

ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

February 2018

Dear School of the Arts Alumni,

Happy 2018! Our newsletter is back with exciting developments from our talented alumni.

This January marked the much-anticipated publication of *Halsey Street* by **Naima Coster '15**. **Sigrid Nunez '75** also released her 7th novel, *The Friend*, a tale about grief and a Great Dane. **Mary Freericks '89** published a new book of poetry, *Blue Watermelon*, which chronicles her childhood in Iran under the Shah. Finally, **Erica Garza '10** celebrated the release of her debut memoir, *Getting Off*, which has since been reviewed by the *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and others.

Looking for a more visually appealing 2018? *National Park* by Visual Arts alumnae, **Alex Strada '16** and **Tali Keren '16**, is now showing at *The Socrates Annual* in Astoria, Queens. The exhibition is open to the public and runs through March 2018. The work of **Grace DeGennaro '86** is up now at the *Helen Day Art Center*. Two of DeGennaro's paintings will also be featured in the New Geometry II exhibit at the *Fred Giapietro Gallery*.

Chris Murrah '16 directed *Madame Pascal*, an original musical which ran at the *Dixon Place Theater* in January. The play, a fictionalized history of a Broadway star seeking recognition, pairs with a book written by **Rakesh Baruah '16**. Fans of Hulu's *The Path* can look for **Eliza Green Smith '16** in Season 3. *An Ordinary Muslim*, written by **Hammaad Chaudry '14**, is playing at New York Theatre Workshop until March 11. This play asks potent questions about the challenges of integration and assimilation for immigrants in today's global world. Congratulations to **Jillian Walker '17**, whose play, *Sarah's Salt*, was selected as an Honorable Mention for the *2017 Relentless Award*.

Last but not least, Columbia alumni had great success at this year's Sundance Film Festival. **Christina Choe's '12 Nancy** won the U.S. Dramatic Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award. The film, edited by **David Gutnik '12** follows a young woman whose fictional internet persona begins to blur her reality. *And Breathe Normally*, written and directed by **Isold Uggadottir '11**, took home the World Cinema Dramatic Directing Award. The film follows Lara, a border patrol officer in Iceland who detains a refugee. *Shirkers*, written, co-produced, and directed by **Sandi Tan '00**, and co-produced by **Jessica Levin '02**, won the World Cinema Documentary Directing Award. *Night Comes On*, written and directed by **Jordana Spiro '15**, and produced by **Alvaro Valente '14**, won the NEXT Innovator Award.

The Grand Jury Prize went to *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, with **Jessica Daniels Schwarz '07**, casting director; **Marcus Kirschner '09**, production designer; **Andrew Hauser '12**, post supervisor; and **Rob Cristiano '13**, production manager. The film depicts a high school girl who's shipped off to a conversion camp after being caught with another girl in the backseat of a car on prom night. For the full list of the 28 alumni winners at this year's Sundance, click [here](#).

To keep receiving news and updates, make sure we have your most recent [contact information](#). If you know a fellow alum who is not receiving emails from us but would like to, have them email us at artsalum@columbia.edu.

As always, please continue sharing your news and achievements via artsalum@columbia.edu, like and follow our [Facebook page](#), and add [Columbia University School of the Arts](#) to your LinkedIn profile to start connecting with fellow School of the Arts alums.

Best,

Laila Maher
Dean of Student and Alumni Affairs

Are you showing at **SXSW 2018**? We are still gathering information. If so, please email us at artsalum@columbia.edu.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

This edition of the Alumni Spotlight features Writing alum **Hillary Jordan '04**. If you would like to submit your own stories to be included on our website, you can do so at this [link](#).



Hillary Jordan '04 is an author, speaker, and occasional teacher. She is best known for her debut *Mudbound*, which was recently made into a film starring Carey Mulligan and Mary J Blige.

Prior to being optioned, *Mudbound* won the 2006 Bellwether Prize, a 2009 Alex Award from the American Library Association, and was long-listed for the 2010 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. It was also named one of Paste Magazine's [Top Ten Debut Novels of the Decade](#). After being adapted to film, *Mudbound* debuted to critical acclaim at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. The film was acquired by Netflix shortly thereafter and has since gone on to be nominated for several Academy Awards including Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Original Song.

Jordan's second novel, *When She Woke*, was a 2012 Lambda Literary Award finalist. It was also long-listed for the 2013 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

She earned her M.F.A. in Writing from Columbia University School of the Arts, and a B.A. from Wellesley College.

Was there a specific faculty member or peer that especially inspired you while at the School of the Arts? If so, who and how?

Jennifer Cody Epstein and I connected on our very first day at Columbia. As women in our 30s, we were among the oldest students in our class, and we were relieved to see each other's faces at orientation! We became each other's trusted readers, and we both went on to write historical first novels far outside our own personal experience: Jenn's, *The Painter from Shanghai*, about a Chinese woman who rose out of prostitution to become a celebrated painter, and mine, *Mudbound*, about black sharecroppers and their white landlords in Jim Crow Mississippi. These stories required big, scary leaps, and I think the fact that we were doing it together and cheering each other on gave us courage. Jenn has read multiple drafts of everything I've ever written, and vice versa.

I will also add that I had outstanding female workshop instructors, several of whom—Maureen Howard, Victoria Redel, and Binnie Kirshenbaum—became mentors and friends.

What were the most pressing social/political issues on the minds of the students when you were here?

Because of work obligations, I took five semesters to complete my classwork at SoA. I started in fall 1999, at the end of the Clinton era. When Bush was elected a year later, we were all concerned about the new brand of strident conservatism that was on the ascendance, but then in September of 2001 the world was turned upside down, and all checks and balances on the power of the right were lost. We started a senseless war in Iraq, while at home, we began to see infringements on civil rights in the name of patriotism and national security, a rise in religious fundamentalism, the muddying of the line between church and state, and widespread attacks on

women's reproductive freedom. I wrote my second, dystopian novel, *When She Woke*, out of a sense of outrage and alarm over the abuses of power and weakening of democracy that happened post-9/11.

[More](#)

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