

Nathaniel Brodie wins Waterston Desert Writing

By Katy Yoder
Correspondent

Nathaniel Brodie's interest and research into the deserts of the Southwest has brought to light the existence of large felines more commonly found in tropical jungles. His winning submission to the Waterston Desert Writing Contest tells the story of the Sky Islands, a region often neglected in Western literature.

He's quick to point out that his book, entitled "Borderlands," is still in the discovery process. But excerpts and ideas from the book were enough to win him the \$2,500 cash award and a four-week residency at PLAYA at Summer Lake, Oregon.

As he noted in his winning submission: "In the past two decades seven jaguars (*Panthera onca*) have been treed, photographed, or physically captured in Arizona and New Mexico. The presence of large felines more commonly associated with tropical jungles in the deserts of the Southwest opens one to wonder and curiosity."

His second book will weave together the historical and environmental repercussions of past actions by colonists, and show the overlap of Native American, early Spanish explorers 500 years ago, American westward expansion and manifest destiny. He points out that our history is very recent and is still playing out in contemporary American culture.

In another excerpt Brodie explained more about the region he'll cover and the reason it intrigues him enough to write a book about the historical and environmental repercussions of the "settling" of the United States.

"Here, in southern Arizona, where the Mohave, Sonoran, and Chihuahuan deserts meet, jaguars eat black bears and bromeliads festoon maple trees. Here, Native American, European American, and Latin American cultures have

overlapped for 480 years.

"The essays within *Borderlands* will weave together the stories of the Apache Wars, the current migrant crises, rewilding schemes, The Rosemonte Copper Mine, and the threatened fragility of endangered species such as jaguar, ocelot, and Sonoran pronghorn.

"The Sky Islands region has been relatively neglected in the annals of Western literature. So too has the southwestern jaguar; which, unlike the wolf, has little prominence in North Americans' ideas and conception of wild creatures, wilderness and contemporary human-nature interactions. For these reasons I believe *Borderlands* can make a new and meaningful contribution to the body of desert literature, and to a greater cultural desert literacy. My plan is to visit this region in the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020, and interview desert ecologists, wildlife biologists, border patrol agents, tribal members, historians, and desert jaguar aficionados."

Jaguars were once a resident species in the U.S., but white settlers wiped them out so quickly, they aren't included in the history of animals that lived there. Brodie will reveal Dene or Apache history which has a different story to tell, one that goes much farther back.

"I was born and raised in Southern California, a very arid place," Brodie told *The Nugget* from his Portland home. "I've been attracted to desert places and traveled around the world to desert places. I lived in Arizona and worked in the Grand Canyon for a decade. I love their stark, severe beauty. Everything has thorns, spikes, but also luxurious blooms. Water is

miraculous in the desert. There aren't many desert writing prizes out there. It was a natural fit for me."

Brodie's family moved last year to Portland from Reno, Nevada. His wife got a tenure-track job at Portland State University in eco-hydrology. She grew up in Seattle and loves being back in the Pacific Northwest.

"When we drive back over to Central Oregon's high desert and the firs transition into sagebrush, we both love it. She likes the big looming trees and I like the open spaces," he said.

Receiving the award is a great honor for Brodie.

"We writers sometimes aren't recognized for the work we do that is not a published book. The vast majority of my writing career is toiling away. I'm lucky enough to have one book published."

He's also excited about the High Desert Museum event on June 26, where he'll receive his award and get to meet writers he respects and admires.

"I'll get to be with Kim Stafford, Bruce Berger and meet Patricia Limerick. I'll be in august company and it's an honor," he said.

Brodie looks forward to meeting Limerick.

"Her book, 'Legacy of Conquest,' is important for me and I quote her in my first book," he noted.

Brodie appreciates her understanding of how the histories of oppression still affect us all and that the legacy of conquest is still being borne out today.

Ideas for *Borderlands* have many threads that are still coming together for Brodie. The process is half the battle.

"I'm doing the research now. I'm so excited about

doing a four-week residency at PLAYA," he said. "Right now I'm in the information gathering stage, I tend to gather and only use 20 percent of what I gather. PLAYA time will be that winnowing down into what the story truly is. Right now I'm still falling down the rabbit holes."

WDWP founder Ellen Waterston is proud to celebrate the fifth anniversary and was impressed with the breadth and quality of the participants.

"The caliber of this year's proposals, from two continents, three countries and 14 states, made the task of selecting the winner and finalists especially challenging for the Board of Directors... but in the end Nathaniel Brodie's compelling proposal *Borderlands* rose to the top. In a generous and eloquent style, Brodie's proposal invites the reader to look at the literal and metaphorical, social and environmental consequences of what is taking place on the southern border of the United States from the perspective of the endangered jaguar who



PHOTO PROVIDED

Nathaniel Brodie will accept the Waterston Desert Writing Prize at an event at the High Desert Museum on Wednesday, June 26.

no longer enjoys freedom of movement back and forth across political boundaries."

For more information about the Waterston Desert Writing Prize Award ceremony visit www.highdesertmuseum.org/events/waterston-prize/. To register for one of the writing workshops before the evening's events visit: www.highdesertmuseum.org/events/waterston-workshops/. Visit Nathaniel Brodie's website at: www.nathanielbrodie.com.

Happy Father's Day to all the amazing dads out there!

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