

# Gregg Wilhelm, MA, MFA

Writer | Publisher | Teacher | Arts Administrator

410-274-5691 | greggutmf@gmail.com | greggwilhelm.com

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

### **Hotel COVID** (novel)

Twenty-three stories (minus a 13th floor), 440 rooms, more than 100 “residents,” three dozen medical staff, and three months in the summer of a pandemic. Plus ghosts! Hotel COVID explores the transformation of a 100-year-old landmark hotel into an urban triage, respite, and isolation center during one of America’s most extraordinary summers. In May 2020, the Lord Baltimore Hotel became home for hundreds of the city’s most at-risk populations: people battling addiction, people with mental health conditions, people experiencing homelessness, people living in multi-generational families, and others residing in congregate settings. The pre-pandemic challenges these residents faced on the outside followed them inside the hotel. Residents went missing, scored drugs, ignored protocols, fought, and were hospitalized, but they also missed their families, lost jobs, were evicted from homes, and struggled to keep their lives together. Three main story threads follow Amalia and her children isolated from a large immigrant family, Krista a young Johns Hopkins nurse thrown into a role of leadership among the chaos, and Cunny the ex-military-turned-hotel-manager trying to keep order. Meanwhile, readers are guided through these interweaving stories by the apparition of 9-year-old Sadie, based on the “real” ghost of the daughter of Great Depression-ruined “jumpers” from the hotel’s 19th floor deck (the ghosts of Babe Ruth, Amelia Earhart, and nurses from the 1929 University of Maryland Nurses Alumni Association annual banquet make cameos—as mediums say—at the “crowded” hotel). Then, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, which occurred just weeks after the fifth anniversary of Freddie Gray’s death while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department, protesters flooded the streets around the hotel. The fuse to the powder keg that Baltimore can be seemed primed to be lit.

### **Untitled Howard Cooper Project** (novel)

Howard Cooper, an African American resident of Towson, was accused of the assault, rape, and attempted murder of a white teenager in 1885. Just 15 himself, Cooper was lynched by a mob at the old Baltimore County Courthouse, which still stands today. Reports noted that the conductor of the Maryland & Pennsylvania railroad line slowed the train down as it approached the Towson overpass at York Road so that riders could view the swaying corpse. I have long been concerned about Maryland’s racist and murderous past, such as lynchings on the Easter Shore covered by HL Mencken and part of the tapestry of a memoir of an African American poet I published. Our move a few blocks north of the city coincided with the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project’s erecting a historical marker on the courthouse site. Set in a swath of land from Hampton Mansion across Towson to forgotten Rockland, land cut by the Jones Falls, this fictionalized retelling of a historical tragedy seeks to humanize an already dramatic event to reach a wider readership.

### **Backbeat the Waves** (novel)

The summer of 1977 is going to rock thirteen-year-old Mercury Widdershins’s world. Over the course of a month, his Elvis-infatuated single mother struggles to keep the family, his strung-out sister drifts away from what remains of the family, his transit authority uncle stresses over kickbacks and corners cut with the new toll bridge that completes the city’s beltway circuit, the

King of Rock and Roll dies, and Voyager 2 blasts into outer space. And foul-mouthed Nixie Fossgrim, Merck's ill young cousin from Appalachia, arrives for one last hope at a cure. Together, Merck and Nixie discover their own liberating music, their unique sexual identities, and their separate solutions to what the future holds. Set in a time between glam rock and filthy punk, in a city not-unlike Baltimore with corner bars, steel mills, and stevedores, *Backbeat the Waves* explores moments when people exist between things: city and country, adolescence and adulthood, male and female, perseverance and mortality. For a summer that witnessed the death of a universal "king" and the launch of human culture into space, the most dramatic events happened at home.

**Maryland: America in Literature** (nonfiction with fiction, nonfiction, and poetry excerpts)

"America in Miniature," coined as a state slogan in 1939, has served to describe the small state of Maryland for nearly a century. With sandy Atlantic shores on its eastern border and the Alleghenies rising 300 miles to the west, the state contains the country's largest estuary, an extensive multi-county metropolitan area, rolling farmland, a vast network of watersheds, a colonial capital that once served as the emerging nation's capital, and a demarcation line that acted as a fulcrum between slave states and free states. It stands to reason that the people who populate these places within Maryland – past and present – and their stories and stanzas are as diverse as the topography. This led to the hypothesis, could Maryland represent "America in literature?" How have these disparate landscapes informed various literary artists? What different types of creative writing captured the people, places, and times in a state just 12,000 square miles, a third of which is water, with more than forty other states measuring larger? We will explore writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Some names will be recognizable, many will not. Some will be immediately identifiable as Marylanders, others will not. However, the unifying criterion is these writers' settings and inspirations sprang from their surroundings or other parts of the state, or from their explorations of these places. How does this collection of writers and their art demonstrate that, within its modest footprint we can trace the steps of America in Literature?