



MARCH NEWSLETTER  
2018-2019 NUMBER 7

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Designer: Norman Baugher

# FRIENDS OF AMERICAN WRITERS CHICAGO

[www.fawchicago.org](http://www.fawchicago.org)



## President's Message

CHRISTINE SPATARA, *President*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has brought us friends and new members this year. Our luncheons have been extremely well attended and we are proud of the programs presented thus far. We have recently sent out

our yearly solicitation letter for the Patron's Fund. The Patron's Fund is what helps to sustain our organization in addition to our luncheons and membership. We are a small club but we have survived close to one hundred years. It is with our members help that we will survive the next hundred. We thank you for all your support.

## MARCH PROGRAM

### Patricia Frazier: National Youth Poet Laureate

KAREN PULVER, *Chair*

You only have to read Patricia Frazier's poetry to get a glimpse into her soul. This young Chicago native pours remembrance, social activism, and a sense of empowerment into her work. Though she is only twenty years old, she was named the second-ever National Youth Poet Laureate. For those not familiar with the program, the National Youth Poet Laureate program was created ten years ago by the literary arts organization Urban Word and the New York City Mayor's office. Judges select a National Youth Poet Laureate from a group of five Youth Poet Laureates, each representing a different region of the United States. Ms. Frazier is the first to be named to the group from Chicago.

The young writer says she draws inspiration for her writing from her upbringing in the Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. The homes have




since been demolished. Frazier never had a sense of her community growing up there because negative reports from the media made her afraid to go outside. The family moved away when she was only nine years old. In her last year there, she gathered her courage and ventured out. What she found has remained with her and inspired her to this day. She said that her poetry has become the replacement home for the one she has lost.

Patricia Frazier is both an artist and an activist. Through her creative output and her community activism, she hopes to inspire Chicago's young people to follow their dreams—to enter whatever world they envision for their future, and to express themselves fully. She tells them that they all have stories, and each story is valid. She also hopes to dispel the view of poets as “writers stepped in a white academia.” Poetry exists everywhere, in everyone, in every time. FAW is proud to share Ms. Frazier's story and her work this month. The following is one of her poems.

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*Funeral Scene Where it isn't Raining (a retelling): After Eve Ewing by Patricia Frazier*

She died on a hot September night. Her spirit rose from her body like a bird fleeing a falling tree, transcending the green and yellow bathroom walls. She flew over the empty plain we used to call home, moonwalked across the McCormick place bridge, and into the uber on 22nd street, where her granddaughter received the news. Her granddaughter hung up the phone and fell into the arms of the car door, weeping into a cup holder. The sun fell with her granddaughter's breath, the driver redirected the route. The

car rises off the ground, the driver pulls the gear shift one notch past L. The car tilts upward, the engine smoking like the head of a cigarette. The car spins the granddaughter's brain back in time. Gyrating as though driving through a vaguely familiar giggle. It is 1998 and she died years before of old age. The granddaughter exits the vehicle and the doctor shouts "It's a girl!" and it is a selfish new world. The granddaughter cries as Jay-Z raps a Hard Knock Life, but the granddaughter will never know. 



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Luncheon Reservations

The March 2019 meeting of the Friends of American Writers will be held on Wednesday, March 13, 2019. Luncheon reservations for this meeting are due no later than 6:00 p.m. on Sunday, March 10. Please note, this deadline is firm. No reservations will be accepted following this date and time. To reserve, contact only Pat Adelberg (847-588-0911) or Peggy Kuzminski (1-773-710-8637). Please note, this is a different contact number for Peggy, so please replace the old one you have.

If you wish a permanent reservation, please mention it to Peggy or Pat when you call. All Board members automatically have permanent reservations. Also, a reminder that no permanent reservations are held over from last year to this year.

Luncheon will be served at 12:00 noon in the main floor dining room of the Fortnightly Club of Chicago, 120 W. Bellevue Place. The cost is \$45 per person, payable by check (preferred) in the front lobby on the day of the meeting. For group reservations, we ask that only one person make the reservation to avoid confusion. Please note, if you make a reservation and you cannot attend, you must cancel no later than 6:00 p.m. on the Sunday preceding the meeting.

Reservations not cancelled must be paid for by the member.

Looking forward to seeing you there.

### Young People's Literature Award Committee

By ANGELA GALL, *Chair*

"A woman with a voice is by definition a strong woman."

—Melinda Gates

Since 1987, the United States has formally recognized March as National Women's History Month because every woman has a story to tell and gifts to share with the world. Thus, at our last Young People's Literature Awards Committee meeting, we reflected upon the historic and literary women that helped shape not only our thoughts but our actions.

Tanya Klasser reflected upon her admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt whom she sees as a driving force in American history especially considering her role in humanitarian efforts. Eleanor's inspirational words are ones to live by: "You must do the things you think you cannot do." and "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

After reading a biography about Bertha Palmer, Peggy Kuzminski was more than impressed. "Bertha was a woman ahead of the times, especially since

she was born in 1893 and died in 1918. Although she was a socialite, she was concerned about social issues. Bertha worked very hard to improve education, wages and working conditions. Her many accomplishments included the setting up of Jane Adams' Hull House, the bringing together of business owners and workers to improve working conditions, the establishment of a millinery union, the establishment of Kindergarten for young children, the fight to have a Women's Building in the 1893 Columbia Expedition and insisting it be built by a woman, and the support of Sophie Hayden, the first woman graduate from MIT in Architecture. Bertha Palmer was quite the woman!"

"Nora, the main character of *Seventh Heaven* by Alice Hoffman is one of my favorite characters. A divorcee moves to a suburb with her two scruffy children and though she's out of sync with her neighbors, she slowly shows her kindness and caring and helps those around her. I admire how Nora is able to assist others in small, but key ways. Alice Hoffman writes of many "regular" characters who are able to serve others and make their lives magical." —VIVIAN MORTENSEN

"Hester Prynne, Elizabeth Bennet, Jo March, Anne of Green

Gables, and Pippi Longstocking, are only a few of the great list of literary female heroines that have influenced me to be opinionated and strong, creative and fun, feisty and hot-tempered, passionate and loving.” —ANGELA GALL

The Young People's Literature Awards Committee is thrilled to report that five out of the six books that are headed to our winners' circle are books written by women featuring strong, determined female protagonists who insist on taking control of their own destiny, forcing all of its readers to stand up and want to do the same. Happy Women's History Month!

*"I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me."*  
—MAYA ANGELOU,  
*Phenomenal Woman*

## Join Us In March for Readers and Reviewers

ROBERTA GATES

Please join us when Readers & Reviewers meets on March 13 for a discussion of Celeste Ng's novel *Little Fires Everywhere*. Ng's first book, *Everything I Never Told You*, was one of our prizewinners in 2015, and while that was a very good book, her latest is even better—so good, in fact, that Hulu has plans to turn it into a miniseries.

If you haven't yet read *Little Fires Everywhere*, I encourage you to do so. It's not only readable but relevant, posing questions about the role of women in society, the legitimacy of cross-cultural/racial adoptions, and the viability of a career in the arts even when it doesn't pay the bills. (For a full review, see page 5.)

Our discussion of the book

will take place in the boardroom as soon as the board meeting is adjourned, which should be about eleven o'clock. Any member (or guest of a member) is welcome to attend.

I look forward to seeing you!

## Nominating Committee in Full Swing

If you'd like to join the FAW board, or simply learn about which positions are available, please feel free to contact someone from the nominating committee:

Roberta Gates, Chair  
Diana Adams  
Tammie Bob  
Tanya Klasser  
Peggy Kuzminski

The phone numbers and e-mail addresses for all of these members are in the directory.



FEATURE  
ARTICLE

by SHIRLEY BAUGHER

RUSSELL BAKER

## WHY YOU SHOULD READ THE OBITUARIES

Who reads obituaries? Well, I do, for one. And so did Russell Baker.

Russell Baker, who left us on January 21, 2019, might not be a familiar name to some of you. He was a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning columnist, although he had not written regularly for a good many years. In his own obituary, Baker was referred to as a humor columnist—and he wrote humor quite well. But he also wrote about politics, history, current events, literature, and just about any other subject to which he turned his pen. In 1997, The New York Times commissioned Russell Baker to write the foreword for a book of obituaries and farewells published by the paper. They called it, "The Last Word."

His foreword was one of the most memorable parts of the book. In it he wrote, "As youth turns into middle age, and middle age turns into grayness and failing vision, the cultural collapse accelerates. It becomes routine

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to arrive at the obituaries and find another part of your past has been moved out during the night. At a certain age, the past starts vanishing so fast that it is impossible to track any longer of who is dead and who is alive.”

Baker understood, better than most, that everyone’s death diminishes us and results in a societal loss of knowledge. He noted such commonplace losses as hand-cranking a car on a cold morning. Who does that anymore? Butchering livestock on a farm—rarely done. Foregoing the box mix and baking a cake from scratch. Fewer people even know how to do this, much less stock the ingredients that make it possible. For the most part, these losses don’t really matter. But Baker understood that there was a more serious aspect to this loss of knowledge that comes with death.

“More alarming,” he wrote, “is the loss of knowledge of old realities. Each day, death takes another batch of people who experienced the time of Hitler and his war. This is an alarming loss, for many of their replacements have been encouraged to think of Nazis as sources of entertainment. Sitcoms have portrayed them as comical bunglers (think *Stalag 17*). Film has spread a romantic taste for those smashing Nazi uniforms. Those beautiful ankle-length leather coats! Those fantastic red and black armbands. Here is a case where death is robbing us of valuable knowledge. The Nazis were not entertaining. They were not comical and not bunglers. They were fine soldiers and dangerous, terrifying, dreadful people. In their enchanting red, black, and leather, they were as romantic as the machine-gunning of a mass grave.”

### Where to turn? The obituary.

Russell Baker knew the value of the obituary. He observed that “...obituaries often provided the only pleasure to be had from the daily newspaper and should be savored slowly, for leisurely reading over the last cup of breakfast coffee. To plunge into them first thing before having endured the rest of the day’s news is like eating the dessert before taking a fried liver dinner. What a blessed relief they provide after the front page—people butchering the neighbors’ wives and children to serve God, right injustice, and display cultural superiority; science announcing that everything you love to do, eat, or drink will kill you...then at last, the obituaries. Oases of calm in a world gone mad. Stimulants to sweet memories of better times, to philosophical reflection, to discovery of life’s astonishing richness, variety comedy, sadness, of the diverse infinitude of human imagination that it takes to make this world. What a lovely part of the paper to linger in...for long thoughts and easy living, it’s the obituaries every time.”

Is it possible, that in this digital age, we will lose this refuge so treasured by Russell Baker? Though others have written about the passage of time, his observations are more upbeat and insightful. He did not spend time looking back to the good old days. He was very much a person of his time and his culture.

“I am amused to realize that half the present population of the United States will not recognize most of the names that made up the environment in which my life was lived,” he reflected. “From their viewpoint, I am a creature from another planet. This is rather a pleasant feeling. I have been to a place the young can never know. It provides a harmlessly spiteful pleasure to realize that though my culture is vanishing, the new culture can never know the pleasure of chewing Jujubes in the Lord Baltimore Theater while Charlie Chan scolds Keye Luke; of falling in love with Margot Fonteyn at Covent Garden; remembering when Leo ‘the Lip’ Durocher taught me the roguish joys of irreverence by preaching that “nice guys finish last.”

These were the joys that made up the daily life of Russell Baker. Now, Baker himself has become a creature of that other planet. Young people will not be able to relive his experiences or visit that special place known to him alone. Sure, you can google Leo Durocher and Keye Luke, and Margot Fonteyn, but the information you receive will not transport you to that land where Russell Baker found them. You might do better to read something by the man himself, and through his words, try to tag along on his journey.

Russell Baker died on January 21, 2019 at age 93.

### A Few Observations by Russell Baker

“The only thing I was fit for was to be a writer, and this notion rested solely on my suspicion that I would never be fit for real work, and that writing didn’t require any.” *Growing Up*, 1982

“The old notion that brevity is the essence of wit has succumbed to the modern idea that tedium is the essence of quality.” *Getting on With It*, 1982

“Perhaps humans have always had this ridiculous belief in the absolute excellence of the present, this conviction that the world into which they have had the marvelous good luck to be born is the best world that ever was, the best that ever will be.” *Stuck on Ourselves*, 1993

“I think—this has been a long time ago remember—but I think we expected school only to process those kids—that is, swell them a bit in size and add social poise without really changing them from kids, the point of our lives, into something alarming, as school did. They were fated to become people, alas, and they did it without our even noticing for the longest while.” *No Kidding*, 1973

“Life seemed to be an educator’s practical joke in which you spent the first half learning and the second half learning that everything you learned in the first half was wrong.” *Back to the Dump*, 1983

“We all come from the past, and children ought to know

what it was that went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord of humanity stretching up from time long gone, and that it cannot be defined by the span of a single journey from diaper to shroud.” *Growing Up*. 1982  
 “What are they like, these Washingtonians? Very much as you and I would be if we found ourselves in the curious jobs that Washingtonians perform. Which is to say, cocksure and uncertain, devious and naïve, ebullient and melancholy, pompous and frivolous, bored, hard-working, shiftless, wide-eyed and tired of it all, full of dreams and

schemes, and, without quite realizing it, a little absurd, for they are mostly common men distinguished largely by possession of uncommon jobs.” *An American in Washington*, 1961

“Columnists tendency to spend their time with life’s winners and to lead lives of isolation from the less dazzling American realities makes it too easy for us sometimes to solve the nation’s problems in 700 words.” *A Few Words at the End*, 1998



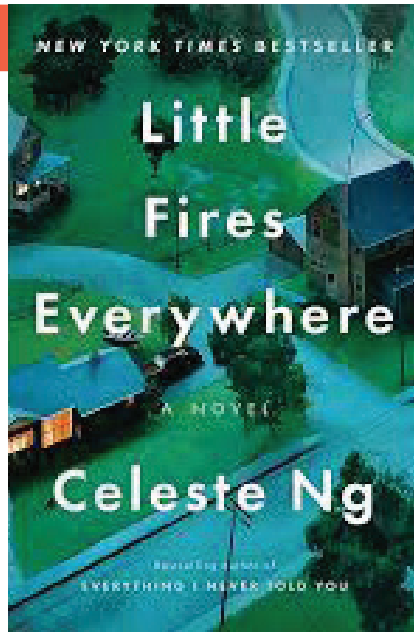
## The Reading Corner

**Little Fires Everywhere by Celeste Ng**

Reviewed by Roberta Gates

Our Readers & Reviewers choice for March is Celeste Ng’s thought-provoking novel which pits two mothers against each other. Their conflict takes root when Mia Warren, a single mother with a teenaged daughter named Pearl, rents the upstairs of a house owned by Elena Richardson, a matriarchal figure who has four children, all of whom are only one year apart. Mrs. Richardson (as she is always called) is a proud and orderly person who thanks her lucky stars that her grandparents had the foresight to settle in Shaker Heights, the leafy and progressive suburb of Cleveland which is the book’s setting.

Mrs. Richardson, although she supports the arts and likes offering a helping hand to those in need, finds her new tenant somewhat unsettling. Mia is a self-proclaimed artist who, though her photographs are exhibited (and sometimes sold) at a gallery in New York City, lives in near poverty. To make ends meet, she takes odd jobs, including one as a housecleaner/cook at the Richardson home. Mrs. Richardson also works, but her job as



a local journalist is not as satisfying as Mia’s photography is to her.

Before long, these two families become intertwined. Pearl, who starts dating Moony Richardson, envies the Richardsons and their large comfortable house. “They were so artlessly beautiful, even right out of bed,” thinks Pearl. “Where did this ease come from? How could they be so at home, so sure of themselves, even in pajamas?”



Celeste Ng

In the meantime, however, Izzy, the Richardsons’ misfit daughter, does not find home a particularly appealing place and consequently spends almost all of her after-school time at Mia’s apartment, where she serves as an unpaid “studio assistant.”

The tension builds further when Mark and Linda McCullough, who are neighbors, decide, after years of trying to have a baby of their own, to adopt an infant left at a neighborhood fire station. But the baby’s biological mother, an immigrant from China, soon appears, leading to a court case which leaves Mia and the Richardsons on opposite sides of the debate.

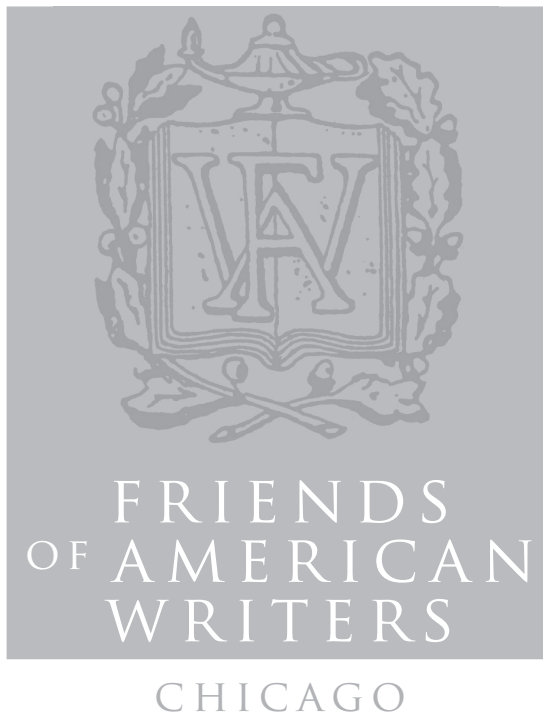
In addition, there’s a mystery about Mia’s youth, which Mrs. Richardson, using her journalistic skills, sets out to solve.

These threads coalesce in a dramatic and surprising way that should give us plenty to talk about at our Readers & Reviewers discussion, including mother-daughter relationships, the importance of racial/cultural heritage, class divisions, feminism—and more!

So please join us for Readers & Reviewers if you can. We’ll be meeting in the board room at eleven o’clock or as soon as the board meeting is adjourned.



**SHIRLEY BAUGHER**  
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### **FAW MEETINGS 2018-19**

A reminder of the FAW meetings for 2018-19. Be sure to mark your calendars. You won't want to miss a single one!

#### **OCTOBER 10, 2018**

**Steve Venturino**  
Speaking on Daniel Deronda

#### **NOVEMBER 7, 2018**

**Exploring Historical Fiction:  
A Panel of Three Writers**

**Connie Hamilton Connally**  
(author of *The Songs we Hide*)

**Kelly O'Connor Mcnesse**  
(author of *Undiscovered Country*)

**Devin Murphy**  
(author of *The Boat Runner*)

#### **DECEMBER 12, 2018**

interFRIENDtions will perform  
Christmas and Hannukkah music

#### **JANUARY 9, 2019**

The American Writers' Museum  
will send a representative

#### **FEBRUARY 13, 2019**

Adult-Books Editor  
Booklist Reviews

#### **MARCH 13, 2019**

**Patricia Frazier**  
National Youth Poet  
Laureate

#### **APRIL 10, 2019**

**Leslie Goddard**, actress  
As Rachel Carson

#### **FRIDAY, MAY 3, 2019**

Awards Luncheon