



IN ORBIT WITH: MAIYA ROELEN



A WRITER EXPLORING AWE AND COURAGE IN THE BIODIVERSITY SPHERE

About Maiya Roelen

Maiya Roelen is a recent graduate from the Wildlife Biology program at the University of Montana. She is a dedicated climate activist striving to amplify young voices in the environmental movement by centering her efforts on youth service and leadership as an avenue for changemaking. Her work also highlights the intersection between science and solutions, recognizing the importance of translating research into action for a more equitable world. Maiya is a former National Environmental Leadership Fellow with the Rachel Carson Council and currently serves on the inaugural Youth Advisory Council for Our Children's Trust.

As a creative, Maiya's writing explores the human connection to the natural world and emphasizes the importance of seeking joy despite the environmental challenges of our time.

Spotlight Piece: *When You Find Yourself On An Island*

"This piece is about wonder, child-like imagination, and trying to approach the unknown with curiosity instead of fear. There is so much that we do not know or can't understand, but just because something is unfamiliar does not make it bad. I wrote this piece to highlight how questions and the earnest desire to learn can transform your perspective from being afraid to seeking moments that spark intrigue, humor, and gentleness. I believe that if we choose to be authentic and inquisitive in our effort to be closer to nature, we are less likely to want to extract and harm. From our questions and awe, we become better protectors and stewards of this place."

In Conversation with Maiya Roelen

What first drew you to storytelling, and how did your journey begin?

“Storytelling has always been the method through which I have processed my own worries, joy, uncertainty, wonder, fear, and frustration about the world. I have always considered myself a writer, and from a young age, much of that self-expression was focused on the natural world; wildlife specifically. In elementary school, teachers encouraged me to continue investing in my growth as a writer, and that commitment has served me well through college, and I hope for it to continue to do so.”

How would you describe your work and the themes you keep returning to?

“I would describe my work as trying to nurture the awe and inspiration that so many of us experience as children when regarding the natural world. Youth possess so much curiosity and wonder for the planet, and I feel that we tend to lose this as we age. My goal in writing narratives is not only to maintain my own connection to the planet but to encourage others to seek a relationship with every organism, since we are all dependent on each other to exist.”

How does the environment or climate shape your work?

“The climate crisis deeply shapes my work, seeing as it is a daily reminder of just how much is at stake. Just as loss reminds us how precious this life is, climate change threatens the planet as we know it, the beauty of this place we call home, and our ability to connect to the non-human world. Therefore, in my writing, I seek to illuminate the extraordinary life that exists on Earth while also inviting people to take action against that which threatens life from persisting.”

What does your creative process look like from idea to finished piece?

“I tend to think of my creative process as slow and deliberate. If I sit down and try to write without inspiration, the piece usually feels lackluster to me. So, I usually wait for a moment, idea, or message to strike me before sitting down to write. After that, the story mostly unfolds on its own. When a first draft is written, I step away from the story for a day or two to let it marinate. Then I return to the piece for edits to refine and clarify my ideas in order to deliver my story in the clearest way possible and in a manner that feels authentic to my style and message.”

What are you working on right now?

“I am really inspired by the work of Margaret Renkl, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, and Robin Wall Kimmerer in the way that they weave narratives about their own lives with stories of the natural world. Therefore, I am drawing inspiration from their model and compiling a series of short narratives. These narratives draw on my own experience as a young person while exploring how my story is completely shaped by, and connected to, the planet. My hope is to reflect on and demonstrate how people can be more thoughtful stewards of this land through the examination of our innate desire to be kin to place.”

Why do you think storytelling matters in shaping the future?

“We cannot transform the way we live nor our societal systems if we cannot envision a different reality for ourselves than the one we are currently occupying. I often consider the famous saying “life imitates art” because it illuminates how the human imagination shapes our understanding of what is possible. Storytelling matters in shaping the future because it sheds light on not only what people deeply crave - in our relationship with nature and each other - but also what is possible for our human existence.”

What advice would you give to other emerging creatives?

“Anya Dillard, an incredible young leader, entrepreneur, creative, and visionary, gave a TED Talk in which she said, “trust your art to heal you.” This deeply resonated with me because much of my writing and storytelling is shaped by a deep sense of loss from the environmental crises our world faces on a daily basis. For me, writing is healing. So, I hope other creatives may trust their own process and turn to their craft to reflect, ponder, and drive the creation of a better world.

If you could live in any fictional, sci-fi universe, where would you go and why?

“Sometimes, the modern day already feels like a fiction or sci-fi world with the extraction, systems of oppression, and technological development that people seem to prioritize over all else. Since much science fiction writing reflects this state of the world, I would be hard pressed to find a fictional universe that I might want to occupy. I suppose I shall focus the efforts of my imagination here, first.”