The Online Creative Writing Program is nearing the end of its first decade, running more than fifteen courses each quarter, including our two-year Novel Writing Certificate Program. This space will aim the spotlight on the talented alumni and faculty of our courses, featuring news of recent successes, opportunities for networking and publishing, short personal essays and interviews relevant to all aspects of the writing life. If you have a piece of news or know of an opportunity you’d like to share with our community, please email: continuingstudies@stanford.edu.

JANUARY 2017

This month, we are thrilled to spotlight the recent success of Online Writing Certificate student Elaine Ray, who received the 2016 Gival Press Short Story Award. Her story, titled “Pidgin,” was chosen by competition judge Thomas H. McNeely, who happens to be an instructor in the OWC program, although he never taught Elaine. Small world! The award carries a prize of $1,000 and publication in the ejournal ArLiJo (Arlington Literary Journal), Issue 95. Here is a link to Elaine’s story: http://arlijo.com/

About Elaine Ray

Elaine is a journalist and fiction writer based in Stanford, California. She grew up in Pittsburgh, where she had many imaginary friends - who became characters in stories she later wrote. She has spent most of her career as a journalist, working for many years as an editorial writer for the Boston Globe and as an editor and writer for Essence magazine. She is currently Director of Communications and Web Strategy at Stanford. Her blog, My Father’s Posts, is a collection of her own commentary and the writings of her father, Ebenezer Ray, who was a journalist in Harlem from the 1920s through the 1940s. She recently completed the Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing offered by Stanford Continuing Studies and is working on the final draft of a novel titled Wanted.

Thomas McNeely’s Praise for “Pidgin”

“In fewer than twenty pages, “Pidgin” sketches a world of its narrator of color’s post-colonial migration, political activism, and imprisonment within the choices offered him by history. At the same time, it’s a narrative that seems
shaped by mysteries that transcend and yet throw into sharp relief its political moment, the chief one being the brilliant voice of its narrator, who is at once mercilessly exposed and utterly enigmatic. Elaine Ray is a writer who plays by her own rules, and is a writer to watch.”

—Thomas H. McNeely, Gival Press Short Story Award judge and author of Ghost Horse

FEBRUARY 2017

Angela Pneuman, a core instructor in our Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing and a frequent instructor in our Online Creative Writing program, will be one of the featured writers at Story Is the Thing, a new quarterly reading and discussion series at Kepler’s Books in Menlo Park.

Inspired by the national Why There Are Words series (founded in Sausalito), Story Is the Thing invites established and emerging authors to read and discuss passages that they select from an assigned theme. The Kepler’s event takes place February 16 at 7:30 pm and the evening’s theme is “the electrifying moment.” Angela is hoping that some of her students who live on the peninsula might be able to attend, so that she can meet them in person and talk to them about their writing lives as well as her own. Angela is the author of the story collection Home Remedies, and the novel Lay It on My Heart.

You can learn more about the February 16 event here.

An Interview with Core Instructor in our Online Certification Program in Novel Writing, Angela Pneuman

Malena Watrous: Having written both a collection of stories and a novel, which form calls to you now, and why? What do you like (or dislike) about both the long and short forms of fiction?

Angela Pneuman: While I was working on the novel, I kept thinking of stories I wanted to write. Unwritten stories are always so good! So now I’m working in the short form again. I like it because I think it tolerates a lot of variety and risk – whether technique or subject matter. For example, I loved Wells Tower’s story “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned,” but I was happy enough for it to be over, too.

I like the novel form because of its relationship to time. It takes more time to read a novel, of course, and so the reader is having a certain experience of moving through time themselves while reading a narrative that must manage time – usually, but not always, a greater span than that of a short story. Because I can rarely read a novel in one sitting, that experience of picking it up and putting it down and doing something else in between is more like living with something than visiting it. Whenever I consider novels I’ve read, I remember so vividly the parts of my life I was living while reading them—and that doesn’t happen so much with short fiction, for me. And of course writing a novel is like being married to it. I’m sort of excited to start on a genre-ish novel next, a crime story based on something that happened in coal country like where I grew up.
MW: You split your work hours among writing, teaching writing, and commercial writing in the wine business, as well as conference organizing. How do you manage to pay the bills and also save enough time and energy for your creative work? Do you have any tips for our working writers?

AP: I was thinking that the way you know you're an extrovert or introvert has less to do with whether or not you like to be around people and more to do with how you feel afterward: energized or drained. I'm lucky that everything I have to do for a living reenergizes me in some way—at least most of the time. With teaching, I get to teach books I love, and talk with people who have also read them. I get to talk about a process—writing fiction—that is, in its best practice, sacred. And the wine stuff keeps me grounded in a world of soil, weather, the market, people who work with their hands, engineering, science—none of which I studied in school, and all of which I find interesting. I get to watch coopers make barrels, for example, and toast them over fires. I've visited the biggest bottling lines in the world—on a scale that is hard to comprehend, visually, but is appealing in its industrial way.

I do find my creative approach has changed some since the days I was in school and had more free hours. Now I make a lot of lists, wherever I am, which I try to keep firmly in the material world. I try to leave the observed objects and moments pregnant with emotion and reference, rather than attempt any meaning-making. My little notebooks are like anti-journals, I think. I don't want to write why, just what, and something about training my observing mind to stay that way has been helpful when it's time to turn to fiction. There, the "why" lies in wait to surprise me.

With the wonderful Napa Valley Writers’ Conference, I have a fantastic team that keeps things running smoothly. It's a pleasure to bring some of the world's best contemporary poets and fiction writers into this small community—to hear them read to the public and to watch them inspire the writers in their workshops.

MW: What have you learned from teaching, and/or from having finished and put two books into the world? Do you have any words of hard-won wisdom for writers who are closer to the start of their careers, something you'd like to go back and tell your beginner self?

AP: It's hard not to want to do it right the first draft. But it's the most destructive thing for me and for most writers I work with. There are the lucky few who naturally embrace mess, and then there are the rest of us who have to learn—usually over years—to get comfortable with it, to trust it. It's so natural to want to be good, but that desire is the enemy of early work. You know how Emerson says "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts?" That voice that tells us it has to be good is that thought-rejecting voice. It's hard to press "pause" on it, but it must be done in the early drafts. That rejecting voice, though, can become the voice of discernment in revision. So you press "pause" on it, then when you've discovered what it is you're up to, you press "play" and let it do its organizing, evaluating, analyzing, winnowing thing.
This month we celebrate the recent publication of a memoir by our beloved and acclaimed instructor Joshua Mohr: *Sirens*. Josh has been teaching for us for many years, most regularly in our Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing. In addition to teaching and raising his young daughter, he also manages to find the time to produce new books at a prodigious rate. *Sirens* is his first book-length work of nonfiction. Here’s how his publisher, Two Dollar Radio, describes the book:

“A raw and big-hearted chronicle of substance abuse, relapse, and family compassion. *Sirens* provides a harrowing and complicated account of Mohr’s years of substance abuse and culpability. Employing the characterization and chimerical prose for which he has been lauded, Mohr leaves no rock from his sordid past unturned, from his childhood swilling fuzzy navels as a latchkey kid, through the blackouts and fistfights, his first failed marriage, to his path to sobriety, through the birth of his daughter and the three strokes he suffers in his thirties that reveal he has a literal hole in his heart.”

*Kirkus Reviews* says: “By turns raw and tender, this book not only chronicles a man’s literary coming-of-age. It also celebrates the power of love while offering an uncensored look at the frailties that can define – and sometimes overwhelm – people and their lives. An entirely candid, compelling memoir of addiction and the long, fraught road of recovery.”

I took the opportunity to ask Josh a few questions about this new book:

Malena Watrous: As a novelist, why did you decide to write a memoir now?

Joshua Mohr: I wrote the first draft of this under immense duress. On New Year’s Day 2014, I had a stroke - actually my third stroke - and the doctors determined I had a severe congenital heart defect and they needed to operate. I was thirty-eight years old. The surgery was scheduled for March 11, so I had two months of waiting, and because my daughter was only eighteen months old at the time, if I had died during the heart surgery, she’d have no conscious recollection of me. So I used that two-month window to write her a love letter. That’s when I finished the rough draft.

MW: How was the experience of writing your story different from the experience of making up a character’s story?

JM: It’s easier - and it’s harder. I don’t have to invent backstories, logic, etc. But I do have to be abjectly honest and emotionally nude on the page. Writing *Sirens* was the scariest thing I’ve ever done as an author.

MW: Having finished a memoir now, do you have any advice for students or beginning writers considering writing memoirs?

JM: Structure is key in nonfiction. People seem to want to tell their stories straight, hyper-linear, and it’s always more interesting when writers are more nimble with their architecture. I’d already published five novels so I very deliberately
structured Sirens as a novel - no fatty exposition, a reliance on scene. Memoirists tend to indulge their own histories, but I tried to curate this one in a compressed way, making it readable and greyhound lean.

MW: Did you find the experience of writing a memoir cathartic or was it emotionally difficult to access and report honestly on painful memories and misbehavior?

JM: Honestly, the most difficult part of writing nonfiction is that protracted examination of the past’s pain. It would be one thing if you could write it and then poof - you’re done with that vignette. But memoir, just like fiction, is all about revision, going over scenes time and again, exhausting all your options. It becomes an exercise of sitting in your shame for large swaths of time. Oddly, I had a blast doing it. I’ll definitely write another memoir. People seem to connect with the material in a more intimate way. When I tour for a novel, people say things like “Good book, man,” then they go on living their lives. I’ve just finished the West Coast leg of the Sirens tour and the conversations I’ve had with readers have been marvelous. People are coming to the events to share their stories with me. The book has become a kind of catalyst for dialogue, which is the whole point of making art: to connect to other humans on this confusing planet!

MW: What are some the pitfalls that new memoir writers should watch out for?

JM: Write the scenes you don’t want to write. That’s where the good stuff is. The most fertile and terrifying scenes are the ones that (eventually) have to be in the book. And try not to worry about your family’s feelings. I keep hearing people say that they want to write a memoir and they would except for their dad or sister or son, etc. Worry about the ethics in the revision process. At first, just let your imagination feel free to write the book. Don’t stew on practical matters until you’ve honored the art.

MW: Did you know what you were going to write, or did you ever surprise yourself by what came out?

JM: Well, it’s a pretty weird memoir! There are talking dogs and a dead Nazi doctor and a duffel bag that I readily converse with - there are scenes that never happened, superimpositions of the future. To me, the most poignant moment of the book is a fictionalized conversation I may or may not have with my daughter when she’s in her twenties. I openly wept while I wrote it. That’s the power of nonfiction in 2017: that it can be so many things, not just things that have happened in the memoirist’s life, but also dramatizations of our greatest fears and frets. We live in an age right now where memoirists are taking wonderful risks and that’s exciting to me.
APRIL 2017

What a great month! I keep getting emails from our former Online Creative Writing students, either sharing news of their own recent publications or prizes, or letting me know about classmates with good news of their own. As you'll see from the three we're celebrating below—an essayist, a mystery novelist, and a poet—our students' writing is as diverse and unique as they are. Each writer shares a bit about the origins of their project, followed by links to where you can check them out.

Malena Watrous
Online Writing Lead Instructor

Harley Mazuk is celebrating the publication of his first novel, a private-eye story with a love triangle, set in San Francisco and the nearby wine country in 1948. He writes: “I wrote my story in a pulp fiction style in which character is revealed through action, as opposed to introspection. The protagonist is a ne’er do well pacifist who bungles along but is redeemed by his courage and perseverance. This is not the book I was working on in class—that was my second novel in the series—but in the long revision process that followed, I certainly used what I learned in class.” Read more about White with Fish, Red With Murder on the Driven Press website or read an excerpt on the Driven Press blog.

Ann Pelletier has a new book of poetry out, called Letter That Never. She writes, “the book is a series of what I think of as imagined autobiographies written in the voices of the exiled, disappeared, sequestered. For several years I've been meeting online weekly with three other people to write. We generally begin with some kind of prompt, which we either use or ignore, write for a couple of hours, and then read what we've written. Many of the poems in the book got started during those writing sessions.” It’s published by The Word Works and can be found on Amazon.

Lynne Blumberg writes: The essay I developed in Otis Haschemeyer’s Tools class and finished in Lewis Robinson’s Description class has been published. It’s called “When I Realized My Religion,” and it is in Tiferet: A Journal of Spiritual Literature. Also, something I wrote in response to an exercise in one of Malena Watrous’ daily practice classes developed into an essay, and this was also published. This personal essay is called, “Learning from My Past,” and it is in WritingDisorder.com/creative-nonfiction, Winter 2016-17 edition.
MAY 2017

This month I talked to June Gillam, author of the Hillary Broome series of literary mysteries, who recently completed the Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing (even though she’d already written complete novels) out of a desire to learn more about the craft of novel writing and to get a better Kirkus review on her next book. She succeeded! June talked to me about both writing and marketing her novels, as well as about the exciting process of casting them for the audiobook versions.

Malena Watrous
Online Writing Lead Instructor

Malena Watrous: Where did you get the idea for your Hillary Broome character and her series?

June Gillam: Hillary Broome was a minor character in my first, still unfinished, novel. A Northern California reporter abandoned by her mother at age ten and raised by her award-winning journalist father, Hillary stepped out of that early novel and became the protagonist in House of Cuts, after some of my critique partners said how much they liked her. In Cuts, Hillary grows into a hero figure hunting the story of a crazed butcher overtaken by personal anguish who becomes mad enough to kill—and to uniquely showcase the skills of his trade. Along the path of her series arc, searching for her long-lost mother, Hillary is forced into battling other villains in order to save the people she loves. In House of Dads, the culprit is the head of a patriarchal family business; in House of Eire, Hillary takes on a rapacious theme park developer scheming for personal gain in Ireland.

MW: You had already written a few novels in this series before starting the OWC program, and you also teach writing online. Can you share a bit about why you decided that this program would help you, and what you learned from it that you did or didn't expect to learn?

JG: Well, the second book in the Hillary Broome series—House of Dads—received a mixed Kirkus review: too many points of view and not enough character development. Right after I saw that review, I applied to the OWC program in order to improve my writing processes and outcome. My journey through the two-year program was stimulating and rewarding; I got so much from workshopping with other novelists and learning from you, Josh Mohr, and Ammi Keller, my final-project instructor. House of Eire’s Kirkus review was good enough that I let it go public. So the OWC program not only was tremendous fun but also paid off by way of the improved review from Kirkus—and increased sales, too.

MW: How much longer do you foresee writing Hillary Broome novels? Do you keep having ideas for these books or are you getting pulled in other, new directions?

JG: The pleasures of staying with Hillary's story are many. I've gotten to see her grow from an insecure young single woman, orphaned by her powerful father, who loses her own byline due to obsessive meltdowns when reporting on stories of bad mothers and commits the unforgivable journalistic sin—becoming part of the story. She becomes a ghostwriter and matures into a married woman with children, still obsessed with finding her own mother and healing...
that wound. I'm on book four now, *House of Hoops*, centered on Sacramento's new basketball arena. And as a new character appears in those pages—an African-American grandmother—I find that book five's central problems are insisting on their place in the series' future: *House of Crows* is in the nest!

MW: What are the pleasures and pitfalls of series writing?

JG: The pitfalls of writing a series include having to remember details such as eye color, height, etc., from book to book for all the continuing characters. One way to overcome that problem, as one of my fellow writers in *Sisters in Crime* noted recently, is to kill off those ancillary actors as the series moves along!

MW: You are in the category now known as the “authorpreneur,” where you are your own publisher and publicist, and you wear any number of other hats aside from that of writer. What do you like about overseeing all areas of book production and sales? Any tips for others thinking about taking this route?

JG: I like being able to set my own prices. Traditional publishers set the price and the author has no say. This happened to me in 2009, where the publisher of my book *Creating Juicy Tales: Cooperative Inquiry into Writing Stories* set the price way too high, in my view. That experience led me to want control over all aspects of my publications, so I created my own business—Gorilla Girl Ink. It is a LOT of work, though, having to carry out all the tasks involved. Some friends and I are planning to create a company together, in which we will divvy up the various tasks.

MW: Finally, I am very interested in hearing about the process of turning your books into audiobooks. Please tell us a bit about how you made that happen and what it has been like to hear actors read your characters.

JG: One of my critique partners, Michele Dreier, had an audiobook produced of the novella that gives the background story of the main vampire character in her series “SNAP: The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles.” Listening to the dramatic telling of that story enchanted me, and I was thrilled to learn how simple the process had been for my friend. Basically, after you have a .pdf file of your book, you go to ACX.com, Audiobook Creation Exchange, and follow the directions to find a good voice actor for your story. Then you submit a short portion of your manuscript as a script and listen whenever producers upload an audition reading. You can choose among voices and producers you like and can either pay them or offer Royalty Share, which is the way I've gone with the two books on Audible.com now—*House of Cuts* and *House of Dads*. Hillary Broome book three, *House of Eire*, is in production now, along with my poetry chapbook, *So Sweet Against Your Teeth*. With Royalty Share, it costs the authorpreneur nothing except time spent to listen and respond to each chapter of the work as the producer completes it and sends it for review. It's a joy to hear your own books read by a polished professional voice—Ginny Harman, who read mine, taught me how to better read my own novels!

June's books are available through her [website](#), and at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com), [audible.com](http://audible.com), and elsewhere.
This month, we celebrate the publication of *Tilting: A Memoir*, by Nicole Harkin, who has taken a wide variety of our online writing courses ever since we first started offering them. Nicole was a student of mine many years ago (I’ve lost track of exactly how many) in a magazine writing class, where I was immediately taken with her devious – some might say wicked – sense of humor, one I happen to share. Nicole’s memoir possesses this same trademark dark humor, but although she manages to find the comedy in her family melodrama, she writes with great love for the people she’s remembering, who are flawed and human, as we all are. Nicole’s family story may be more extreme than most, which is why it’s memoir-worthy, but she also finds universal truths about human frailty and the value of forgiveness, for the wronged as well as the wrong-doer. *Tilting* will be published June 22, but you can get a sneak preview in excerpts here, and more at [www.tiltingamemoir.com](http://www.tiltingamemoir.com). Nicole talked with me about her writing process and how her Stanford courses helped her to write this book.

**Malena Watrous**
*Online Writing Lead Instructor*

**An excerpt from Tilting: A Memoir:**

*We only learned about our father’s girlfriend after he became deathly ill and lay in a coma one hundred and twenty miles from our home.*

Overhearing the nurse tell Linda—since I was nine I had called my mom by her first name—about the girlfriend who came in almost every day when we weren’t there to visit him confirmed that the last moment of normal had passed us by without our realizing it. Up to then our family had unhappily coexisted with Dad flying jumbo jets to Asia while we lived in Montana. We finally came together to see Dad through his illness, but he was once again absent from a major family event—unable to join us from his comatose state. This is the moment when our normal existence tilted. Dad recovered, but his marriage ailed, as did Linda, with cancer. Our family began to move down an entirely different path with silver linings we wouldn't see for many years.

**Malena Watrous: When did you start writing this memoir? How long did it take you?**

Nicole Harkin: Before Linda – my mother – became sick, I had urged her to write her own story about her relationship with my Dad. And at some point when she had cancer we started writing some small pieces together: “The Just Add Water Cookbook” and other vignettes from my childhood. After she died in 2000, I really wanted to write the book but felt I didn’t quite have the distance from the events nor the tools in my writer's toolbox to do it. During law school I kept reading for pleasure and because I knew that was the best way to become a better writer: read more. And when I lived in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar, I tried to pull the stories together for the first time but failed. It was only after I had been working for a few years and my husband saw an ad in the *Paris Review* for the Stanford Online Writer’s Studio that I really started to work on writing. I took one course a quarter for about five years. After I had my second son, and was miserable working, I launched
my photography business and was able to write more or less full time. The time from the draft I had when I quit my job to the publication date has been four years.

MW: Can you talk a little about the writing that you generated in your Stanford online courses and how it may have contributed to the writing of this book?

NH: In the Stanford online courses I learned the discipline of writing every day, regardless of what else might get in the way. Only through this daily practice was I able to develop the stories from my childhood that had meaning for my larger narrative. The feedback from fellow students – some of whom I am still in contact with – and the professors, gave me new insights regarding my writing. And reading the other students’ work gave me ideas. Additionally, I learned a lot of the soft skills needed in writing: how to craft a query letter, how to put a submission together, the specific formatting for a manuscript, etc.

One professor challenged me to rewrite my book in first person, which I did during the course. After I finished, he reviewed the pieces I submitted and asked me if this exercise had helped me expand any of the stories, make any of the details more concrete? Yes, it had. He then suggested that I rewrite the book again into third person! He was right. The book was better for the two rewrites, but I still think of him as Mr. Miyagi from The Karate Kid: wax on, wax off.

Another excerpt from Tilting: A Memoir:

He hadn't died. He wasn't a vegetable, but he was like an infant who could talk.

We knew when we knew. But the reality of what was happening didn't clobber us over the head in the same way his initial illness had. His improvements were gradual, as was our understanding that he wasn't the same person.

The process gained momentum steadily as a different drug or bandage or medical device was removed. But he was still on a fair amount of pain medicine. He watched the Weather Channel constantly in his hospital room.

“Montana, move the fan, please. It's going to melt,” said Dad from his hospital bed.

“What are you talking about, Dad?” asked ten-year-old, but almost six-feet-tall, Montana.

“Montana, the fan. Move it away from the window.”

“But it can bring in the cool air. Aren’t you hot?”

“Montana, the fan’s made out of chocolate. You can see that. If it stays in the sun, it will melt.”

We looked at the fan and then at Dad. Everything and nothing had changed.
I have often imagined what life might have held had Dad died the first time he was sick. My parents would have never divorced and a whole mythology surrounding their relationship would have emerged – a happy story. They met flying and our family had been perfect. Remember the trip to Legoland? Or watching him bass fish on the lake? He had such a love of life. How he took us skiing every weekend? He was so much fun. Gone would be the memories of having to choose between giving him my mother’s diamond ring or having a relationship with him.

I don’t regret not giving him the ring, because even if I had given it to him, there always would have been something else. Something else to try to control my behavior with.

If Dad had died, Linda would have taken charge of our finances. She would have sold the house and the extra cars. Maybe the kids would have resented her for living and having made the hard choice to take Dad off life support. I doubt I would have finished school at my large university. Too expensive, Linda would have said because she had three more children to educate.

What if Linda hadn’t died? Would Linda have moved? Would Linda have married Walt? Would Gram and Linda have talked to each other again? Would Erica have had Tanner? Would Linda have stopped smoking and never gotten cancer? Would I have felt greater sadness that Dad was dead?

In either outcome, I am sure that Linda would have gotten cancer, and she would be dead now. Both of my parents would still be dead, just in a different order.

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**JULY 2017**

This month, we turn our Writer’s Spotlight on Martha Conway, a novelist based in San Francisco whose fourth novel, *The Underground River*, went on sale June 20.

Martha’s book is available [here](#).

Martha has been teaching for Stanford’s Online Creative Writing Program for many years now, and her course on how to create indelible characters always enrolls to capacity within hours. She has published two of her novels with traditional publishers and put out two of her novels herself. Last year, she teamed up on campus with publishing expert Holly Brady to teach a Continuing Studies workshop on how to self-publish intelligently, so that your book gets the care it needs and then gets into the right readers’ hands. Martha’s first novel, a mystery called *12 Bliss Street*, was published by St. Martin’s Press and nominated for an Edgar Award. Her second novel, *Thieving Forest*, received a 2014 Gold North American Book Award for best historical fiction, and her third, *Sugarland*, was named a Kirkus Best Indie Books of 2016.
I took this opportunity to ask Martha a few questions about her latest novel, *The Underground River*, and her writing process. Also, because she has such an interesting and varied publishing record, I also passed on a few of the questions that I often hear from students who are curious about the publishing process.

Malena Watrous  
*Online Writing Lead Instructor*

Malena Watrous: Your latest novel is about a woman who becomes involved with the Underground Railroad. *Sugarland* was about the intersection of characters of different races during what was called the Jazz Era. *Thieving Forest* concerned the complex relations between Native Americans and the whites encroaching upon their territory. What draws you to historical fiction and to writing about the shifting history of race relations in the US? Where do your ideas for these novels originate?

Martha Conway: I'm fascinated by the fact that, historically, the world hasn't changed much in terms of divisive conflicts, although the names may have changed. I was constantly reminded of bipartisan American politics when reading about the North and the South in antebellum America. To be honest, I never set out to write about race relations. I usually start with a character who has conflicting desires, but who has to go outside her community to get what she wants.

MW: What inspired you to set this story on a riverboat theater?

MC: I'd been in theater groups as a child and in high school, and for a long time I've wanted to write about the kind of tight-knit community that theater seems to inspire. I also was interested in the idea that storytelling and reading and theater-going fosters empathy. May Bedloe, the protagonist in *The Underground River*, is socially awkward and has been told all her life she has no imagination. But she does have an imagination – we all do – and as she starts to exercise it she learns to think about and feel for others (cue the Underground Railroad). It's the story of how one woman goes from being a bystander in a political movement to being an active participant.

MW: Having used a traditional publisher twice, and self-published twice, can you share a little bit about the pros and cons of each choice?

MC: Self-publishing is both empowering and exhausting. It's wonderful to be able to have the final say in everything – cover, formats, price – but it is a lot of work. Because self-published authors can change the price of their book to suit their needs, they can reach a lot more Internet customers. Traditional publishers can get the word out about your book more effectively in newspapers and other media, and can put your book into more bookstores. They do all the heavy lifting for you, and each person on the team is specialized – editor, marketing coordinator, designer, and so on. When you self-publish, you need to learn at least a little bit about each of those jobs, and if you are on a tight
budget, you might decide to do them yourself. If you’re not on a tight budget, you can hire professionals. That’s what I did, but it was still very time-consuming. No matter what route you take, it’s important to schedule time for your own writing. That’s what will give you the most joy when the day is done.

Please enjoy this **brief excerpt** from *The Underground River*, which is truly a marvelous read, as is everything that Martha writes.

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**AUGUST 2017**

This month, we celebrate the accomplishments of Suanne Schafer, who just received a publishing contract for her second novel with Waldorf Publishing, due out in 2019 – before her first is even released! Waldorf, based in Texas, is publishing both. Suanne’s first novel, *A Different Kind of Fire*, will be released in 2018.

Suanne was a student in the Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing from January 2012 to October 2014, in which she worked on her first novel. We talked about how that story evolved from the romance she’d envisioned writing into something less conventional, more exciting, and unique, but still true to her Texas roots and her interest in the history of her region.

*Malena Watrous*
*Online Writing Lead Instructor*

Malena Watrous: Tell us a little bit about your background and how it informs your fiction writing.

Suanne Schafer: I was born in West Texas at the peak of the Cold War. Although I haven’t lived there in many years, the vast landscape and my pioneer ancestors certainly influenced my writing. I began the Stanford program thinking I would write romances, but along the way I learned that either as a result of failed relationships or a genetic quirk, I’m incapable of writing the requisite happy-ever-after. Instead, my protagonists tend to be strong women who overcame societal restrictions and harsh environments beside – or despite – men who may or may not love them.

MW: What did you learn or take away from your two years in the OWC Program in Novel Writing, either from classwork or from your fellow cohort members, that helped you to complete this novel and start another?

SS: The most surprising thing I took away from the Stanford program was that writing isn’t necessarily a solitary process. I loved the input of my fellow cohorts and made friends I still correspond with on a regular basis. The professors in the OWC program were all extraordinarily supportive and their feedback saved me years of trial-and-error learning.

MW: Can you share a bit about the experience of trying to get your novel published? There are so many new kinds of
opportunities available to writers that many of us don’t even understand the choices these days. What does it mean to win a publishing package?

SS: A Different Kind of Fire, my first novel, started out as a retelling of my grandparents’ love story, but as I progressed through the Stanford program, it became more of a feminist’s statement about how much and how little women’s lives have changed in the past 125 years. To complicate matters, my protagonist, Ruby Schmidt, became bisexual, which also complicated the selling of the book. After a year in which I put out sixty-plus query letters, I realized the manuscript was too straight for the gay presses and too gay for the straight presses. One agent said, “I laughed, I cried, I read the entire 400 pages in one sitting, but I don’t think I can sell it. Why don’t you rewrite it as a standard romance?” I turned down several offers because the contracts were poor and the publishers unwilling to negotiate. The manuscript was a finalist in several contests and eventually won a publishing package with a Texas publisher. I am hoping that this will help get this very Texan book out there. They are supposed to help me set up a website for the book, provide marketing support, press releases, etc. So far they have been very supportive. I didn’t care for the contract they offered me, but with the help of an intellectual property rights lawyer, I was able to renegotiate a satisfactory contract.

Recently I received an email from this publisher asking for a manuscript to be published in 2019. As I was about 75 percent through my new novel, tentatively titled Dark Vow, I sent them a proposal and it was accepted in less than three hours.

Read an excerpt from A Different Kind of Fire.

SEPTEMBER 2017
This month, we celebrate the recent literary accomplishments of Joanne Godley, who is not only an accomplished and gifted writer but also a physician, currently living and working in Hawaii. Joanne has taken many courses through the Stanford Continuing Studies Online Writing Program, in virtually all of the genres that we offer: from creative nonfiction to fiction to poetry. She was my student first in a magazine writing course and then in the Online Writing Certificate Program in Novel Writing, through which she completed a rich and riveting historical novel about an African-American teacher who is recruited to work at a boarding school for Native American children.

Joanne is a uniquely multitalented writer, now hard at work on a memoir based upon her own exceptional life. While the memoir is still a work in progress, she submitted an excerpt from it to the Women’s National Book Association 2017 Writing Contest, and received an Honorable Mention. Another excerpt will be published in an upcoming anthology. If this weren’t enough, Joanne reports that she has “begun work on a collection of lyric nonfiction essays about being a Black physician. And I have a ghost story that keeps nudging me.”
I still remember so vividly a piece that Joanne wrote in my magazine writing course many years ago, about a dish she was compelled (as a good guest) to eat. Read an excerpt here.

Malena Watrous
Online Writing Lead Instructor

Malena Watrous: Do you prefer writing fiction or nonfiction? What are the pros and cons of each?

Joanne Godley: I prefer nonfiction. I took the Novel Writing Certificate Program to improve my nonfiction writing. I think fiction is more difficult because one has to bring the ideas and characters, the theme, the settings, the plot – everything! I see writing nonfiction as decorating a house that has already been built as opposed to imagining the hole in the ground that will become the house. I enjoy poetry because in some ways, the structure has been set and the challenge is to express one's ideas within the context of certain number of stanzas.

MW: In your memoir – about marrying an African man and moving to Africa, only to learn that he was a polygamist – is it hard to portray yourself objectively? What about the other people in the story? Is it hard to be “fair” when you have a stake in the story?

JG: Physicians are schooled to be objective and only record, for example, what the patient says in describing her ailment. That said, there is no such thing as true objectivity. I tried to focus my memoir on my reactions to experiences and mentioned him, my ex-husband, as little as possible or indirectly. The memoir is about me, not him. The other people in the story are rendered by virtue of the situations that I depict in the narrative. That makes their portrayal subjective because I select the narratives. The answer is yes; in memoir it is difficult to portray everyone objectively.

MW: How do you find the time both to practice medicine and to write?

JG: In order to make time for a writing practice, I confess to binge writing on weekends. When asked on Mondays, “what did you do on the weekend?” most of my colleagues would view my answer – “oh, I wrote all weekend” – as mundane. After a productive writing weekend, I am elated, transported, and entranced. I often feel as though I have been in another domain. Reading feeds me creatively! I listen to audiobooks while I'm driving to the hospital – tip: listening to books read by the author are the best! I keep a book of poetry at my bedside. I thrive on music and perform my endoscopic procedures to music. However, I rarely write with music playing.
OCTOBER 2017
This month’s Writer’s Spotlight by Stanford Continuing Studies’ Online Writing Lead Instructor, Malena Watrous, is focused on Litquake. This upcoming event is a Bay Area literary festival that will feature panel discussions, unique cross-media events, and more than 850 authors giving hundreds of readings. The grand finale capping off the festival takes place on Saturday, October 14, at Lit Crawl—a special night where eighty-five venues in San Francisco’s Mission District become stages for readings open to the public.

This year, for the fourth time, students from the Online Writing Certificate (OWC) program will participate, reading from the novels they have completed over the course of the program.

The six OWC students participating in Lit Crawl will give their readings on Saturday, October 14, from 6:30 – 7:30 pm at The Elbo Room, located at 647 Valencia Street in San Francisco.

Reflections on Litquake, by Malena Watrous.

We are proud to sponsor this special event, featuring readings by Susan Bockus, H.J. Brennan, Debbie Feit, Phil Laird, Michelle Li and Kirsten Lind. I will be emceeing the event, which is always one of my favorite things that I get to do for this job all year. It’s a treat and a thrill to celebrate the tremendous accomplishments of these talented authors, and to hear their stories in their own voices. Please visit litquake.org to learn more about the festival and our student readings.

We can only fit six authors into Lit Crawl, but we have so many more talented writers to celebrate as they finish our program. So, in addition to Lit Crawl, on Friday, October 13, Stanford’s CoHo (coffee shop) will host a fun and informal reading featuring more of the students from our OWC Program. From 9:30 - 11:30 am, students that completed the program this year are invited to share a 5-minute selection from the novels they wrote in their years studying the craft of novel writing with Stanford Continuing Studies.

If you live nearby, we hope you can join us for one or both of the readings!

NOVEMBER 2017
Those of you who follow this monthly column know that I typically interview a Continuing Studies Creative Writing student or instructor whose recent publication or accomplishment I want to celebrate and bring to your attention. This month, I am happy to announce the publication of my own novel, Sparked, a collaboration with Helena Echlin, who also teaches fiction writing for the Online Writing Program. Helena and I decided to do a joint “interview,” in which we discuss why we chose to write a young adult novel together and the ins and outs of collaboration. Along the way, we offer a few tips to our students or any aspiring novelists.
Both writers had published adult literary novels. But *Sparked* is a young adult thriller

Malena Watrous: Helena and I met at a mutual friend’s wedding, where we learned that we were both novelists and mothers of young children, and had almost identical taste in books. Not long after that, we met for a drink on a rainy, dark Friday the 13th, and started talking about how we both wanted to try writing the kind of novel we’d read when we were young, when we’d joyfully devoured books under the bedcovers with a flashlight and reread them over and over.

Helena Echlin: We thought that writing a YA book would be easier than writing an adult novel. And more fun, too! We could have teens with powers, an ancient Zoroastrian prophecy, and a boy who could shoot fire from his eyes. We were wrong about it being easier, but it definitely was way more fun.

**Deciding to collaborate**

HE: We didn’t really decide – it just happened. Malena had drafted a few chapters of a stalled YA novel, and that night in the bar, when she told me her idea, I was hooked. I started furiously scribbling notes and we sat there until the bar closed, hammering out the plot. Even so, I don’t think we really thought it would go anywhere. But the next day, I couldn’t stop thinking about it and I wrote a new scene. I sent it to Malena, who edited it and wrote another, and before we knew it, we were collaborating.

MW: I have screenwriter friends who collaborate on projects, and the idea of writing creatively with someone else intrigued me. I had come to a point where I felt a little isolated, writing and teaching writing online. I was really excited to be able to brainstorm and develop material with another writer as amazing as Helena. Within an hour of bouncing ideas back and forth, the seed of the idea I’d had on my own grew into something so much better. That kept being true throughout the process.

**The original idea for Sparked**

MW: It came from two things. As a kid, I had this recurring dream that I could move things with my eyes. The feeling was so real that I always woke up feeling disappointed that I wasn’t actually telekinetic. When I had the dream again as an adult, I started thinking about a teen character who wants to have a power but doesn’t – which becomes really frustrating when other kids in her town do get powers. The other inspiration was the 2002 kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, who was abducted from her bedroom when she was fourteen, a bedroom she shared with her younger sister. I found it perplexing that her younger sister hadn’t heard or called out for help, and I couldn’t stop thinking about that younger sister and what it felt like to be left behind.
HE: I have a theory that the Big Idea for a novel often comes from two things you can’t stop thinking about, things that don’t seem to go together. In the process of writing the novel, you find the hidden connections between these two things. Our protagonist, Laurel, feels like she’s second best to her sister and these mean girls at her school. That feeling becomes the connecting thread, the thing she has to overcome as she sets out to find and save her big sister, with or without a power.

The logistics of collaboration

HE: After we had an outline for the novel more or less set, we met in a coffeehouse on Monday of every week, roughed out the next couple of scenes we knew we wanted to write, and took on weekly writing assignments. Usually I did the romantic scenes, and Malena did the mean girls. I’m British, and so apparently my teenagers sound like they’re on Masterpiece Theater. We’d send each other our new scenes at the end of the week, and then revise the other’s work, sending it back and forth until it got to the point where we no longer remembered who came up with what and the voice was consistent. We pounded out the first draft in a white-hot frenzy of inspiration we called “the Vortex.”

The difficulties of collaboration

HE: The first draft seemed incredibly brilliant as it flowed out of us. We had tricked ourselves into believing that because we were writing a paranormal thriller, we could rely on some tested tropes that seemed to appeal to readers of that genre. But after we shared it with a few smart readers and got their feedback, we realized that we’d made some rookie mistakes in our new genre.

MW: Basically, we thought that in order to write a paranormal thriller, there were certain boxes we had to tick, and hadn’t realized that we were settling for clichés.

HE: Gorgeous but standoffish hero? Check. Doormat heroine? Check. Gratuitous love triangle? Check. For a brief period, we considered giving up the book. But there were other things about it that we really liked, and after licking our wounds, we got back to our original intention – to write the kind of novel we’d loved reading as teens – and revised it to save the magical parts of the story while making it more uniquely ours, with dark humor and complicated, flawed characters.

MW: Still, finishing took more work than either of us had anticipated.

HE: We’re both perfectionists, so every time one of us thought we were done, the other would decide we needed to do another draft to address some lingering issue. That’s why I have dozens of files on my laptop with names like “SparkedFinal.doc,” “SparkedFinal2.doc,” and “SparkedFinalFINAL.”

MW: As we got closer to the end, sometimes one of us would respond to a piece of writing that the other had worked hard on without putting enough sugar on the feedback. I have a pretty self-critical inner voice. Sometimes I forgot that Helena was a separate person, and inadvertently hurt her feelings. I actually learned from that to be
kinder to myself, to silence that inner voice that says “you’re no good,” a lesson we gave to our protagonist, who also wants to be a writer.

**The best part about collaboration**

MW: Sharing a world that we created together, peopled by characters we made up together. When I was little, I used to play “pretend” with my friends, taking on identities and making up situations in which to act them out. Turns out you can play make-believe with your friend as an adult and call it collaborating!

HE: Because we work together, we get to spend way more time together than adult friends usually do. Our friendship feels more like the kind of friendships we had as teenagers.

MW: We just drove to and from Oregon, ten hours each way, and we never once stopped talking – mostly plotting our sequel!

HE: When you write a book alone, there are periods when you want to give up. No one really cares about it to the extent that you do. It’s been great having a partner to shoulder the work of getting the book into the world and into readers’ hands, and also having someone with whom to commiserate about a “meh” review or to celebrate a good one.

**How this collaborative novel is different from anything they would have written on their own**

MW: In our novel, most of the girls’ powers allow them to enter someone else’s mind in some form. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we often had that slightly eerie experience of mind-meld. I’d come up with a plot point in the middle of the night and email Helena about it – only to receive an email from her about the exact same thing.

HE: The writing process really influenced the story. As we worked together, our book became a story about collaboration. Laurel can’t save Ivy on her own; she has to learn to let other people in and to understand that people working together can create something bigger than anything each could have done on their own.

**Parting words of advice for students**

MW: Write the book that you want to read, in whatever form that takes. Don’t worry about whether it’s literary enough. If you’re expressing ideas that interest you deeply, using fiction to address questions to which you don’t know the answers, then you’ll end up with something you can be proud of and have a lot of fun in the process.

HE: Don’t be afraid to try something new, whether that’s experimenting with genre, collaborating, or maybe just taking a course in a form you’re curious to explore. Read widely, and carry a notebook with you to jot down ideas whenever you have them. Writers don’t wait for inspiration to hit. They train themselves to find it.
Caroline Goodwin is a poet, essayist, and memoirist whose most recent collection of poetry, *The Paper Tree*, was published in March 2017 by Big Yes Press. Since receiving a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford, she has taught creative writing extensively both here and at other colleges. This Winter, for the first time, she will be teaching a course for Continuing Studies called “Writing Through Struggle,” encouraging students to use whatever challenges may have come up for them as substance for various forms of creative writing. Caroline herself is no stranger to writing through struggle, having maintained a vigorous writing process while dealing with numerous personal losses over the years. In her essay “Amaranth: The Language of Memory,” she touches upon those experiences in a poetic and fragmentary way that allows her to revisit them and hold them up to the light of examination. For this month’s Writer’s Spotlight, I asked Caroline about her own creative process and her intentions for the exciting new course.

Malena Watrous
Online Writing Lead Instructor

Malena Watrous: You lost a baby after a year in which she was very sick, and then much more recently your husband died in a biking accident. I find your writing about loss to be very arresting and invigorating because I don’t see you reaching for some kind of pat “closure,” but instead trying somehow to make peace with the fact that loss is part of life, no matter how much our culture would like to believe otherwise. Can you talk briefly about how and why you choose to write about this subject?

Caroline Goodwin: Nick and I lost our daughter Josephine in 2002 after two liver transplantations and a total of eighteen trips to the operating room. Josephine was almost a year old when she died. This experience was so strange and surreal, and stressful and traumatizing, and it took us both many years to start to heal. It also brought us very close together as friends and equals in a lot of ways, although our processes were different and often took us away from one another. So when Nick died, I was honestly like, “Okay, Universe, really? Now? Me? My kids? Really? Okay then...”

For me, healing from any kind of trauma is always circular. Anyone who has walked through something like this will tell you that you never really know when intense memories or feelings are going to pop up - often at the most inconvenient times. It’s embarrassing to start crying when you’re being interviewed or teaching! But that’s the way it is. So I want my writing, both poetry and prose, to explore the experience of being in the moment, without closure. For me, this reflects the way it really feels. It’s also a core spiritual truth. I hope that my work, both teaching and writing, will bring students and readers into my world for a little while, which is a strange world but also a beautiful world. Through writing, I’ve been able to form some kind of meaning out of what’s happened, and also honor my husband’s memory. I know it sounds cliche, but what else do we really have outside of the present moment? And how else can we show respect except by showing up and being our best selves?

Malena Watrous: Has the act of writing changed the way you think about these losses?
CG: Yes! The act of writing has shown me so much about my core values and my inner resources. In order to look back on my experiences and bring them to the page, I have to be pretty strong. I find that writing is a way of entering a zone of the imagination where anything is possible. It sounds weird, but writing allows me to understand and even celebrate the inherent connections that I possess and that we all possess - connections with my family and with nature, with my children and my own childhood, and even with the mysteries and rhythms of existence. Things come into focus when I’m writing. I can’t say it’s always pleasant or comforting, but it’s satisfying for sure. Writing gives me hope and it also helps me feel less lonely, as does reading and talking with other writers, going to readings, etc. On a side note, funny thing: the piece “Amaranth” was finished and sent to Catamaran Literary Reader for consideration six days before Nick died, so it’s full of strange premonitions.

MW: Some writing teachers really dislike the idea that creative writing can be “cathartic.” There seems to be one school of thought that holds that this is self-indulgent, that writing shouldn’t serve as therapy. I remember when I was in graduate school, there was a definite prejudice against “confessional” poetry, for instance. I don’t think that your writing about loss feels self-indulgent in any way, or even particularly confessional. But how can a writer manage to write about personal experience and loss without seeming self-pitying?

CG: This is a terrific question. I have always erred on the side of the sentimental. What’s that quote? You have to risk sentimentality to get to the true sentiment? I have always found the label “confessional poetry” to be dismissive in a way that feels like “the patriarchy,” although I’m sure that’s much too simple. Why are we so afraid of being labeled confessional, though? And so what if the process is cathartic? I guess I’ve never really understood why catharsis can’t be transformed thoughtfully into complex art and writing.

I definitely have the Mean Voice inside saying I’m being self-indulgent. But who cares? Blah blah blah. We all have it. The trick is to ignore it, dive into the catharsis, let the messy thoughts accumulate, and go with it. Eventually, something takes shape. But if we completely resist being confessional or self-indulgent, I’m afraid many of us would make very little progress in our work.

And the question about self-pity is a good one also. I guess I try to remember that I’m not the only one who’s experienced loss, even extreme loss. I try to remember that life is a gift and my job is to show up and be the best I can be. This involves writing! And a sense of humor is also a good antidote for self-pity.

MW: Can you talk a bit about your writing process? Do you write daily? Since you write both poetry and prose, how do you decide what form to use on any given day?

CG: Another great question. In order to feel okay on a daily basis, I have to let lots of things “count” in my practice. I make myself engage with my work as early in the day as possible. Sometimes this is just reading a few poems from a recent collection that I admire. Other times it’s revision, and still other times it’s brand-new work. I tend to do the initial push on a new project quickly, when I give myself time away from my life here in California. For example, I took myself to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories last August with the goal of finishing my memoir about Josephine. What happened was I started on a new poetry manuscript entitled Common Plants of Nunavut, which currently has my full...
attention. It traces my grief journey around Nick, and also my admiration for the Arctic landscape. Oh, and also the 2017 fire season in British Columbia, which was the worst one on record.

So much is going on everywhere right now. It feels more important than ever to have time on a daily basis to focus on creativity. It's a gift and a privilege to be able to write and teach, I think. My process is pretty darn messy, though - downright ugly, actually - and I let my heart choose which form I'm going to use, poetry or prose. I keep getting sidetracked by poetry, but someday, someday, that memoir will be finished! In the meantime, I'm revising my poetry manuscript while wearing my tie-dyed long johns from Yellowknife's famous Ragged Ass Road.

Click here to read Caroline’s essay Roy.