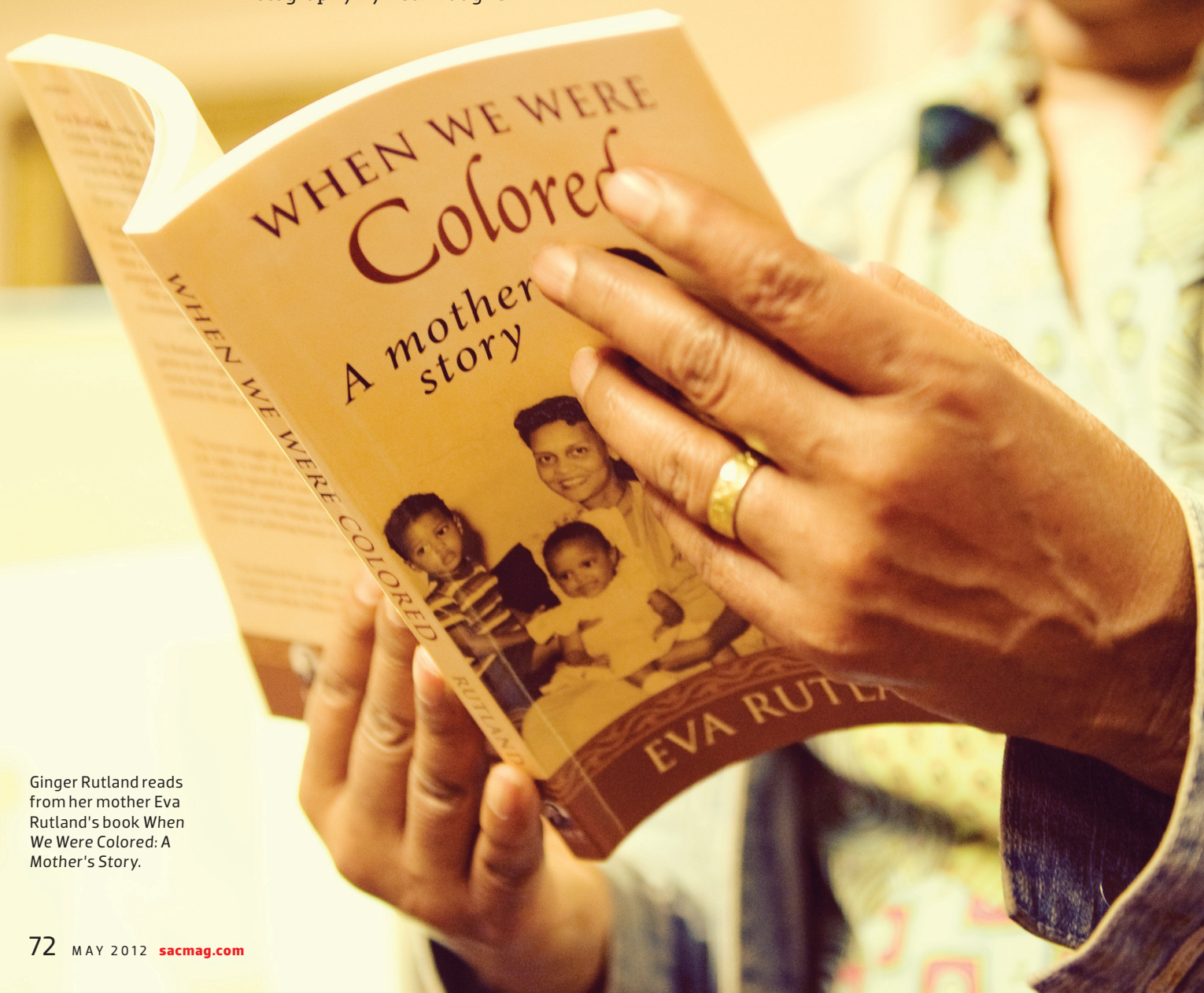


THE WRITTEN WORD

SACRAMENTO HAS A THRIVING LITERARY COMMUNITY, WITH WRITERS' GROUPS, POETRY READINGS AND A WHOLE LOT OF PEOPLE WHO JUST WANT TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES.

By Corinne Litchfield
Photography by Beth Baugher



Ginger Rutland reads from her mother Eva Rutland's book *When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story*.

The phrase *literary community* conjures up images of people dressed in tasteful clothing, standing around in a dark-paneled room full of books and talking about literature and philosophy, with at least one person waving around a martini glass to emphasize a point, whatever that point may be. For writers and poets in the Sacramento region, literary community means something quite different.

Kate Asche, a local poet and writing instructor, is a member of that community. After she received her master's in creative writing from UC Davis, she was unclear about what would come next. But the Sacramento writing community helped her out. "They showed me the truth of the phrase 'a writer is someone who writes,' and

that it doesn't matter if I have a job that incorporates my writing or not, because I am still a part of the writing community," she says.

In Sacramento, readers as well as writers play a major role in the literary community. "They give their time and resources to keep writing happening here," says Asche. You don't have to look hard to find these readers. For nearly two decades, Art Luna, owner of Luna's Cafe on 16th Street downtown, has shown his love of the written word by hosting Poetry Unplugged, a weekly open mike where poets can share their work.

Through writing workshops, poetry events and locally produced publications, Sacramento's literary community provides everyone a way to live a life of words.

WRITING FICTION AND FINDING COMMUNITY

As part of her fiction writing classes, local author Jodi Angel makes a point of encouraging writers to consider their audience. "Who is going to be interested in what you write?" she asks. Whether it's through the courses she teaches at Sacramento City College or in her private workshops, Angel clearly recognizes the drive that compels her students to write. "They are people who want to produce work and have it read. They need to get their voices out," she says.

That compulsion motivates Christian Kiefer as well. A professor of English at American River College, Kiefer went through 41 drafts of his debut novel, *The Infinite Tides*. A musician and poet as well as a novelist, Kiefer encourages his writing students to find a community to support their work outside of the classroom. "It's central to developing your voice and having confidence," he says.

For those who want to develop their writing ability, Amherst Writers and Artists Sacramento, once known as Sutterwriters, offers writing groups throughout the area where anyone can write without fear of being ridiculed or judged. "You can teach people the craft of writing without tearing them apart," says Jan Haag, an AWA Sacramento member and group leader. Since becoming involved with the group, Haag has incorporated the AWA style into the English courses she teaches at Sac City



Jodi Angel's (top right) writing workshop

College and has seen the positive impact it's had on her students. "I'm not going to be the teacher who beats you up," she says. "I'm going to tell you what you're doing right, for that's the way to grow a happy, healthy writer."

Sacramento area readers who wonder about their role in the literary community need only look to Eva Rutland's experience. In the last five years of her life, her 1964 memoir about family life in Sacramento during the civil rights movement was republished, bringing the book to a new generation of readers. Through the efforts of Rutland's daughter, Ginger Rutland, and granddaughter, Eva Fields, *When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story* gained a huge fan base among local audiences. "People love the book," says Ginger. "It makes them feel they can suddenly talk about race issues." Fields talks about the joy her grandmother got from participating in readings of her work, even when her health was failing. "It kept her going the last few years," she says. "She'd get in front of an audience and smile." Eva Rutland's death in March does not mean the promotions and events will end, however. The family plans to carry on her legacy through a stage play adaptation and a follow-up book focusing on her later years. "That's what Grandma told us to do," says Fields.

SOME LOCAL LITERATI

When **Janet Ashmore** received her first writing assignment in the memoir writing class at Davis Senior Center, she thought she couldn't do it. "I didn't want to write about my early childhood, as it was too painful," she says. Class leader Betty Lou Schultz encouraged her to think it over, and as a result Ashmore produced a series of short pieces titled "The Alice Stories" about the family maid who raised her and saved her from abuse on more than one occasion. "The class allowed me to heal from a traumatic past," she says.

Early in 2011, **Janna Marlies Maron**, a writer, instructor and local entrepreneur, decided it was time to shift focus with her blog. She wanted a self-contained, timeless resource of online-friendly nonfiction tales from a variety of contributors. Her vision led to the creation of *Under the Gum Tree*, a creative nonfiction journal available in digital and print format. The premiere issue, launched in September 2011, contains predominately Sacramento-based contributors. The journal's collection of pieces on film, music and family reflect the multifaceted nature of nonfiction, which is what Maron loves about the genre. "There is deeper meaning in the experience we have as human beings," she says, "and creative nonfiction is a way to explore that."

When **Brenda Nakamoto** started writing 17 years ago, she focused on fiction but soon discovered that pieces she wrote from a personal perspective held much more power. She began writing essays about growing up on a peach farm in Gridley, just north of Sacramento. Last spring, local independent publisher Roan Press published *The Peach Farmer's Daughter*, a collection of Nakamoto's essays. She's currently working on a project about Japa-

nese-American internment camps. "Now," she says, "I'm writing because I want things to be remembered."

"I was born to tell my mother's story," says **Charles Randell**, who began working with the Life History writing group at Hart Senior Center more than two years ago. Since that time, he has been interviewing his 86-year-old mother, Savannah J. Randell, and writing down her tales in a conversational format, leaving a binder of his work in her home so that other family members can read what she's shared. The experience, plus the positive feedback from his classmates, has taught Randell he can write his own stories as well. "I pick up a lot from hearing others read their work."

Diana Zuniga has many stories to tell. Stories of her grandfather, who fought alongside Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution. Stories of her grandmother, Enriqueta Andazola, who founded the Mexican War Mothers group as a way of supporting World War II troops, including her sons and son-in-law. And stories of her and her twin brother, David, who died in 1975. Writing about their childhood antics has been therapeutic for her. "It's helped me get past the problems and write the funny stories, too."





THE POETRY SCENE

I'm sitting in the audience at Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis. It's the open mike portion of The Other Voice, a monthly poetry series. A young man named Oliver approaches the podium, where he confesses this is his first time reading his poetry to a group. He smiles nervously at the audience and takes several deep breaths before he begins his poem, full of imagery connected to the universal struggle between light and dark. At the end, we all applaud, and current Davis poet laureate Allegra Silberstein gets up to thank Oliver, pointing out the lines she particularly enjoyed. His face is bright with pride and confidence, becoming even brighter as Silberstein leads us in another round of applause.

The Other Voice is just one of many venues where Sacramento area poets can share their work before an audience. In October 2005, UC Davis professors Andy Jones and Brad Henderson started Poetry in Davis, a twice-monthly event with featured poets and an open mike. For more than 25 years, Sacramento Poetry Center has been a driving force on the local poetry scene, hosting weekly readings and lectures as well as publishing poetry collections. Local poet Susan Kelly-

DeWitt has been involved with the center from its early years. "I'm just amazed by the crowds they attract now—it's a mix of poets and nonwriters," she says.

Just as there are venues for more traditional forms of poetry in Sacramento, there are others where slam, hip-hop and urban poetry reign supreme. For the past 12 years, the Mahogany Urban Poetry Series has been a powerful force among young people seeking an audience for their work. "Poetry is a religion for us," says co-host Lawrence Dinkins, who reads his own work under the name NSAA. "We pour our heart and soul into it." Weekly poetry readings at Luna's Cafe in downtown Sacramento also have played a pivotal role in shaping local poets for the past 17 years, giving them a space to share more physical, raw poetry.

Sacramentans interested in reading poetry written by area residents need only stop in at The Book Collector in midtown, where there are several shelves dedicated to chapbooks and collections by locally based poets. And while co-owner Richard Hansen won't stop customers from buying as much poetry as they want, he encourages them to attend local poetry readings as well. "There are so many exceptional poets in this area who perform live," he says. "It's an experience [people] will enjoy."



Becoming a part of Sacramento's thriving literary community is easy: Readings and other events are happening throughout the region. Many readings and events are free, and those who perform their work appreciate having an audience. Here are some ways to experience the local literary community.

The website eskimopie.net/calendar offers a comprehensive list of poetry readings, lectures and other events in the area.

Sacramento Poetry Center hosts a free weekly Monday Poetry Reading Series, with featured poets as well as an open mike. sacramentopoetrycenter.org

Stories on Stage showcases the work of local writers paired with dramatic readings by local actors once a month. \$5 donation. valeriefioravanti.com/sos.aspx



Attend the **SummerWords Colloquium** May 31 through June 3 at American River College. This mix of readings, workshops and panel discussions covers fiction, nonfiction and poetry. The four-day event includes a public reading by U.S. Poet Laureate Philip Levine. Registration is \$85. summerwords.org

Volunteers are needed at **916 Ink**, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting literacy through writing programs for youths in the Sacramento area. Current projects will culminate in published books

using the I Street Press Espresso Book Machine at Central Library in downtown Sacramento. 916ink.org

Poetry in Davis, hosted by Andy Jones, is held twice a month at the John Natsoulas Gallery. This free event includes

featured poets and an open mike. poetryindavis.com

Other Voice Poetry Series is a free event held every third Friday at Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis. Featured poets, an open mike and light refreshments. For more information, contact allegas@dcn.org.

Open Mic for the Spoken Word gives poets and writers five minutes to read their work. First Thursdays at Mel's Diner in Auburn. For scheduling information, contact taleteller2@gmail.com.

READING LIST

Before you head off to the beach or mountains this summer, pick up a few selections from our list of local authors, poets and literary journals. Titles can be purchased on Amazon.com unless otherwise noted.

● ***The Hobo Speaks*** by Mark Bell
Known as Sacramento's "homeless poet," Bell wrote this debut collection of poetry, essays and stories based on his observations of the world around him. To purchase, contact Maryellen Burns at matrixarts@mac.com or (916) 768-6077.

● ***Celebrations: Images and Texts***
by Laverne Frith
This spiral-bound collection of poetry and images taken by Frith himself focuses on the flora and fauna of Sacramento. Available at rattlesnakepress.com.

● ***Contents May Have Shifted***
by Pam Houston
Head of UC Davis' creative writing program, Houston writes about the travels and travails of a woman named Pam, who may (or may not?) have a lot in common with the author.

● ***The Infinite Tides***
by Christian Kiefer
A professor of English at American River College, Kiefer spins a story about an astronaut who returns to Earth to find everything in his life has changed.

● ***The Peach Farmer's Daughter***
by Brenda Nakamoto
Nakamoto's memoir of growing up on a rural Northern California farm will have you craving peach cobbler before you reach the final page.

● ***A Sense of Melancholy***
by Joyce Odam
This chapbook from award-winning local poet Odam showcases her lyrical take on nostalgia and longing. Available at rattlesnakepress.com.

● ***When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story*** by Eva Rutland
Rutland shares her experiences being a mother living in segregated Southern society who must later adjust to life in an integrated Sacramento.

● ***Walt Whitman Orders a Cheeseburger*** by Bob Stanley
Sacramento's current poet laureate offers this chapbook of poems about family, writing and yes, cheeseburgers. Available at rattlesnakepress.com.

● ***The Sacramento Anthology: One Hundred Poems***
Published in 2001, this collection of poetry about Sacramento by Sacramento poets is a beautiful tribute to the River City. To purchase, contact Anja Aulenbacher at aaulenbacher@cityofsacramento.org or (916) 808-3986.

● ***Under the Gum Tree***
Available in digital and print formats, this Sacramento-based quarterly journal offers a selection of creative nonfiction pieces perfect for a quick yet thought-provoking read. To purchase, go to underthegumtree.com. [f](#)