

MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL 2021 MISSISSIPPI CULTURE

‘Everybody has a place to be outside’: Q&A with author Aimee Nezhukumatathil



by **Brittany Brown**
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Aimee Nezhukumatathil is an official panelist in this year's Mississippi Book Festival on Aug. 21. Credit: Cheyenne Alford

When Aimee Nezhukumatathil moved to Mississippi from New York in 2016, she expected to be in the state for only nine months as the 2016-2017 Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi. Within a month of being in Oxford, she said, she fell in love with the town and has lived there ever since.

Currently an English professor at the University of Mississippi, acclaimed poet and essayist Nezhukumatathil draws inspiration from nature and the outdoors in her writing, as seen in her most recent book, *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, & Other Astonishments*. She is also an official panelist in this year's **Mississippi Book Festival on Aug. 21.**

Mississippi Today recently spoke with Nezhukumatathil about her work and what

inspires her to wonder.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Mississippi Today: Can you tell me a little bit about your background story, how you got into writing?

Aimee Nezhukumatathil: Well, I always loved the outdoors, and the way I kind of made sense of it was through metaphors. So, being a poet came first and pretty easy to me because that's kind of how I made sense of the world in the first place is through metaphors. I studied poetry first. Then, I came to love creative nonfiction in college. And so, what I love about having those two genres under my belt is sometimes I don't want to deal with something in a brief amount of space, so I have an essay for that. Sometimes, I just want to be compressed in my language, and so I turn to poetry for that.

MT: Can you tell me a little bit about your writing background because I'm, of course, most familiar with your recent essay collection, (*World of Wonders*), but what has your trajectory been in terms of writing as a poet and in creative nonfiction?

AN: Well, actually it's funny. I did not know there were any living poets until my junior year in college. (Laughs.) So, I thought, you know, I just wanted to follow in the footsteps of my mom. She's a doctor. She's retired now. So, I was pre-med. I was a chemistry major, and it wasn't until I came across the work of some living writers that I just was so blown away by. I didn't know, honestly, you could be a poet and be alive. I didn't know. (Laughs.) It sounds so silly to me, but once I discovered that, once I took my first creative writing classes, I switched to English pretty late in my junior year and kind of made my parents very nervous. But, ultimately they said, you know, we just want you to be curious. We want you to feel like a student no matter what you choose. So, I've been so grateful that they are now my biggest fans, even though they were absolutely worried and pretty upset with me because, you have to imagine, since I was four years old, I had been telling them I want to be a doctor just really because I always wanted to be like my mom. But I didn't know you could be a writer. I just really didn't know. I was not exposed to living writers as a kid. I was definitely not exposed to any writers of color, so I just didn't really understand it as a possibility for me.

MT: So when you changed your major from the pre-med track to English, what did you find yourself most attracted to when you were writing? And how did you make sense of that for yourself as a writer?

AN: Honestly, it was something that I was just so much more curious about. I was kind of going through the motions as a pre-med student and doing the assignments, but I couldn't wait to do my English homework. I couldn't wait to get to writing. For me, there was so much more discovery and wordplay and investigations of what you can do with a well-placed line or sentence. That excited me and still excites me to this day.

MT: Can you tell me more about how you incorporate nature into your writing and why that's really a cornerstone of how you write?

AN: That is such a good question. I'd just have to say as a kid I loved the outdoors and I loved reading about the outdoors, but I never saw anybody who looked like me who wrote about the outdoors. And I wanted these essays (in *World of Wonders*) to reflect that everybody can be outside. Everybody has a place to be outside. And you can be in awe of the outdoors and also like pop music and makeup. You can have more than one interest, do you know what I mean? I guess what I'm trying to say is these essays stem from the questions of who gets to be outside and who gets to tell about it and why. Who feels safe outdoors and who doesn't, and why? And I am wildly and ecstatically in love with the outdoors, but I've come across so many people who've told me that they don't feel safe outside. Or they don't feel welcomed. So, my book is, hopefully, a place for them to remember to conjure up memories that they had as kids and to say it's not too late to learn about a new bird or to learn about the names of trees that are just in your neighborhood. You don't need to fly out of the country. You can do a lot learning about the outdoors just right here in Mississippi.

MT: And speaking of Mississippi, how has being in Mississippi impacted your writing about the outdoors?

AN: I moved here from Buffalo, New York, so the quick and short answer is I can just simply be outside a lot more here. I can teach my classes outside a lot more here than I could in Buffalo where we're dealing with winter conditions so much of the year. But what I would also say is that being in Mississippi, I've had to learn a whole new ecosystem here. I've had to learn birds in the Delta and plants in the Delta that I was not familiar with, and that just conjures up being a student again for me. So, it makes me feel like there's so many things to learn about this beautiful state, about the flora and the fauna that's here. And there's a richness of noticing how much beauty is in the outdoors here that I think a lot of people kind of skip over. One of my greatest thrills is getting my Mississippi students to realize, 'oh, that big tree I played under when I was little, that's called a catalpa. There's a name for it.' Many of my students don't have names for the plants and animals that they encounter. And my hope is that once you get to know the names of plants and animals, you have more of a tenderness for

them. You feel like you want to protect them more. And in turn, I hope that conjures up a feeling of wanting to keep us tender with ourselves. I think there's a lot of pain and worry and fear about being outside, especially in the last year or so. And again, there's issues of safety, but my hope is that if people just start small with getting to know the names of plants and animals around them, their hearts softens a little bit towards each other as well.

BB: So, you mentioned how, growing up, you didn't really see any writers that looked like you, let alone any poets or essayists that looked like you and writing about nature. And now you're one of those people. So, what do you hope for your legacy to be, in terms of the books and the writings that you're leaving behind?

AN: I hope *World of Wonders* helps people picture a wider variety of people outdoors. Of all backgrounds. Of all different abilities. I think when people talk about birdwatchers or hikers, I think they picture, frankly, like a white male. And I hope this book opens up the idea that there are people of all different backgrounds who love the outdoors. And I hope for people's imaginations to grow wider and a little bit more curious about the planet after getting to know these plants and animals a little bit better. We've just come out of a time where a lot of our government makes you want to be scared of other cultures, or they want to encourage fear and distrust. And my hope is that this book helps us be tender with each other. My hope is that if you get to care about Indigo Warblers and catalpa trees, that kind of care is also extended to our fellow humans, frankly.

MT: Before we wrap up, do you have anything else that you'd like to talk about that I have not asked you yet?

AN: The best thing about wonder is that it's free, and it's also contagious. Even when the world tells you not to be curious and the world tells you to be jaded, if you can allow yourself to be vulnerable and be curious about something other than yourself, I think you will see that reflected in yourself and in your relationships with other people. When you become curious and it becomes a habit, then you feel less alone, honestly. So many of us have been alone through the pandemic, and I get that maybe people are still not feeling safe to be outside, but if you just even have a window, you can try to figure out and teach yourself the names and different shapes of clouds. You can teach yourself the names of wildflowers in your area. That kind of thing. When wonder becomes a habit, you feel less alone, and I think, more than ever, that's a good lesson to have.

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