



**OWEN WISTER AWARD**  
Named after Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* and considered the “father” of the Western story, the Owen Wister Award is presented to a living author for lifetime achievement in Western history and literature. The recipient is automatically inducted into the

Western Writers Hall of Fame, which is housed outside the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

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By Phil Mills Jr.

“Stories represent life. Stories reflect our existence. They open doors to the mind. They send you places you can only imagine,” says W. Michael Gear, who joins his wife, Kathleen O’Neal Gear, as this year’s recipients of the Owen Wister Award for their lifetime contributions to Western literature.



“The act of putting words on paper allows me to see the subject in a way I never would have before,” Kathleen says. “It’s as though words are the vehicles for self-transcendence so I can see the subject in a new way.”

Adds Michael: “Our goal in writing, whether it’s coauthored or individually, is we want the reader to fall into that world so seamlessly that they never come out until the last page.”

“And that takes both of us to do it,” Kathleen adds.

“If you’re going to be a writer, you really have to write,” Michael says.

“We are always working on more than one book at a time,” Kathleen says. “We are constantly shifting back and forth. If

you are going to be a productive author, you are going to be working on three or four books at once.”

Their system works. Productivity and literary influence are hallmarks of this *New York Times* and international best-selling team of Wyoming authors. As of this month, they’ve published 73 books and have contracts for several more. They have more than 17 million copies in print worldwide. And their work has been translated into 29 languages.

This popular duo writes in several genres. Although perhaps best known for their “North America’s Forgotten Past” series, the Gears have had considerable success in science fiction, historical fiction and nonfiction, as well as hundreds of published articles and papers. They are also authorities on the bison industry having been published extensively on bison genetics, health and management.

“Nothing gets out of this house without both of us having



*Kathleen O’Neal Gear and husband Mike have written more than 70 books. Bottom: The Gears at their bison ranch, which they recently sold.*  
All photos courtesy of W. Michael and Kathleen O’Neal Gear unless otherwise noted.

been through it,” Michael says. “Everything we write is co-authored even if it only has one of our names on it.”

Kathleen continues, “When we write together –”

“We just finish each other’s thoughts,” Michael says with a laugh.

The Gears are known for their productivity ... churning out one bestselling novel, then another, in a seemingly endless string. So how do they stay motivated?

“One of the reasons we’ve had the productivity we’ve had is because we’ve dedicated ourselves to the craft,” Michael says. “We’ve never stopped learning. One of the reasons we attend [International Thriller Writers’] ThrillerFest in New York each year is so we can be there for CraftFest. It’s the only place on earth where even after having published 70 novels you can sit there for an hour and listen to your colleagues talk about the writing process. For as many books as we’ve written and their many different voices ... the many different styles and genres ... we are still learning. Any time you think you’ve written your best work, your career is over.”



Kathleen adds, “To a large extent, what motivates both of us is the West. We have spent the last 28 years living on what you would call the edge of the frontier ... the Yellowstone Ecosystem. Our next closest house was seven miles away. And when you live as we have, the frontier is very close. Wildlife is very close. The threat of the land ... the beauty of the land ... all that open space. That is a lot of what inspires and motivates us. It’s a job we love.”

“But it’s a hard one. It’s tough,” Michael says. “Even with our track record. Even with as many copies as we have in print and as many copies as we’ve sold, we still constantly get back-handed by the industry. It’s just how publishing is.

“You have to be willing to accept the fact you are going to face disappointment after disappointment after disappointment. And you just have to believe in yourself and go right back to work. We are going to write it to the best of our ability and eventually we’ll find a publisher for it.”

This year’s Wister honorees have been associated with WWA since the group met in Fort Worth in 1986, but that first encounter took some serious encouragement.

“I had sold my archaeological consulting company, Pronghorn Anthropological Associates, back in 1984, and I started writing full time,” Michael says. “Kathy worked for the [Bureau of Land Management] for another year and then took her retirement. We were going to be writers. And come hell or high water we were going to make this work.

“A good friend of ours, Gaydell Collier, was the only author we knew. So we kept bombarding poor Gaydell with all these manuscripts. She had read the manuscript that eventually became *This Scorched Earth*. She sent it back and said ‘you really need to go to the Western Writers of America meeting.’”

At the time, the Gears were living in a remote cabin built by Michael’s great uncle Aubrey on an old mining claim on a Colorado mountain. They were at 9,000 feet near Empire.

“We told Gaydell, ‘We are living on less than \$100 a month in a cabin in the mountains with no running water and a two hole outhouse,’” Michael recalls. “‘How can we afford to go to the Western Writers meeting in Fort Worth?’ Her reply was ‘You can’t afford not to.’

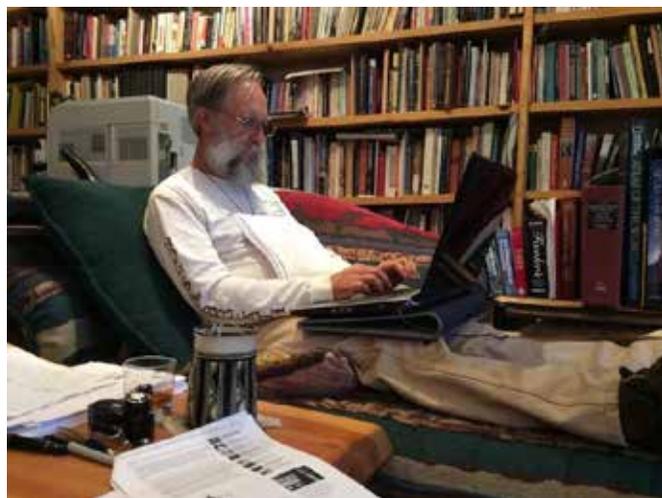
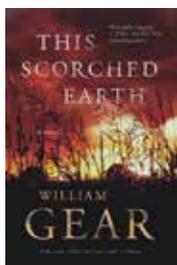
“She said, ‘If you will go, I will send this manuscript to Jeanne Williams and see if she will read it and discuss it with you when you are there.’ So we did. Jeanne Williams not only read the manuscript, but she provided the input that would eventually lead to its publication, although it took another 32 years.”

*This Scorched Earth* received Spur Finalist honors in 2019 for Best Historical Fiction. The Gears also received Spur finalist honors in 2018 for *Moon Hunt* and in 2006 for *People of the Moon*. They received a Spur Award for Best Novel of the West in 2005 for their coauthored novel *People of the Raven*.

Kathleen’s first published book was a science fiction novel, *An Abyss of Light*, which came out in 1990. Her *Treasure of Light* and *Sand in the Wind* followed in 1990 along with *People of the Wolf*, which was coauthored with Michael. Future novels *The Ice Lion* and *The Ice Ghost* are 2021 titles.

Kathleen has authored 13 novels under her own name and coauthored another 38 novels with Michael. She has published more than 100 nonfiction articles and publications in the fields of archaeology, history, writing and buffalo conservation. She won her first writing contest in 1968 at age 13, when she took first place in an American Legion essay contest. Numerous awards have been coming since. She has twice received the Department of Interior’s “Special Achievement Award” for outstanding management of our nation’s cultural heritage. She was also honored by Congress in 2015 with a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition for her work as an American archaeologist and writer.

In March 1987, Tor Books bought Michael’s first West-



Michael at work, above; Kathleen at the Western Writers Hall of Fame.



ern, *Long Ride Home*, which was published in 1988. That book was soon followed by *The Big Horn Legacy*. That same year, DAW Books bought his science fiction “Spider” trilogy. *The Warriors of Spider* was also published in 1988, followed by *The Way of the Spider* the same year.

Michael has published 22 novels under his own name. His latest novel is *The Alpha Enigma*. This year he starts a new series, “The Wyoming Chronicles,” with *Dissolution*.

The Gears’ most recent coauthored book, *People of the Canyons*, was released last year. Their next novel, *People of Cahokia: Lightning Shell*, is scheduled for release in 2022.

The desire to tell stories came naturally for the Gears, who have been married for 38 years. They grew up around story tellers and family members who believed reading was important.

“I grew up telling stories,” Kathleen remembers. “My father was actually a Western short story writer. My mom was a newspaper journalist. I grew up in a house that told stories all the time. I think I wrote my first short story when I was 7.”

While many books have influenced her style of writing, Kathleen points specifically to Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, Jack London’s *White Fang* and “anything else Jack London wrote.”

Michael explains, “I grew up an only child, and my mother was an English and journalism teacher. She raised me reading books. But even then it was a Doc Savage novel by Kenneth Robeson entitled *The Phantom City* that changed my life and led me to where I am today. I still have it. My mother had a book in my hand from even before I could hold them. I can still remember most of the stories from *Mr. Punnymoon’s Train*.”

When not writing or pursuing one of their many other interests, they are reading. They have a library of more than 30,000 books. “A part of being a writer is doing research, which includes reading,” Kathleen says.

“Kathy and I both read eclectically. We aren’t tied to any one genre.”

Both believe there is a bright future with books but not without some potential problems.

“I believe storytelling has always been a fundamental part of who we are as human beings and it always will be,” Kathleen says. “The way we tell stories will change. We’ve got new methods of telling stories coming into vogue. And that’s on what we



## Talking about the Gears

“They hit town on a motorcycle too small to carry a suitcase yet some-



how step out of their hotel room as if prepared for a photo shoot. They raise bison on their remote Wyoming ranch yet move with sophisticated ease through

urban landscapes. They understand not only the art and craft of writing, but every aspect of the ever-changing publishing business. They have proven instrumental in expanding literature of the American West to prehistoric times. If I pitched these characters to an editor as protagonists for my next novel, said editor would probably dismiss my premise as too farfetched. But my friends Mike and Kathy Gear are not fictional creations. They are as real as real gets.”

– Mike Blakely  
WWA president, 1998-2000

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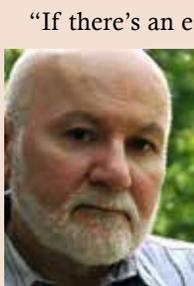
“Kathleen and Michael Gear are amazing. They’ve written about 70 novels separately and together. Because they are archeologists and focus on precontact cultures, these novels have expanded our



awareness of who and what Indian people have been and are in a huge way. They have a world-wide readership, and they deserve it.”

– Win Blevins,  
2015 Owen Wister Award recipient

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“If there’s an equivalent in fiction for the historical team of Will and Ariel Durant, Mike and Kathleen O’Neal Gear can claim that prize. I’m proud and astonished to travel in such exalted company.”

– Loren D. Estleman,  
2012 Owen Wister Award recipient

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“Through their numerous writings over the last few decades, Kathy and Mike Gear have probably contributed more words to the recognition of, and appreciation for, North American Indian culture than anyone I can think of.



Combining their scientific professional training with their commanding and engaging writing style, they have educated and entertained untold millions of readers across the globe.”

– James A. Crutchfield,  
2011 Owen Wister Award Recipient

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“For more than three decades, Kathleen and Michael Gear have been bringing the past to vivid life with their books about the indigenous peoples. Both individually and as a writing team, their work stands out for its focus and readability. The Wister Award was created for such talent.”

– Chris Enss,  
WWA president

need to focus. But people are still reading. That's what is important."

However, that doesn't mean publishing isn't facing its own challenges.

"When you talk about the future of American publishing ... when you understand the biggest publisher in the United States is censoring their authors for sensitivity, that bodes very poorly for the future," Michael says. "I have no idea where this is going. This is not government censorship. It's censorship by the publisher.

"Kathleen and I have spent our lives writing from minority character perspectives, Native American perspectives, different gender roles as anthropologists understand them. To be brought up on the carpet like this is unacceptable."

Michael is referencing his efforts at getting his book *The Alpha Enigma* published last year. The book was published in 2020 but not without some effort.

"You have to draw a line for this stuff," he points out. "We are going to go ahead with the second book. But if we have problems with censorship we'll have to go to court. And that frightens us to death."

Where do Michael and Kathleen Gear go from here? Are there mountains left to climb?

"We have a lot of books still to write," Michael says. "The problem with this crummy 80-to-90-year lifespan is there is only so many books in a lifetime. There is so much wonderful new stuff especially in the work of anthropology. We are really excited about the expansion of modern Westerns."

The Gears recently sold their Red Canyon Ranch, where they raised bison for research and income. The ranch was home for 28 years. They have since moved to Cody, Wyoming.

"We still own a couple buffalo out on the ranch," Kathleen says. "We still do a lot of nonfiction articles for bison magazines."

Why bison?

"Mike and I had been excavating lots of prehistoric bison. We had discussed with regional native peoples the role that bison had played in their culture. Many tribes at the time ... this was 30 years ago ... sincerely wanted to have bison back on the reservations.

"A lot of native people also have private ranches and they wanted bison on them for the health and spiritual benefits of the animal. That's why I wanted to better understand how bison played a role in North American prehistory and history – especially the spiritual aspects. That's why we started raising bison."

They were twice (2006 and 2009) presented with the "Producer of the Year" award by the National Bison Association.

The Gears have shown they aren't afraid of getting their hands dirty for the sake of research or to improve their knowledge about a particular subject. They will always have stories to share.

The influence of this year's Wister Award winners on current and future generations of readers and authors is worth telling and sharing for years to come.

## One Last Look

"Joyce's meticulous attention to detail is unparalleled. She always manages to find more errors than I ever thought could be there. I COULDN'T PUBLISH WITHOUT HER!"

– Donna Mabry, *Wall Street Journal* Best-Selling Author

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## Congratulations to Laura J. Arata



Winner of the 2021 SPUR  
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