

Writing Wild

With whitewater instead of whiteboards, Chandra Brown helps writers polish their craft on the storied waters of the West. It might help the rivers, too.

BY MAGGIE NEAL DOHERTY



CHANDRA BROWN PHOTOS, COURTESY OF FREEFLOW INSTITUTE

CHANDRA BROWN SPEAKS THE LANGUAGE OF rivers. And she's teaching it to others. She has merged her background in education and river guiding with a love of good writing to form a confluence she calls the Freeflow Institute. Founded in 2018 and based in Missoula, the organization uses wild spaces such as river corridors, Pacific Northwest seascapes, and rugged mountain terrain as classrooms, trading in laptops for paddles, using rafts and beaches for conference halls. The field courses, all developed and coordinated by Brown, are led by prominent writers including David James Duncan, Pam

Houston, William deBoys, Heather Hansman, Chris La Tray, and others.

Rivers were an elemental part of Brown's Alaskan childhood and have surged in importance ever since. Growing up in Wasilla, her perception of rivers was primarily confined to sustenance.

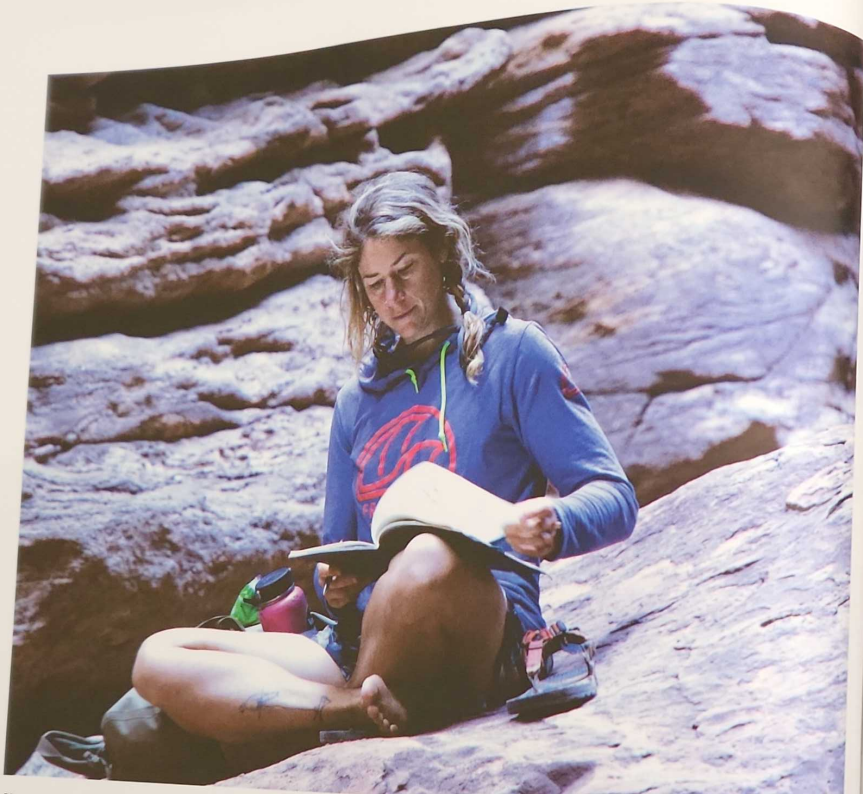
"Rivers gave us salmon," she said. "We didn't recreate on them."

This changed after she visited Montana to tour prospective colleges, and her family took its first white-water rafting trip on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River near West Glacier. Enamored with the experience

Left: The Freeflow banner welcomes participants to a campground near Terlingua, Texas.

Below: Writers gather to watch a sunset in the San Juan Islands of Washington while on a Freeflow course in 2022.





Chandra Brown takes a moment in the Grand Canyon while guiding a commercial trip in 2020.

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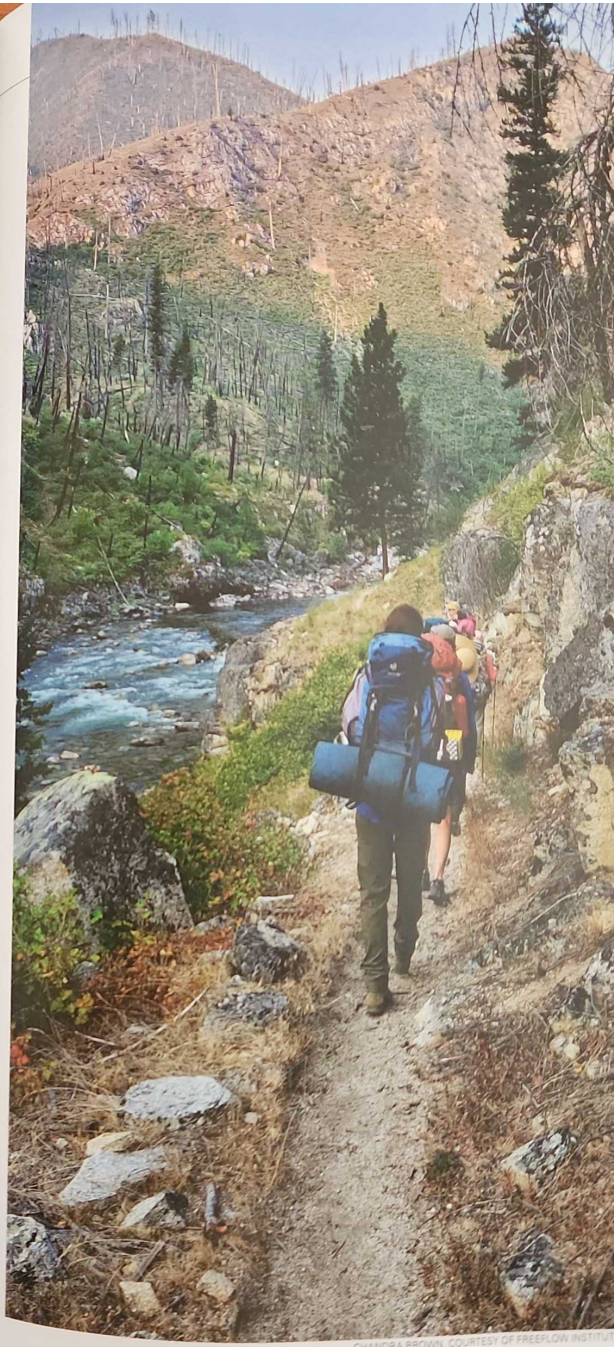
and eager for more, Brown became a river guide between semesters at Montana State University. She started guiding on the Yellowstone River, then the Green and Colorado rivers of the southwest, and developed her powerful technical skills on Alaska's famed Sixmile Creek, a Class V (requiring expert navigation) stream. After flipping a raft on Sixmile's Predator rapid at high water, her hands were paralyzed by cold and she kept dropping the rescue lines.

"I remember thinking: If I survive this, I'm going south," Brown said. She went as far south as the Grand Canyon and returned to guide on the Colorado, and she has continued to do that each summer since 2014, the same year she began graduate school at the University of

Montana in the environmental studies program with an emphasis on environmental writing. Missoula was also the place where the idea to combine teaching, writing, and river guiding into one meaningful endeavor found its peak flow.

"Chandra is a visionary," observed Duncan, award-winning author of numerous books and essays including *Brothers K*, *River Teeth*, and a forthcoming novel, *Sun House*. Brown was his student during a summer writing class as part of the master's program, and Duncan remembers brainstorming with her about what would later become Freeflow Institute.

When not guiding clients through the Grand Canyon,



CHANDRA BROWN, COURTESY OF FREEFLOW INSTITUTE

Freeflow participants backpack up the South Fork of the Salmon River during a 2019 course.

Brown spent years teaching in public high schools in Alaska, Montana, and Washington, and she served as a Fulbright scholar in Ecuador, where she advocated for the conservation of watershed resources with the Ecuadorian Rivers Institute. Yet these various teaching experiences left her feeling like something was missing. Brown, now 41, said she became "interested in how to make each of those singular endeavors more rich, more complex and rewarding."

Around 2016, a friend suggested she create writing workshops on the river. Brown liked the idea and began braiding the various elements into what became Freeflow Institute two years later. She developed course curricula rigorous enough to meet the University of Montana's standards for accreditation, which means students can earn college credits through her programs. She drew on her outdoor outfitting connections to equip and supply the field courses, and tapped her relationships with writing professors to attract authors to lead the workshops. In 2018, Freeflow Institute launched two pilot workshops, the first through the Missouri River Breaks with award-winning environmental journalist and *Field & Stream* contributing editor Hal Herring. The second was on the Main Salmon River, coursing through Idaho's Frank Church Wilderness and led by William deBuys, a renowned conservationist and Pulitzer Prize finalist.

After those two successful workshops, Brown expanded Freeflow's offerings to four courses the next year

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and worked with Montana's Office of Public Instruction to make the programs available for continuing education credit and professional development for educators. The following summer, Freeflow offers four courses in Idaho, Montana, and Utah. To mark the Big Blackfoot River trip, Brown visited Duncan.

After talking and meeting a multi-day workshop on the river he had once fervently defended against a proposed mining project, Duncan said, "I don't think I'll ever teach another writing workshop again."

He continues to lead workshops in Freeflow, including on the Salmon River.

"The river is a great teacher," he explained. Beyond his presentations on craft and building confidence and camaraderie among the participants, Duncan acknowledged another critical element to the flowing wild classroom. "There's so much teaching that the river is doing without the bloody instructor having to even open his or her mouth."

Chris La Tray, a *Mémoiriste*, shares a similar teaching philosophy. In fact, it was Duncan who connected La Tray with Brown, an example of a defining feature of Brown's skill set: an ability to assemble tribunes, the collection of writers, artists, and actors who draw inspiration from natural spaces and, working together, add power to the overall flow. Duncan had invited La Tray as a guest speaker on his Blackfoot River course, and in 2020 La Tray was added to Freeflow's roster.

La Tray, however, is quick to point out that he doesn't consider himself a writing teacher. "What I want is for people to get on a raft. And then just let the world do its thing on them the way it has me. When I'm out there, I'm not thinking about how am I going to make you a better writer. I want to make you a person who's more open to paying attention to the world around you. And if writing is what you want to do, that's going to make your writing better."

As the award-winning author of *One-Sentence Journal: Short Poems and Essays from the World at Large*, La Tray has taught two workshops on the Blackfoot River and led

virtual seminars, first created as a response to the Covid pandemic. Freeflow has since incorporated online courses to expand its reach during the off-season and provide a safe channel for individuals who aren't able to attend a field course but still want to learn about craft and conservation, and form a creative community.

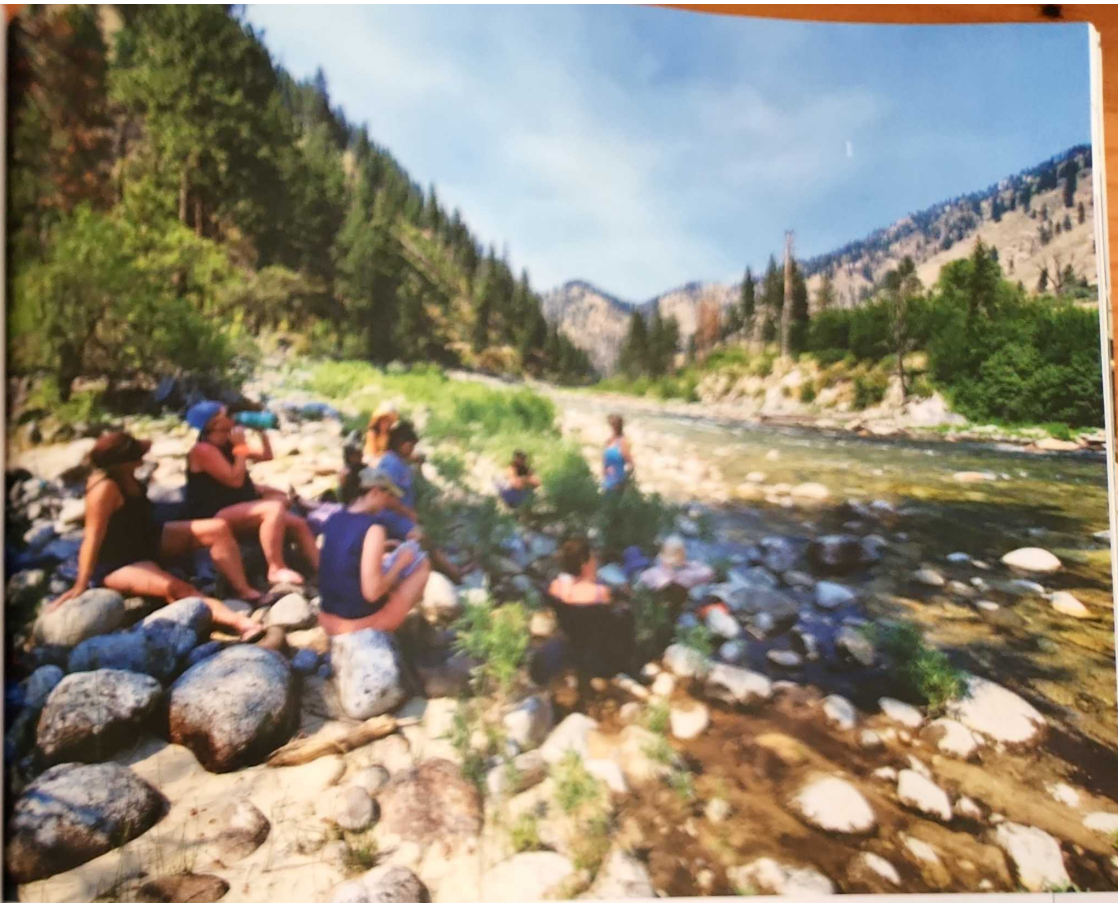
Maddox Friend of Tacoma, Washington, shares a similar background with Brown. A former river guide herself, she discovered Freeflow through a friend from graduate school, where she studied watershed science. The friend forwarded her an email about a scholarship opportunity from American Whitewater to attend a 2021 Freeflow workshop.

Friend was drawn to Freeflow because it offered two of her favorite things: rivers and writing. She applied and was awarded the scholarship, making it possible for her to attend.

Making Freeflow courses accessible is a priority for Brown, and she understands that her courses, which range from \$2,000 to \$4,000, are too expensive for many people. Tuition includes writing instruction, professional guides, meals and beverages, transportation to and from the river, and specialized gear like lifejackets and waterproof bags. To help more people attend, Brown established partnerships with American Whitewater and American Rivers to offer program scholarships. In 2020, the nonprofit Freeflow Foundation was created to allow donors to defray the cost of tuition and travel expenses for people from lower-income communities, and to provide gear and guidance for those students unfamiliar with wilderness or river travel. So far, 27 of 195 participants have received financial aid.

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Independent journalist Miles Griffin was able to attend the 2021 course on Utah's Green River through Desolation



Above: A quintessential Freeflow Institute classroom brings participants together alongside a river.

Left: Sunset settles over Blackfoot Territory during the University of Montana Summer Indian Law Program's field course with Freeflow Institute.

CHRISTINA BROWN PHOTOS,
COURTESY OF FREEFLOW INSTITUTE



Canyon because of the scholarship opportunities. Griffiths learned about the course through the workshop instructor, Heather Hansman, a colleague in the world of environmental journalism. "I loved the idea of doing a workshop that took place on a river and in a canyon I was interested in exploring and writing about," said Griffiths.

Hansman is deeply familiar with the entirety of the Green River from source to confluence as it was the subject of her 2019 book, *Downriver: Into the Future of Water in the West*. She solo paddled the length of the Green, the Colorado River's biggest tributary, and has taught two workshops for Freeflow. As an instructor, Hansman says she also benefits from Freeflow.

"Journalism, right now, can be a hard road at times. I can feel downtrodden in my own head but to have the time on the river, I get fired up and connected," she said.

Facilitating reporting skills, like intensive field observations, reminds her of what's important. "Stories can change people's lives," she said. "We need this."

Another outcome of Freeflow is the bonds that form among the participants, fostered by Brown's intention to host a workshop that is generous and respectful. Friend's experience with Brown and La Tray was exactly that: "It was very open and very welcoming. Chandra really foments that, which doesn't always happen when you go to a critique group and people are tearing each other down."

Bela Garcia-Arce, a graduate student in her second year of the same environmental studies program of which Brown is an alumnus, cited the unexpected friendships that formed during her 2022 San Juan Islands sea kayaking trip, led by Brendan Leonard, writer and the creator of the humorous, adventure-fueled website, Semi-Rad.

Between Brown's approachability—like teaching people how to pack a dry bag—and Leonard's encouraging lessons, she felt her group's lasting connection was the result of the atmosphere the duo fostered, despite rough seas and days of rain.

"We would work really hard [paddling], get sore and get these nice calluses," Garcia-Arce said. "And then go sit by the fire and have really intense discussions about things that really matter to us. It's so rare that you get to do both of those things."

She said her cohort still meets monthly via Zoom to stay in touch and share their writing.

From the outset, Freeflow is focused on the combination of adventure with writing and creative instruction. But there's another key element at work with Brown's mission: to provide a new, creative solution to address the destabilizing impacts of climate change on wild landscapes and protect access to public lands and waterways.

"Getting people in these river corridors," she said, is done partly "in hopes of building relationships between people and rivers, to create advocates, more people who will care."

Just as streams feed into larger bodies of water, generating more flow and movement, Brown and others would like to see Freeflow's concept, guided by her but carved by rivers, spread and deepen.

"Freeflow should be contagious," Duncan said. "I think there's room for more Freeflow Institutes. Why shouldn't there be Freeflow-like workshops taking place on beautiful, beloved streams, like in England or Scotland?"



A Freeflow participant admires the Two Medicine Valley in Montana while on a course in 2021.

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