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SPOTLIGHT

Local author receives 2018 Artist Initiative Grant for literary project

By KELSEY O'HARA kohara@northfieldnews.com Dec 29, 2017 Updated Dec 29, 2017



Harmony Neal sits in front of novels, short stories and other works at her home that inspired her project proposal. (Kelsey O'Hara/Northfield News)

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Harmony Neal does not shy away societal issues. Racism, feminism and imperialism: all topics she has addressed in her own writing and read in countless stories.

It wasn't until reading Marge Piercy's novel, "Woman on the Edge of Time," that she found a new approach to broaching these relevant topics.

"I was blown away that she imagined a society based on human flourishing, and I haven't really seen another example since," Neal said. "Most people think it's not possible, but why?"

Piercy's story sparked an idea for Neal's own project, a project that creates more Utopian stories that thread messages of resistance and ultimately leads readers to move toward a better future.

"The stories we tell right now say it's impossible, and the more we internalize those negative messages, the more we believe it," she said. "That's why we need to use these different outlooks."

Neal will explore this project more in depth in 2018 thanks to her recent grant from the 2018 Artist Initiative grant program.

The grant is designed to support and assist professional Minnesota artists at various stages in their careers by encouraging artistic development and nurturing artistic creativity, according to the Minnesota State Arts Board.

Neal, of Northfield, received \$10,000 to "develop new models for storytelling that illustrate societies grounded in human flourishing, cooperation and environmental sustainability."

"I want others to be able to imagine better societies, so they have something to work toward. I know it's possible for us to all be happy and healthy, treat each other and our fellow species well, to live lives of meaning and fulfillment," she said.

Her project involves writing stories based in Utopian societies and discussing contemporary issues. She will also work with other authors of different marginalized groups to create diverse, authentic representation.

"There is a long history of people who fought patriarchy, racism and imperialism, but those aren't the voices that are handed down to us. Those are the voices we have to go searching for," Neal said.

Neal wrote short stories and nonfiction pieces for journals and literary magazines; "Yemassee," "Grist Journal" and "What Does it Mean to be White in America?" She has also worked with Poet Laureate Rob Hardy on Northfield Writers Resist: Hope is Greater than Fear and A Mob of Scribbling Women.

A Mob of Scribbling Women was an event at Northfield Public Library where Hardy and Neal raised questions about female authors that fell into dustbins while authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne thrived. They also gave information about recommendations from female authors, with commercial success or not.

“The majority of our ‘great’ stories often reinforce oppressive systems. And I’ve come to realize that the misogyny and racism in those great works aren’t bugs, but features,” Neal said.

“Academics and others will tell you that they didn’t know better back then, but that’s not true ... After everything I’ve studied and learned, I know for a fact that the vile politics of the majority of our literary canon is a feature, not a bug, of those classic works,” she continued.

Neal hopes her works will inspire others to raise their voices through their own projects.

“This is meant to be a liberation, for everyone,” she said.

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OTHER GRANT WINNER

Another Northfield resident received a 2018 Artist Initiative Grant, but it was for music.

World-renowned Chinese pipa musician and Carleton College lecturer Gao Hong received \$10,000 to compose six new works for solo pipa altered by a looper and sound effects machine. Hong will perform them live and record them on a CD.

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