EVENT TITLE: Poetry and Science: Writing Our Way to Discovery

Event Description:
By bringing science into poetry, we open the possibility of discovering new forms and philosophies of poetry, new perspectives on our relationship to the Earth and our place in the universe, and even new scientific insights. Yes, many poets—including Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Gertrude Stein—have made “pre-discoveries” that were later confirmed by science. Panelists will discuss the many possibilities for discovery that arise from the union of poetry and science and read relevant poems.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator:
Lucille Lang Day: Lucille Lang Day is the award-winning author of 10 poetry collections, including Becoming an Ancestor, two children’s books and a memoir. A coeditor of two poetry anthologies, Fire and Rain: Ecopoetry of California and Red Indian Road West, she holds an MFA in poetry and a PhD in science education.

Event Participants:
Alison Hawthorne Deming: Alison Hawthorne Deming is author of five poetry books, most recently Stairway to Heaven, and four nonfiction books including Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit. She is Agnese Nelms Haury Chair of Environment & Social Justice at the University of Arizona and a Guggenheim Fellow.


Elizabeth Bradfield:
Elizabeth Bradfield’s most recent book is Toward Antarctica. Her work has been published in The New Yorker, Poetry, and her honors include the Audre Lorde Prize and a Stegner fellowship. Founder of Broadsided Press, she works as a naturalist/guide and teaches creative writing at Brandeis University.
Allison Adelle Hedge Coke: Distinguished Professor UC Riverside Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's books include: *Burn, Streaming, Off Season-City Pipe, Dog Road Woman, Blood Run, Rock Ghost Willow Deer, Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas, Effigies I, II, III*. She directs the Lit Sandhill CraneFest & is working in film.

OPENING REMARKS:

Good afternoon, and welcome to *Poetry and Science: Writing Our Way to Discovery*. Thank you very much for being here.

This panel grew out of my enthusiasm for both poetry and science, and it is a panel I have always wanted to attend. My own background is in biology as well as creative writing, and I’ve been incorporating science into my poetry for many years. Along the way, I’ve learned that all human cultures have poetry, and that Enheduanna, the first known author to sign her work, was a poet. This was in about 2300 BCE. The origins of modern science don’t appear in the human record, though, until almost 2,000 years later, in the fifth century BCE in Greece. It seems significant to me that poetry came before science. Perhaps this means that poetry comes more easily than science to the human brain and can therefore be used as a vehicle to help us understand science.

But that’s not all: as I continued reading about poetry and science, I learned that poets can make intuitive leaps, or pre-discoveries, that are later confirmed by science. Edgar Allan Poe predicted black holes, the expanding universe, and the Big Bang long before scientists thought of these things. He was also the first person to figure out that the sky is dark at night because the universe is finite. He did not write scientific papers about any of these things: he described them in poetry. Walt Whitman also made a pre-discovery. Going against the scientific teachings of his time, he argued that mind depends upon flesh. Gertrude Stein not only found a new way to write poetry but simultaneously showed that the brain’s neural structures for grammar are independent of the meaning of words. She was way ahead of the linguists! So poetry and science are not totally separate endeavors.

All this excites me greatly, and in this panel I wanted to bring together four of my favorite poets who use science extensively in their work: Alison Hawthorne Deming, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Elizabeth Bradfield, and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke. I look forward to hearing their thoughts and experiences related to poetry, science, and discovery.
MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. Please tell us about some of your own aha moments when bringing science into poetry led you to new insights about science, poetry, or both.

2. How and why did you start bringing science into your poetry?

3. What are some of the challenges of bringing science into poetry?

4. What are some of your favorite poems that deal with science? Are there any that you’d like to share?

5. Would you like to share one or more of your own science-related poems?

PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS:

Alison Hawthorne Deming:
In a high school biology class, my teacher drew a diagram on the greenboard to illustrate a time in deep history when science and religion took separate paths as ways of understanding the world and our place in it. I realized in that moment that science had been a source of wonder and discovery for me since early childhood. That in some strange way it had been my religion, leading me to feel part of something much larger than human life. I saw that the natural world and the universe merited endless study, contemplation and reverence. I did not realize for another few decades that poetry would become the road I’d travel, and that science would challenge me to rethink the language and form of what I might consider poetic.

Ann Fisher-Wirth:
I had very little science education as a student; in fact, for my biology experiment in college I never did actually plant the radish seeds to which I was supposedly playing classical and rock music. Later I became an avid gardener and walker, and lived for a while on a farm. These, plus teaching environmental studies over the past couple of decades have made me passionately interested in the scientific accuracy that reveals the natural world's specificity, variety, and abundance. In "Jubilate Agno" Christopher Smart writes, "God make gardeners better nomenclators"—a line that I take to refer to the quest for art and precision in naming the ten thousand things of this world.
Elizabeth Bradfield:
I adore imagination, but I adore it as a scientist does, not inventing facts but creating story and meaning from the odd insistences the world offers. “Accuracy is always the gateway to mystery,” wrote the poet Denise Levertov. Isaac Asimov wrote, “The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not ‘Eureka’ but ‘That’s funny...’” Close observation and a mind attuned to what happens in the periphery has, again and again, been an engine both in my biology field work and my writing. The demand for accuracy that scientific conversations strive for—wrangling again and again to make sure the facts are certain, grappling with how, then, to make sense of them whether they support or upend the researcher’s presuppositions—inspires me. In physics, the “observer effect” (sometimes conflated with Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle) states that observation inevitably changes what is being observed. Although not trained as an anthropologist, my poetic self is often most interested in turning an observational eye toward the humans who are observing “nature” and focusing on the lenses—the particular social selves we bring to every encounter—we see through.

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke:
Science is a natural way of perceiving and witnessing for the purpose of knowing. Trial and error, experiment, have given us all sorts of culinary wonders, some from otherwise deadly sources. Has brought us to understand our ways of being match our ways of knowing from stories that predate our existence by a stream of generations before us and our surrounding environments’ and ecosystems’ dictations and reciprocal needs. We are symbiotic, or not. When not, we are oftentimes completely out of balance. Science attempts to reason with what older cultures around the world have known. This knowing, as well, is essential to our survival on the planet, our beingness. Too, poets and scientists share a mainline—curiosity. It inspires and activates us, wholly.

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