

In Conversation:  
**Alicia Wyneken**  
*Ice Box* Founding Editor



interview  
by  
Isabel  
Rhodes

Alicia Wyneken (née Ristau) was the first student editor of *Ice Box* as a traditional literary journal. Previously, in the late 1990s, graduate students in UAF's English Department had published two zine-style issues under the name *Ice Box*. Once that project went defunct, Wyneken and her peers in the Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society relaunched *Ice Box* as a journal for UAF undergraduate writers and artists. They published *Ice Box*, Volume 3 in Spring 2001. Wyneken served as editor, while the associate editors were Zachary Blurton, Sheila Lauber, and Deidre McMullin, and the editorial assistants were Nathan Pitt, Jennifer Tilbury, and Catherine Whitney. The format and editorial approach they established continues with *Ice Box* to this day.

Wyneken grew up in Nice, France, and moved to the United States in 1994. She began at UAF as a Civil Engineering major but eventually switched to English. She later received an MFA in Poetry Writing from Antioch University and an MS in Counseling Psychology from Mount St. Mary's University, both in Los Angeles. She is now pursuing a PhD in Cultural Studies from Claremont Graduate University in California.

Wyneken continues to write poetry and essays, with recent publications in *Beyond Words* and *The Bangalore Review*. For several years she lived in Juneau, where she taught French at the University of Alaska Southeast. Wyneken is mother to five children, four of whom she and her spouse adopted from the foster care system. She lives with the autoimmune disease scleroderma, which causes inflammation and other wide-ranging symptoms. Wyneken blogs about art, life, and health at her website [acmwresearch.com](http://acmwresearch.com), and her advice for seeking balance in illness holds equally true to the craft of poetry: "My center changes every day," she writes. "Listen. Find the core. Find the point."

ICE BOX & UAF

**In a 2021 *Ice Box* interview, former faculty advisor Cindy Hardy notes that you came to her with a vision to make *Ice Box* a journal of undergraduate art and writing edited by other undergraduates. What inspired you to take on this task?**

During my undergraduate years, I felt a void in my education. At the time, I had already taken all the creative writing classes and tried to write in various genres, yet I sought something different. I volunteered at the local fair's creative writing exhibit and the Fairbanks Arts Association. I did not have enough exposure to the art of writing, even with the community outlets. I sought the editing experience as well. Due to English being my second language, I couldn't work at the Writing Center, and the editorial staff for *Permafrost* was exclusively MFA students. I felt like doors were closed to me. One day, Dr. Hardy handed me early versions of *Ice Box* and asked me to read them. We devised a plan to revive *Ice Box* in just a few days.

**How did you recruit your team of editors?**

The English Department was very close back when I was a student. I worked as an assistant in the main office, and some of my classmates were tutors in the Writing Center. We were always together in classes, at work, and even during our free time. We used to hang out in a corner of the eighth floor of Gruening Building outside Dr. Susan Blalock's office. She was the advisor for Sigma Tau Delta, and that space was furnished with couches, bookshelves, and many books.

My classmates and I read and shared our creative and scholarly work. We braided and dyed our hair. We ate pizza. We laughed and cried. We were a family away from home. It was not a surprise when I introduced them to the idea of an undergraduate journal needing editors. The question boiled down to how many editors *Ice Box* needed. I kept in mind their

interests and strengths. It was an organic process with no formal applications. We devised a team and assigned tasks for fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. We also overlapped and supported one another when we struggled to decide and/or edit pieces.

### **How did you get students to submit their work?**

We all advertised *Ice Box* in our classes and tried to recruit submissions via a snowball process and posters around campus. Most of the submissions were from English students, which we expected for an initial issue; however, we received several submissions from other departments as well. There used to be a class, ENGL 371: Intermediate Creative Writing, which many students around campus took to fulfill a writing requirement. We targeted students from that class so *Ice Box* wouldn't feature only English majors. It was a concern that we were publishing ourselves. For that one reason, I was the only one not allowed to submit pieces to *Ice Box* so we could maintain ethical standards.

### **How did you organize and evaluate your submissions?**

Most of the submissions were on paper, but we also got the rare email or floppy disk submission. We had a tray and a mailbox in the English Department office, right below *Permafrost*. Seeing that inbox meant a lot to us editors. We felt validated. We were so eager for submissions we checked it multiple times daily. We opened the mail and organized the pieces by genre in manila folders, and on Thursday afternoons we read in a small room on the ground floor of Gruening Building. We sorted them by "yes," "maybe," and "no."

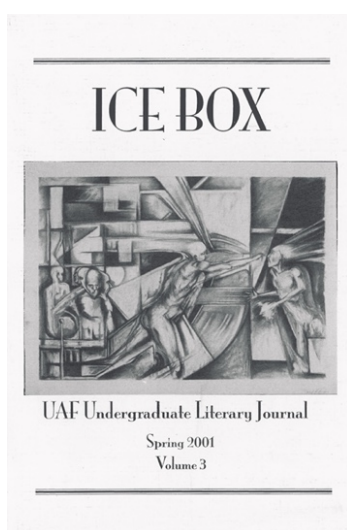
We read pieces beyond spelling and grammatical errors, seeking exciting stories and poems. We evaluated them by content and how they would work together within the space of *Ice Box*. I learned to delegate tasks to associate editors. For example, Zachary Blurton provided excellent feedback when he worked at the Writing Center, so he was essential in the revision process. Other associate editors had different tasks. We didn't have the resources to give feedback, and sometimes we wanted

to support the students' work even when it was a rejection. We learned to breathe and let go.

### **What was the process for creating and picking out the cover?**

We had a few pieces we liked. We thought about not only which art piece worked best with the title of the journal, but also which art would work with the quality of our cover stock, a paper softcover. It had to be a piece that would look good as a black-and-white image. We ran black-and-white copies of all the art pieces to visualize how they would appear. We taped them

on a wall and stared at them as if they magically would speak to us: "Pick me!" I remember being fonder of another piece than the one we ended up choosing. It was by the same artist, yet the color scheme did not translate well to a black-and-white format. The piece we chose was a compromise, which is how publishing works.



### **How did you pay to produce the journal? Did you feel supported by the students and faculty?**

If I remember correctly, Dr. Cindy Hardy knew of funds from another UAF source and reached out to that program. They approved it, and we set our budget and published the journals we could afford. I think our funding was less than \$1,000, and even then it wasn't much to work with. I remember walking through campus with my friend Zachary Blurton, carrying a basket filled with *Ice Box* journals to promote and try to sell. We went to the chancellor, staff, and faculty offices. After that we sought more funding so we could leave funds for the next editorial team. Then we graduated and let go of *Ice Box*, hoping other students would take the baton.

The English Department as a whole was very supportive—all the faculty and staff, from the department chair Dr. Roy Bird to the administrative assistant Malle. They looked forward to the publication and bought some issues. Some English faculty members at UAF might still have an issue of *Ice Box*, Volume 3 on their bookshelves.

### **What was UAF’s creative writing culture like when you attended?**

UAF was home to excellent creative writing faculty. In addition to Dr. Cindy Hardy, the department had Renée Manfredi, Frank Soos, Anne Caston, and John Reinhard, all of whom fostered outstanding mentorship. Peggy Shumaker had just retired, but she was still present on campus and in the community, from readings at the museum to the Dead Writers series on Halloween. Other faculty members such as John Morgan and Dr. Burns Cooper were writers beyond their academic lives and provided support and mentorship.

The eighth floor of Gruening was a vibrant environment where stories and poems were created. It was home to a large group of MFA students, and people would often stop by my student assistant desk in the main office for creative and literary exchanges. Once, the visiting writer Gary Short left a copy of his newly published book of poems on my desk because he knew I couldn’t afford it. I remember the eighth floor as a warm place where faculty, students, and staff supported one another and where we exchanged books and pieces we wrote.

### **How do you think *Ice Box* contributes to the creative writing culture at UAF?**

Our goal with *Ice Box* was to add to and enhance UAF’s already prominent creative writing culture. *Permafrost* represented the work of the MFA student editors, and the undergraduate students needed a journal. *Ice Box* was meant to be open to UAF undergraduate students with an equitable lens to writing from students for whom English is their second language. When I left,

I hoped for it to survive and thrive and perhaps one day be open for submissions from other campuses and out-of-state.

Every established writer had a first piece published, and frequently, it starts with small presses and undergraduate literary journals. *Ice Box* is where beginning writers can see their work in print. It's one of the places where artists make their first steps into the writing world. Like any first step, that publication is a valuable moment in a person's life, in a writer's life.

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## WRITING & LITERATURE

**What did you enjoy writing at the beginning of your literary career? How has your taste evolved?**

I started writing short fiction and essays. When I went to a creative nonfiction workshop at the University of Iowa, the faculty member Patricia Foster mentioned that my writing had a poetic soul and that reading my prose felt like reading poetry. This feedback made me pause for a moment in my writing endeavors. I started experimenting with poetry, but it wasn't until I graduated from UAF that I began to write poetry seriously.

**What was your first publication, and how did it feel to see your work in print?**

My first publication was the poem "Dying" in *Tidal Echoes*, a journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Alaska Southeast. It was in 2004, and I was trying to emerge as a writer. Seeing my poem in print validated my work. I remember smiling and just letting go. Publishing gave only short-term satisfaction, and sending out work was more stressful than the reward I felt. Back then, you had to print pieces, stamp them, and send them via snail mail. It was overwhelming. I tried to push through for a while, but then let

go and focused on reading and seeking truth. It is only now that I am moving through the publication process—not for me, though, but for my kids. I want my kids and grandkids to know me as a poet and see my work in print. It’s a blessing to see their smiles when one of my pieces is published.

### **Which people, artists, and events have inspired your work?**

My grandfather was my mentor early in life. We used to recite poems by Jean de la Fontaine after school, and he taught me how to fight for social justice. He fought in the French Resistance during World War II, and it was essential that he teach me history and how moral choices matter in life. In addition to poetry, we read and discussed French and world history events. Throughout my life, I’ve had traumatic events and blessings that have impacted my writing; my mother’s tragic passing, my illness, and the adoption of my children were major creative historical blocks in my work.

As an undergraduate student at UAF, I read Toni Morrison, Sharon Olds, and Italo Calvino. I even wrote a note to Olds to thank her for her work, and she responded. Since then, I’ve kept her note in my office as encouragement. In the past few years, I delved into work by Aimé Césaire, Maryse Condé, and Edwidge Danticat. I go through phases, and currently I’m reading Caribbean literature. I enjoy art, so I frequently find myself roaming at various museums. As a teen, I used to escape to the Museum of Modern Art in Nice, France, sitting on a bench while absorbing the art around me. I was fond of Yves Klein’s pieces, as the intensity of the blue captivated me. I write ekphrasis poetry; visual art is essential to my work and identity.

### **You have two Master’s degrees and are now pursuing a PhD. How does education fit into your writing? Do you think getting an education is integral to being a good writer?**

I don’t think my education fits into my writing, yet my writing supports my academic pursuits. I write scholarly essays with a poetic voice, and it is okay. It separates me from other scholars.

Poetry also finds its way while I write academic essays and read complicated texts. It helps me prepare for qualifying exams and life. I don't necessarily believe that education is integral to being a good writer. Instead, reading, art, and writing are essential to education and preparing for creative solutions. I am interested in knowledge and truth, so of course I keep expanding my education, yet I don't believe it is necessary for writing.

**Are you working on any projects now—writing or otherwise?**

Aside from my dissertation and my debut collection of poems, I am working on a collaborative project with my friend and artist Nada Fakhreddine. It's a collection of art and poems inspired by each other's work. Ekphrasis poetry has always been my preferred form, and I've published a few individual pieces; however, this will be an entire collection of poems and an art show. Nada and I are friends with similar cultures and roots. We grew up on opposite sides of the Mediterranean Sea, and our work brings to the surface memories of the docks, boats, sea, and fish. I've also been working on a collection about my mother's tragic passing. I have a lot of writing, editing, and processing ahead of me in the next year.

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LIFE & LANGUAGE

**You grew up in France but moved to the United States as a young adult. Can you explain about that cultural transition and how you ended up at UAF?**

Before I moved to the US, I lived in a segregated neighborhood in Nice called St. Roch, the third most challenging place to live after Les Moulins and L'Ariane. I wanted to get out and have a chance for a better future. I grew tired of burnt cars, urine smell, and broken glass. I didn't know how to leave St. Roch and there were no outreach programs. I applied to various French schools,



and, as the summer of 1994 approached, I still heard nothing. I didn't have much hope for acceptance, since people from segregated neighborhoods didn't have many opportunities, and our schools were poorly regarded. Unexpectedly, I had the chance to move to Fairbanks via my birth father and enrolled at UAF. I did not know my father then, having spent only a few weeks with him over two summers during my teen years. It was a risk, but I took it. I had a golden opportunity to make it out of St. Roch. Even though I didn't know English well and was apprehensive about the unknown, I packed my bags and left.

My father was not a good man, and very fast I was left to fend for myself in an unknown environment. I went to classes with my French/English dictionary and spent more time trying to understand lectures in English than I did learning the actual content. I managed mathematics and engineering classes, but chemistry was challenging. I grew a circle of friends relatively quickly, and we studied for many hours in Duckering Building, even overnights eating pizza.

I struggled to write my engineering reports, so even though I was placed into freshman composition due to my high TOEFL scores, I took extra classes—developmental English, technical writing, and creative writing—to improve my grammar and compensate for my clumsy writing. All the work took time, and because my living situation was difficult, I worked several jobs to survive and go to school part-time, like many undergraduate students. My freshman year, I was a maid at a bed and breakfast because my verbal English was not proficient and it was the only job I could find.

Over time, I grew fond of creative writing and found my place among the English majors. I was drifting away from the Engineering Department. I enjoyed the mathematical challenges provided by engineering classes, yet they lacked the art component I needed—and I was not happy. My dream was to be an architect, not an engineer. One day I filled out a change of major form and switched to English. I went to the “dark side,” which is what Engineering students called the Humanities at the time (we were *Star Wars* nerds from the early trilogy). My

friends in English were not surprised I had changed. Yet my friends from Engineering were upset and cut all ties, but for a couple, such as my friend Jean-Marie, who taught me how to make American food staples such as mac and cheese and Jell-O (we're still in touch today) and my ex-boyfriend Steve. It felt like I underwent an academic divorce. As English was my second language, it was very unexpected, but I felt safe and happy on the eighth floor of Gruening Building.

**Your first language is French, but you write primarily in English. Do you find it difficult communicating between these two languages?**

No, not really. One advantage is that French and English have similar roots and language history. I use either whenever one is better for the circumstance (some words are not easily translatable). In my academic and creative writing, French is usually present. I also translate my work from French to English or English to French. I have not published any pieces in France yet. I'm not as familiar with the publication system. It's one of my future goals, and it will mean a lot to me to publish in the country where I grew up and where I claim my roots.

Until recently, my writing was considered "second class," as it was not high-standard English or something perceived as high-standard. I edited my essays a dozen times to pass and/or excel in my classes or at work. In my Ph.D. program at Claremont Graduate University, I found faculty who appreciate my writing, the poetic prose, and the French language. They focus on voice and authenticity. They still keep high standards, yet more so in the critical thinking and creative writing processes. I have the honor to be under the tutelage of great committee members—Dr. Martha Arguello, Dr. Darrell Moore, and Dr. David Seitz—who are familiar with the French language and culture, and even francophone lifestyles like in the French Caribbean. I consider myself a spoiled Ph.D. student at times. I'm not saying it's easy; far from it. I can finally read and write in either language, even for my qualifying exams. I have the

right to be who I am as an individual, poet, and scholar. I don't have to suppress any component of my being, such as my language.

**Your website discusses your diagnosis with the autoimmune disease scleroderma. How has your health journey impacted your identity and your daily work?**

I am careful not to use my illness as a component of my identity. It does not define who I am or who I will be tomorrow. My illness is undoubtedly a variable in my life, such as the weather, but not a facet of my identity. One day it's warm, the sun is shining, and the body is cooperating; the next it's a thunderstorm with lightning, and my muscles refuse to move. I wake up each morning, assess the day, and check in with my body just as I do when I look outside the window to know how to dress up for the weather. "What can I do today?" is my go-to phrase. I do a head-to-toe body check-in. My illness, even though it is technically considered a disability, does not stop me from being motivated to live, travel, read, and write.

I seek balance and harmony with my body. Yes, I have some limitations, yet I try to find ways to make things happen rather than excuses for them not to happen. I will walk until I can no longer walk. And I will write until I no longer can write. I've always taken a holistic approach to my well-being. My recent diagnosis has provided some challenges, and writing through each challenge has been my art therapy.

One of the most excellent physicians of all time, Stephen Hawking, contributed greatness to our world even with his ALS diagnosis. Frida Kahlo was known to paint in her bed. My granddaughter, Hope, has fibular hemimelia, and it does not stop her from running and playing soccer. Disabilities, visible or not visible, do not have to restrict people from being part of society and enjoying life. Society creates and reinforces those boundaries; people with disabilities keep on taking them apart. The Paralympics are also a great example.

**On your blog, you write about the struggles you've faced, from chronic health issues to becoming a parent. How do you find the time and motivation to write?**

Yes, I blog about my health struggles with the hope of inspiring other people dealing with a similar diagnosis. I don't have time to write, but writing finds its way. When I started to write, I tried to manage and plan my writing—the number of pages a day and when to revise my pieces—just as if training for a race. I read books like Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, attended creative writing workshops, and earned my MFA in creative writing. I did everything I thought was right to become a "good" writer. However, it provided more anxiety.

It took a while before the act of writing became organic again. It took me mourning the creative process after years of writing dry technical essays, mental health case profiles, and emails to advocate for children's special needs before I wrote a creative piece again. During a thesis accountability workshop, I didn't feel like working on my psychology thesis, so I started to write an essay, an early version of "Shades of White," which I later published. Since writing poetry again, I have slowly been trying to emerge as a writer.

**When discussing your time at UAF, you reflected on your friendships and mentors in the English Department. As you've moved up the academic spheres, do you still find that sense of community?**

My community at UAF was unique and very strong. I lived in two places in Alaska, Fairbanks and Juneau. In both places, the communities were unlike anything I've known in Nice and now in Los Angeles County. At UAF, it felt as if all of us English majors knew each other and kept coming across one another in venues such as the Fairbanks Art Association, the Alaska Museum, various dance studios, the Alaska Coffee Bean, and the community fair. We all saw each other and participated at all the locations. To this day, I remain in contact with several UAF alums and faculty, most closely with Dr. Cindy Hardy, Pete

Pinney, and my dear friend Zachary Blurton.

### **What advice do you have for aspiring writers?**

We all hear, “Keep writing!” “Live so you have something to write,” and “Write what is hard to write,” but we don’t frequently hear that breaks are okay. Sometimes we push ourselves and work too hard, we worry too much about what others think, and the writing can lose authenticity. It is only a matter of time before burnout occurs. I think writers today need to be able to slow down, enjoy the process, and remember why they started to write and maintain that passion instead of worrying about how many pieces they submit and how many get accepted and rejected. Instead, writers could consider focusing on the page and the art. Not all art is meant to be shared or published. And sometimes the poem left hidden in a file folder is good enough.