

INTRODUCTION to Mary Clearman Blew's Reading at the Kenworthy Theatre
November 15, 2022

Many thanks to the University of Idaho, its English department and its official head, Tara McDonald. And thanks to its thriving creative writing program, especially to interim department head Alexandra Teague and Mike McGriff, for organizing this reading. I am delighted to have this chance to introduce Mary Clearman Blew this evening. My problem is that there is *too much to say without usurping our entire time together* ... sooo to keep myself on track I have organized my introduction into three *mini*-chapters: BACKSTORY, REVERBERATIONS, and CLIMAX.

MINI-CHAPTER ONE: BACKSTORY

The term "true grit" could have been coined for Mary. She vaulted over many challenges to become the writer, mentor, and keen professional she is today. From her childhood working on her parents' Montana ranch along the Judith River during the days when boys were given preference--a time during which, while she was helping break horses and brand calves, she was dreaming all the while of that "great romantic elsewhere." From family members who expected her to drop out of school when she became pregnant with her first child. From a time and culture in which women who pursued their PhDs and became professors, as she did, were... if not oddities, then at least the target of suspicion.

Yet, she earned her PhD (in Shakespeare and the Renaissance) when few women managed that feat--while she was a wife and mother. She was soon hired by Northern Montana University in Havre as an assistant professor and almost immediately lured into administration-- English department chair, dean of nursing.

Then, Lewis-Clark State College, teaching four hefty classes per semester, helping budding writers gain confidence in telling their stories and offering the kind of support she had seldom herself received.

Mary's decision to move up the hill to Moscow in the fall of 1994 was a momentous occasion for UI's English department. She was the first department faculty member ever to be hired at the full professor level with tenure, and she joined Ron McFarland and only a few others in designing the state's first graduate creative writing degree program, which opened its doors two years later. Then followed 20 years of mentoring, writing, editing, and producing a dozen or so books—all of her work helping the program achieve its current distinction.

MINI-CHAPTER TWO: REVERBERATIONS

In spite of these odds, Mary's "short list" of close to 20 AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS starts from the late 1960s.

Among them: An O. Henry Prize for one of her stories; inclusion of another of her stories in the *Best American Short Stories* collection. University of Idaho Outstanding Faculty Award for Creative Research, TWO Pacific Northwest Booksellers Awards in two consecutive years. **Two Lifetime** Achievement Awards: **One** from the Western Literature Association; **the other** from the Idaho Humanities Council for outstanding work in the humanities. **And... (THIS IS MY FAVE)-- induction into the** National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

MINI-CHAPTER THREE: CLIMAX

Let's look at the seven years since her "retirement" in 2015.

She has put to use her training in literary research and prodigious skills in creating fictional worlds to bring to life compelling, complex individuals in Western settings. The four novels she's written and published in these recent years span a century and a half of Western history. That sense of history, and her passion to keep learning about it, informs and inspires her writing.

She is in many senses an historian of the West—not only its stories and landscape, but also cultural attitudes and emotions. And particularly, its women.

In the first three novels of this Montana Quartet, her protagonists are a rich assortment. In *Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin*, a teenager runs away with a country Western band and finds herself testifying in a court of law about an alleged cult in her small town. *Waltzing Montana* features a midwife on horseback who was

abused as a teenager and finds a sympathetic ally in an injured old friend who is up against family secrets he struggles to untangle. *Sweep out the Ashes* presents a young professor confronting the 1970s challenges of working in the small, male-dominated college in Montana where she has snagged her first teaching job -- sound familiar?-- and of finding her father and sussing out the truth about the disappearance and death of her mother. *Tonight*, you'll hear about Tam Bowen, horseback *rider* extraordinaire, *writer* of romance novels, heroine of the final, freshly-minted book in that harmonious quartet, *Think of Horses*. Collectively, these interrelated novels confirm Mary's status—along with her friends Ivan Doig, Bill Kittredge, and Jim Welch, as one of the giants of contemporary Western writing.

So. Dear Fellow Lovers of Writing and Reading: I now present the real-life protagonist and heroine of this saga— steadfast mentor, astute literary critic, college stage actor, editor, poetry memorizer, mother (then single-mother, foster mother, and grandmother), accordion player, quilter, narrative essayist, horse breaker and equestrienne, Mariners' fan, crazy-avid-fast reader; scholar, *novelist*, the most generous of collaborators, the most loyal of friends, resident of the Great Romantic Elsewhere... AND the extraordinary, brilliant person her former department chair Gary Williams calls one of the Gems of the Gem State ...And I **call** the Northwest's Grande Dame of The Written Word: **Mary. Clearman. Blew.**