

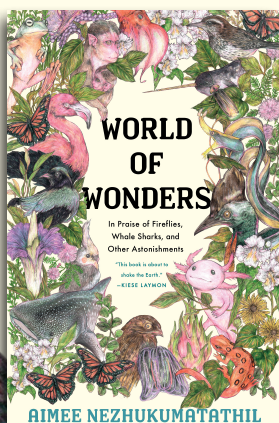


World of Wonders

In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments
by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Discussion Guide

1. *World of Wonders* is Aimee Nezhukumatathil's first work of nonfiction. What ways do you see poetic elements intertwine with memoir in this book?
2. Nezhukumatathil writes about her identity as an Asian American woman—often seen as an outsider by those around her. In what ways does she come to terms with feeling the pull to 'blend' in with her white classmates and friends?
3. *World of Wonders* speaks to the beauty and surprise of the natural world, along with the responsibility we hold toward it; Nezhukumatathil emphasizes the dangers facing nature as she wrestles with humanity's impact on it. Where does her concern stem from? In what ways do you connect with her message?
4. There is a quality of nostalgia and reflection to *World of Wonders*. What memories resonate with you? As Nezhukumatathil reflects, what does she learn about herself?
5. From her parents teaching her about fireflies to being a professor at the University of Mississippi, Nezhukumatathil's life is highlighted with her dedication to education. How does this dedication translate in her writing?
6. Motherhood is a prominent theme in *World of Wonders*. What is the connection being made between Nezhukumatathil's experience as a mother and the call to protection she feels for her children and the world around her?
7. Nezhukumatathil writes of the influence of her Filipina and Indian heritage. How have culture and the traditions of her family shaped her?
8. *World of Wonders* captures a certain universality about life in each essay—the joy in the little things and the awe found in the world. What images resonate with you? What wonders stand out to you through the reading of this book?
9. Nezhukumatathil moved from one place to another, migrating across the United States, much like the monarch butterflies she writes about. What has this taught her about the importance of home, and what does it teach you?
10. Nezhukumatathil writes, "There is a time for stillness, but who hasn't also wanted to scream with delight at being outdoors?" (95). How do you see these two sides of Nezhukumatathil in her writing?



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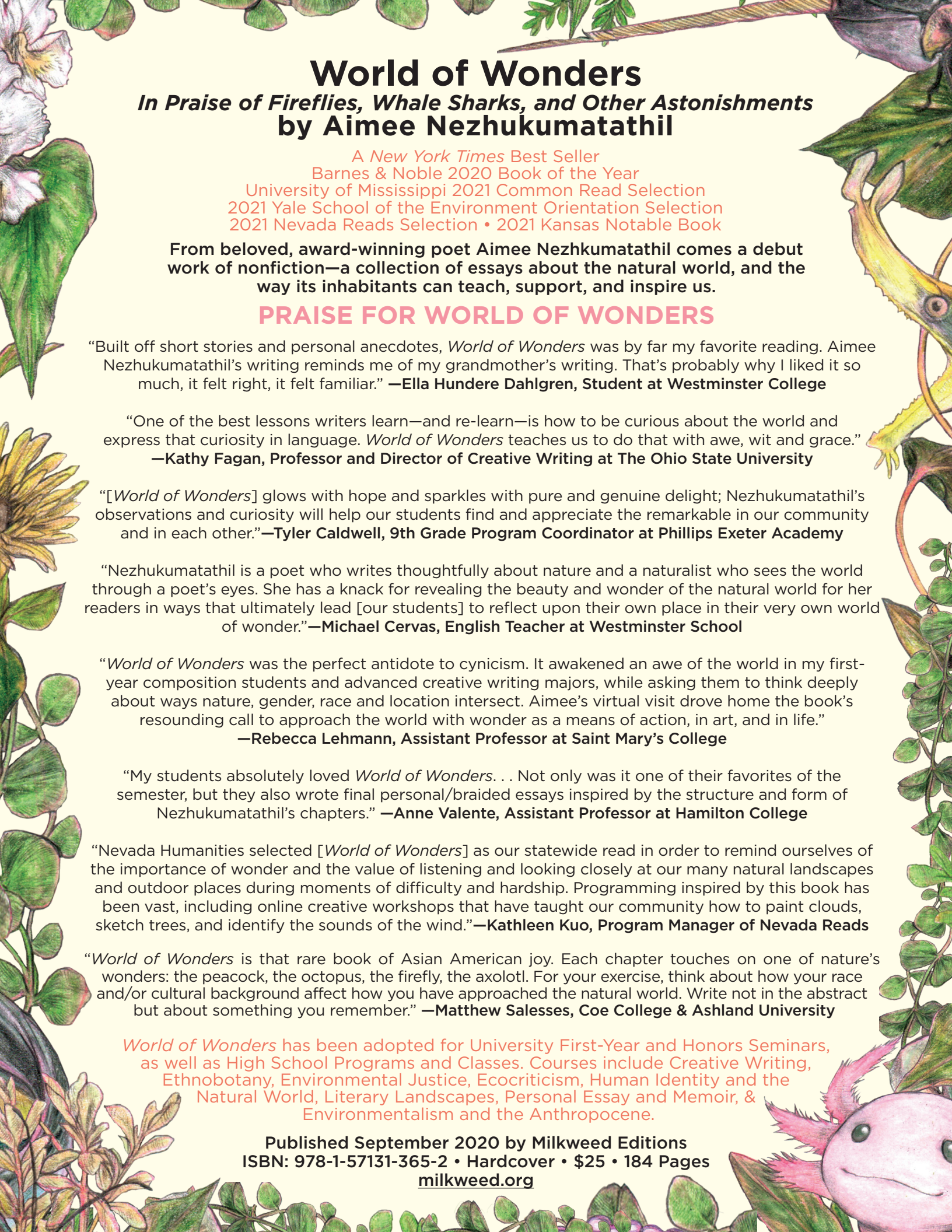
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Questions written by Anita Stasson
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World of Wonders

In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

A *New York Times* Best Seller
Barnes & Noble 2020 Book of the Year
University of Mississippi 2021 Common Read Selection
2021 Yale School of the Environment Orientation Selection
2021 Nevada Reads Selection • 2021 Kansas Notable Book

From beloved, award-winning poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil comes a debut work of nonfiction—a collection of essays about the natural world, and the way its inhabitants can teach, support, and inspire us.

PRAISE FOR WORLD OF WONDERS

“Built off short stories and personal anecdotes, *World of Wonders* was by far my favorite reading. Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s writing reminds me of my grandmother’s writing. That’s probably why I liked it so much, it felt right, it felt familiar.” —Ella Hundere Dahlgren, Student at Westminster College

“One of the best lessons writers learn—and re-learn—is how to be curious about the world and express that curiosity in language. *World of Wonders* teaches us to do that with awe, wit and grace.”
—Kathy Fagan, Professor and Director of Creative Writing at The Ohio State University

“[*World of Wonders*] glows with hope and sparkles with pure and genuine delight; Nezhukumatathil’s observations and curiosity will help our students find and appreciate the remarkable in our community and in each other.”—Tyler Caldwell, 9th Grade Program Coordinator at Phillips Exeter Academy

“Nezhukumatathil is a poet who writes thoughtfully about nature and a naturalist who sees the world through a poet’s eyes. She has a knack for revealing the beauty and wonder of the natural world for her readers in ways that ultimately lead [our students] to reflect upon their own place in their very own world of wonder.”—Michael Cervas, English Teacher at Westminster School

“*World of Wonders* was the perfect antidote to cynicism. It awakened an awe of the world in my first-year composition students and advanced creative writing majors, while asking them to think deeply about ways nature, gender, race and location intersect. Aimee’s virtual visit drove home the book’s resounding call to approach the world with wonder as a means of action, in art, and in life.”
—Rebecca Lehmann, Assistant Professor at Saint Mary’s College

“My students absolutely loved *World of Wonders*. . . Not only was it one of their favorites of the semester, but they also wrote final personal/braided essays inspired by the structure and form of Nezhukumatathil’s chapters.” —Anne Valente, Assistant Professor at Hamilton College

“Nevada Humanities selected [*World of Wonders*] as our statewide read in order to remind ourselves of the importance of wonder and the value of listening and looking closely at our many natural landscapes and outdoor places during moments of difficulty and hardship. Programming inspired by this book has been vast, including online creative workshops that have taught our community how to paint clouds, sketch trees, and identify the sounds of the wind.”—Kathleen Kuo, Program Manager of Nevada Reads

“*World of Wonders* is that rare book of Asian American joy. Each chapter touches on one of nature’s wonders: the peacock, the octopus, the firefly, the axolotl. For your exercise, think about how your race and/or cultural background affect how you have approached the natural world. Write not in the abstract but about something you remember.” —Matthew Salesses, Coe College & Ashland University

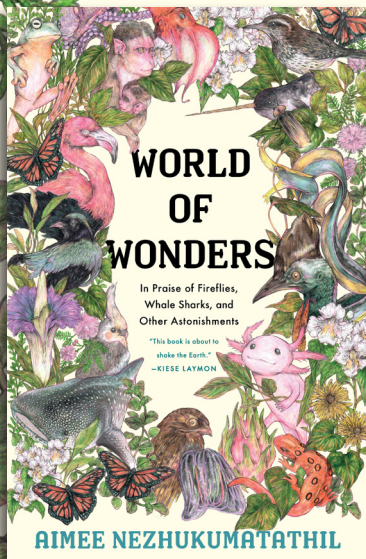
World of Wonders has been adopted for University First-Year and Honors Seminars, as well as High School Programs and Classes. Courses include Creative Writing, Ethnobotany, Environmental Justice, Ecocriticism, Human Identity and the Natural World, Literary Landscapes, Personal Essay and Memoir, & Environmentalism and the Anthropocene.

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Suggested Exercises & Class Discussions

- 1. Pre-Reading Question:** What has surprised you in the natural world? Think of something that you learned in school, or on your own, that really changed your perception of something in the natural world. This could also be something you were unaware of, or something you were just uninformed of.
- 2. On page 43, Nezhukumatathil says, "The tighter the smile, the tougher you become."** Write a personal essay that discusses both the essay and this quote in the context of your own personal experiences.
- 3. Based on "The Potoo" Essay:** When would you say is a time that you feel most "seen," for who you are? When you need to "slow down," or "be still," what do you find helps you? What benefit can come from doing less, being still, looking inward, or taking a step back?
- 4. Final Essay:** Do your own research on an animal or plant in nature and craft a personal essay that connects your own life to something about that plant or animal, while also paying careful attention to narrative and figurative language.

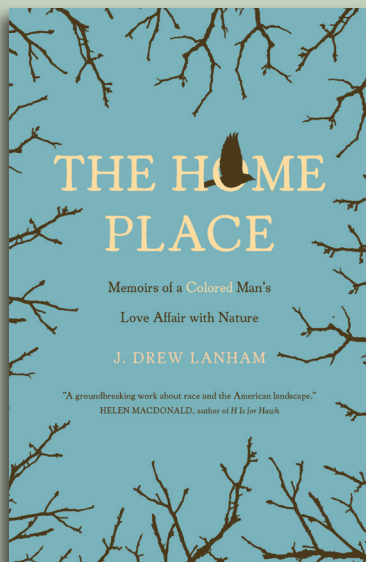
Written by Leah Umansky, Director of the Scholars Program at York Preparatory School



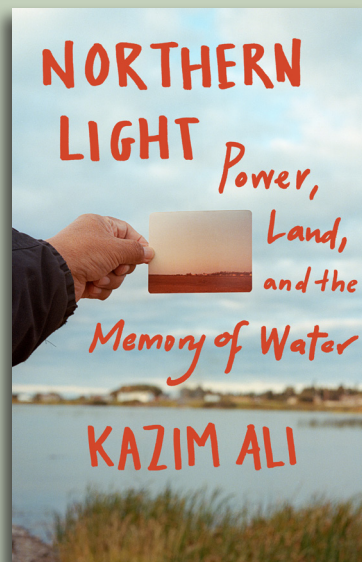
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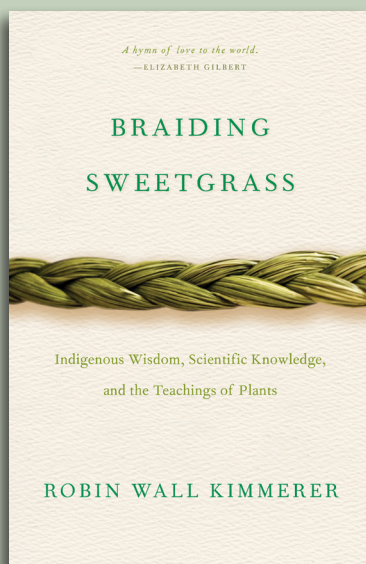


Northern Light
Power, Land, and the Memory of Water
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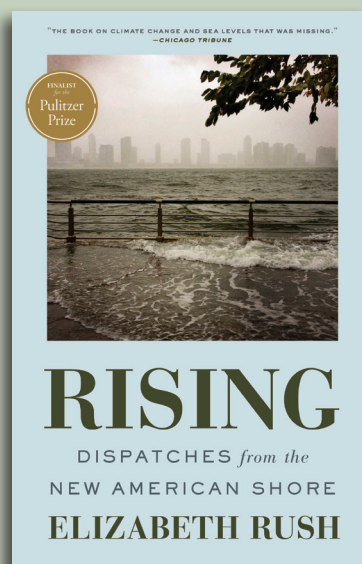
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Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants
by Robin Wall Kimmerer



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Rising
Dispatches from the New American Shore
by Elizabeth Rush

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