

Bright Talents, Dark Tales

Clark College will host award-winning authors Benjamin Percy and Wells Tower in two separate installments of the college's renowned Columbia Writers Series. Percy will read from his work and discuss his writing process on October 21; Tower, on November 3.

This is the first time the series will feature two separate events with different authors during the same quarter. "We've been really fortunate in that the Associated Students of Clark College have supported our efforts to expand this series," says CWS co-director Alexis Nelson, who teaches English at Clark. "Bringing two authors to campus on two different days (and at different times of day) will hopefully allow us to reach a wider audience. I know Clark students can have packed class schedules and often have work and family obligations on top of that, so this gives them more than just one chance to attend a reading this term."

As writers, Percy and Tower have some things in common. Both explore themes of the natural world, violence, fathers and sons, and men struggling with failure and redemption. Both have successful careers in magazine writing as well as in fiction (Percy is a contributing editor at *Esquire*, while Tower is a contributor to *GQ*). Each has two Pushcart Prizes and one Plimpton to his name.

But each writer has a very different voice and style. Tower is known for his depictions of gritty American realism; Percy is perhaps best-known for his most recent novel, *Red Moon*, which author John Irving called a "literary novel about lycanthropes [werewolves]" and which earned praise on Twitter from none other than horror great Stephen King himself.

"Both Percy and Tower are writing fun, energetic stuff and working in multiple genres," says Nelson. "Percy is a great

crossover author, someone who writes literary fiction yet can also attract a wider audience of readers interested in horror, fantasy, or suspense. And I love Tower's work for how funny and serious it can be at the same time, and for his exuberant and original use of language."

Benjamin Percy will read at 12:30 p.m. on October 21 in PUB 258C. Wells Tower will read at 2 p.m. on November 3, also in PUB 258C. Both events are free and open to the public.

About Benjamin Percy



Benjamin Percy.
Photo by Jennifer
May.

Benjamin Percy is the author of two novels, *Red Moon*, an IndieNext pick and Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and *The Wilding*, winner of the Society of Midland Authors Award for Fiction; as well as two books of stories, *Refresh, Refresh* and *The Language of Elk*. Percy is currently adapting *Red Moon* as a series for FOX TV with Oscar-winner Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind*, *I am Legend*, *Winter's Tale*) and *The Wilding* as a film with director Tanya Wexler (*Hysteria*). Percy's next novel, *The Dead Lands*, a post-apocalyptic reimagining of the Lewis and Clark saga, is forthcoming in April 2015 with Grand Central. He also has a craft book, *Thrill Me*, due out by Graywolf Press in 2016.

His fiction and nonfiction have been read on National Public Radio; performed at Symphony Space; and published by *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Time*, *Men's Journal*, *Outside*, the *Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Orion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, and many other magazines and journals. His honors include a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Whiting Award, the Plimpton Prize, two Pushcart Prizes, and inclusion in *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Comics*. He writes for DC Comics, and his story "Refresh, Refresh" was adapted into a screenplay by filmmaker James Ponsoldt and a graphic novel by Eisner-nominated artist Danica Novgorodoff.

About Wells Tower



Wells Tower.
Photo courtesy of
the author.

Wells Tower is the author of the short story collection *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*. His short stories and journalism have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Harper's Magazine*, *McSweeney's*, *The Paris Review*, *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, and elsewhere. He received two Pushcart Prizes and the Plimpton Prize from *The Paris Review*. His magazine journalism has been shortlisted for the National Magazine Awards. He divides his time between Chapel Hill, North Carolina and Brooklyn, New

York.

Subtext Features Karen Russell



Author Karen Russell will appear in the spring 2014 installment of the Columbia Writers Series on May 29. *Photo credit: Michael Lionstar*

During the spring installment of its renowned Columbia Writers Series, Clark College will welcome writer Karen Russell, author of *Swamplandia!*, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, and *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*.

This event is part of "Subtext," a three-day festival of words

and literary arts. Other events include a free book exchange and a reading by students and faculty, including Clark County poet laureate Christopher Luna. All of these events are free and open to the public.

Karen Russell, a native of Miami, won the 2012 National Magazine Award for fiction, and her first novel, *Swamplandia!* (2011), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She is a graduate of the Columbia MFA program, a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow, and a 2012 Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin. In 2013, she was a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant." Her short stories have been featured in *The Best American Short Stories*, *Granta*, *The New Yorker*, *Conjunctions*, *Oxford American*, and *Zoetrope*.

"We are extremely pleased to be able to host Karen Russell for our spring reading since she is not only a fabulously talented fiction writer, but has been nationally recognized by critics as an American author of true significance," said Clark College English professor James Finley, director of the Columbia Writers Series. "It is not every day that we can bring a writer of this stature to Clark. Her writing—with all its cleverness, jaunty energy, and searing insights into the human condition—are a perfect match for college-age audiences, and I hope Clark students and the community at large take advantage of the opportunity to hear Russell read from her work in a live setting."

Russell will read from some of her works and discuss her writing process from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Thursday, May 29, in Foster Auditorium. The book exchange takes place in the Cannell Library commons area on Wednesday, May 28, 10 a.m. to noon. Crossroads, the student/faculty reading, takes place Friday, May 30, noon to 1 p.m. The theme for this year's Crossroads is "Plants and Animals."

Individuals who need accommodation due to a disability in order to fully participate in these events should contact

Clark College's Disability Support Services (DSS) Office at 360-992-2314 or 360-991-0901 (VP). The DSS office is located in room 013 in Clark's Penguin Union Building.

The Columbia Writers Series was launched at Clark College in 1988, bringing local, national and international authors to the college and the region.

Clark hosts writer Jon Raymond



Jon Raymond appears in the Columbia Writers Series on February 13. *Photo: Courtesy of Jon Raymond/Justine Kurland*

Clark College welcomes the award-winning fiction author and

screenwriter Jon Raymond during the winter quarter installment of its renowned Columbia Writers Series.

Raymond, whose work has garnered both critical acclaim and prestigious awards, will read from some of his most recent works and speak about writing from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Thursday, February 13, in PUB 258C.

Raymond is the author of the novels *The Half-Life* (a *Publisher's Weekly* Best Book of 2004) and *Rain Dragon* (2012). His collection of stories, *Livability*, won the 2009 Oregon Book Award for Fiction. An accomplished screenwriter, Raymond's credits include *Old Joy*, *Meek's Cutoff*, *Night Moves*, and *Wendy and Lucy*, a movie based on the short story "Train Choir" from *Livability*. He earned an Emmy Award nomination for his work on the 2011 HBO miniseries *Mildred Pierce*. He lives in Portland with his family.

The Columbia Writers Series was launched at Clark College in 1988, bringing local, national and international authors to the college and the region. Information about the Columbia Writers Series is available at www.clark.edu/cc/cws.

Individuals who need accommodation due to a disability in order to fully participate in this event should contact Clark College's Disability Support Services (DSS) Office at 360-992-2314 or 360-991-0901 (VP). The DSS office is located in room 137 in Clark's Gaiser Hall.

As the World Turned



Spanish instructor Felipe Montoya, *third from left*, with members of the Spanish Club at the International Students Exhibit.

Clark College hosted a wide range of public events—including films, music, speakers, and panel discussions—during its observance of International Education Week, November 18-21. This year’s theme was “The Language of Learning: Creating a Sense of Place.”

International Education Week (IEW) is a joint initiative of the U.S. Departments of State and Education to highlight the importance of international education and cultural exchange. This is the fifth year that Clark has participated in IEW. According to committee member and International Student Recruitment & Outreach Manager Jody Shulnak, planning the week of activities took more than three months, and the committee is already looking forward to next year, possibly building on the success of this year’s International Photography Contest by working with the Archer Gallery to create an international

art exhibit. “Stay tuned!” she said. “IEW gets bigger and better each year.”

Some highlights from this year’s IEW:



Iset Prcic talks about writing his novel *Shards*.

Columbia Writers Series

The college hosted a reading on November 18 by two highly respected writers as part of its Columbia Writers Series. Iset Prcic and Zachary Schomburg, winners of the 2013 Oregon Book Awards for Fiction and Poetry, respectively, read from their work and discussed their writing processes. Prcic, who teaches Drama at Clark, described how writing his novel, *Shards*, served as a way to process his experiences growing up in war-torn Bosnia. The book—Prcic’s first—is semi-autobiographical (the central character is named “Iset Prcic”) and told through a fractured composite of diary entries, recollections, and speculative imaginings of what might have been.



Former student Marisa Petry, *left*, introduced Spanish professor Erika Nava at the fall 2013 installment of Clark's Faculty Speaker Series.

Faculty Speaker Series

On November 19, Spanish professor Erika Nava gave the fall presentation of Clark's Faculty Speaker Series. Nava spoke about her experiences building online classes to teach Spanish. She acknowledged that many people are skeptical that languages can be taught online—including students. Indeed, she was introduced by a former student, Marisa Petry, who said she was concerned about getting enough support in an online environment. Instead, Petry found that Nava's use of tools like embedded video and Skype allowed her to learn Spanish just as well as she would have in a face-to-face classroom. "Even today, I use it at the bedside," said Petry, who is now working as a nurse. "And because of her course, I had the confidence to take other online courses."

Nava said that she herself initially resisted the idea of teaching Spanish online. "My initial reaction was like many people's: 'No way, I'm not going to do that. How will I have the personal connection with students?'"

However, she found herself reconsidering that attitude after her first few years teaching at Clark. "I saw that I had a lot

of nontraditional students in my classes who were working full-time jobs and were coming in late to class, really struggling to be there,” she said.

Nava showed some of the ways she makes her online classes feel more interactive and personal. Where many online modules include written instructions, she instead inserts video of herself speaking the instructions “so I can be more present in the class.” She has also connected to students while taking live video in Mexico, providing them with a sort of virtual study-abroad opportunity. Using technology in innovative and thoughtful ways like this, she said, can keep that personal connection between students and instructor strong, even in an online environment.

See video of Erika Nava discussing her approach to online learning.



German professor Julian Nelson, *right*, translates the German children’s poem his student is reading.

International Read-In

On November 20, poetry filled the air of PUB 161 as students

and staff read favorite pieces in different tongues. Sociology professor Carlos Castro read “Pueblo Tropical” by Nicaraguan poet Salomón de la Selva. English professor Jill Darley-Vanis read “La Beauté” from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and provided a handout showing the dramatic variations between three English translations of the poem. Student Joy Robertson-Maciel, meanwhile, read a prose passage in Portuguese from Brazilian writer Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis.

The prize for most gruesome readings, however, had to go to the students in Professor Julian Nelson’s German classes, who read from classic German children’s poems. One passage, from the classic collection *Der Struwwelpeter*, told the tale of a naughty child who sucks his thumbs—until a tailor chops them off. Another told the tale of a friendship between a cat and a dog, which ends with one of them getting shot. “There are no happy endings in German, sorry,” said Nelson with a laugh.



Saudi students Majed Alhumaidani, Saleh Almaki, and Faisal Aljubaylah talk about their country and culture.

Saudi Student Panel

Also on November 20, three international students from Saudi Arabia spoke about their country, its culture, and their experiences living in the United States. It was clear that

life for a young person in America is very different from that of a young person in Saudi Arabia. For one thing, it's lonelier; all three students spoke wistfully about their closely knit families and about the comfort of having lots of relatives living together. "When I was home, all my day was scheduled to be about my family," said Saleh Almaki, the eldest of 11 children by his father's two wives. "But here, every day is scheduled to be about myself."

The students, all three of whom are Muslim, also expressed hope that they could help dispel American misconceptions about Islam. Faisal Aljubaylah said he wanted Americans to understand that "the first letter of Islam is 'learn'—not just 'learn about Islam,' but 'learn about other cultures and religions.'"



Students provided music during the International Student Exhibition.

International Student Exhibition

On November 21, students gathered in Gaiser Student Center to enjoy art and music with an international flair. Many students from instructor Felipe Montoya's Spanish classes wore skeletal Day of the Dead face paint as they stood before the traditional Day of the Dead altars they'd created as extra-credit projects. In Mexico, these altars often honor deceased relatives—here, students created altars to celebrities passed.

One was devoted to Michael Jackson, complete with framed fingerless glove; another, honoring Elvis Presley, included a guitar.



Christian Fairchild and Amanda Murphy show off their Day of the Dead altar to Pancho Villa.

Students Amanda Murphy and Christian Fairchild sat next their altar honoring the spirit of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. “We were going to go with a painter, but one student in our group is blind and wanted something she could enjoy, too,” explained Murphy, who is co-enrolled at Clark and at Portland State University. “We settled on a revolutionary. That’s a theme everyone can get behind: rebellion and revolution. We can all identify with that.”

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley. Erika Nava Photo: Clark College/Hannah Erickson

More photos on Flickr.

Q&A with: English instructor Alexis Nelson



English instructor
Alexis Nelson

English instructor Alexis Nelson has taught at Clark College for four years. Last year she became active in the committee that organizes the college's Columbia Writers Series (CWS), which brings accomplished writers to the college to read from and discuss their work; the next installment of the series is on Monday, Nov. 18. Nelson, who earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of California at Santa Barbara, has a Master of Fine Arts degree in Nonfiction Writing from Portland State University. Recently, *Clark 24/7* chatted with her about CWS, as well as about a new English course she's helping to develop and her own recent brush with literary fame.

I understand you've become part of the group that organizes Clark's Columbia Writers Series. Could you tell me a little bit about that event and its purpose?

The Columbia Writers Series brings professional authors to campus to read from and talk about their work. We bring in local and national fiction writers, nonfiction writers, poets, playwrights and screenwriters. As for the purpose of the series, last year I had a student tell me she didn't "get" poetry until she attended a CWS reading, with the poet Matthew Dickman. Hearing Dickman read his work helped this student appreciate and understand poetry in a new way, and it got her interested in attending more readings in the future. To me, that's what CWS is all about: enriching the educational experience of Clark students by introducing them to contemporary authors and by exposing them to literature in a new way. The series also emphasizes Clark's role as a center for arts and culture within the community, and it builds connections between Clark faculty, students, and members of the public.

CWS seems to be undergoing a sea change recently. What's the thought process behind that, and what can we look forward to seeing at CWS in the future?

There is a core group of English department faculty that is really excited about CWS right now, and we've been putting a lot of work into getting great authors to come to campus and creating more awareness of our readings. We're all writers ourselves, and we see so much opportunity to build this series into something truly special for Clark and the community. We've also been working on building stronger connections between CWS and some of the other exciting creative writing initiatives we have at Clark. For instance, last year, Clark's art and literary journal, *Phoenix*, published a fantastic interview with one of our CWS readers, Charles D'Ambrosio. D'Ambrosio is an award-winning author with a national reputation, and having that in-depth interview with him was great for *Phoenix*, not to mention a wonderful opportunity for the student who conducted the interview. We'd love to be able to do more things like this in the future, in addition to

continuing to bring in the best writers from the Northwest and beyond.

Tell me about this coming CWS reading.

I'm really excited about the November 18 reading for a couple of reasons. First, we're going to have two writers: poet Zachary Schomburg and fiction-writer Ismet Prcic. Zachary and Ismet both won Oregon Book Awards this year, so this is a chance to hear two of the Northwest's best contemporary writers share their work. I'm also especially excited for this reading because Ismet actually teaches at Clark—he's an adjunct in the Drama department—so we'll also be celebrating Clark's talented faculty. Ismet was born in Bosnia and his award-winning novel *Shards* tells the story of a young Bosnian immigrant, so there's also a connection between the November 18 reading and International Education Week, which will be happening at the same time.

I know you've been developing a Creative Nonfiction course at Clark. How did that come about, and what role do you think the course will fill at Clark?

Creative nonfiction is an important genre that has become a lot more prominent and popular in the last couple of decades. It's a diverse genre that includes things like memoir, personal essay, travel writing, and even journalistic pieces that use some of the techniques of fiction-writing such as description and scene-building. If you look at other schools that offer fiction and poetry writing courses, most of them will have creative nonfiction writing classes as well. My MFA is in nonfiction writing, and I'm a nonfiction writer myself, so when I saw that there weren't any creative nonfiction courses being offered at Clark, I wanted to design one. I think this class will help round out the creative writing offerings at Clark. It's also an important course because this type of writing is fun and creative, but it also has practical applications. If you're interested in writing for magazines,

you need to know creative nonfiction. Being able to write a great personal essay will also help with college and scholarship applications.

How do Clark students respond to the coursework in this class?

When I taught nonfiction writing at Clark last spring, I had a number of Running Start students who were in their teens; there were also several returning students in their 30s and 40s. To me, this diversity is part of what makes Clark special. Particularly in a class where you're writing from personal experience, having students who have been through a lot in their lives and others who are just beginning to figure out who they are makes for a dynamic class. The students were so respectful of one another, and I think that both the older and the younger students learned a lot from each another.

How has teaching this course informed your own writing process?

Teaching forces me to think about how different pieces of writing are put together, and to put into words ideas about craft that I might not otherwise fully articulate to myself. I also like to do all the writing exercises that I give my students along with them, and this can sometimes open unexpected doors for me and lead to new work. Overall, it's just great to be immersed in reading, thinking, and talking about the kind of writing I'm most passionate about. It's like breathing richer air.

Finally, I know you're hesitant to talk about this, but your essay, "On Love and Memory," was recently listed as a notable essay in *The Best American Essays 2013*. How does it feel to have your work recognized by such a prestigious publication? Also, since the original essay isn't available online, could you share a little about its theme?

One of my grandmothers had dementia and the other currently has Alzheimer's; so the essay is partly about what they've

gone through and partly about my own fears of losing my memory. It also, like the title suggests, explores the relationship between memory and love. The essay is structured like a collage, with short, discrete sections that are woven together to create a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts. It's a somewhat experimental kind of writing that I've been really excited by lately.

I was thrilled when the essay was published in the first place (in a great journal called *The Normal School*), but knowing that it stood out to the editor of the *Best American Essays* series feels even better. At the same time, it's funny how quickly the initial excitement over getting news like that fades, in the sense that it doesn't make the work any easier. I'd imagine that even getting a big book deal or winning a prestigious prize would be same. Afterward, you still have to go back to your desk and figure out how to put more words on the page.

Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley