



The  
**Ellen Meloy Fund**  
for Desert Writers

PO Box 484 • Bluff Utah 84512

### Supporting the Fund

The Ellen Meloy Fund offers an annual award of \$3,000 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 in two ways—either visit [www.ellenmeloy.com](http://www.ellenmeloy.com) and donate through PayPal or use the envelope inserted in this newsletter to send a check. All contributions are tax deductible.

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# The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

Dedicated to the memory and legacy of writer, artist and naturalist Ellen Meloy (1946-2004)

## Sarah Stewart Johnson Receives 2013 Desert Writers Award

In 2013, the Ellen Meloy Fund awarded its eighth annual Desert Writers Award to Sarah Stewart Johnson of Cambridge, Mass.

Johnson, who has a Ph.D in Planetary Science, is using the \$3,000 grant to support research and writing for her project *Pale Red Dot*, a work of creative nonfiction exploring the connections between deserts on Earth and the environments of nearby planets. The book will use scenes from both Mars and harsh environments on Earth to “provide a meditation on, and a vivid description of, the stunning resiliency of life: how it can adapt to an environment, wedge into a crevasse, and hang on against all odds.”

Johnson grew up in Kentucky, but as a college freshman she joined a research team that tested a prototype of the Mars Rover in the Mojave desert. Since then, she notes, her Mars research has taken her to deserts “all over the world, from the Patagonian Steppe to the polar deserts of Antarctica to the salt flats of Western Australia.”

Johnson decided to put together a proposal for the Desert Writers Award because she was looking for a way to carve out time to write and reflect. “It is through writing,” she says, “that I’ve found the most success in reconciling the great mysteries around me.”

Plus, she is convinced that “the relentless red deserts of Mars” belong in the “canon of desert literature.”

Awards Committee member Ann Walka described Johnson’s work as providing “an exhilarating perspective on desert

literacy proposed by a writer who has the depth of experience, intellectual rigor, and lyrical sensibility to take us to two fantastic, barely known landscapes.”

Don Snow, chair of the Awards Committee, noted how Johnson’s proposal stretches the definition of desert. “Her scientific imagination has led her to make some truly fascinating analogies,” he says. “In light of the rapid spread of deserts in the era of anthropogenic climate change, it may behoove all of us to confront the image of what may be the ultimate desert, the planet Mars.”

Johnson holds a multitude of degrees, including a Ph.D. in Planetary Science from MIT and a M.Sc. in Biology from



the University of Oxford. Along with fellowships from NASA, the White House, Harvard, and the International Institute for Sustainable Development, she has also received numerous awards and scholarships.

“Ellen Meloy was drawn to the desert’s immense, trembling landscape, and her rigorous and courageous exploration of its far reaches drew us with her. To be given an award in her name is such a gift. I can only aspire to write so beautifully.” —Sarah Stewart Johnson

### Now Accepting Submissions for 2014 Award

Between now and January 15, the Ellen Meloy Fund is accepting applications for its ninth Desert Writers Award.

The award will go to a creative non-fiction writer who uses the desert landscape, ecosystem, geography, history, and experience as the foundation and inspiration for their literary project. The Fund supports writing that

combines an engaging individual voice, literary sensibility, imagination, and intellectual rigor to bring new perspectives and deeper meaning to the body of desert literature.

Review the award guidelines and submission instructions at [www.ellenmeloy.com/the-award.html](http://www.ellenmeloy.com/the-award.html). The winner and finalists will be announced in early spring 2014.

### Trip to Mars, cont.

us, it was a very special moment, a time to thank the many friends, family members, and supporters of the Fund who knew Ellen in Montana and who helped establish the Fund through their love and generosity.

The evening—attended by a crowd twice what we had hoped for—included readings from Ellen’s books by Board members Rena Satre Meloy and Ann Walka and a special appearance by our 2013 award winner, Sarah Stewart Johnson. Sarah read from her book-in-progress titled *Pale Red Dot*, which explores the red deserts of Mars. An astroscintist with the literary flare of a young Rachel Carson, Sarah stretched our minds with a story grown from her work on the recent Rover mission to the Red Planet. She is truly relocating the boundaries of desert literature.

For many of us, it was our first opportunity to meet our newest award winner, and we were very grateful for the effort Sarah and her family made to join us for this event. According to Sarah, however, the insight she gained into the spirit and passion of Ellen Meloy and the deeper understanding of the legacy she is now part of, were the most gratifying gifts.

Imagine a long, warm summer evening in Montana. Sharing remembrances of Ellen while stretching our imaginations to a different planetary desert combined to create a perfect celebration of eight years of the Fund’s work. Most poignant for the Board members – whether from Helena or elsewhere – was the recognition of the lasting ties this community has to our remarkable and talented friend who, though she left the mountains for the hot sun of the

desert, never truly left behind her community of family and friends in Montana.

As for the location of next year’s meeting? We’re considering Mars. There may be enough water for a float trip.



Sarah Stewart Johnson reads from *Pale Red Dot*.



All Illustrations  
by Ellen Meloy.



## The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers

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.

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P.O. Box 484  
Bluff, Utah 84512  
fund@ellenmeloy.com  
www.ellenmeloy.com

## Endowment Tops \$100,000 *by Tony Jewett • EMF Board Co-Chair*

We are both pleased and proud to announce to our donors and friends that the Ellen Meloy Fund recently surpassed the fundraising goal set at its inception and, as of December 2013, stands at \$125,000.

This success is one built on the generosity of over 190 individuals who have contributed (many repetitively) over the past eight years to grow this permanent endowment.

When the Fund formed in 2005, the Board established a financial target of raising \$100,000. We felt that if we achieved this goal and invested the generous donations of Ellen's friends, fans, family, and followers both conservatively and wisely, the Fund would be able to provide, in perpetuity, a stable stipend to its award winners. This stipend, though small, has now helped eight talented and aspiring desert writers pursue their creative dreams and aspirations.

Because of the generosity of all of you receiving this end-of-year newsletter, the Board recently was able to increase the size of our annual award from \$2,000 to \$3,000.

As the Ellen Meloy Fund enters its ninth year of operation, we want to take a moment to send a special thanks to all of Ellen's friends and supporters who have helped us through the years to achieve our shared vision of keeping Ellen's voice and desert spirit alive and growing. The Fund continues to be an all-volunteer effort with little to no overhead. The active efforts of our supporters and our Board have helped create a legacy award whose prominence has grown nationally—one that is now recognized and sought after as a prized accomplishment by talented writers from across the country.

Our thanks to you all for being a part of this lasting accomplishment.

## A Summer Solstice Trip to ... Mars

*by Joan Miles • EMF Board Co-Chair*



The audience (including—left to right—Lorna Milne, Jon Motl, Bonnie Ade, Frank Crowley, Scott Hibbard, Dave Carr, and Janet Hess-Herbert) reacts as Rena Satre Meloy reads a slyly humorous passage from *Eating Stone*.

Each year, the Fund's board of directors tries to meet one time face to face. Conference calls are great, but there's nothing like a few days together for us to revitalize our commitment to Ellen and each other. This year, we held our meeting at a time and place that were special to Ellen: in Helena, Montana, around the summer solstice.

While we normally hold our in-person meetings in the deserts Ellen so loved, this year we chose to gather in the place she called home before moving to southern Utah. The highlight of the weekend was an evening reception at the Holter Museum of Art. For

*(Trip to Mars, cont. page 4)*

## A Reading Life *by Don Snow • Awards Committee Chair*

Liberal arts colleges are among our best conservators of something we take for granted: the reading life. It's the ancient idea that reading is a lifelong habit, and at the core of that habit lies the reading of books.

Where I teach, Whitman College in Walla Walla, I have learned over the years that most of our students come from reading families. I teach literature, and most of my students—no great surprise here—are in love with books, much as I was at age 20.

I wonder, though, to what extent this is any longer true in the case of American college kids at large. Is the love of books as widespread as it used to be? Can we any longer assume the existence of a robust reading life among the majority of students-at-large?

It may seem silly to say it, but Ellen Meloy was a reader's writer. Her four books are generous, warm, and inviting but also challenging. One does not come casually into her work. I see the truth in this claim each spring semester at Whitman when I offer an independent study in the work of the Ellen Meloy Fund. The premise of the study is simple: I invite a handful of students to join me as I read the applications for the annual award. The students form a little phantom Awards Committee which shadows the work of the official Committee which I chair. The independent study is a lot of fun, of course, but it's much more than that. It's also a means of introducing the next generation to Ellen's work; it is an affirmation of everything Ellen stood for—her love of the desert and the natural world, the work she shared with other writers and artists with similar interests, the ancient tradition of nature writing and natural history (and what could be more important today, amid our techno-dazzled world?). Mostly, the Meloy independent study is another affirmation of the reading life—what Thoreau called the examined life.

I simply love the students who wish to join me in this legacy. I trust them with the future.

Last year, there were six: Matt Beatty (Indiana), Lyra Dalton (Lopez Island), Molly Esteve (Portland), Ali Murray (Nevada), Ryann Savino (California), and Cathryn Klusmeier who grew up in Walmart's hometown in Arkansas. These six young stars read the applications, came together once a week to debate and discuss, arrived at a consensus, and chose a winner. They also read Ellen, and thus entered into her legacy first-hand.

Do these things matter? They matter absolutely. In an earlier newsletter article, I reported on the successes of Julianne Ballou, my first independent participant ('09), who went on to a successful editing career as Associate Editor at

Oxford American magazine. Julianne joined the official Awards Committee last year and just recently agreed to accept a seat on the Fund's board. Two other successes are worth noting. Naomi Gibbs (independent '10) is now Assistant Editor at Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt in New York. Ryann Savino (independent '12 and '13) is working in Green River, Utah, with a local organization dedicated to assisting low-income kids, mostly Hispanic. Ryann has become a desert rat, learning the Green River over Ellen's shoulder.

Yes, these things matter. Books and reading matter, and I count myself so wonderfully lucky to be able to help pass along not only Ellen's legacy but also the ancient legacy of reading to the next generation of Book People.

Pay it forward.

## Photos from the Holter Reception



Above: People gather in the Holter's High Gallery for the reception. Ann Walka smiles after the "program" portion of the evening.



Sarah Stewart Johnson gets to know a few of Ellen's friends.