

Writing Prize Endorses Alumna's Passion for Her Craft
by Greg Glasgow



When Amanda Rea came to the University of Denver as a freshman, it was only the second time she had ever seen a city.

“I came to Denver once, when I was 14, for the state spelling bee,” she says. “My English teacher brought me, and that was the first time I ever saw a city. I remember seeing the skyline, and I couldn’t breathe because I was so excited.”

Rea grew up in Marvel, CO, a tiny town in the southwest corner of the state. She came to DU to pursue her love of creative writing, and she graduated in 2000 with a BA in English. She has since earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of California Irvine, and her stories have appeared in *Kenyon Review*, the *Missouri Review*, and the *Sun*, among others. A memoir piece, “A Dead Man in Nashville,” won a Pushcart Prize in 2011.

In September, Rea was one of six female authors to win a prestigious Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers Award, which comes with a \$30,000 grant to finance writing time and to provide assistance for everything from child care to research and travel. Rea currently is working on a novel set in the Four Corners region during World War II.

Q: How old were you when you started writing?

A: I think I was 5 when I decided to be a writer. I’ve had a lot of detours along the way, but I’ve remained really focused on it. My family is a bunch of storytellers, and I grew up hearing their stories. My grandmother had an old typewriter, and I typed out a little story about my dog, and they passed it around the family and praised it and all thought it was really great, and I sort of got addicted at that point. I would write these novels in spiral notebooks, usually with one of our cats as the protagonist — that was my leisure activity. Everyone would do their thing, and I would go write another novel.

Q: You studied creative writing at DU; how did that help prepare you for a career as an author?

A: I was a creative writing-focused English major. I exclusively wanted to take creative writing classes, but they wouldn’t let you do that, so I had to learn some other stuff too. I took all of the creative writing classes until I couldn’t take any more, and then the fabulous Brian Kiteley [a DU English professor who was then head of the creative writing PhD program] allowed me into the PhD workshop. I was 19, and the rest of the people [in the workshop] were adults working on books. I’m sure my naiveté was annoying, but it was a really great experience that helped prepare me for graduate school.

Q: It sounds like Brian was a real mentor for you.

A: Brian was so wonderful — I can't emphasize enough how much he encouraged me. I had other wonderful teachers, like Beth Nugent, Brian Evenson and Rikki Ducornet, but it was Brian who really made me feel like I could do something with my writing. He also told me about the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Mass., which is a fellowship for seven months where you get to go live at the end of Cape Cod with a bunch of other artists through a lonely cold winter and work. I applied straight out of DU on Brian's urging. I was not accepted, but I kept it in the back of my mind. Later, when I was back in Denver working a desk job, I applied twice more. They let me in the third time, and it was a magical experience.

Q: Much of your work, including the novel you are working on under the Jaffe grant, takes place in the area of Colorado where you grew up, and focuses on what the foundation's press release calls "the underbelly of the West — the poor and disenfranchised." What is the draw for you in that world?

A: I guess on some level it's just the world I know. I grew up in a trailer house. We were on food stamps when we were kids. My parents were both really hard workers, but they didn't always have great luck; and we're a family of talented people often plagued by alcoholism. These are all things I'm interested in dealing with. Especially now that I have my own family — my daughter has a very different life than I did. I think my imagination is fired up by the differences between these worlds.

Q: Does that theme resonate with people? Do you get feedback from readers who can identify with that kind of experience?

A: I'm sure it doesn't resonate with everybody, but it means a lot when I hear from someone who's found truth in my work. People seem interested in the other side of Colorado. Not the Aspen ski-bunny kind of thing, but the Colorado that exists for the people working in a basement laundry, washing sheets for the tourists, or the people building the vacation homes. My dad built homes for 40 years. He built beautiful log mansions for people to come meet their families for Thanksgiving, and then he went home to our trailer. There was a gulf between our life and the lives that my dad spent most of his time creating for other people.

Q: You teach at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver and do some freelance work as well, but is writing more or less your full-time job these days?

A: Especially after winning the Rona Jaffe Award, I feel a duty to write full time. But it's been a job for the past few years, in large part because of my husband, who has been very supportive. I became more serious when I had my daughter, because I can't just wake up and have some coffee and toddle around and get down to writing eventually. You have a

very small window of time, and you need to get your butt in the chair. I've had to develop more discipline, and that's been really useful for me. I get up in the morning, I take my daughter to school, and I go directly to the desk. My challenge is not to mess around with email or look at every website on the planet beforehand, but just to get right to work

Q: How did you feel when you found out you had won the Jaffe award?

A: I just started sobbing. I was so stunned. Even at the award reception in New York, I had to fight back tears a couple of times. It was this beautiful party with all these well-known editors and champagne and marble floors, and I felt like, "I'm a kid from Marvel; what am I doing here?" [The award is] a financial relief, but it's also this wonderful psychological gift, feeling like somebody official wants me to do this, that it's OK. It's given me a new sense of freedom. I'm just so grateful that an organization like that exists to help women — especially mothers, because young children and writing are not terrifically compatible.