

USU Faculty and Alum Publish in Anthology

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The Great Salt Lake pumps through Utah's heart — capturing toxic metals, powering agriculture, promoting recreation, and sculpting a unique habitat for the state's aquatic and avian life, yet the lake is shrinking.

English Department Professor Charles Waugh and USU alum Alyssa Quinn respond to the crisis in *The Once and Future Lake*, a collection of essays, stories, and poems giving a voice to one of Utah's greatest ecological challenges. Their work represents the only fiction in the collection.

Charles's story focuses on the consequences of a dry Great Salt Lake — on heavy metals polluting Utah's mountains, watersheds, and eventually its populace, with the poorest families being impacted the most.

"A collection like this that focuses on the Great Salt Lake has the potential to reach people in a way that just telling them about the problems does not," Charles says. "This collection not only delivers a lot of information about the problems the lake faces and what they will mean for

Utahns' health, livelihoods, and recreation, but it also shows how deeply individual people are connected to it and to the myriad species and ecosystems it sustains."

Charles hopes this demonstration of love from the writers helps readers better understand their own connection to the lake but emphasized that conclusions cannot be forced upon readers.

"As soon as a reader thinks the story is just a prop for some kind of message, the story is no longer interesting," Charles notes. "A story has to just be a story first and foremost. It has to make you care about its characters and feel embedded in its setting. If it can do that, and still make a reader consider something new about their relationship to the environment, then it might be a success."

Alyssa currently teaches creative writing at Kenyon College. They are working on revisions to their novel, *Notes from the Island*, about Antelope Island and the Great Salt Lake. Their contribution to the anthology is an excerpt of their novel.

"Above all, art helps us pay greater attention, and attention is in many ways inseparable from love," Alyssa reflects. "By turning out attention to the many nonhuman beings who call the Great Salt Lake home, the pieces in this anthology have the potential to awaken in readers a new love for those beings. It's my hope that that love will then inspire action."

Alyssa calls the collection "a crucial intervention in the face of Great Salt Lake's existential crisis" and believes that art can help us imagine alternatives to our current systems and cultivate new aesthetic values.

Alyssa argues that the Great Salt Lake crisis is a failure of imagination. Their contribution, inspired by a Davis County Clipper news story about a prospector found dead on Antelope Island, probes at gaps in the historical narrative and asks how much we can know about how we've arrived where we are. Through their work, they aim to stretch our environmental imagination.

Alyssa says form, structure, narration, and point of view can unlock new modes of ecological thought.

"My fiction often focuses on webs of connection between human and nonhuman beings," Alyssa reflects. I enjoy zooming out, both spatially and temporally, to see how disparate entities are in fact related, and how what appears to be in the 'background' of a story might come any minute into the fore."

Charles says that reading other environmental fiction, nonfiction, and poetry has helped him define what works in those genres.

"I knew while writing my story for the collection that I couldn't necessarily dictate a course of action or spell out what readers should take away from the story. It has to create a visceral reaction and make the reader keep thinking about it after they've finished reading," Charles reflects.

The Once and Future Lake is available through Torrey House Press.