



WORDSMITHS: Local poets and writers, from left, Mildred Barya, Clint Bowman, Michael Hettich, Meagan Lucas and Brit Washburn all celebrated the release of new publications in 2023. Photos courtesy of the writers

Matthews is a collection of stunning photographs accompanied by insightful, incisive, moving meditations on those photographs. There's a tenderness and vitality here that's rarely achieved in such collaborative efforts. As **Larry Fink** blurbs, this book is "a softly purring love affair with dignity and the small elements of pride which make up all of our lives."

Lucas: *Bushwhacking: How to Get Lost in the Woods and Write Your Way Out* by **Jennifer McGaha** is a can't-miss. McGaha is a naturalist and a writer, and the book is memoir but also a meditation on the creative life. I found it really encouraging as a writer, but I think that any creative will find a lot of wisdom in it. Particularly as we move into a new year, and a new beginning, I think *Bushwhacking's* optimism and honesty will be a welcome addition to anyone's to-be-read pile.

Washburn: Ugandan native and Western North Carolina resident **Mildred Barya's** poetry collection *Animals of My Earth School*, published by Terrapin Books in 2023, really blew me away. It is a sustained exercise in inhabiting the experience of others, in this case nonhuman others, which may well be prerequisite to the cultivation of compassion and kinship with other humans as well. It is a prime example of poetry's capacity to expand our consciousness and, by extension, our hearts.

Was there a book, old or new, that you read this year that everyone should consider? If so, why?

Barya: **Michael Hettich's** *The Halo of Bees: New & Selected Poems, 1990-2022*. This is a true gem of a book! Besides beauty and magical elegance, the reader gets to encounter Hettich's artistic range across

a broad spectrum of subjects and emotions, from his earliest to most recent works. All packed in one book.

Bowman: *Facts About the Moon* by **Dorianne Laux**. Dorianne is an incredible poet with ties to North Carolina — having taught creative writing at N.C. State University and now living in Raleigh. Her book is a great example of how she beautifully jumps back and forth between big concepts such as outer space and down-to-earth moments like sitting on a hospital bench. If you're a fan of poets such as Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich, I can't recommend Dorianne enough.

Hettich: For years **Campbell McGrath** has been one of our most capacious, daring, emotionally and intellectually powerful American poets. He is also a tremendously readable writer, someone whose work should certainly appeal even to those who rarely read poetry. His most recent book, *Fever of Unknown Origin*, which was published this year, is one of his finest. It's teeming with pleasures and surprises — short and long poems, poems and prose. As always, his work sings with lyricism and wit as it delves down deep. His longer poems are capacious; his short ones are witty and surprising. All of them are moving. I read the book in one sitting.

Lucas: **Karen Tucker's** *Bewilderness* is a wonder. It's a story of female friendship and opioid addiction in rural North Carolina. But where so many other stories of this kind focus on the crime and violence inherent in this problem, Tucker focuses on how addiction, and its fallout, changes relationships. It's a revelation.

Washburn: I read many wonderful books this year, old and new, but with so much available and of value, I want to be very careful with

what I recommend prioritizing. That said, I think absolutely everyone should read **Kate Di Camillo's** *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, which I do at least annually. It is among the greatest depictions of how the annihilation of ego teaches us to love, written by anyone, for any age group, no matter that the antihero in question is a china rabbit.

What forthcoming book in 2024 are you eagerly awaiting? Bonus points if it's a local writer.

Barya: **Rick Van Noy's** *Borne by the River: Canoeing the Delaware from Headwaters to Home*. I loved reading Noy's earlier book *Sudden Spring*. I appreciate the way he balanced important climate change narratives with research and personal reflections, while also highlighting the collaborative, intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches required to address environmental shifts. Lately, I've been thinking about my home rivers — literally and figuratively. So I think Noy's forthcoming book will

offer new perspectives and clues to sustaining the lives of rivers as well as our own.

Bowman: I'm looking forward to reading **Rachel Hanson's** book, *The End of Tennessee*, in 2024. Rachel has given so many writers in our community a platform through her nonprofit, Punch Bucket Lit. I can't wait to see her writing get more of the spotlight that it deserves.

Hettich: I've read **John Balaban's** writing for years, always with admiration for his clear eye, beautifully shaped sentences and lines, and ability to bring the larger world — the world of history and ideas — gracefully into his poetry and prose. His translations from the Vietnamese are stunning, and his memoir *Remembering Heaven's Face* is a classic. Balaban taught for years at N.C. State University and lives in Raleigh. His new book, *Passing Through a Gate: Poems, Essays and Translations*, is due from Copper Canyon Press in 2024. That's the book I'm most looking forward to as we turn toward the new year.

Lucas: **Tessa Fontaine's** *The Red Grove*, coming in May 2024, is an exploration of the legacies of violence, the price of safety and the choices we make to protect what we love — and it sounds freaking awesome.

Washburn: I am eagerly awaiting books by two devoted river writers: **Rachel Hanson's** *The End of Tennessee*, due out from University of South Carolina Press in 2024. She is such a deeply intelligent human and generous literary citizen, it's high time the spotlight she so often shines on others is turned her way. I am also looking forward to **Rick Van Noy's** hybrid memoir/natural history *Borne by the River: Canoeing the Delaware from Headwaters to Home*, which will be published by Cornell in May of 2024. He's not yet a Western North Carolina local — he lives just over the border in southwest Virginia — but I hope he will be soon. ✪

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