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**CULTURE**

# Author Terese Marie Mailhot wins first Spalding Prize, visits Festival of Contemporary Writing

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | May 22, 2019 5:45 am



Author Terese Marie Mailhot will speak at Spalding University. Her book, "Heart Berries," is a New York Times bestseller. | Courtesy the author

Canadian First Nations author [Terese Marie Mailhot](#) is the recipient of the first \$7,500 Spalding Prize for the Promotion of Peace and Justice in Literature for her bestselling book [“Heart Berries: A Memoir.”](#)

The \$7,500 prize will be awarded to Mailhot during her visit to the Spalding Master of Fine Arts’ residency and [Festival of Contemporary Writing](#) May 25-31 in Louisville. Mailhot will speak from 5:30-6:30 p.m. May 30, with a book signing to follow.

On May 25, Spalding president Tori Murden McClure will read from her book, [“A Pearl in the Storm,”](#)



which was released 10 years ago and recounts her solo row across the

Spalding president Tori Murden McClure. |  
Courtesy photo

Atlantic 20 years ago. A book signing will follow. There will also be faculty readings throughout the festival. (For more on the festival’s schedule, visit the Spalding School of Writing [Facebook page.](#))

Before Mailhot’s visit, all Spalding MFA students and faculty have read and discussed “Heart Berries.”

“What I admire about ‘Heart Berries,’ besides its gorgeous lyric prose, is Terese Marie Mailhot’s reclamation of her ‘maltreated story’ through the practice of writing,” said Kathleen Driskell, chair of the School of Creative and Professional Writing in a news release. “The memoir is a marvelous yet challenging model for our Spalding MFA students, and our School of Writing is excited to share it with our greater Louisville writing and reading community.”

## ‘Heart Berries’

Mailhot, now a professor of writing at

Purdue University, said she was surprised and excited to learn she'd won the prize.



## Author Terese Marie Mailhot | Courtesy

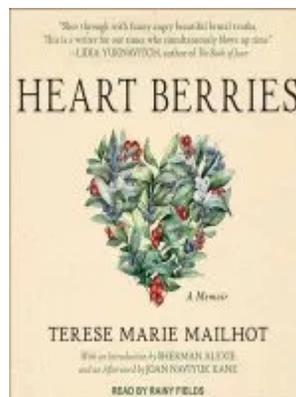
“It’s a real honor,” she said. “I’m really excited to be there because I really haven’t had an

opportunity to just celebrate different things in my life, and not only is it inaugural but it’s also close to where my in-laws live in Evansville. So we’re going to be able to bring them, and it’s going to be a real celebration.”

She grew up on the [Seabird Island Band](#) First Nation reservation in British Columbia, and her book deals with what it’s like to be a woman, survivor of trauma, bipolar and native. She began writing the book while in a mental hospital where she was being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar disorder, writing the book as a type of letter to her now-husband. She said she still writes by hand because as a mother, she’s always on the go. Having time to sit down and write is rare, so a notebook gets the job done.

In the book’s Afterword, she says that she originally wrote the book as fiction. Now she says the reason she chose a memoir was that it made the writing more personal to the reader.

“I think people reading my work understand that these things really happened in my life,” she said. “If I were to fictionalize it, I feel like it would kind of create a layer between me and the audience that I didn’t really need. I felt like it was unnecessary. Plus, I think the story, the truth of it, was more interesting than trying to conceive of a fictionalized version of events.”



Digging into the past, especially for someone who has been physically and sexually assaulted, was no easy task, she

acknowledged. But it wasn't the hardest part, she said.

"I think trying to find the art of the work itself was hard," she said. "Because it's one thing to write down a chronology of events. It's another thing to turn that into a story that can kind of explore truth or explore abuse and explore trauma in ways that are artful. A lot of us are just trying to move through it. So, for me, it was almost more traumatic to have events happen but then also try to relive the events in order to capture it in an artful way. But I knew it was worthwhile."

Readers have come to appreciate her candor and artful writing style. The book is a New York Times bestseller, and readers have told her that her way of portraying mental illness spoke to their experiences.

"A lot of women have read the work and said they felt like I articulated very well what it's like to be looked like I'm 'too much' or that I'm 'crazy.' I think a lot of women when they are just sharing their feelings with a partner are often met with negligence or ignorance in terms of mental health and our well-being," she said.

"It was really important to me to convey what it's like to be on the other side of that relationship where when you have feelings and when you're trying to express that you felt hurt, when they don't listen, that's deeply troubling, and trying to articulate that in the story was important as well."

Mailhot calls herself an Indian throughout the book, instead of the preferred First Nations moniker given to Canadian indigenous people.

"It's just very weird that our identity has to be fixed in politically correct terms even though nothing seems politically correct about being indigenous," she said. "It's almost like the language is very ambitious in terms of trying to get us all to be equal, but the reality is we don't feel that way and we're not living our daily lives that way."

Mailhot said it's important for people to know that anyone can create art. "I really started the book in a small kind of dollar-store composition book that was given to me by the hospital staff," she said."

"And you can generate something really beautiful, and you don't need a degree to do it, and you don't need to know the right people, and you don't need to have an agent, but you can cultivate art through your experience no matter where you're

from. I would hope that people who are driven to do that because I think it's really necessary.”

## **LISA HORNUNG**

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master's degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



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