

MEET YOUR PRESENTERS

Daniel Bernstrom

Hi, I'm Dan! When I'm not teaching English at Minnesota West Community & Technical College, you'll find me immersed in my true passions: writing stories and poems. If you were to catch me doing anything, it would probably be creating something—be it through art, reading, or long walks.

Daniel R. Bernstrom is the critically acclaimed author of seven picture books, including the beloved “One Day in the Eucalyptus, Eucalyptus Tree”. His work has received widespread recognition, most notably winning the Minnesota Book Award for “Big Papa and the Time Machine”. His books frequently appear on prestigious lists such as the Banks Street College of Reading Best Books of the Year and the CCBC (Cooperative Children's Book Center).

Further cementing his literary impact, Daniel has earned the Skipping Stones Award for “Goodnight Little Man”, an NCTE Notables Award, and boasts two Junior Library Guild selections. His book “Song in the City” was chosen as an NEA Read Across America selection and nominated for the Minnesota Star of the North Award, while “Big Papa and the Time Machine” was featured in the PBS virtual “Let's Learn” program. He's also been nominated for the Cybils Award and several state awards across Iowa, Arizona, and Illinois.

Daniel holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University. www.danielbernstrom.com

Jennifer Davidson

Jennifer L. Davidson is the author of three novels and works in communications at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. She enjoys writing, reading, and sharing all she's learned about being creative with students young and old.

Dan Debates

Dan DeBates is a communications professional, educator, and lifelong craftsman with a passion for mentorship, media, and hands-on learning. He currently serves as a Youth Employment and Career Specialist with the Southwest Minnesota PIC and as a part-time On-Air Talent with Marshall Radio. He earned his bachelor's degree in communications (Radio and Television Broadcasting) from SMSU. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in mass communications from SDSU and is preparing to begin Ph.D. studies. His professional background spans a wide range of fields. Dan's work and life are guided by the values of curiosity, craftsmanship, and community. Whether he's mentoring youth, broadcasting on the radio, teaching martial arts, or working under the hood of a car, he is always driven by a passion to learn, create, and make a positive impact on those around him. Connect with Dan on [LinkedIn](#)

Jessica Hennen

I direct the Creative Writing and Literature programs at SMSU. By training, I'm a fiction writer, but I also practice improv, write and perform sketch comedy, and produce two weekly columns for the Granite Falls Advocate Tribune. I live on a farm with my husband and too many pets (cats, chickens, and a needy dog). I was also a child illustrator for Stone Soup Magazine, my first publication. Now, with my friends, I write and produce the live and filmed parody sketch show A Granite Falls Home Companion.

<https://jessiehennen.wordpress.com/>

John Lauritsen

My name is John Lauritsen, I am a reporter with WCCO-TV (CBS) in Minneapolis. I report on general news, fill-in anchor and I do a segment called Finding Minnesota in which we go across the state and feature unique and historic things to know about in our state. In my spare time, I like hanging out with my family, working out, playing volleyball and pickleball, and watching my kids play sports. I also love spending time on the farm. wcco.com

Erin Makela

Erin Makela is the author of “Worthy of Trust”, a young adult historical fiction novel. While she calls Worthington, MN home, Erin is always looking for her next travel adventure with her stuffed alligator, Swampy. When choosing music to write to, Erin's go-to playlists are Broadway show tunes and sea shanties.

<https://erinmakela.com>

The Zoo Man

I'm known across the US as The Zoo Man. I travel with my animal friends educating and entertaining the young and the young at heart. Performing Zoo Man programs is my favorite part of life. I'm also an author of 2 books, The Zoo Man Remembers and True Crimes and Bizarre Stories of Sleepy Eye Minnesota. My book, The Zoo Man Returns is in the works. I am also a Personal trainer for Parkinson's Disease Clients, which keeps me very busy. I keep people active and train them for balance, strength, and flexibility. See more on my Facebook: [Zoo Man's Attractions](#)

Afton Northrup

Afton Northrup is a writer, editor, teacher, and poet who explores everything from fantasy adventures to climate change and even medical mysteries. Her work blends creativity with curiosity, showing how stories and poems can help us understand the world in new ways. She enjoys sharing a love of words with young people and believes anyone can be a writer. When she is not teaching or writing, Afton can often be found reading, exploring nature, or imagining new worlds where science and storytelling meet.

www.reachafton.com



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Nicholas Northrup

Hi! My name is Nick. Born on the South Side of Minneapolis, I've always known that words were my calling. From spoken word to hip-hop, poetry to prose, I've spent years refining a storytelling style shaped by life experience, raw emotion, and crafted cadences. As Crowfather, I built my name in the underground hip-hop, but I got my start in slam poetry scenes, earning recognition as a Minneapolis All City Slam Finalist (Slam MN, 2015) and After-Hours Slam Champion (AWP, 2012). My work has been published in Perceptions Literary Journal and The Spur news columns, and for a brief stint, I took my love of storytelling to entertainment journalism as a features writer for Screen Rant. I hold a BFA in Creative Writing, and when I'm not writing or performing, I'm probably painting miniatures, rolling dice in a TTRPG, or losing track of time in a deep sci-fi or fantasy binge. I share life with my incredible wife who makes sure I never miss a deadline, and our two corgis, who ensure that no deadline passes without at least one dramatic interruption. Through all of it, my goal remains the same: to create the kind of art I wish I had when I was younger; art that pulls back the veil on generational trauma, the demons that haunt us, and the resilience that keeps us breathing.

www.crowfathermpls.com and www.nicknorthrupmpls.com

David Pichaske

I am a retired English Professor who taught at Southwest State for forty years. I taught four years in Poland, Latvia, and Mongolia. I am the author of three dozen books and chapbooks, and as (also retired) editor-publisher of Spoon River Poetry Press, Ellis Press, and Plains Press, publisher of 150 books by other authors. My most recent book is titled the THE SECRET PLACES OF SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA. www.ellispress.com

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SEE MORE PERSPECTIVE is an MC, Producer/Composer, Spoken Word Poet, Visual Artist, Filmmaker, and Social Justice Educator. Their work explores identity, culture, social justice, mythology, science fiction, spirituality, and the paranormal. Learn more at www.seemoreperspective.com

Gillian Singler

I am an instructor, a partner, a mother to both people and pets, a writer, and a volunteer. I enjoy reading, writing, hiking, traveling, jogging, playing games, the company of some people, and watching what I suspect may be too much television. Most importantly, I believe writing is a powerful instrument for expression and change.

Thomas Kingsley Troupe

Thomas Kingsley Troupe likes writin'. He is the author of the fiction series HAUNTIQUES, FURRY & FLO and the upcoming STAR BELCHERS. Other than that, he's written a whole bunch of titles for kids from non-fiction picture books to a few installments in the JAKE MADDOX sports series. Thomas has been writing books and stories in one form or another ever since he can remember. When asked, he'll tell you about the time he entered a book into his school's book fair in 2nd grade.

Hi, I'm a published children's author with over 300 books published. I enjoy reading (obviously!) and writing. When I'm not doing one of those things, I enjoy spending time with my kids, watching movies, playing video games, or taking a nap. I also like chocolate chip cookies, orange Popsicles, and turtles.

www.thomaskingsleytroupe.com

Julie Walker

Julie Walker is a professor at SMSU by day, creator and troublemaker by night. When she's not chasing after her herd of children, she's enjoying the wildlife in her bee garden. Sit down for a chat with this storyteller to hear some wild tales.

Scott Welvaert

Scott Welvaert is a writer of middle grade, young adult, and adult fiction. He has written numerous books, including The Curse of the Wendigo, The Mosquito King, The Alabaster Ring, Grotesque, The 13th Floor, The Ghost of the Wicked Crow, Escape from Atlantis City, and the forthcoming, The Traveler's Kiss. An avid outdoorsman, movie buff, nerdy sci-fi and fantasy reader, and a joyful comic book nerd, his real jam is writing stories that bend the fabric of reality and offer a different perspective than most. He lives in Chaska, Minnesota with his wife, and a deaf husky named Rocket.

<https://scottwelvaert.com/>



507-537-2257



andrea.anderson@swwc.org



www.swwc.org/yw