



# The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

## A Look Back at EMF Award Winners

by Jullianne Ballou

In 2006, the Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers awarded its first grant to Rebecca Lawton, a river guide and writer from Vernal, Utah. That year, advances in technology, a growing world population, and water issues were common in the news. NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter entered orbit around Mars, the population of the United States exceeded 300 million people, more people sounded the alarm about water quality and access, and a NASA spacecraft discovered geysers of a liquid substance—water?—shooting from Saturn's moon Enceladus. Meanwhile Lawton's own writing focused on the effects of the domestic oil boom in Utah—specifically, the impact it would have on community, wilderness, and water. The Ellen Meloy grant allowed Lawton to return to the Green River valley to document the experiences of its residents, and she incorporated their accounts and her field observations into her first novel, *Junction, Utah*, which went on to win a 2014 WILLA, Women Writing the West Award.

Since its inaugural award, the fund has given grants to nine other writers whose peregrinations have taken them to deserts all over the world, from the Antarctic and Northern Kenya to the Sonoran Desert and the Chiricauha Mountains. The writers are essayists, poets, novelists, and reporters who have been guided throughout their careers by Ellen Meloy's writing. They include Lily Mabura (2007), Joe Wilkins (2008), Amy Irvine (2009), Michelle Lanzoni (2010), Craig Childs (2011), Kate Harris (2012), Sarah Stewart Johnson (2013), Adelheid Fischer (2014) and Melissa Sevigny (2015).

These writers have addressed water quality and drought; the relationship between humans, animals, and the landscape; biomimicry; natural history; and the evolution of planetary environments. They write about the resilience, upheaval, and adaptation of places, and their work can be found in *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Orion*, *The Sun*, *The Utne Reader*, *Slate*, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *the New York Times*, *Men's Journal*, *Outside*, *Best American Essays* and *Best American Travel Writing*.

This year, curious to know what kind of impact an EMF grant has had on our winners, we followed up with our award recipients. A number of them responded that the grant had been a valuable source of recognition. Kate Harris wrote,

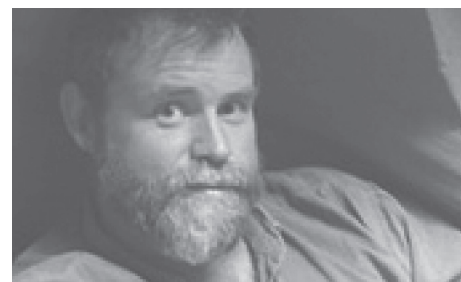
When I won the Ellen Meloy Fund Award in 2012, I didn't have a single literary publication to my name and the whole idea of "being a writer," a bona fide writer, was just a longed-for secret identity—the cape I fervently hoped was hiding beneath my clothes. A few years later, the project I proposed for the award is becoming a book (due out with Knopf Canada in 2017); the unpublished sample writing I submitted for the award application found in a home in *CutBank* and went on to be cited in *Best American Essays*.

Award recipients also mentioned that the fund's recognition signaled their place within a literary tradition as well as within a living community of readers and writers who care about desert regions.

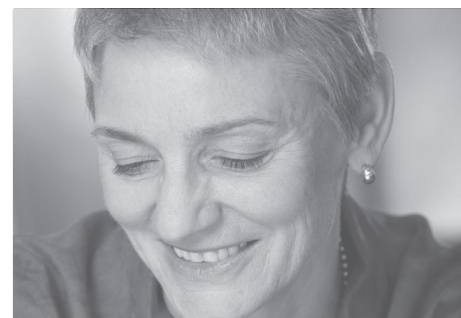
(continued on page 2)

### A Selected List of Published & Forthcoming Books from Ellen Meloy Fund Winners:

Rebecca Lawton, *Junction, Utah*  
 Lily Mabura, *How Shall We Kill the Bishop? and Other Stories*  
 Joe Wilkins, *The Mountains and the Fathers: Growing Up in the Big Dry*  
 Amy Irvine, *Trespass*  
 Craig Childs, *Apocalyptic Planet: Field Guide to the Everending Earth*  
 Kate Harris, *Lands of Lost Borders*  
 Sarah Stewart Johnson, *Pale Red Dot*  
 Adelheid Fischer, *North Shore: A Natural History of Minnesota's Superior Coast*  
 Melissa Sevigny, *Mythical River*



Craig Child, 2011 Winner



Rebecca Lawton, 1st Award Recipient, 2006



The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers provides support to writers whose work reflects the spirit and passions embodied in Ellen's writing and her commitment to a deep map of place.

#### EMF Board of Directors

Co-Chairs

Tony Jewett

Joan Miles

Jullianne Ballou

Grant Ditzler

Kate Harris

Sarah Stewart Johnson

Jake Lodato

Edie Lush

Maile Meloy

Crystine Miller

Beth Satre

Ryann Savino

Sandy Shuptrine

Don Snow

Ann Walka

John Wilson

Executive Director

Mark Meloy

P.O. Box 484

Bluff, Utah 84512

[fund@ellenmeloy.com](mailto:fund@ellenmeloy.com)

[www.ellenmeloy.com](http://www.ellenmeloy.com)

(continued from page 1)

**Craig Childs:** The award kicked in while I was writing about desertification. The project carried me across the dunes of the Pinacate in northern Mexico and the barren heart of the Atacama Desert in northern Chile. I went out to find what lives or even thrives at the end of the world. In the dunes, I found live seeds blowing across bone beds of Pleistocene animals that perished in ancient droughts. In the Atacama, the driest non-polar desert in the world, I found saltwater springs where pink flamingos landed to strain brine shrimp from the acrid, metallic water. Both of these passages were major features in a book that I published after receiving Ellen's award. I then carried her writing onto an icefield in Alaska, part of the next book, where her words were read into a land of rock and ice, a place Ellen would have thoroughly loved.

**Rebecca Lawton:** My indelible link to Ellen and the Fund continues. In all I do, her name evokes affection and meaning: in Canada where while researching my second novel I met Ellen aficionados and scholars at the University of Alberta; in Summer Lake, Oregon, when I met friends and fans of Ellen at PLAYA, the residency program for creative individuals; in correspondence with Colorado River lovers who call Ellen's legacy of books their enduring favorites. Ellen's genius and humor shine on every page and still manage to connect us all these years after her passing.

Importantly, too, the grant encouraged many of the writers to think more seriously about their work. Our 2015 winner Melissa Sevigny's project evolved over the three years she applied for the grant. The application process gave her the opportunity to refine her ideas until they were clear and strong. Her book about water issues in the Southwest, *Mythical River*, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press. Similarly, the process of applying for the award helped Joe Wilkins think about his own work in terms of projects to plan and eventually complete.

In a winter 2001 issue of *Northern Lights*, Ellen wrote, "More than others, it is said, artists have the capacity to seal themselves away in a private world, to retreat into a forest of mental forms which most ordinary humans cannot penetrate, there to explore all that it means to be human. Without an unwavering fidelity to humanity—to language, image, experience—the creative process is bankrupt of its fire." One of the fund's hopes is that the EMF grant will continue to help to keep that fire vital.

## A Decade of Success by Mark Meloy

It's hard to believe it has been ten years since we founded the Ellen Meloy Fund and began the work of keeping the spirit of Ellen's writing alive. With the bestowal of an annual EMF Desert Writer's Award during this time span, we have fostered new voices for desert environments throughout the world. As you will see in this newsletter, our small endowment has helped these ten writers gain strong footholds in the literary world.

We are excited to report that our work will continue in earnest with the addition of strong, capable and enthusiastic young board members who we have added to the EMF board in recent years, some who know Ellen only through her writing, and all who are motivated to help in big ways.

During mid-October of each year, in conjunction with the annual Bluff, Utah Arts

Festival, we celebrate success by campfire light illuminating the red cliffs near Ellen's chosen home. This year's award winner, Melissa Sevigny, a resident of nearby Flagstaff, Arizona, joined the festival, reading her words and captivating nearly 100 folks gathered at dusk beside the river Ellen loved. That event alone is an example of our success, shining brightly and warmly illuminating our future.



# 2015 Ellen Meloy Fund Award Winners by Don Snow

## MELISSA SEVIGNY, FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

Melissa is the winner of the 2015 Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers for her work on the upcoming book *Mythical River: Encounters with Water in the American Southwest*



“... my writing seeks to deepen the lines on the ongoing map writers create to understand our place in the world.”



MELISSA SEVIGNY is a native of Tucson. Sevigny earned a dual degree from the University of Arizona in environmental science and creative writing. She worked as a science communicator for NASA's Phoenix Mars Scout Mission and the Water Resources Research Center in Tucson before heading off to graduate school at the University of Iowa, seeking a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. After several years of teaching at Iowa State University, Sevigny in the spring of 2015 accepted a position as science and technology reporter for KNAU Radio in Flagstaff.

In Sevigny's words, *Mythical River* “weaves together the geology, ecology, history and politics of the American Southwest into a narrative that considers what it means to make a home in a dry place.” The book's title refers to the Colorado River and “the illusion of constancy, which made the sprawling suburbs and agricultural fields of the Southwest possible, in the face of what are actually ephemeral desert rivers.”

In her application essay, Sevigny wrote this: “Deserts have vital lessons to offer about how to deal with climate change and scarcity. I write a map that is undergoing upheaval, even catastrophic change, and yet I also capture what endures: the igneous bedrock of the desert where I grew up, from which I draw strength and hope for its future.”

Sevigny has published more than 60 articles and essays on science and environmental topics. *Mythical River*, her first book, has been accepted for publication by the University of Iowa Press and will appear in spring of 2016.



## TARA FITZGERALD, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Tara received special recognition for writing on issues related to water in her book manuscript-in-progress, *No Water of Their Own*



“I have long had a particular interest in Central Asia and have traveled extensively ... where the Aral Sea is located.”



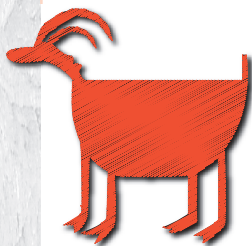
TARA FITZGERALD is a native of England. FitzGerald completed a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction at Columbia University in 2013. Prior to her arrival in New York to pursue graduate studies, she spent six years as a freelance reporter in Mexico.

Her book project, *No Water of Their Own*, is a chronicle of the Aral Sea, one of the largest bodies of fresh water on earth, now drastically depleted by irrigation withdrawals to support Russian agriculture.

A telephone call from the BBC World Service in 2014 stimulated her interest in the plight of the Aral Sea. Satellite photographs from that year had identified, for the first time, the eastern basin of the Aral Sea gone completely dry. FitzGerald writes, “I have long had a particular interest in Central Asia and have traveled extensively in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where the Aral Sea is located. It was during a reporting trip to the region that I first began investigating the shrinking Aral Sea and the new Aralkum Desert that was appearing in its wake. *No Water of Their Own* focuses on the communities of the Aral and their transition from a sea people to a desert people.”



An anonymous contribution in 2015 enabled the Ellen Meloy Fund to grant a special recognition award for significant writing about water issues. FitzGerald is the 2015 recipient of that award.



PO Box 484 • Bluff, Utah 84512

### Supporting the Fund

The Ellen Meloy Fund offers an annual award of \$3000 to an individual to write about the desert from the desert. Visit [www.ellenmeloy.com](http://www.ellenmeloy.com) for the latest information.

You can contribute to the fund by either visiting [www.ellenmeloy.com](http://www.ellenmeloy.com) and donating through PayPal or by sending a check to:

The Ellen Meloy Fund, c/o D.A. Davidson  
P.O. Box 1677, Helena, MT 59624

*All contributions are tax deductible.*

## Meet the New EMF Board Members



Kate Harris



Ryann Savino



Edie Lush

**K**ATE HARRIS is a writer with a knack for forgetting lost, most notably on the Silk Road during a very long bicycle ride. That journey took nearly a year, and writing a book about it is taking even longer, proof that spinning words is infinitely harder, at least for her, than spinning wheels. In all endeavors, though, she hopes to emulate Ellen's spirit of adventure, poetic sensibility, and boundless appreciation for the absurd. Kate is a proud and grateful recipient of the 2012 Ellen Meloy Desert Writer's Award. She lives off-grid near Atlin, BC, in a log cabin insulated with books, among them all of Ellen's.

**RYANN SAVINO** first read Ellen Meloy's work while canoeing down the Green River through Labyrinth Canyon. She now finds her home in Southeastern Utah where she works as a seasonal river guide and, on occasion, gets to captain a fourteen-foot boat named

after Ellen. Ryann believes preservation of land is inextricably tied to the preservation of its stories and is thrilled to be a part of Ellen Meloy's legacy.

**EDIE LUSH** is Ellen's cousin and has happy memories of visiting Ellen and Mark in Bluff both in the baking hot summer on a mountain bike and in the winter armed with many fleeces. In fact, she toasted her first wedding anniversary with her husband Cosmo, Ellen and Mark somewhere in Goosenecks State Park, Utah. Edie grew up in California and now lives in London, UK with Cosmo, three kids and Monty the cat. She works as a journalist and communications coach. Journalism has taken Edie to some fantastic places in the last few years including Switzerland, Vietnam, China and Mexico. She's looking forward to covering the Climate Change Summit in Paris this December.