

Book recommendations

WNC poets and writers share this year's must-reads



BY THOMAS CALDER

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There is plenty to write home about when it comes to 2023, including Western North Carolina's literary scene. Looking back over *Xpress'* coverage this year, our region saw a lot of new initiatives, publications and nonprofit firsts.

For example, in June, Yetzirah, a local literary nonprofit for Jewish poets, hosted its inaugural five-day Jewish poetry conference at UNC Asheville. A month later, fellow literary nonprofit Punch Bucket Lit introduced listeners to its new podcast. In October, Dark City Poetry Society, a Black Mountain-based reading series, published an anthology featuring 26 local writers. Meanwhile, in November, thousands of local residents signed up and participated in

the annual National Novel Writing Month.

We'd be remiss to not also note *Xpress'* own contributions to the local lit scene through our ongoing monthly poetry feature, as well as the paper's launch of the new "Look Homeward" series, where we speak with local authors and historians about the impact and legacy of Thomas Wolfe.

To celebrate WNC's 2023 literary accomplishments, *Xpress* reached out to the following local authors and poets who published a new work this year: **Mildred Barya** (*The Animals of My Earth School*); **Clint Bowman** (*Pretty Sh!t*); **Michael Hettich** (*The Halo of Bees: New & Selected Poems, 1990-2022*); **Meagen Lucas** (*Here in the Dark*); and **Brit Washburn** (*Homing In: Attempts on a Life of Poetry and Purpose*).

We asked each writer to share their 2023 book recommendations as well

as upcoming titles they're excited to read in 2024. Based on some of their answers, it is worth noting that the featured writers did not know who else was participating in the article, nor did they see each other's responses.

Was there a book published in 2023 by a local or regional WNC writer that blew you away? If so, what made it so spectacular?

Barya: **Brit Washburn's** *Homing In: Attempts on a Life of Poetry and Purpose*. There's deep love and focused attention here. There's candidness, grace and perceptive skill in knowing and admitting that even when a person is conflicted about "what is" or "what ought to be," beneath the confusion is an intelligence holding a mirror to life's mysteries and humbling surprises that go beyond "reasonable interpretation."

This book shows what an "examined life" looks like.

Bowman: A small, but mighty book that knocked me off my feet was *Total Annihilation* by **Michael Conner** from Swannanoa. I particularly liked the lasting images Michael put in the reader's head with poems like "Christ Addresses a Gathering Crowd After Setting the NRA Boardroom Ablaze," and "The God of Death Goes Sailfishing." Michael's poems touch a lot on religion and human impact on nature, which are two subjects that frequently inspire my own writing. He shines a light on some of the grotesque parts of nature, such as roadkill and "soil soaked in dog piss," while not giving up hope on nature's perseverance. I'd recommend this book to anyone looking for a quick (but lasting) read.

Hettich: *Travelogue: A Photographic Journey* by the photographer **Charter Weeks** and the writer **Sebastian**

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