



# Falling for Books Through George Mason Creative Writing

By **Gregg Wilhelm**

Last month, George Mason University's creative writing community wrapped on the twenty-sixth annual Fall for the Book literary festival.

Over the course of three consecutive days, plus a Saturday the week prior, seventy-five authors were featured on campus—plus in the city of Fairfax and the town of Burke, Virginia—serving more than three thousand people. The diversity of artists, issues, and genres represented covered almost everything, from headliners and *New York Times* bestselling authors Bonnie Garmus and Silvia Moreno-Garcia to legendary Black Arts Movement poet A. B. Spellman and this year's New American Voices Award recipient, Shahnaz Habib. Panels explored how Mason MFA students and *Poetry Daily* graduate assistants engage incarcerated youth through poetry, the slow pace of government climate change legislation in the face of accelerating global warming, the budding identities of queer teens, and how Southern gothic and Indigenous horror stories lean into a sense of place.

These events epitomize how students can experience the breadth of what it means to be a literary citizen in the microcosm of a campus environment. In fact, there are so many opportunities for students that we chartered a center for them called Watershed Lit: Center for Literary Engagement and Publishing Practice.



The notion of “watershed” reflects both our region’s tributaries flowing into the Potomac River and this transformative period in writers’ lives. Students can learn arts management through major festivals like Fall for the Book; editorial, marketing, and other publishing skills with our literary imprint Stillhouse Press; and digital curation and publishing with the online journal *Poetry Daily*, which also spearheads the Poetry Alive! program at the Fairfax County Juvenile Detention Center. They can also raise awareness of writers from around the globe with the Cheuse International Writers Center or develop best practices for writing teachers through the Northern Virginia Writing Project. These entities that grew from the creative writing program over its forty-year history form the collective core that is Watershed Lit.

Perhaps most importantly, new funding lines have been developed for graduate professional assistants who support the center and its member entities. Rebecca Burke (MFA '21) was among the early cohort of GPAs. Because of her assistantship at Mason, Rebecca landed a job after graduation in a higher position than the one she had applied for. As editorial manager for *Science Advances*, a publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, she oversees the production of more than two thousand articles a year. Rebecca also edited Stillhouse Press’s first anthology, *In Between Spaces: An Anthology of Disabled Writers*.



“As an alum, I can confidently say that the critical hands-on experience students receive sets them apart from their peers and directly translates to success in the workplace postgraduation,” said Rebecca, who was also the fiction editor at *So to Speak*, one of Mason’s two graduate student literary journals (along with *phoebe*).

We also offer graduate teaching assistantships, through which students take pedagogy courses in composition and literature and then get in-class experience teaching comp, lit, and creative writing courses. Mason’s robust BFA in creative writing program gives MFA graduate students a chance to teach a variety of cross-genre or genre-specific courses.

“I’m really appreciative of all the opportunities the GTA can offer to teach composition, literature, and creative writing,” said Martheaus Perkins (Cand, ’26), a graduate teaching assistant who came from Texas to study and write poetry at Mason. “Plus, I met one of my jazz poet heroes, A. B. Spellman, at Fall for the Book.”





Mason Creative Writing is a large community with about seventy graduate students, one hundred undergrads, nine MFA professors, and eight professors who teach undergraduate courses and manage various aspects of the creative writing program or Watershed Lit. This size may not be for everyone, but it does allow us to present a diverse range of faculty and students who write in a variety of genres. Being part of a large university also affords students the chance to work with a number of literature professors, who specialize in African American literature, Southern lit, horror, science fiction, folklore, translation, and other categories.

At Mason, the study and creation of literary art is the focus, but we equally value literary citizenry and ways to live a literary life or build a career in the arts that nourish not only your own soul but also the souls of others in your world. That's the work of transformation and what can result from watershed moments.

---

**Gregg Wilhelm** is the director of Mason Creative Writing, a community that encompasses George Mason University's BFA and MFA creative writing programs.

Photo credits (except header): [Aster Equine Photography](#)

Copyright © 2024 by AWP. All rights reserved.

AWP's projects are supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts

