

# 5 Over

All of the published authors who appear in the pages of this magazine have roads behind them—paths to publication that are as unique to each writer as their own poems, stories, and essays. Some of these roads cut a straight path, while others turn this way and that; some double back and crisscross, while others are under construction, redirected by detours and bypasses. Sometimes there are shortcuts, but other times there are long scenic tours through many of life's most notable markers: births, deaths, loves, families, travels, careers. Periods of joy and contentment followed by episodes of darkness, difficulty. Achievements and failures—all of it informing, inspiring, delaying, or precipitating the writer's work in some way, directly or indirectly.

The authors featured in our second annual 5 Over 50 have followed different paths as well, but their routes to publication are perhaps a bit longer—and, one could argue, more nuanced, often more complex, and even more, dare we say it, interesting—than those of “younger” writers who have the spotlight in today's youth-focused culture. If our 5 Over 50 authors have one thing in common, it's a sense of patient determination to create something meaningful, beautiful. And it really doesn't matter how long that takes. As Peg Alford Pursell says, “There exists only one moment—the last—at which it's too late for anything.”

Here, in their own words, we present five authors over the age of fifty whose debut books were published this year.



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encouraged me to keep going. It is so easy to give up, especially as an older woman with little confidence. I honor my teachers: Joy Harjo, Laurie Kutchins, Joy Jacobson, Valerie Martinez, Margaret Randall, Lisa Gill, Hilda Raz, Lynn Miller, and many others both at the University of New Mexico and in private workshops who bore witness to my efforts and encouraged me to keep going.

Writing and publishing are not competitive sports. Writing is the

most important, but reading aloud brings the writing to life and allows for an audience. Listen to and read as many other poets and other writers as you can. Join a group that will root you on through the muck. Keep working on the craft with good teachers. Submit to paper and online journals, newspapers, art shows. Find local presses by talking to poets you know, noting which presses are publishing the books of poetry you love, and doing online research. I was able

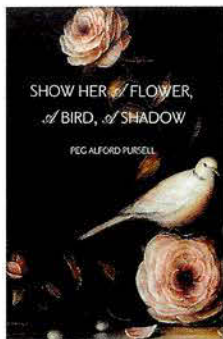
to publish my first book through the University of New Mexico Press, which has an honorable history of publishing books related to the Southwest. Encourage other poets to publish, to read aloud, to be heard. Buy their books when they come out, go to their readings. We live in a culture that doesn't read enough poetry, so invite those people who don't know poetry to go with you to readings. Send them poems you love. Animate the world with your words. ∞

## PEG ALFORD PURSELL

**Age:** "Over fifty." **Residence:** San Francisco Bay Area. **Book:** *Show Her a Flower, a Bird, a Shadow* (ELJ Editions, March), a collection of intense hybrid prose—flash fiction, prose poetry, and other forms that resist categorization—that pulls a world of almost terrifying beauty into laser-sharp focus. **Editor:** Ariana Den Bleker. **Agent:** None.

RECENTLY I returned to the town where I grew up and where most of my family still lives: I went there to attend a wedding, to visit family, and to give readings from my first book in (somewhat) nearby Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. There is still no bookstore in my hometown, nowhere for a girl to window-shop and superimpose her reflection on a book

jacket. I grew up knowing no one who made a living by writing, no one who wrote as a matter of course. Until college, I'd never been to a literary reading.



This experience, or lack thereof, isn't particularly unique, but it may have a lot to do with why I didn't take my writing seriously until later in life. I was in my late thirties when I thought about learning to write, seeking entry into a then-unconventional MFA program—Warren Wilson, the first low-residency program (and, I might add, the best in the

country). I was a single mother who taught in the public education system. I stole spare moments, usually in summer, to write. And though I'd entered and won a prestigious short story contest, I still didn't understand my need to write, or to publish as the necessary completion of the creative act.

During that recent trip to my hometown, I visited my sister and her husband, two lovely and gifted people who paint, play music, teach school—and, for the past year, have run the region's playhouse. When my vivacious brother-in-law greeted me, he said something that took me aback. I didn't register the exact words, but they

had to do with his excitement about how we three are doing big things at an age when most people are supposed to be winding down—he and my sister taking over the theater and me publishing and promoting my book.

The surprise I felt was similar to the one that anyone over fifty has

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experienced when passing the plate glass of a storefront, say, on the way to the post office. You catch your reflection: Can that aged face really be yours? It can. It is. But you go about your business—collecting your mail, recycling junk flyers—and the image is gone, never to supplant the picture of yourself you hold in your mind's eye.

Though it's true that this is my first published book, giving readings, finishing a new book, and sending out work for publication are my daily activities—simply part of what it is for me to be in the world. I've come to understand the necessity. And I've come

to understand that the act of creating follows its own imperatives. Writing—a story, a poem, a book—takes as long as it takes. To publish a first book over the age of fifty? I'm glad to say it doesn't seem that unusual to me. I'm looking forward to the next one.

As for practical advice, I'd offer that the essential value resides in respecting your own process and creative imperatives, in pushing through the self-doubts that all art-makers experience—that advice isn't age-specific, of course. For me it comes to this: Never stop. There exists only one moment—the last—at which it's too late for anything. ∞

## 5 more over 50

### Kathline Carr

of North Adams, Massachusetts, age 50, author of the hybrid narrative *Miraculum Monstrum* (Red Hen Press, October)



### Joan Dempsey

of New Gloucester, Maine, age 54, author of the novel *This Is How It Begins* (She Writes Press, October)



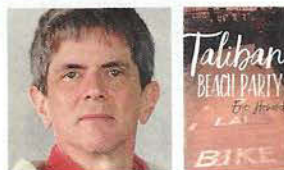
### Kathleen A. Flynn

of Brooklyn, New York, age 51, author of the novel *The Jane Austen Project* (Harper Perennial, May)



### Eric Howard

of Los Angeles, age 56, author of the poetry collection *Taliban Beach Party* (Turtle Point Press, April)



### Lu Spinney

of London, England, age 68, author of the memoir *Beyond the High Blue Air* (Catapult, August)



## THE Rona Jaffe Foundation WRITERS' AWARDS

*The Rona Jaffe Foundation identifies and supports emerging women writers. Recipients receive awards of \$30,000.*

### 2017 WINNERS

Aamina Ahmad  
(Fiction)

Ama Codjoe  
(Poetry)

Ebony Flowers  
(Fiction/Nonfiction)

Tiana Nobile  
(Poetry)

Dominica Phetteplace  
(Fiction)

Shawna Kay Rodenberg  
(Nonfiction)

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