personal writing process, as well as offer some counsel for those just starting out on the writer’s path.

Bio: Marc’s collections of poetry include *Woman in Red Anorak*, winner of the Blue Lynx Prize, *Believe What You Can*, winner of the Weatherford Award [Appalachian Studies Association] and *Following the Silence*, Press 53. *Dispatch from the Mountain State* is just out from West Virginia University Press. He was named Appalachian Heritage Writer for 2024 by Shepherd University whose past honorees have included Barbara Kingsolver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Henry Louis Gates, and Nikki Giovanni. He is, as well, co-winner of the 2019 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award and his poem “Dispatch from the Mountain State” was printed in the Thanksgiving 2020 edition of the *New York Times*. He is also the author of fourteen nationally acclaimed children’s books including *The Storm*, a Smithsonian Notable Book for Children. He has been Poet Laureate of West Virginia since 2012.

Chrissy Alhart (aka Chrissy Abruzzi) - Paw Paw, WV



“The Poetic State of Mind”

If you're like me, you use a different part of your brain to drive a car or solve a problem at work than you do to create your poems. In this generative session, we'll explore what it means to be in the world as a poet and consider ways we each prepare our minds to sit down to write.

Bio: Chrissy Alhart is living her dream life in her adopted home state of West Virginia with her Soul-Horse, Lexie; her dog, Hazel; and her husband, David. She is grateful that her paying gig as a cybersecurity consultant allows her ample time to write and pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in Fiction Writing from West Virginia Wesleyan College. Chrissy writes poetry and short stories and is in the process of revising the draft of her young adult novel.

Jane Ellen Freeman – Middleway, WV



“Creating Emotional Impact in the Reader”

The goal of this presentation is to help writers create identifiable emotions in their characters. Sources used were Writing for Emotional Impact by Karl Iglesias, Story Genius by Lisa Cron, The Emotional Craft of Fiction, by Donald Mass, and The Emotion Thesaurus by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglis.

Bio: Jane Ellen Freeman's stories appear in: **Northern Appalachia Review Vol. V and Vol. VI, the Anthology of Appalachian Writers Vol. XVI and Vol. XVII, The Ghosts of Shepherdstown Vol. I**, and in several collections. Her short story “Connection” won 2nd prize in the 2024 WV Fiction competition and is a featured story in **AAW Vol. XVII**. Published books include books for children and an historical fiction ghost story. Jane lives in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia on two wooded acres. Website: www.janeellenfreeman.com

Kirk Judd – Morgantown, WV



“A Year That Will Live in Imagery”

This hands-on workshop will begin with a brief discussion and demonstration of “showing”, not “telling” the audience what we are writing about - conveying the spirit of the piece, not just the circumstance. Then we will move on to a couple of hands-on exercises designed to facilitate the creation of images and incorporating them into your work. We will end with sharing and discussing our new draft pieces and the effectiveness of the process.

Bio: Kirk has lived and worked in West Virginia all his life. He was a member of the Appalachian Literary League, a founding member of West Virginia Writers, Inc., and is a founding member of Allegheny Echoes, Inc. Kirk is the author of 3 collections of poetry and is included in “Porch Poems” a collaborative collection featuring 4 WV poets. A co-editor of the widely acclaimed anthology, “Wild, Sweet Notes – 50 Years of West Virginia Poetry 1950 – 1999”, he is widely published.

Ruth McQuade – Shepherdstown, WV



“Mining Your Childhood Experience for Poems”

All of us have a vast reservoir of memories of our childhood. Come learn in this interactive workshop how to shape these memories into poems.

Bio: Ruth McQuade is a retired lawyer. She writes short stories and poems about her childhood growing up in a large family in a mining and lumber town in southern West Virginia. Her short story, “Tioga Mine No. 2” was published in the Kingsolver volume of the Anthology of Appalachian Writers. Two of her poems, “Chosen” and “Inch Worm” were recently published in the Harshman volume of the Anthology of Appalachian Writers.

Dr. Carrie Messenger, Shepherd University – Shepherdstown, WV



“Creative Nonfiction: Personal and Public”

This presentation will explore creative nonfiction, with exercises and strategies for writer’s block. Balancing personal narrative and reflection will be discussed. We’ll write from prompts and try them at least two ways.

Bio: Carrie Messenger joined the Shepherd English Department in the fall of 2010. Her work has appeared in literary magazines including *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ecotone*, *Pleiades*, and *Witness*. She was a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and at MacDowell Colony. Her short story collection *In the Amber Chamber* was published in 2018. She lives in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Dr. James Pate, Shepherd University – Shepherdstown, WV



“A Knock on the Door: Writing Character-based Suspense Scenes”

Suspense scenes can sometimes seem invested in plot at the expense of character, but having those scenes take place from a strong character-based perspective can actually enhance the tension and intrigue. In this session, we’ll developed strategies, including two writing exercises, that might help us move a scene from not simply “What will happen next?” to “What will this specific character do next?” We’ll brainstorm ideas that will help in building three-dimensional characters and write about how your chosen character would act in various suspenseful situations.

Bio: James Pate is a fiction writer and poet who teaches creative writing at Shepherd University. His noir novel *Speed of Life* was published in 2017 by Fahrenheit Press. His other books include the poetry collection *Mineral Planet* (Schism Books) and the essay collection *Flowers Among the Carrion* (Action Books Salvo Series). His short stories have appeared in *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Burning House Press*,

Come October: An Anthology of Autumnal Horror, and other venues. He is currently at work on his second novel, which takes place in the indie film world of the 1990s.

Doug Van Gundy, West Virginia Wesleyan College – Buchannon, WV



“The Line in the Landscape – Writing about Place (for all Genres)”

A tomato grown in the sandy soil of Florida doesn't taste anything like a tomato grown in a West Virginia creek bottom. And the identical variety of grapes grown in France and Australia are required by law to be called by different names, so important is the influence of place. In this workshop we will read and discuss a number of works that focus on place: as setting, as emotional locus, as character. We will then respond with a number of writing prompts that explore how place figures into memory, shapes our sense of ourselves, and even influences the words we use in our writing.

Bio: Doug Van Gundy directs the West Virginia Wesleyan College Low-Residency MFA Creative Writing program. His poems and essays have appeared in many journals, including *Poetry*, *Guernica*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The Oxford American*. He is the author of a book of poems, *A Life Above Water* and co-editor of the anthology *Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Contemporary Writing from West Virginia*.

Julia Young, Four Seasons Books – Shepherdstown, WV
Allison Gunn – Charles Town, WV



“So I Wrote a Book, Now What? A Practical Guide to Navigating Bookstore & Community Partnerships”

This interactive session demystifies how indie bookstores make stocking and event decisions, emphasizing that policies protect fairness and sustainability—not gatekeeping. Attendees will learn how to pitch professionally, navigate rejections as

redirections, and explore alternative ways to reach readers through libraries, community venues, and collaborations. With insights from both a bookstore manager and a debut author, this workshop equips writers across publishing paths to strengthen visibility, build partnerships, and grow audiences—while fostering Appalachian literary community.

Bios: Julia Young is the Events Manager at Four Seasons Books in Shepherdstown, WV, where she curates a powerhouse calendar of author tours, book clubs, and community partnerships that spotlight genre fiction, Appalachian voices, and independent publishing. Known for blending creativity with logistics, she has built Four Seasons into a regional hub for book launches and literary culture, hosting everyone from debut authors to New York Times bestsellers. Julia’s work focuses on empowering writers with practical tools to navigate bookstore partnerships, while fostering an inclusive, vibrant community around storytelling.

Allison Gunn is a professional researcher and writer with a penchant for all things whimsical and strange. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she has extensively studied marginalized communities as well as folklore and the occult. She resides in beautiful Charles Town, WV with her daughters, a precocious pup, and one seriously troubled tabby. She is the author of horror-thriller, *Nowhere* (Atria, 2025) and the forthcoming novel, *Hive Mind* (Atria, 2027).