

Improvising Statues

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CHU

NISI SHAWL (CW 92)

Award-winning author John Chu was born in Taiwan and currently lives in the Boston area. His deceptively straightforward writing often shows marginalized people behaving decently in fantastic circumstances. "The Water that Falls on You from Nowhere," which 2014's Hugo voters selected as Best Short Story, first appeared on the site of the prestigious Tor.com. Other venues in which his work has appeared range from genre publications such as Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine to the political and literary online journal Boston Review. Recently Nisi Shawl (CW'92) got to ask Chu a few questions about what he does, how he does it, and what he's likely to be doing in the near future.

Clarion West: What is the background image on the home page of your personal website? (<http://www.johnchu.net/>)

John Chu: It's a picture of climbing gear. The bag holds a coil of climbing rope and on top of the bag is a set of chocks. It's been post-processed so that you see only the outline because my agent correctly pointed out that the full-color picture made it impossible to read the text on the page. There's no particular significance to the image except that I used to rock climb much more than I do now.

CW: So it's not symbolic of how you write, then, as I thought it might be. A Clarion West instructor once asked me



to come up with a metaphor to describe my writing process, which I found a very useful exercise. Can you share one for yours?

JC: It's not really a metaphor if it's what you actually do but I have a pile of training in improv and I tend to approach my writing the way an improviser approaches what they do. The result is this paradoxical mix where you simultaneously hold onto the ideas you have while working into the presentation whatever inspiration that strikes you as you go along.

I do spend a lot of time thinking about shape and structure as though I were a making a statue, both from the inside out, by putting in a skeleton that supports the flesh of the story, and from outside in, by carving away the bits that are not the story I'm writing.

CW: You attended Clarion in 2010 and you'll be teaching Clarion West this

summer (2017). What's your take on the relationship between the two workshops? Will your experience as a Clarion alumnus influence what you accomplish as a Clarion West instructor?

JC: My sense of the relationship between Clarion and Clarion West has always been that it's friendly, with both workshops open to cross-fertilization. It's impossible for my Clarion experience not to influence my work teaching Clarion West. Being an instructor so soon after being a student, the experience is still fresh in my head and I will be that much closer to any problems that the students have.

CW: As part of your Clarion West week you'll be reading publicly. What is your ▶▶



Armature by Rebecca Buck

► **approach to public readings? What do you model them on? Were you read to as a child?**

JC: My approach to public readings is to prepare in much the same way I'd prepare a monologue. I have some stage acting and voice acting experience, so I see public reading as a similar sort of thing. I practice for timing and so I don't trip over my own words. Generally, I don't practice nearly as much as I should.

I was not read to as a child. My parents owned and operated a restaurant. Until I was maybe 12, I went to school before my parents woke and slept before they came home from work. I rarely saw them except on weekends (and since the restaurant was open on weekends, that's where I was then—not home getting read to).

SF... is ultimately a reflection of society. And is society diverse and inclusive? Not nearly as much as it needs to be.

CW: You've related to science fiction as a reader, a short-story writer, a podcaster, and a translator, and now you're going to teach it. Are there other ways you'd like to interact with the genre? Editing? Illustrating? Writing novels, plays, comics, or kids' books?

JC: I've been asked to edit and I've turned down those opportunities, so far. I may accept them in the future—who knows? I can only draw well if I draw extremely slowly, so illustrating? Probably not. A novel is probably in the future. I've always joked that I missed my calling as a playwright for regional theater since much of my work involves only two characters talking to each other in one location. I love comics, but I don't know that I read

enough of them that I'd do a good job writing one. I've written a little YA and I'd like to write more, but I haven't thought about writing for younger age groups.

CW: Do you translate Chinese to English or English to Chinese? Or do you do both? Are there texts you yearn to translate? Texts you're afraid of?

JC: I translate from Chinese to English. I do the reverse only under duress. There really isn't anything in particular I'm dying to take a crack at—in part because there is so much that isn't translated that I don't even know what all is out there waiting.

The texts that scare me are the funny ones. Translators have to deal with not just linguistic differences but cultural differences. Humor can be so culturally specific. What one culture finds funny, another may not. Often, translating puns, wordplay, jokes, and situational humor really means writing brand new text that does the same things on similar subjects. I.e., the translator has to be just as funny in the new language as the original author was in the old one.

CW: Does the race of your characters matter to the stories you tell about them?

JC: It does and it doesn't. I don't know that I write many stories where race is a character's primary characteristic. I do write plenty of stories a character's race has an effect on the story. E.g., changing the race would change the choices the character makes or how other characters might react to their behavior.

CW: Is speculative fiction a diverse and inclusive field?

JC: There's not nearly enough space in a single newsletter to answer this question! I think SF wants to be a diverse and inclusive field, and those of us working in the field are trying to make it more diverse and more inclusive. SF, however, is ultimately a reflection of society. And is society diverse and inclusive? Not nearly as much as it needs to be. ♦

Clarion West Writers Workshop

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Workshop Update

Plots and Plans

NEILE GRAHAM (CW 96)
HUW EVANS (CW 12)
KATIE SPARROW (CW 05)



Workshop Director Neile Graham



Workshop Administrator Huw Evans



Program Specialist Katie Sparrow

So many things that are underway as we write this will have come to fruition by the time you read it. Most excitingly, barring fire, flood, or other disasters, the class of 2017 will have all been invited, and they will be enthusiastically planning for their six weeks in Seattle this summer.

But that's the future. In the present, the competitive pool of applicants from which those successful students will be drawn are busy preparing and submitting literary representations of their writerly selves, while on our side of the curtain, the magic of randomization, reading, and ranking proceeds. While Huw manages the applications, Neile is busy preparing for every other aspect of the summer workshop. The lease has been signed, so we will be returning to the lovely, welcoming house that has housed us for the past two summers. The instructor agreements are finalized, and Neile is watching airfares—a little anxiously, it's true! And we're holding workshop committee meetings to line up everything for this summer, as well as to plan and plot for 2018.

Also meanwhile—so many *meanwhiles* when there's so much going on—we've been having a wonderful, intensive, and productive series of one-day workshops. These occur roughly once per month, September through June. They continue to offer venues for writers—mostly local, but some from farther afield—to gather for a full day of learning from some of the genre's best and brightest writers. This past autumn, David D. Levine (CW '00) provided provocative instruction on integrating world, character, and plot; Nisi Shawl (CW '92) taught a stunning session on voice and diversity in our genre; and in January Curtis Chen (CW '14) shepherded a bright-eyed class through the dreaded hurdles of creating compelling novel synopses and query letters. We're equally stoked about our upcoming line-up of classes, to be taught by Kat Richardson, Hannu Rajaniemi, Randy Henderson (CW '09), and Helen Marshall (CW '12). If you are from out-of-town and happen to be coming to Seattle, you might consider arranging your trip to include one of these workshops (and if you don't happen to be coming to Seattle, you might just want to re-arrange your happenings). Oh, and seeing as many of you, our faithful readers, are brilliant writers yourselves, if you have a workshop idea you've been wanting to

teach, send your pitch to Katie Sparrow at oneday@clarionwest.org. We can't guarantee what will fit into our schedule, but if we think we can fill a class we'll happily consider it.

After having to cancel teaching in the summer workshop last July, Geoff Ryman came to town to use his London-to-Seattle plane ticket before it expired, and he gave a powerful reading at the University bookstore and a one-day alumni-only workshop on voice. Students submitted the first two pages of works-in-progress, and after a morning of thoroughly compelling and enlightening lectures and discussions, the afternoon was spent in round-the-table critiques (with Geoff offering the final summary word on each piece). Huw and Neile were both in attendance, and were both inspired and challenged to up their (our) games.

Finally, a teaser: There is some behind-the-scenes work in progress on a new project that we hope to launch in the not-too-distant future, so... *stay tuned!* ♦

Alumni News

Do you have news you'd like to share with the Clarion West community? Our monthly Alumni News is still going strong. Email your news to alumni@clarionwest.org—we want to hear about publications, teaching gigs, book tours, and any personal news you'd like to share. We love pictures, and we love hearing about alumni gatherings! You can see each month's Alumni News at www.clarionwest.org/community/alumni-news, or subscribe to the Clarion West email list to have it delivered fresh to you every month. ♦

From the Executive Director

MARNEE CHUA



I am thrilled to be writing you today to introduce myself to the Clarion West community. I am honored to support this excellent organization and to have the opportunity to work on behalf of aspiring writers and speculative fiction fans. As a newcomer to Clarion West, I have been so impressed by the breadth and scope of work that our alumni have accomplished over the last thirty-three years.

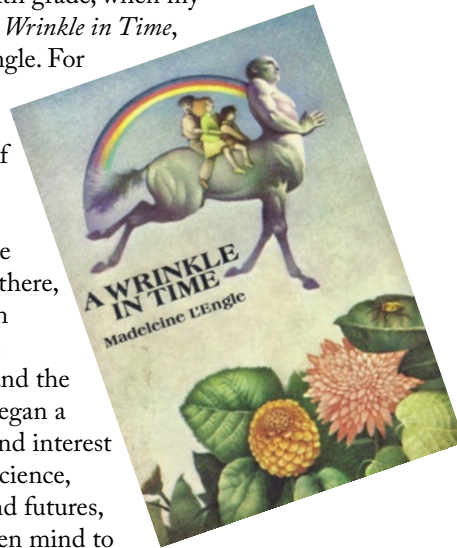
Clarion West's vision of supporting speculative fiction and giving voice to diverse backgrounds, experiences, and considerations speaks to me on a very personal level. Without a doubt, my love for science and all things science fiction began in sixth grade, when my teacher assigned *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L'Engle. For the first time, I discovered this amazing mixture of interesting futures, truly terrifying adults, and a female protagonist. From there, our school librarian turned me towards Anne McCaffrey and the Pern series. Thus began a lifelong curiosity and interest in learning about science, alternative pasts and futures, and keeping an open mind to other world views.

Originally from California, I attended the University of Oregon to study environmental studies and biology. I joined the U.S. Peace Corps in 1997 and spent three years working on coastal resource management in the Philippines. Since returning to the States, I have worked with nonprofits and educational institutions for the majority of my career, including Merced College and the University of California, Merced. It has been a privilege for me to work with students and researchers, and to help promote real science to new audiences. My new role with Clarion West presents an incredible opportunity to apply the breadth of my experience and interests both as a leader and in promoting the intersections of art and science.

This summer, Clarion West has another inspiring line-up of instructors to work with a new group of students. As this newsletter goes out, the application process

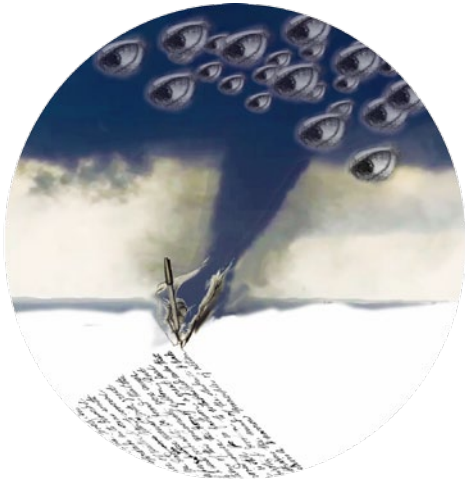
is ending and our staff and volunteers have selected the next 18 students who will bring their unique perspectives to the field of speculative fiction.

I look forward to getting to know the Clarion West staff, volunteers, and alumni, and am eager to promote Clarion West's mission. I hope to reach out and get to know all of you as we continue to inspire new writers. ♦



Connect with Clarion West on social media

It's easy to keep up with happenings at Clarion West on Twitter and Facebook, and we now have videos of past years' Summer Reading Series on YouTube. Visit www.clarionwest.org/contact/ for links. ♦



Clarion West Write-a-thon

SPONSOR CLARION
WEST WRITE-A-THON

If the
Write-a-thon
had a
Write-a-thon
Page

VICKI SAUNDERS (CW 09)



Board Chair Vicki Saunders

About Me

At first, I shadowed the Summer Workshop. I began in 2003, the brainchild of Adrian Khactu (CW '02), born to bring his class together and create an immersive writing experience like Clarion West. I became part of Clarion West and open to all in 2004, inviting participants to join a community of writers and put writing first, soliciting donors to support their work.

I've since become Clarion West's biggest fundraiser and branched out into Write-a-thon readings, Write-a-thon meet-ups, and Write-a-thon writing sprints. This year's events will be held in Seattle, some online and some in person. Plans will be settled by the time sign-ups open, just before the Workshop begins on June 18. I run through the end of the Summer Workshop and then go dormant a month after it ends, but I am happy to accept sponsorships throughout the year.

Confession

I love my participants and donors. I'm in awe of their ideas and energy. Writers offer sneak peeks of new works, Tuckerizations, books, cartoons, postcards, and weekly reports on their process, techniques, and feelings. None of this is required. All I ask is that they write.

Donors seek out new writers, people who've never been published, as well supporting the work of favorite writers, classmates, friends, favorite genres, or diverse voices. Some commit to recurring donations. Some offer matching funds. Every bit counts. Five bucks is fine. The average donation runs around \$30.00.

I worry that my hybrid nature—encouraging writers and donors—may be confusing. To me, they are means to the same end: helping writers to grow, to find their voice and their audience. I like to help writers and donors find each other, and include suggestions in my pages each year. Without donors, the Workshop could not exist. But in the end, it's all about the writing.

Writing Description

My participants write everything: space opera, slipstream, fantasy, poetry, literary fiction, nonfiction, novels, short stories, screen plays, haikus, outlines of a multivolume sequence—all legit.

Website: clarionwest.org/writeathon

Twitter Handle: @ClarionWest #writeathon

Publications

So hard to choose: So many have had their start, their middle, their end, or their final edit in a Write-a-thon. I haven't been keeping track as well as I should. A few come to mind: E. C. Myers' (CW '05) *Fair Coin*—it won the Andre Norton award. Nisi Shawl's (CW '92) *Everfair*, now shortlisted for a Nebula. Stephanie Burgis CW '01) found an agent during a Write-a-thon, drafted her first novel during a Write-a-thon, and sold that novel during a Write-a-thon while working on its sequel.

Write-a-thon Goals

My 2017 goal is 200 participants and an equal number of unique donors. (Lucky for me, many of my donors support the efforts of multiple writers). I hope to raise over \$20,000, to help cover all the things, big and small, that the Summer Workshop requires, from reams of paper to airfare for gifted instructors from far afield. But this year I'm rattled. Some of Clarion West's funding sources, such as the NEA, are threatened. Housing costs in Seattle are skyrocketing. My stretch goal is over 300 participants, and \$30,000.

The Workshop has been going for over 30 years. I'm able to draw from 650 alumni plus instructors, board members, staff, the folks who come to our readings and attend our parties, and the whole supportive Clarion West community. I have high hopes! ♦

Many thanks to Kate Schaefer for her long institutional memory and Kris Millering for her Wayback skills.

Dancing in Trinidad

YANG-YANG WANG (CW 14)



2016 was a year of transition for Clarion West, including the onboarding of a new Treasurer (apparently me).

We'll get to the numbers soon; let's take a moment to recognize Dan Trefethen for all the great work he's done—and continues to do—for Clarion West. Thank you for taking care of the sacred spreadsheets, Dan, and enjoy your newly acquired “free time” (but please, always keep your cell phone on and handy).

Overall, we finished the year with a small gain. This is a major victory as two key financial forces competed as to which would be lower: grant revenues or workshop expenses.

We began the year knowing that our fundraising would be down five figures from our projected budget. This was due to a major grant donor restructuring and lowering their maximum donation. Despite regaining ground with smaller

grants, higher One-Day workshop revenues, and increased Write-a-thon donors, we were still substantially down.

This is where the good news begins. Once again, our incredible team of staff members and volunteers came to the rescue. Due to their generosity and hard work, our workshop costs were brought down more than enough to offset the loss in revenue. Thank you, each and every one of you.

As of the end of 2016, our total cash and investment assets are at \$177,979.34. This is approximately one year of expenses, a great position for any nonprofit. Our investment manager Susan Gossman continues to grow our money with an expert hand, an important contribution to help offset inflation and unexpected expenses.

Looking forward to 2017, our budget is set for aggressive revenue growth. Tuition levels will be higher by \$400, a much-needed correction. Despite rising costs, we have only increased tuition \$200 over the last five years. We're also working towards getting unrestricted donations up near 2015 levels.

Moves like these will allow us to fund some special (totally clandestine) projects that will help Clarion West adapt and grow, ultimately continuing our legacy as one of the best writer's programs in all the possible universes.* ♦

*Our projects have nothing to do with parallel universes.**

Unless they do.*

Quit thinking about it.*

****You have amazing vision.*****

Actual 2016 Budget 2017

Income

Unrestricted Donations	\$11,510	\$23,500
Write-A-Thon	\$21,381	\$23,000
Scholarships	\$28,300	\$32,200
Matching Funds	\$2,148	\$2,000
Instructorships	\$14,050	\$17,000
Special Events/Readings	\$1,650	---
Grants	\$26,107	\$31,000
Workshop Income (Scholarships removed)	\$40,575	\$48,900
One-Day Workshops	\$16,685	\$14,795
Corporate Matching	\$8,220	\$8,000
Total Income	\$170,626	\$200,395

Expenses

Special Events/Readings	\$3,488	\$2,150
Seventh Week newsletter	\$649	\$605
Workshop	\$85,274	\$93,025
One-Day Workshops	\$8,922	\$9,320
Administration	\$67,671	\$76,260
Fundraising	\$3,961	\$5,830
Total Expenses	\$169,965	\$187,190

Surplus \$661 \$13,205



Extracts from Vonda N. McIntyre's Pitfalls of Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy



Nebula Award-winner and Clarion West co-founder Vonda N. McIntyre offers these small tasting-portions of her writing advice. If you're interested in the full meal, her entire Pitfalls text is available free to readers of this newsletter at: <http://bookviewcafe.com/bookstore/book/pitfalls-of-sf/> using the coupon code CWPITFALLS.



McIntyre's First Law

UNDER THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES, ANYTHING I TELL YOU COULD BE WRONG.

Pitfall #2

IT'S ALMOST WRITING, OR, HALF BAKED WEASELS

Almost and half (half-smile, etc.) are weasel words that allow you to evade the responsibility of being precise. Their use will drain the life from your prose. "Some kind of" has recently joined the infamous company of weasel words. If you're tempted to use this phrase, ask yourself what meaning it conveys. That the writer has no idea what's going on? That the writer knows but isn't going to bother to tell the reader? It carries no information. Why use it? Some writers litter their pages with these words and phrases to no purpose. Beware!

Pitfall #3

SUBJUNCTIVE TENSION, OR "DON'T MINCE WORDS, BONES; TELL ME WHAT YOU REALLY MEAN!"

Samuel R. Delany coined the term "subjunctive tension", which is the difference between what you mean and what you actually say. In "realistic" fiction you can get away with a lot of metaphorical (not to say sloppy) phrasings

that, in science fiction, can bring the reader up short. Examples:

His eyes fell to the floor.
(Boing! boing!)

She screwed up her face.
(To the ceiling? Owie!)

He ran through the door.
(Able to penetrate strong oak in a single bound! Might one possibly mean the doorway?)

She strained her eyes through the viewscreen.
(My all-time fave.)

Pitfall #4

RAMPANT CAPITALS, OR THE NOUNS OF DOOM

Be careful about capitalizing words in order to indicate their importance. Several problems attend rampant capitalization.

First, extraneous capitalization tries and fails to conceal a lack of intensity, style, substance, or all those qualities, in your prose.

Second, if you capitalize Many of the Nouns in your Sentences, your Prose your Wish a Story in German to write will read. (In German you capitalize all the nouns.) (And the verbs come last, but that's a different Pitfall.)

Third, when you sell your novel, the cover blurb will contain every single word you've capitalized. Here is a possible result:

On the Plains of Mystery, Prince Greb of the Empire of Thorns rides his WindHorse, Fred, to challenge the Troll-Bugs to a FireDuel!

You get my drift. It looks dumb. Don't set yourself up for it.

Pitfall #6

YGDYLC'HAAFUK'S REVENGE, OR, MCINTYRE'S LAWS OF TITLES

Never use a title that is impossible to pronounce, or embarrassing to say.

Doing either causes people to find it awkward to discuss your book. For example, *Superluminal* (a book of mine) has been misspelled and mispronounced by everybody, up to and including the *New York Times* ("...her novel *Superliminal*, which she says means 'faster than light.'")

▶ Pitfall #8

IT LOOKS LIKE SEEM OR APPEAR! OR, THESE SEEM TO BE MORE WEASELS

Be very careful about the use of words such as “seem” and “appear,” especially in science fiction. As Samuel R. Delany pointed out, in SF things can happen that are unlikely to happen in real life or in realistic (“mainstream”) fiction. Therefore, if you use “seem,” you should mean “seem.” As in, “This is what it looked like but this isn’t really what’s going on, so pay attention!”

A perceptive reader will note “seem” or “appear” or “looked like,” perk up their ears, and wait for you to tell them what really is going on. If nothing other than the superficial action is going on, the reader is going to be irritated.

Eventually the reader will quit trusting you.



Pitfall #9

DEPARTMENT OF REDUNDANCY DEPARTMENT, OR, DEPARTMENT OF REDUNDANCY DEPARTMENT

Samuel R. Delany’s technique for determining whether a phrase is redundant (if you have any question): choose one of the words you suspect of being redundant. Switch it to its antonym. If the resulting construction is inherently ridiculous, an oxymoron, you have redundancy. For example, a “large giant.” As opposed to a small giant? Other common speech-habit redundancies include the rich heiress and the consensus of opinion.

Hyperbole is a fine and respected literary tradition, and speech habits are indispensable for creating characters. (Think of Stephen Maturin’s charming habit of saying “little small.”)

But when you use these techniques, be sure you know you’re doing it—and why.

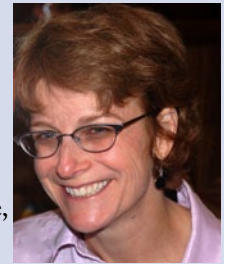
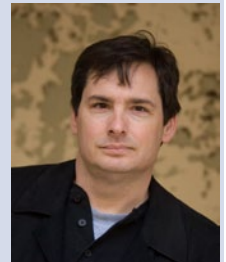
Pitfall #12

“I AM AN AMATEUR,” OR SEVEN WAYS TO GET YOUR MANUSCRIPT REJECTED

1. Turn Page 100 upside down or surreptitiously dog-ear pages eight and nine together to be sure the editor has read the whole typescript. (All editors have seen these tricks; some find them so insulting that they’ll leave the pages turned upside-down or dog-eared even if they have read that far.)
2. Beg the editor to buy your story so you can pay for your mother’s operation.
3. Track down the editor’s email address and email your manuscript, even though the publication’s guidelines ask you not to.
4. Send an editor hate mail to inform them how stupid they are for having rejected your story. Quibble with every comment they took the time to make. This is a fine technique for getting future manuscripts rejected.
5. Ostentatiously display a copyright © notice (on every single page!) so the editor will know not to steal your ideas. (Ideas are easy, and parallel evolution of story lines is common. It’s what you do with the ideas that counts.)
6. Warn the editor outright not to steal your ideas, because you have (or are) a hotshot lawyer. (See #5. Plagiarism does happen — but it’s rare; editors have not, to my knowledge, been the perpetrators; and it always blows up in the plagiarist’s face. Editors aren’t interested in stealing anyone’s stories to make themselves look good. What makes editors look good is finding writers who can write good stories, and publishing them.)
7. Send a nonstandard manuscript “so it will stand out.” Pink paper with purple type. Perfect-bound, camera-ready manuscripts. Typeset text. If the editor sends you information on proper manuscript format—by all means, argue with the old fuddy-duddy. ♦

Summer Reading Series 2017

As always, the instructors of the Summer Workshop will read from their work and meet the community at 7 p.m. on most Tuesday evenings during the workshop. If you are local to Seattle, join us for these thought-provoking evenings. Unless otherwise noted, the readings take place at the University Book Store, 4326 University Way NE in Seattle.



Note: Due to Independence Day falling on a Tuesday this year, John Chu’s reading will be on Wednesday, July 5.

June 20
Daryl Gregory

June 27
Kij Johnson

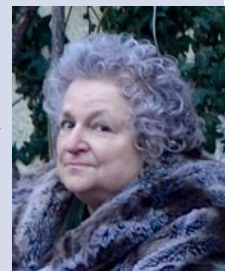
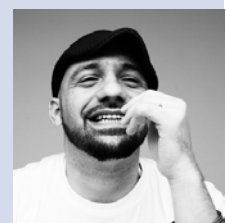
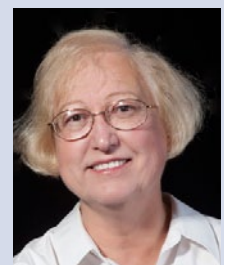
July 5
John Chu

July 11
Connie Willis
at the Seattle Public
Library Central
Branch, 1000 4th Ave

July 18
Daniel José Older
at the Seattle Public
Library Central
Branch, 1000 4th Ave

July 25
Pat Cadigan

See <https://www.clarionwest.org/events/readings/> for the latest information about the Summer Reading Series. ♦



(photo credits: Daryl Gregory by Steve Williams 2008, Daniel José Older by John Midgley, Pat Cadigan by Ellen Datlow)