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## A Banner Year for a Debut Work of Nonfiction

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## A Banner Year for a Debut Work of Nonfiction

**UM professor's memoir rockets to the top five of New York Times Best Sellers list**

JANUARY 21, 2021 BY ABIGAIL MESEL



UM English professor and author Aimee Nezhukumatathil shows off a copy of 'World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments,' which has drawn widespread praise and is included on the New York Times Best Sellers list. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – Aimee Nezhukumatathil, a **University of Mississippi English** professor and award-winning poet, has been making national news with her bestselling book, "World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments."

This book of illustrated essays – Nezhukumatathil's first foray into nonfiction – is a paean to the beauties of nature seen through Nezhukumatathil's eyes from childhood through the present. The essays constitute a memoir that emerges from the depths of her powers of poetic perception.

"During a year of so much sadness and loss, booksellers have brought whole worlds to people who need it most," she said. "There's no way an indie book gets to be on the NYTimes Best Seller list without booksellers and word of mouth.

"I'm enormously grateful for booksellers' vision and creativity – and their belief in the power of books."

Since its publication in September, the book has taken on a trajectory of its own. In early December, "World of Wonders" was chosen by Barnes & Noble as its Book of the Year and released in a special gift edition. The book will be featured in every Barnes & Noble in the country.

Book of the Year candidates are nominated by booksellers at the company's stores across the country. The collective list is then narrowed down to eight finalists and from there, sellers select their favorite from among the list.

Weeks after the Barnes & Noble honor, "World of Wonders" jumped to No. 5 on the prestigious New York Times Best Sellers list by mid-December. It has been on the Best Sellers list for five consecutive weeks. The author also was featured in a New York Times **profile** on Dec. 24.

Nezhukumatathil has won praise from the highest realms of literary criticism. In a New York Times **book review**, "World of Wonders" was praised as "a beautiful, poetic and powerful memoir about growing up as a 'brown girl' in America in the 1980s, the child of a Filipina mother and a South Indian father ... a carefully crafted gem."

The writer also has published four collections of poetry. Her most recent is "Oceanic" (Copper Canyon Press, 2018). Her previous books were published by Tupelo Press: "Lucky Fish" (2011), "At the Drive-in Volcano" (2007) and "Miracle Fruit" (2003).

Nezhukumatathil poetry has been featured in the monthly publication Poetry, and the 2015 and 2018 volumes of "Best American Poetry." Nezhukumatathil serves as poetry editor of Orion magazine, and her writing has been featured in ESPN Magazine and on "PBS NewsHour."

One of her poems, "Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth," was published in The New York Times Magazine in 2018.

Last April, Nezhukumatathil was named a **2020 Guggenheim Fellow** by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. She was the first Ole Miss professor to receive this prestigious fellowship as an active faculty member.

She also received the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for poetry in 2019. She has received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Mississippi Arts Council. In August 2019, she was chosen to be a resident artist at the famed MacDowell artists' colony for a third time.

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### Donations Sought for 25th Annual Books and Bears Program

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children's play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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### Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship Aims to Build Leaders

OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

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### Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith's Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith's enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith's 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school's first African-American student.

Nezhukumatahil was born in Chicago to parents who emigrated from the Philippines and India. Her New York Times profile touched on the centrality of her identify to her creative work: “Nezhukumatahil has written a timely story about love, identity and belonging (more accurately often about not belonging, because of racism and her family’s immigrant experience).”

“The enthusiasm with which my book has been greeted is a gentle reminder of how good and easy it is to slow down and be a little curious about this planet and, in turn – if we do that – how we can feel less alone,” she said.

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“James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier,” a collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

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