

## From behind the mask of Red Riding Hood, new Logan Poet Laureate finds her voice

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### Poet Shanan Ballam will be 'inaugurated' Aug. 20, replacing Star Coulbrooke



*Shanan Ballam*

As a graduate student, poet Shanan Ballam found herself staring at a blank page. She wanted to express her regrets and the growth arising from sinkholes in her life: the shadow cast by an angry, alcoholic father, a sister stalked and menaced by a former husband, a brother's suicide.

And also, the occasional oasis, like a grandmother who cherished the young Shanan, but whose light had been muted by a restrictive culture.

But, no words came.

Her mentor at the University of Nebraska sat her down, remembers Ballam. "She told me, 'If you're not able to write, why don't you try a persona or a mask.'"

And so Ballam took Red Riding Hood as her voice. The ancient fairy tale neatly dovetailed with the three major characters circling in her own mind: the naive, uncertain Red herself, a caring grandmother, and a predator.

Ballam's first poems as Red, published in the 2010 chapbook *The Red Riding Hood Papers*, were fraught,

sometimes bleak and tinged with violence. Now she revisits her life as Red in a second collection, "Inside the Animal: The Collected Red Riding Hood Poems" (2019, Main St. Rag Publishing Co.). The new poems describes how Red and her world, like Ballam herself, has shifted and enlarged.

It won't be as Red, but as the accomplished poet she is when she is inaugurated Aug. 20 as the new Logan City Poet Laureate. Ballam is only the second to hold the post as the city's poetry ambassador, following the path set by Star Coulbrooke, who was appointed Logan City Poet Laureate in 2014.

Ballam is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at Utah State University, while Coulbrooke is director of the USU's Writing Center.

### The economical expression of poetry

So as she moves between her varied roles, does Ballam see herself as a teacher first? Or a poet foremost? She says she's actually found a way to merge both paths. She's taught in USU's Creative Writing Program since 2010 as well as in multiple workshops around the state where she's seen the power and sway of poetry.

"The way I approach it is, everybody has something that they want to express — something that's beautiful, something that's personal or even just commemorating another person," she said. "Everybody has that desire to express. And poetry is a very economical way to do that."

To further this approach, she'll be hosting workshops and working closely with the Logan City Library.

"I prefer to write in an intimate space," she says. She's inspired in part by a sister who's wheelchair-bound with multiple sclerosis and cannot travel easily.

But more than that, she says, "I'm very comfortable in a room where we can all write together and be a part of something."

She appreciates the map provided by her predecessor and colleague, Star Coulbrooke, she says. "I'll be building off of the community that she created. She did a beautiful, excellent job and brought a lot of people together."

Ballam clearly remembers the first time she put her thoughts to paper in a poem. She was just a third-grader when she scrutinized a storm as it swept over the garden.

"I watched it very carefully," particularly one rose whose petals had been savaged by the rain, she said. "I wrote kind of a love poem to a rose."

Perhaps there's a tie between that rose and her identification with Red. Even beginning with the first poem in *Inside the Animal*, readers will quickly catch on that she's not retelling the old tale. The poem, "Red Riding Hood Opens the Door," begins: "There is a house. / Inside the house / is a wolf . Inside the wolf / an old woman. Inside the / old woman an empty womb ..."

In the years since her 2010 collection, she says, "the poems have evolved and became something different." For instance, she wanted to flesh out the storybook character she identified with her own grandmother. "I wanted to give her a voice, and so in many of the poems about (Red's) grandmother, it's actually my grandmother I'm writing about."

## Breaking out of the age-old story

Fairy tales are malleable things that shift and reform with the society retelling it. That was Ballam's intention as she sought to "break out of the narrative."

Wolf, a complex, multi-faceted character, is perhaps the character most bound by the tale. In the poem "Wolf Dreaming: The Fantastic Library," Wolf reads about the fairy tales — Rapunzel with her long locks, an old woman "who sings about babies in cradles rocking high."

Then he turns the page and sees Red. The poem reads, "Once, in a book, he saw the girl in the red cape and his heart sang." But the fairy tale goes on to speak about Wolf himself, "the hideous beast with awful teeth that made the girl's smile fade," and he chafes against the story's bounds.

Red, too, has dreams and fantasies that want to escape the story. She thinks of the "glimmering city" where she was raised by a distant and distracted mother who had fled the forest, in the process breaking her parents' hearts.

One reviewer, the poet William Trowbridge, explains it this way, "The poems are set in an inner landscape, lushly described, charged with allure and menace, terrifying beautiful."

- [Janelle Hyatt](#), Communications Director, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, (435) 797-0289

*Star Coulbrooke, outgoing Logan City Poet Laureate, gives the words of her poems extra lilt when she performs them.*



Cover of Ballam's newest book of poetry, 'Inside the Animal'. The cover illustration is by Brock Dethier, a former USU professor of English. To purchase the book, visit the publisher, [The Main Street Rag](#).

### Stories by [Janelle Hyatt](#)

### More about the poets:

- Contact Coulbrooke at [star.coulbrooke@usu.edu](mailto:star.coulbrooke@usu.edu).
- Contact Shanan Ballam at [shanan.ballam@usu.edu](mailto:shanan.ballam@usu.edu)
- Read about Helicon West at <https://writing.usu.edu/helicon-west/ahw>.

For information on the Logan City Poet Laureate role.

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### Star Coulbrooke, Logan's First Poet Laureate, Will Pass the Pen on Aug. 20

This month, Star Coulbrooke completes her five-year walkabout as the Logan City Poet Laureate.

The poet is known for her “walkabouts,” nature-themed public meanderings along wildflower brooks and tree-shaded paths seeking poetic inspiration. Her tenure also set the standard for poetry ambassadors as the first-ever city poet laureate in the state.

At the Aug. 20 Logan Municipal Council meeting, Coulbrooke will present her final reading and announce the incoming Poet Laureate, Shanan Ballam. The meeting begins at 5:30 p.m. in the city's council chambers, 290 N. 100 West. The meeting is open to the public. Coulbrooke, Utah State University's Writing Center Director, suggests arriving early, as the poets are first on the agenda.

Coulbrooke will read “Love Poem to Logan City,” which she describes as a “collaborative, commemorative community poem” created out of the lines and words written by walkabout participants in the last year.

Now, a week before the event and relaxing on a grassy lawn, Coulbrooke is wistful about the end of an era and, she says, anxious about a future in which she can write, well, anything she wants. *City of Poetry*, a collection of the Cache Valley-themed dedicatory and commemorative poems from her years as poet laureate, was published in July. While Ballam's term as poet laureate will be much different from her own, “it will be magnificent,” Coulbrooke predicts.

“I think I've inspired a lot of poetry and people to write,” she said. “Now, Shannon will be able to help them take it to an even higher level.” Ballam is a senior lecturer in USU's Department of English.

In 2014, Coulbrooke accepted a proposal that came from a USU creative writing committee, as well as then Logan Council member Holly Daines. In the years since, she's established herself as the poet laureate no one knew they had needed all along.

Those first months were overwhelming. “I didn't know where to begin,” she remembers. So she started where she often does as a poet herself: under the open sky.

“I love walking, and I love nature. And I knew that when I get inspired, it's through hearing someone else's poetry,” she said. “That's what I wanted to combine.”

Her walkabouts have led budding poets along Logan's paths, foothills and among grave stones to explore what she describes as “neat little places in Logan that nobody's seen.”

Over the years, she says, she and partner Mitch “have driven every inch of this entire valley. I've driven it or I've walked it, and I've found inspiration and I've found solace.

“And that's where the walkabouts came from.”

The walkabouts “just magically drew people,” she said. Her walking companions were “people who'd never written poetry, and people who hadn't written poetry in 40 years,” she said.

Coulbrooke is the author of several poetry collections, including the 2018 *Both Sides from the Middle*, which chronicles her life journey from an Idaho farm girl through failed marriages and cancer and finally to a sort of contentment. She concludes, according to the book cover, that “nothing in this world has only two sides, two paths, two ways of thinking. But to reach that realization can take decades of ‘seeing both sides from the middle.’”

Coulbrooke will remain active in the Cache Valley's poetry and arts community. She founded and has long coordinated Helicon West, a bi-monthly open mic series that also includes featured readers. And perhaps, she says, there will be future walkabouts to share.