

# The Seventh Week

clarion west fall workshop report 2015

## CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

NEILE GRAHAM (CW 96)  
WORKSHOP DIRECTOR

AND HUW EVANS (CW 12)  
WORKSHOP ADMINISTRATOR

Another summer has passed and another Six-Week Workshop has occurred, succeeded, triumphed. Once again, eighteen strangers converged on a discrete region of space-time, then, catalyzed by the genius of six spectacular instructors, shared, exchanged, fused, diverged, stewed, strived, matured, and sparked. A new family of writers has emerged—a Clarion West cohort that is as brilliant and talented as its predecessors, but unique unto itself.

All Clarion West workshops are unique; each workshop's challenges, however, are challenging in their own ways. And this summer brimmed with them. To start, we had to learn our way around a lovely but new-to-us sorority house. Before we picked up the keys, we'd only walked through the house twice. Though we were sure it would work, it was hard to feel certain until we checked out all of the bedrooms, set up the instructor space, and got the classroom tables optimally aligned.

Around move-in time, we realized that we were lacking a few vital items (food! desks! a whiteboard! and especially fans, fans, and more fans, given the weather predictions), so we published a wish list. Suddenly, board member Tod McCoy was delivering bounties of donations on an almost daily basis. Our wonderful, supportive community came through for us once again, leaping at the opportunity to pitch in and purchase what we needed. Each student got a fan and a desk, and our food budget (this is the first year Clarion West paid directly for housecleaning and the students' food) got a bit of relief.

Before we knew it our cook (now Clarion West's and not the house's), Joe Schindler, was setting up the kitchen with the help of Esther Hoffman, our cleaner, and the students were arriving: first from India, Nigeria, Australia, and Japan, then from Canada and across the U.S. An additional arrival was Topher, a black Labrador retriever, guide dog, and the unofficial 2015 class mascot.

This year brought student visa challenges too: one student's arrival was



YES! Awe-struck Leo Vladimírsky gives Clarion West's new house two thumbs up.

delayed when the U.S. visa system had a computer glitch that stranded her in Germany for nearly a week, while another had to leave a week early to be home in Nigeria for a visa interview so he could return to the U.S. for a fall fellowship. Both students attempted to attend the workshop via Skype—with intermittent success.

Barely were (all but one of) the class members settled into the house when Andy Duncan challenged them to write about the weirdest experiences of their lives. Sadly, they were prohibited from writing about what they were experiencing right then—having gathered, in the basement of a sorority house in Seattle, to begin one of the most intense experiences of their lives and to face one of the most marvelous, delightful, and weird writers they'd ever met.

In their second week of the workshop, the students moved forward under Eileen Gunn's wise and expert guidance. After some preliminary exercises, she initiated them into full-blown Clarion-style critiquing. They rose spectacularly to the



Clarion West forges friendships... and four-headed fiction-writing monsters. Top to bottom: Rebecca Campbell, Nibedita Sen, Julia M. Wetherell, and Monidipa Mondal.

► challenge, stretching their days to greater lengths, while Eileen urged them to claim new literary ground.

Tobias Buckell led the students through their third week with the example of his own hard work and enthusiastic dedication. The students dug deeper, both in their writing and their critiques. They survived Seattle's ongoing heat wave by upping their game in every way, and the focus was on plot, plot, plot.

The workshop itself had a brief crisis when, two days before she was due to arrive in Seattle, instructor Connie Willis



Instructor Tobias Buckell is not at all perturbed by the fact that the entire class wishes to eat his brains.



Thersa Matsuura experiences four stages of the writing process: inspiration, ecstasy, determination, and rumination.

had a fall that necessitated surgery. Luckily, Clarion West alumna and award-winning author Susan Palwick generously agreed to take the helm. This is the second year in a row that we've had such a crisis, but also the second time that it was resolved within a few hours. Yet another proof, like the wish list donations, of how wonderful our community is. Susan guided the students through their dreaded fourth week with grace and authority, helping them to get deeper into their characters through careful attention to dialogue and to realistic portrayals of personal interactions.

In the fifth week Nalo Hopkinson brought her energy and intelligent grace to the class while challenging them to dig still deeper, taking the students past the week's exhaustion and continuing heat wave, and startling new vigor into them. They were still tired, but their stories burned with life.

When the final week of the workshop arrived, the stalwart students, led by veteran instructor Cory Doctorow, jumped into it with both feet, eager, enthusiastic, and equipped with all that they had learned over the previous weeks. Cory's incisive critiques and focused lectures polished facets and honed edges—adding even more brilliance to the students' writing as they prepared to rejoin the outside world.

On the personal level, we also had

challenges: Neile had to leave the workshop twice, for a few days each, at crisis points in her father's final illness, while Huw had a brand-new daughter at home (not to mention an almost-three-year-old). But with each other's help, as well as that of our terrific new workshop assistants Lauren Dixon and Katie Sparrow, and members of the board and staff and community, everything went well.

In fact, everything turned out brilliantly: the house was comfortable (and quiet!), Joe and Esther did a wonderful job keeping the students fed and the house clean, the instructors kept the energy and class challenges high, and the students wrote and wrote and wrote and played and wrote. So much promising fiction was given its first look at the world and its first critique that everyone was exhausted and both happy and sad to see the workshop end.

It left us looking forward to seeing much, much more from this dynamic and talented class.

Look out, universe! These writers are making waves. Despite the challenges, this was a stupendous year. ♦

(all photos by M. Huw Evans)



Service dog Topher was quickly adopted as the class mascot.



## THE CLASS OF 2015

**Back row:** Evan J. Peterson, from the United States; Samuel Kolawole, from Nigeria; Rebecca Campbell, from Canada; Tegan Moore, from the United States; Michael Sebastian, from the United States; Leo Vladimírsky, from the United States; Margaret Killjoy, from the United States; Thersa Matsuura, from Japan; Nana Nkweti, from Cameroon/United States.

**Middle and front rows:** Monidipa Mondal, from India; Garret Johnston, from Canada; Dinesh Pulandram, from Australia; Christine Neulieb, from the United States; Justin C. Key, from the United States; Julia M. Wetherell, from the United States; Nibedita Sen, from India; Jake Stone, from the United States; Susan Palwick, instructor.

**Dog:** Topher. (photo by M. Huw Evans)

## In Students' Words

"CLARION WEST WAS THE MOST FUN I'VE HAD IN YEARS, it was hard, it was exhausting, it was thrilling, it made me so happy, and it made me work." — **Julia Wetherell**



"I AM NOT A PERSON WHO MAKES MANY ALL-OR-NOTHING STATEMENTS, but I say with complete conviction that Clarion West has been the single most important and far-reaching experience and accomplishment of my writing career. I feel like Charlie Bucket finding a golden ticket. I have met some of my heroes through Clarion West, and now people are knocking on my door to publish me. The experience wasn't scary; it was challenging, beautiful, and life-altering." — **Evan J. Peterson**



## Clarion West Writers Workshop

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# 2015 Reading Series



Eileen Gunn

The 2015 Clarion West Summer Reading Series started off strong with a reading from Andy Duncan that skirted the knife's edge between humor and horror. Eileen Gunn followed with a story that unveiled the tender love between a starship captain and his science officer. Tobias S. Buckell kept the energy going with his tales of growing up on a boat and how his secret stash of books tipped the vessel forward—and he followed with a story about humans failing a Turing test.

Susan Palwick stepped in at the last minute for Connie Willis with her story about damned souls for sale in a gift shop. Nalo Hopkinson



Susan Palwick

read a story that crept up on the audience with its slowly growing sense of wonder as a girl tried to convince her drowned sister to forgive her.



Cory Doctorow ended the season spectacularly with his reading at the University Temple United Methodist Church. He read from a new novel, and then he was interviewed by Frank Catalano about technology, activism, and our collective dreams for the future.

Videos from the 2015 Summer Reading Series will be available on our YouTube channel this winter. Find a link to our channel on [www.clarionwest.org](http://www.clarionwest.org).

If you're in Seattle next summer, please join us for the 2016 Clarion West Summer Reading Series. The company is congenial, the instructors are fantastic, and the stories are always amazing. See you there! ♦ (photos by Kris Millering)



Nalo Hopkinson



Frank Catalano (right) interviews Cory Doctorow at the University Temple United Methodist Church. (photo by Yang-Yang Wang)

# 2016 Clarion West Summer Reading Series Schedule



June 21  
Paul Park



June 28  
Stephen Graham Jones



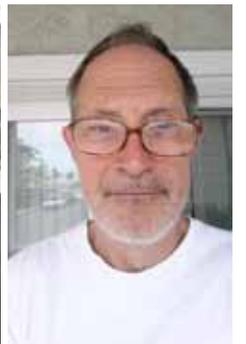
July 5  
Elizabeth Bear



July 12  
N. K. Jemisin



July 19  
Sheila Williams



July 26  
Geoff Ryman

(photo of Paul Park by Leslie Howle  
photo of N.K. Jemisin by Laura Hanifin)