

The Seventh Week

clarion west writers workshop • spring 2022

Alumni Highlight: Sheree Renée Thomas (CW '99)



Sheree Renée Thomas

*Sheree Renée Thomas is an award-winning fiction writer, poet, and editor. Her work is inspired by myth and folklore, natural science and Mississippi Delta conjure. She is the author of *Nine Bar Blues: Stories from an Ancient Future*, *Sleeping Under the Tree of Life*, and *Shotgun Lullabies*. She is the Associate Editor of the Black arts literary journal, *Obsidian: Literature & the Arts in the African Diaspora*, and Editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. She lives in her hometown, Memphis, Tennessee.*

Stefani Cox
Communications
Specialist

Groundbreaking music artist, actor, and overall phenomenon Janelle Monáe released the story collection *The Memory Librarian* in April, which expands the Afrofuturistic universe of her much-celebrated *Dirty Computer* album.

Monáe has been on tour with the book and its writers, including Clarion West alumna Sheree Renée Thomas (CW '99). We had the chance to talk with Sheree about what the project was like and where it took her:

CW: How did you come to be involved with *The Memory Librarian* project?

SRT: I was invited! They'd been planning it for some time. They thought about who they would love to be a part of the project, and they knew my

work so they were able to reach out. I thought it was a prank email at first. I had to print it out, and then I started to wave it around. I was squinting at it like that meme with the woman squatting.

CW: What was the most rewarding part of working on this project?

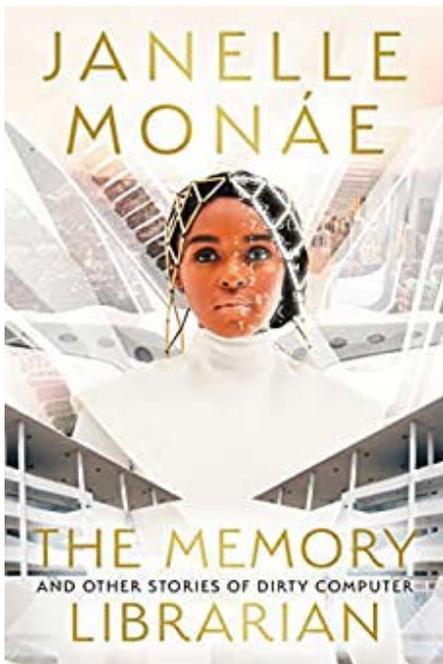
SRT: Finishing the story and really seeing the reaction to it was wonderful. Kind of similar to when my own work goes out there, and having it just going through all the stages of writing to publishing. In some ways, it's how I felt about my short story collection *Nine Bar Blues* – you write the individual pieces when they come to you, but seeing them all together is like, "Oh this is actually in the world!" When we got the full story collection it was amazing. Each story gives you a different aspect of *New Dawn*. This is science fiction so we're all familiar with post-apocalyptic societies whether it's from *Fahrenheit 451*, *1984*, *Station Eleven*, or whatever it is.

But the worldbuilding here is about the people who inhabit that space. In Alaya Dawn Johnson's title story "The Memory Librarian," for example, we get the chance to see the world through the eyes of someone who ostensibly has a great deal of power in the story. But of course, they have a life changing desire to fall in love. How do you do that when you know the secrets of everyone?

CW: Were you given parameters for your story, or did you have total control over what you contributed?

SRT: Janelle had a vision for each of the stories; each one came out of her imagination. You're given the aspect. For example, time poverty. Eve Ewing did "Timebox" where that is inside an apartment and the couple has different ideas on how this should be used, for personal gain or for the community. For my story, "Timebox Altar(ed)," we talked about my fascination with land having that ability and the character Bug. Mine is the last story in the ►►

► collection and we wanted to end on that sense of happy times. They also wanted to explore children coming of age. I wanted to think about if we could skip ahead of that whole coming out process. In the story, people are very clear about things we seem to struggle so deeply with. You can't overcome humanity, the extraordinary diversity and complexity we have on this planet. Self-love and care are so important. The characters may not have too many financial resources as outsiders of New Dawn. They can't really afford to live in the big city, but they created a space of love and care for each other, and that's what matters.



CW: What advice do you offer writers looking to be involved in projects like this? (It seems like a unique opportunity to connect fiction and the music world!)

SRT: *Laughs.* It's not like *The Running Man*! I'm not quite sure what to say, because you don't really seek this kind of project out. Working on a shared world with others, they pick you because of what you do. They

pick you because of your voice. Don't be afraid to be yourself in your writing. It was wonderful, they reached out and had done their research. Like Zora Neale Hurston said, there are the years that ask questions and the years that answer. This felt like a year that answered!

CW: How would you describe the current stage of your career, both looking back and what you've accomplished so far and plans you have for the future?

SRT: I've had some wonderful opportunities recently. I co-hosted the Hugo 2021 Awards with fellow Clarion West '99 alum Andrea Hairston, who is a theater queen and great with scripts. It was perfect and fun. Whatever is going on, know that I'm always going to be writing my work. Whether I'm at the con or not, on social media or not, I'm always going to be doing my work. I'm glad people are having a chance to discover and learn more about me. I hope more readers will be able to do that. I'm just excited to contribute to a project for an artist I love so much, who I've admired from the very beginning, and who has Kansas City roots, where I also have connections. She's an amazing artist, very brave. And watching how she moves through the universe is so amazing and inspiring, very instructive for me. As for my career, *Trouble the Waters*, co-edited with Pan Morigan and Troy L. Wiggins, came out in January and *Africa Risen* is coming out in November, co-edited with Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki and Zelda Knight. And I'm a 2022 Hugo Award finalist as an editor! ♦

Clarion West Writers Workshop

2022

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Summer Workshop Instructor: P. Djèlí Clark

Stefani Cox
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Phenderson Djéli Clark

*P. Djéli Clark is the Nebula-winning author of the novel *A Master of Djinn*, and the award-winning and Hugo, Nebula, and Sturgeon nominated author of the novellas *Ring Shout*, *The Black God's Drums*, and *The Haunting of Tram Car 015*. His short stories have appeared in online venues such as *Tor.com*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and in print anthologies including, *Griots* and *Hidden Youth*.*

CW: Recognizing where you're at, having won the Nebula and Locus awards and being a finalist for the Hugo and World Fantasy awards, plus publishing your debut novel, *A Master of Djinn* — how is it all feeling?

PDC: It's been a bit surreal. When I started writing, I don't think I even knew what most of those awards were. It took me a while until I did. And I just never expected anything I was writing would end up there. So, it was kind of a surprise. I'm like, "Really? Really? Okay." But I didn't go in thinking, "Oh man, I need to gun for these awards" or anything. Maybe that's a little better, because if I'm not nominated for them, oh well. If I am, then I'm thankful!

CW: What are you most looking forward to as a first-time Clarion West instructor?

PDC: I think one of the things I'm looking forward to with Clarion West is finding a way to talk about what I do, and I'm always amazed that other people do this, like Max Gladstone or N.K. Jemisin. That they can hold Masterclasses, and they have all these

things where they're explaining about what they do, and I've always thought, "I just do it." I've never sat down and thought about how I did it. So, there's a way — even though this is to impart something to other people — that I think the experience is going to help me also sift and think about, "Well, what did go into creating that?" And, "Oh, it turns out there's a word for that, it's called 'worldbuilding.'" I thought I was just doing it, but there are structures to writing that I was kind of doing from copying what I'd read, almost intuitively. It'll be interesting to go in and plug the holes; it's my turn to try and do some of that.

CW: Turning to some of your own writing and work — you have an interest in alternate histories. Can you say a bit about what draws you to look at the past and then take tangents or create your own worlds from that?

PDC: I taught a workshop last summer to students, and I said, "You know, I think all speculative fiction pulls on history." Because all we know is what's happened. It's all history. We don't have another world or another dimension of how things have happened, so I don't care if you're doing Tolkien, or if you're even trying to imagine what the future is going to

be like, you're pulling on history. Now, counterfactuals and alternate history, I think they just do it a lot more specifically. We definitely know that this is this time period we're going to set this in within the historical narrative, but that being said, I think we all draw on history, whether we're creating a completely secondary world fantasy or not, we're pulling on aspects of cultures from around the world and histories in order to tell those stories.

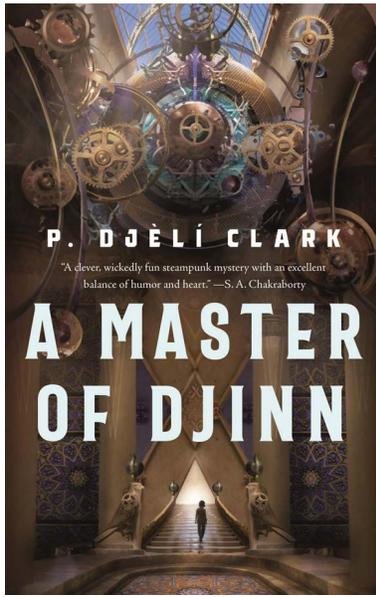
It's interesting because, I'm thankful that the awards that I've gotten, and the acclaim that I've gotten has been for "alternate history" works, but my first love was actually fantasy. I'm a huge epic fantasy fan. And I definitely think that pulls on history, if in a different way. But when it comes to the works that I've done, I think what I've most enjoyed is pulling on histories that are a bit more familiar to people, that aren't as hidden.

If you're doing a secondary world fantasy, you're taking bits and pieces here and there, but when I'm doing *A Dead Djinn in Cairo*, or I'm doing *The Black God's Drums*, it's a definitive space that people can understand, and understand the history of it and get the feel for it. I've always had an interest in counterfactuals, but most of them when I grew up were like, "What ►►

► if the South won the Civil War?” I think I became a lot more interested in shifting the power dynamics of those kinds of histories, and I was really influenced by Steven Barnes’ *Lion’s Blood*. It was one of the first times I’d seen a counterfactual that made us start thinking, “Ok, what if we looked at the power dynamics of things like race, marginalization, and colonialism, and we changed them?” I came to understand that what the counterfactual is about and how it does it is not really important. To me, what’s important is why you chose to change what you chose. I realized that I purposefully in *The Black God’s Drums* changed the Haitian revolution, because I want to talk about the issues of slavery, colonialism, and so forth. So, all this to say, I think what’s drawn me to doing alternate history is examining issues of power and imagining how things could be different. In that way, it elucidates a lot about our world. It still tells us a lot about the world we live in, even though I’m altering it to tell the story.

Why are we putting importance on what they call the “point of convergence”? It’s because something about that interests us, right? And so, I guess I was looking for the things that might most interest me. I mean, I’m interested too in *The Man in the High Castle*, I won’t lie, but I’m also looking for those other points that people may not think about, that are more interesting if you are a Black person and you’re looking at it. You

know for us, we’re always like, “What if we showed up with a bunch of weapons on the coast of West Africa?” Right? That’s our counterfactual. It just shows you how different people can have different moments. So, *A Dead Djinn in Cairo* arose to look at anti-colonialism. That’s my idea of a counterfactual.



CW: So much of what Clarion West is about is supporting and mentoring emerging writers — who were your writing influences or mentors as you were coming into the space?

PDC: It’s interesting because growing up at the time when I was coming up and reading speculative fiction in the eighties, I didn’t even know of an Octavia Butler or whoever else. I learned about them when I got to college. I was reading all kinds of other things. The other authors existed, of

course, and they were doing pretty well, but they weren’t going to be what you were going to read as a teenager coming up, unless someone did an intervention and said, “Here you go.” And so, my early people that I was reading were Frank Herbert, J.R.R. Tolkien, and everything Dungeons and Dragons, those kinds of things. And it was really later that I was like, “Oh wow, look at these Black people doing this kind of work.” There was a way they put politics in their work that I could relate to, things that I was living and going through at the time. I thought the last person who had done that, I remember when I was in middle school and I read Ray Bradbury for the first time. It was like the *Twilight Zone* that my mom liked, the old black and white ones, but in words. It had these political and deeper meanings, and so to see that from a Black perspective, from people like Butler was great.

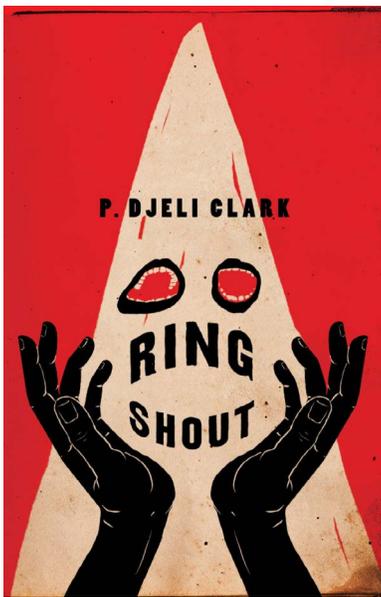
And then I remember after that I went and read Tananarive Due, and it was this way of, again, telling our stories. It was like, “Okay, we want to tell a story about immortals, or what have you, but what if we set it in Ethiopia, and what if we bring in this history and culture that most people aren’t talking about?” So, the idea of doing that blew my mind. And then I read Charles Saunders and realized, “Oh!” I had all these ideas of doing African fantasy and realized somebody’s been doing it. And then I would probably say the person who influenced me the most, and even ►

MISSION STATEMENT

We support emerging and underrepresented voices by providing writers with world-class instruction to empower their creation of wild and amazing worlds.

Through conversation and public engagement, we bring those voices to an ever-expanding community.

▶ though I've met her, it was more so afar and reading her work, was N.K. Jemisin. When I read *The Inheritance* trilogy and others, then it was like a whole other realm of, "Okay, I love setting stories in fantasy Africa, but I can do something else too." And they can still be as complex and deep and political. And I remember that blew my mind. I thought if you were Black and you did fantasy it had to be in an African world. And there's nothing wrong with that. I love doing that. I've done it. It's the freedom to know that if I want to do something else, I can do something else. And it can be just as profound. And so, there's a way that I was not exploring how fantastic I could think of things, until I read her works and realized how much she was letting her imagination just go.



CW: Clarion West has students from all over, with different life stories and professions. As an academic historian, how do you balance that with your speculative work? Do they draw from each other?

PDC: They always compete for time. When you have two jobs that are writing, it means that I never get to sit down and watch

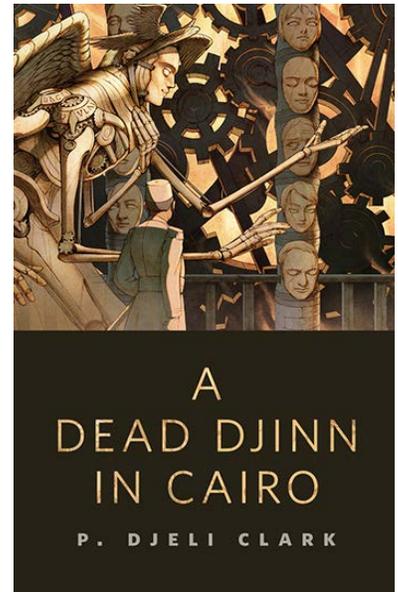
all those Netflix shows I want to, because as soon as I finish one writing assignment, I'm like, "Okay, time to get to this other writing assignment." But, right now, I would say the influence is almost a bit one-sided, in that certainly I'm drawing on history a lot, especially with my past works to tell my speculative fiction. And some of this is just by happy chance. It's what's popped into my head. Like "The Secret Lives of the Nine Negro Teeth of George Washington," the short story I wrote, was just me knowing about that and me trying to figure out, "What if I told a story about that?" And I just kept playing with it in my head, and then I had something. And so that certainly helps me as an influence. It also helps me when I do any kind of speculative fiction, doing research, I can use those tools that I have as a historian to keep 40 Google sheets open and not lose my mind.

What hasn't happened is the other way around. And I'm surprised actually, because I didn't think this would be the case, but they're actually asking me to do that a little bit [in academia]. They're like, "We've seen you, we've seen your voice that you have within the speculative work. How about you bring some of that narrative voice into your academic writing?" And that's new for me, because in academia, I was always taught, "This is how you write, this is how you say words." And it was not to talk about it in the ways that I do creatively. I'm still experimenting and seeing how that can work.

CW: Do you have any words of wisdom as you come into a mentorship role with Clarion West?

PDC: I'll tell you my lesson. Learn the craft as much as you can. I think when I first started, because I didn't have social media at the time, we had listservs. I did not have that access where editors and writers and others are just on there freely talking. All

of those folks, listen to them. That's why, when I first started writing short stories, my short stories were embarrassingly long, like 20,000 words, because I had no idea that short stories were supposed to be like 7,500, or for most markets, 4,000 to 6,000 words probably. Just those little



things were things that I had to teach myself going forward, and I think the great thing is that now a lot of that information is available. I always tell people, throw yourself into genre, sit around and listen, be that fly on the wall. Look up these things and learn what the market is, learn the genre, learn the craft, all of that. And also, don't be afraid to put your stuff out there. I know that's easy to say, but I mean, if you plan on publishing — if you're not just writing for your friends and for yourself, and that's fine if you are — if you plan on having larger audiences, you've got to get your stuff out there. So that means, joining writers groups, learning to take those critiques, and taking the chance that people want to read your work.

I think Clarion West will be a really new experience for me, so I'm really looking forward to it, to working with everyone else there, and seeing this class. ♦

Introducing The Clarion West Class of 2022!

JAE STEINBACHER (CW '14)
WORKSHOP COORDINATOR

It is with great excitement that we present the Clarion West class of 2022. After an unprecedented two years without an in-person workshop, we are delighted to welcome the incoming students to Seattle this summer.

The incoming class represents the most international cohort of students

Clarion West has ever hosted. We are thrilled for voices from Venezuela, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tasmania, Guyana, Singapore, India, and across the United States to come together in one class.

The eighteen writers will study with Susan Palwick, P. Djèli Clark, Fonda Lee, Tobias S. Buckell, Bill Campbell, Annalee Newitz, and Charlie Jane Anders.

Congratulations, Class of 2022!

- Kel Coleman (Suitland, MD/Philadelphia, PA, USA)
- Sam Davis (Los Angeles, CA, USA)
- Naomi Day (New York by way of Massachusetts, USA)
- Varsha Dinesh (Trivandrum, Kerala, India)
- Louis Evans (NYC, NY, USA)
- Tania Fordwalker (Tasmania and Queensland, Australia)

- Amit Gupta (Honolulu, HI, USA)
- Kerstin Hall (Cape Town, South Africa)
- Ana Hurtado (Quito, Ecuador/Maracaibo, Venezuela)
- Steph Kwiatkowski (Naperville, IL, USA)
- P H Lee (USA)
- Wen-yi Lee (Singapore)
- Sloane Leong (Portland, OR, USA)
- Yvette Lisa Ndlovu (Zimbabwe)
- Issa Marc Shulman (California, USA)
- Subraj Singh (Georgetown, Guyana)
- Alex Veras (Jersey City, NJ, USA)
- Takim Williams (Atlanta, GA, USA) ♦

Write-a-thon 2022

EVAN J. PETERSON (CW '15)
DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH
COORDINATOR



Clarion West's Annual Community Builder and Peer-to-Peer Fundraiser Returns!

When: June 19 - July 29, 2022

Where: Online

Registration opens: June 6

How much: Free! Donations welcome!

Do you miss writing with a community? Do you need motivation to get some writing done this summer? Join us again this year for our annual Write-a-thon. Finish projects,

draft your novel, or just take it one day at a time — you create your own goal! Write alongside the Six-Week Workshop and fellow speculative fiction writers.

This community event helps raise funds for the annual Clarion West Six-Week Summer Workshop, One-Day Workshops, and in-person and virtual programming. There is no minimum amount to raise; donations are accepted throughout the six-week event and year-round.

Join our international community for our most popular event of the year!

You can expect:

- An online community of writers — now on Discord!
- Free writing sprints and co-writing sessions each week
- Writing classes every week
- Weekly writing prompts

Flash Fiction Critique Groups \$15 registration fee:

This year, in addition to free classes, writing sessions, and co-writing opportunities, our flash fiction writing groups are back! For a small fee (with scholarships available), participants will be placed in small groups, writing one flash fiction story a week and offering feedback on other group members' work. As a bonus, one story a week will be chosen at random for a one-on-one critique session with our writing mentor Andy Duncan! ♦

2022 Summer of Science Fiction & Fantasy Reading Series



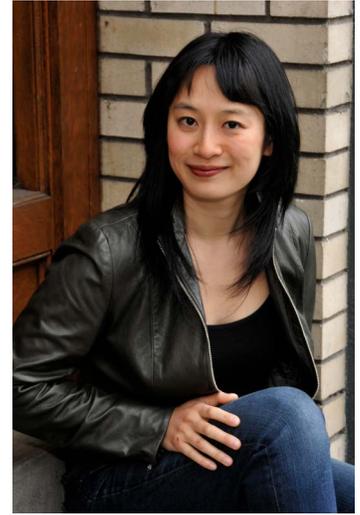
June 21: Susan
Palwick

7PM Seattle Public Library
Central Branch
1000 4th Avenue
Supported by the Leslie Howle
Instructorship



June 28: P. Djèli
Clark

7PM Seattle Public Library
Central Branch
1000 4th Avenue



July 5: Fonda Lee

7PM Seattle Public Library
Central Branch
1000 4th Avenue
Supported by the Sally Klages
Memorial Instructorship



July 19: Bill
Campbell

7:30PM Town Hall Seattle
1119 8th Ave



July 12: Tobias
Buckell

7:30PM Town Hall Seattle
1119 8th Ave
Supported by the Debbie J. Rose
Memorial Instructorship



July 26: Annalee
Newitz and Charlie
Jane Anders

7PM Seattle Public Library
Central Branch
1000 4th Avenue
Supported by the Susan C. Petrey
Memorial Fellowship



Save the Date!

Clarion West After Dark Gala

October 21, 2022

In-person in Seattle & TBD Online

Tickets on sale August 1st

Guest of Honor: Daniel Abraham, co-author of *The Expanse* books



Daniel Abraham

Last year, we revealed ourselves with Clarion West Nerdlesque. This year, let us take you on a cruise across the expanse. Clarion West After Dark is a one-night getaway among the stars—both celestial and human. Join our crew for the party of the year, and let us entertain you.

Opportunities to sponsor this event may be found at <https://www.clarionwest.org/community/clarion-west-after-dark/>
Or email evan@clarionwest.org.

See you soon...

Guest of Honor bio:

Clarion veteran Daniel Abraham (CW '98) writes under several names, all of them successful. As one half of the collaborative team (the other half being Ty Franck) that constitutes

the international and New York Times bestselling author James S.A. Corey, he writes in *The Expanse* universe and is a writer and Executive Producer on the TV series *The Expanse*. *The Expanse* franchise has garnered popular acclaim and numerous awards including the Hugo, Saturn, Locus, and Dragon Awards, and recognition from the Directors Guild of Canada.

His M.L.N. Hanover aspect authored the *Black Sun's Daughter* series while under his own name he has published short stories, the *Dagger and the Coin* series, the *Long Price Quartet*, and now the first book in a new epic fantasy trilogy, *Age of Ash*.

In 1996, Daniel sold his first story to a semi-prozine. The Clarion West Six-Week Writer's Workshop – with a lineup of teachers including George R.R. Martin, Connie Willis and Gardner Dozois – helped him hone his craft,

and he was soon publishing steadily. These and other mentors such as New Mexico authors Fred Saberhagen and Tony Hillerman have engendered in Daniel a desire to mentor in turn, including serving several times as a Clarion West instructor.

Daniel Abraham lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with his wife and his daughter and somehow maintains his considerable writing output around the distractions of a small herd of joyous dogs. ♦