

Williams leads workshop on writing, activism

By Meg Holden
STAFF WRITER

Are you aware that the Devil is an environmentalist? Most Guilford students would be amused or even offended by such a query. However, when Terry Tempest Williams was asked this very question as a young science teacher in Utah, she admitted that — regardless of whether the Devil was or not — she was an environmentalist through and through.

Admitting her environmentalism to herself and her supervisor was a risky move in the conservative Mormon community where Williams worked, but it led her to become an author, activist, and naturalist.

Williams has written and edited works focusing on human relationships with nature. During her visit to Guilford on March 15 as a part of the Green & Beyond theme year, Williams spoke to students about her experience as an activist author.

"My relationship to activism is tied to the land," Williams said in a writing workshop in King Hall. "Early on, I was a single topic activist — I was focused on the wilderness."

Williams later became involved in other aspects of social justice, including women's and minority rights. Nuclear testing became important to Williams in the late 1980s, as her mother battled cancer.

"I come from a clan of one-breasted women," Williams said. "Nine women in my family have had mastectomies. Seven are dead."

In "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place," Williams explores whether the high cancer rate in her family is a result of nuclear testing done by the U.S.

government in the 1950s and 60s.

"I kept having this dream of a flash of light illuminating the desert at night," Williams said. "I told my father about it, and he said, 'That isn't a dream. You saw it.' It wasn't a dream, it was a memory."



JACK SINCLAIR/GUILFORDIAN

Author, educator and environmental activist Terry Tempest Williams speaks to community members gathered in New Garden Friends Meeting on March 15.

"In 1957, my family stopped our car on the side of the road," said Williams. "I was two, my mother was pregnant. There was a flash of light and a golden mushroom cloud rose over the desert."

According to Williams, nuclear tests were done only when the wind blew in certain directions. The Mormon communities around Salt Lake and the Native American reservations were seen as "low risk" communities, so

tests were performed when the wind blew toward those areas.

Speaking out about her beliefs led Williams to commit acts of civil disobedience against nuclear testing and the Iraq War. Williams' primary method of activism, however, is her writing.

"I'm 55 and I have a lot of anger," Williams said. "But I transform this anger into sacred rage through my writing. The power of the people resides in their stories."

In the writing workshop, Williams asked the students in attendance to exchange gifts with a partner, and then write a story about activism using these gifts.

"The giving game brought a lot of things to the discussion — humor, soulfulness, contemplation, creativity," said Early College senior Holli McClean in an email interview. "Hearing the passion and anger and emotion with which other participants wrote shocked me. I hadn't expected strangers to be that open or honest."

"I enjoyed the workshop because it felt like the participants were asked to connect their hearts to their concerns for the world," said Project and Communication Manager Kim Yarbray in an email interview. "I loved that we didn't start at a place bigger than the place where we could exist together. As we saw through our writing processes, change starts with the self and extends out through small groups and into the larger context of the world."

In her books and essays, Williams explores the connections between people and their environment. She also discovers the connections she has with her subjects.

"We each bring a part of us to our activism," said Williams. "It is not a solitary process. All true activism resides in the home and the community."

Renowned fiction writer shares moments of beauty, pain

By Amanda Dahill-Moore
STAFF WRITER

Amy Hempel is a magician who is willing to give up her tricks.

Her reading of short fiction in the Carnegie Room of Hege Library on Saturday, March 19 had the small audience laughing out loud at her dry and acerbic turns of wit. The final story — a largely autobiographical work Hempel called an "elegy," written for the shelter dogs she works with in Harlem, N.Y. — left few dry eyes, and many people wiping tears from their chins.

"She was amazing — amazing," said sophomore Giovanna Selvaggio-Stix. "My mind is so blown right now."

Hempel is the recipient of numerous awards including the Hobson Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship for her short fiction. Despite her status, Hempel was personable and accommodating.

"Amy is one of the most important short story writers of this and the last century," said Traci Conner, assistant professor of English. "To have her here, and the compassion that comes through in her writing, was so perfect for this campus and an incredible gift to the writing community."

"She began her reading with a story, not written, but gleaned from her experience on Guilford's campus just a few hours before.

"I have a new dog that I brought with me," Hempel said. "She is

very excited to meet people. I saw a man walking on the campus and so I called out to him 'Very friendly dog,' to warn him. He replied, 'Very friendly president.'" Hempel paused, smiling, and brushed her hair from her face. "It was the president of the college. What was his name again?"

The first stories Hempel read were what she called "short shorts." After the first short — a story which on the surface is about a woman looking for a lost dog, but is more deeply propelled by the loss of a husband — Hempel held up the single copier sheet of paper and waved it for the audience to see.

"Those of you who have written in this form know how satisfying it is to write something this size and have it be finished."

This is what Hempel has become known for: devastating works of fiction as full of depth and longing as a full-length novel, that are sometimes only a page long.

"Amy's greatest strength is her sentences," said senior English major Meredith Luby, who organized the event with the support of Guilford's literary magazine, The Greenleaf Review. "She labors over each one so that there is nothing extraneous, so that each one is supporting its own weight."

When members of the audience asked Hempel for advice about the craft of writing, she obliged.

"The idea of recursive writing was a huge revelation to me," Hempel

said. "Here is the big discovery — you don't look 'out there,' you look backwards at what you have already written."

Death is a recurrent theme of Hempel's work; so too is love — love lost and occasionally regained, most often through the connection with animals.

"It struck me that (Hempel) seems to know her grief really well and her loneliness," said junior Margot Andress. "It was so familiar to her. And somehow, in the end, that seemed to be okay."

When asked by the audience how she endures through the overwhelming sadness at the heart of much of her work, Hempel responded, "It's a good question. How do you attempt to do anything that has beauty in it, or usefulness, in the face of this — this earthquake? People ask me how I work at the shelter. It is heartbreaking, but I have to do it. How much exposure is enough to galvanize you, to motivate you to do something, and how much will shut you down? It's a question."

Luby recognizes the shattering nature of Hempel's work but identifies a parallel element.

"The themes of fear and grief and love and betrayal all drew me in of course, but there is a wonderfully redemptive quality to her work," said Luby. "Even though her characters don't always win, or don't usually win, they keep going and keep living in the face of sometimes tragic odds."

Washed Out
G-SIDE
DJ MELEE
BITTER CHILDREN

Quadrangle Dr. Guilford College (behind Founders Hall)
March 25th 10pm
Free for Guilford Students
donation of two canned goods for non-Guilford students

The Beach Is Overrated...
Surge Ahead with Summer School
Wednesday, March 30th
Founder's Hall
11:30-2:00 pm

- Learn about Summer School Opportunities
- Save Money & Get Ahead!
- Free Popcorn
- Free Giveaways

...Summer School Isn't