

# Study Guide

*for High Schools, Theaters, Arts Councils,  
and Performing Arts Centers*

*hosting*

**Ken Waldman,**  
**Alaska's Fiddling Poet**

- *poetry writing*
- *traditional fiddling*
- *Alaska*

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## About Ken Waldman and How to Use this Study Guide

Ken Waldman combines original poetry, old-time Appalachian-style fiddling, and Alaska-set storytelling for an interdisciplinary and interactive educational experience. A former college professor with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, he has six full-length collections of poetry, a memoir, and a book of acrostic poetry for children, as well as nine CDs that combine original poetry with traditional string-band music. More than 400 of his poems and stories have appeared in literary journals. Since 1995, he's performed throughout North America at leading performing arts centers, theaters, festivals, concert series, and clubs. He's been a visiting artist at over 160 schools in 31 states and a visiting writer at over 80 colleges and universities.

This study guide is designed for Ken Waldman's work in high schools and can be used before or after a visit.

Because Ken Waldman shares poems and talks in depth about his writing process, his program directly relates to any poetry unit, as well as to more general language arts and literature requirements. In addition, Ken Waldman has led in-services for language arts teachers and is mindful how all writing—not just poetry—spans disciplines so can function as a gateway to any part of the curriculum. There's no reason a poem, short story, or creative nonfiction essay can't be about biology, history, math, or anything else. In addition, Ken Waldman's fiddling is an introduction to an often overlooked or misunderstood branch of American music. Ken Waldman's stories about his Alaska experiences offer a lesson in geography. Finally, his memoir, *Are You Famous?*, details his life as a touring artist, so is particularly appropriate for any student seriously considering a career in the arts.

Because Ken Waldman's poetry varies widely—he's written both free verse and structured, formal poems; he's written not only about Alaska, but about comedy, sports, political issues, relationships, family, the environment, surviving a plane crash, and much more—he can confidently go into any school or venue. He especially excels in master classes with young writers (sometimes as part of a gifted and talented program) as well as with at-risk students.

Ken Waldman has appeared in such a wide variety of settings that he understands that he's making a real impact, even without a study guide like this. But having this guide can deepen the impact Ken Waldman makes. Knowing more about the artist, the work, and the subject can lead to a more dynamic lesson for both the teachers and students. And make no mistake that it's the teachers who are there day after day, week after week, month after month, who are doing the essential work.

While Ken Waldman has a knack for coming to a community for a short time and inspiring with his art, he understands it's the teachers and the administrators that allow his visits, who are the real heroes of the programs.

## About Poetry

True story. One of Ken Waldman's friends is David Romtvedt, the poet laureate of Wyoming. An accordion player, a professor, a husband, and a father, David Romtvedt has also been a carpenter, a rancher, a truck driver, a mailman, a blueberry picker, and an assembly line worker. Once he told Ken Waldman that when he flies on planes and his seatmate asks him what he does, if he wants to be left alone, he answers he's a poet. He finds this not only usually shuts them up, but that his seatmates will inch as far as they can from him, as if he's now carrying a communicable disease. If he answers, instead, that he's a musician, professor, or writer, or if he mentions any of his former jobs, they'll invariably engage him in a conversation.

Why Ken Waldman mentions this story is that even though people might say they like poetry, or appreciate it (and some of those people might even be you), the majority of people don't (or think they don't). In fact, most people not only don't understand poetry, but actively distrust it. If they think about poetry at all, they might think of sing-song rhymes for little kids in elementary school, something that has nothing to do with them. Or maybe they think of it as something written long ago in a kind of code that's hard to understand—and again has nothing to do with them. Or maybe it's something they've come across in another way, and it's something they just don't like, so from then on they stay as far away from those awful poems as they can.

Fair enough. But that's the thing: like everything else, there are good poems and bad poems. And what Ken Waldman has found about good poems is they can be the absolute coolest, smartest, most brilliant things out there. Good poems really can change your life. Often they're a lot of fun. The trick is finding them. It's like a well-known American poet (who was also a doctor), William Carlos Williams, wrote:

“It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.”

Ken Waldman wrote his first poem when he was thirty years old, living in Fairbanks, Alaska. At the time he was in graduate school, studying how to write stories better. His first year there he was taking a class that combined fiction writers like himself with classmates who wrote poems and classmates who wrote nonfiction essays. Though poems had been all around him before—and, really, there are always poems around you (just go to the library and look!)—he'd never been properly introduced in all his years of schooling or independent reading.

In Fairbanks, Ken Waldman read his classmates' poems and learned what they'd been reading the past weeks, months, and years. There were some wonderful poets out there he'd known nothing about. Now he knew more. The next years, as he continued to write stories, he began writing more and more poems. And while he learned that poems could be about anything, he also learned about tastes. While experts could disagree, which was true for any art form, there were ways to improve poems.

Here are a few things Ken Waldman learned:

Like with a story, you could always revise. With poems, not only did every word make a difference, but every syllable could too.

When revising, it helped to cut and cut in order to make a single piece as tight as possible.

Poems could be about anything: narrative poems could be like super-short stories; lyric poems depended more on description, but it helped if they described something. A lyric could be a description of a place—the place could be an external landscape or an internal feeling—but since it was a lyric, it was like a song, so it paid attention to sound.

Paying attention to sound doesn't mean rhymes. Most contemporary poetry doesn't rhyme in obvious ways. Contemporary poetry is much more subtle than that.

Something the poet Emily Dickinson said always feels instructive: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

Another instructive quote is from the poet Robert Frost: “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.”

Both the Dickinson quote and the Frost quote point to the reader finding something that's extraordinary in a particular poem, something that “makes your head come off,” or makes you cry, or just plain surprises you—and, to Ken Waldman's way of thinking, the only sure way to get to that point as a writer is to write something you didn't know that you could say. It means going back and instead of reading something absolutely cool, smart, and brilliant, it means writing something like that, which means *not* writing the obvious or predictable, but writing something a little bit deeper, or wilder, something that only you can write.

seven terms (and the name of a favorite poet, who you can look up):

sonnet	sestina	line	voice
villanelle	stanza	line break	William Stafford

Ken Waldman's best piece of advice: sample lots of poetry collections and anthologies, and when you find a poem you like, read it, reread it, reread it again and again, and then read everything you can by that poet. Chances are you'll find more poems you like. Do you want even better advice? Write lots of poems. Share them. Listen to teachers. Then write more. Have fun with it.

As for online resources, Ken Waldman doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org) has most everything you'd ever want, and so much more. It's so much to go through that you're invited to contact Ken Waldman for suggestions how to narrow the focus or for other sites to visit. Like with most everything else these days, the problem isn't gathering information, it's how to most effectively sift through all the information that's already available. Ultimately, like with so much else, once you have a good overview of the field, it becomes a matter of taste.

## About the Fiddle

Sometimes people ask Ken Waldman what's the difference between a fiddle and a violin.

To answer, Ken Waldman will take out his instrument, play a scale, usually with a bit of vibrato (a sound made by maneuvering a finger on the violin string being bowed so there's a throbbing quality) on one or more of the notes. Vibrato is one of the hallmarks of classical music. After finishing playing the scale, Ken will say, "That's a violin." Then he'll start playing a Southern fiddle tune, with double stops (when two strings are bowed at the same time) and slides (moving a finger up, making a slippery and bluesy sound). "That's a fiddle," Ken will say afterward. Fiddle is the term used for a more folksy or bluesy music—Irish music, Cajun music, blues all may have fiddles. While the instrument is the same, some fiddlers prefer slight modifications, like flatter bridges. But, really, the differences are individual. It's the style, and music, that's different.

Ken Waldman started playing when he was living in North Carolina, sharing a house with a banjo player and a guitarist. One day a friend of the banjo-playing housemate decided he wasn't going to keep his fiddle, so brought it over to the house to sell it. When Ken Waldman bought it, he'd just turned 25 years old.

Ken Waldman kept practicing, and was fortunate to be living in the community near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where there was a tradition of this old-time string-band music. Though Ken never learned to read or write music, he learned as others before him learned: by listening and watching local fiddlers, which is the age-old way for learning this kind of music. As he continued, occasionally one of those other local fiddlers showed Ken Waldman a few tricks. For some tunes, it meant specific techniques with the bowing. For others, it meant retuning the fiddle. Always, it meant listening to the music.

As Ken continued listening to this kind of music, he continued to practice. A few years later, he moved to Seattle, Washington, then the following year to Fairbanks, Alaska. After three years in Fairbanks, he moved to Juneau, then Sitka, then Nome, and from 1982-1992, he played at least for a little while everyday. He continued improving.

What Ken Waldman plays is called old-time music, a style that predates bluegrass. The style comes from the Appalachian Mountains and the adjoining regions of the southeastern United States. Though the music has spread all over the country—and all over the world—it's still identified with the South. But while the music may come from there, it's evolved from other music that preceded it. Since the fiddle and banjo are the main instruments, it helps to know that the fiddle style is related to Irish, Scottish, and English fiddle styles from early settlers. The banjo is derived from various African instruments, and came to this country with the slave trade. The clawhammer banjo style used in old-time music, where the right hand is shaped like a claw and then the hand comes down like a hammer, with the thumb following to pick a string (usually the short, high string), takes the instrument back to its roots as a strung drum. While fiddle and banjo are the classic combination, other instruments found in bands include guitar, bass, and

mandolin. Sometimes you might a dulcimer or a piano in a string band (and some bands will include two or three fiddlers—it can get pretty wild).

In 2000, Ken Waldman made his first CD. And over the next nine years he made eight more CDs, including two double CDs, and two children's CDs. All the CDs include fiddle, banjo, guitar, poetry, and more.

Like with the poetry, there are near infinite resources for this music on the internet, and going to YouTube you can see and hear enough to keep you busy for weeks (or months, or years).

*www.oldtimemusic.com* gets to an overview, which includes a definition “What is old-time music?” *www.sugarinthegourd.com* gets to non-stop old-time music.

Six artists to look up and get you started:

John Hartford  
The Wilders

Erynn Marshall  
Richie Stearns

Carolina Chocolate Drops  
Bruce Molsky

## About Alaska

Our 49<sup>th</sup> state has had a history as mythic as its size (it's not just the largest state, but if Alaska was divided in half, Texas would become the third largest state—Texans don't much like hearing that). It's truly a land of extremes.

Because it's so far north, summer days are much longer than the 48 contiguous states—and winter days are much shorter. From late May through late July in the Interior Alaska community of Fairbanks it never gets darker than dusk; drivers can get by without headlights. Winter is the opposite with a long slow sunrise to the southeast over mountains, which is followed by a long slow sunset—and only several hours of light during the day. The highest spot on the North American continent is in the Alaska Range, on the summit of Mount McKinley, which is over 20,000 feet. But if you call that mountain Mount McKinley, Alaskans will know you're not from there. Everybody calls it Denali, which is an Athabascan Indian word for “Great One,” and is the name of the spectacular national park. By the way, Alaska comes from the Aleut word, Alyeska, which means “Great Land.”

The Southeast part of the state has a maritime climate, so isn't as cold as the northern latitude suggests. Still, the weather is a challenge, and many of the communities there average 100 inches of rain a year or more, including Juneau, the state capital, where approximately 30,000 people live. The main population center of Anchorage, where nearly half of the almost 700,000 residents live, isn't any colder than many communities in the Upper Midwest or Plains. But the state's second most populated community, Fairbanks, population of approximately 70,000, averages January highs of below zero.

There a number of Native groups in Alaska. Athabascan Indians are in the Interior the state. Aleuts are in the extreme southwest, including the Aleutian Islands. Three Eskimo groups are Yup'ik, in the western part of the state; Inupiat, in the northwest; and Siberian Yup'ik, only on St. Lawrence Island in northwest Alaska. In Southeast Alaska, two Native tribes are the Tlingit and the Haida.

These Native groups have made Alaska their home for centuries. In the mid eighteenth century, the first European explorers, a crew from Russia, landed in the Aleutians. The next hundred years Russians settled from the Aleutians, to Kodiak Island, all the way to Sitka, on Baranof Island in Southeast Alaska. In 1867, the United States bought the land from the Russians for \$7.2 million dollars, a deal brokered by Secretary of State, William Seward. After many years as an unofficial United States territory, Alaska officially became the 49<sup>th</sup> state in 1959.

As with everything else, there are plenty of resources on the web to learn more about Alaska. Some of what the state is best known for:

wilderness and wildlife  
oil  
Denali

Iditarod sled dog race  
fishing (salmon, crab, halibut)  
giant vegetables

military bases  
Sarah Palin  
Jewel

## What You Can Expect from a Ken Waldman Visit

Ken Waldman invariably begins a program by playing the fiddle (and if he has an accompanist, they'll both be playing). This lightens the mood and also creates a sense of expectation. Depending on the size of the group and the dimensions of the venue, he may already have written something on a board or easel—and he asks that there be a board, or paper, available.

Early into the program, Ken Waldman will go into a bag, show his books and CDs, briefly explain them. That's only the beginning of his show-and-tell. After showing the published books and the CDs, he'll also begin showing them his chapbooks: self-published stapled collections. He has 26 altogether, and he quickly shows them all. The purpose is not only to show how they're divided by themes—showing there are plenty of topics for anyone to write about—but that it's permissible to do this yourself. In the past, such esteemed writers as Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf have self-published. Then he'll take out an instrument, begin to play one of his original tunes. If students have paper and pens (or pencils) it's an ideal time to write down several questions—and Ken Waldman requests students bring paper and pens to the session. Ken Waldman prefers students write down questions instead of just raising hands. Of course, he doesn't get to all the questions, but he'll get to some. And the questions lead not just to answers, but to Ken Waldman sharing an appropriate poem or two about writing, music, or Alaska, which might lead to another fiddle tune, and another explanation.

Instead of offering a performance that could be repeated anywhere, Ken Waldman shares a dynamic and educational entertainment. A poem has more resonance in response to a specific question and those specific questions can lead anywhere. There are always endless possibilities.

Ken Waldman also leaves a poem bookmark or poem postcard with every student and invites them to write him. If they include a return address, he promises to write back. Of course, what he shares in a workshop or performance depends on the group. Spending four hours with a select group of, say, a dozen creative writers means plenty of time to talk about the nature of poetry and creative writing and time for two or three extended writing exercises. With groups of 25-50, there's time to answer lots of questions, share poems, and begin one new piece. For groups of 50-350, or more, Ken Waldman can only answer a few of the questions. But he's also developed a writing exercise that works in the largest concert halls. Everyone attending has a chance to at least begin writing something remarkable and surprising.

### ***Five responses:***

“The experience was electrifying and inspirational to our students, who continue to talk about the “fiddling poet of Alaska” and his music, his stories, and his poems. Among other remarkable talents, Waldman is uncanny in his ability to capture his audience, regardless of size, age, or backgrounds. He can lead an advanced creative writing workshop with budding poets during the morning, and then, in the afternoon, turn on an auditorium filled with hundreds of middle school students. . . . When Waldman left us, I knew that he was the type of writer I would be calling upon again to visit us. He is a unique, authentic, American voice.

*--Robert Boerth, Chair of English, Trinity Preparatory School, Winter Park, FL (2008)*

“What a wonderful day it was at our school when you visited our English and Creative Writing classes! Our students were delighted by the interaction you offered in your presentations. Many have asked if you will be returning during the year for an encore.

*--Jan Neighbor, Chair of English, Rosa L. Parks School of Fine and Performing Arts, Paterson, NJ (2005)*

“Your performance on February 13 was amazing . . . I do want you to know that your work has influenced many people more than you will ever know.”

*--John Fairweather, Blake Magnet Arts High School, Tampa, FL (2010)*

“Ken Waldman is truly an original. . . . It is always very exciting to incorporate traditional music performance in a class like American music, world music, or on an eclectic concert series. Ken's authentic playing and easy manner, accompanied by his unique insight and humor, make for an enjoyable performance. I recommend him most highly.”

*--William Bradbury, Professor of Music and Music Technology, Coordinator Arts and Lectures Series, California State University San Marcos, San Marcos, CA (2010)*

“A few months ago you came to Louisiana and performed some music and poems at Lafayette Charter High School . . . my life went downhill and I ended up in Pineville in a mental institution for severe depression for three months. My poems and writings stopped and I never wrote again . . . That night (you came) you inspired me to start writing again. I even started to write my poems in a book kinda like you did. It helps to keep them organized. I want to thank you because you helped me get more of my feelings out on paper again. I just turned 18 on February 4 and you made me want to change my life again.

*--student, Lafayette Charter High School, Lafayette, LA (2005)*

## Four Sample Poems

(more can be found at [www.kenwaldman.com](http://www.kenwaldman.com))

### After the Plane Crash

My second day in the hospital,  
a nurse I didn't know came into  
my room, shyly asked if I'd seen  
the bright white light. No, I said,  
then recalled that plane ride  
through zero visibility where everything  
had been white, grainy gauzy white,  
and I'd meditated on that white,  
found it inspiring, ineffable,  
deep, was writing a poem in my head  
about white when we hit,  
and when I woke it was to blood  
warm and wet down my face,  
the red rinse like a movie scene.  
It wasn't until a month later,  
feeling like me, that I began  
focusing in on light bulbs,  
headlights, small shiny brightnesses  
winking like stars. So this is it,  
I thought, and looked harder,  
taking every little last thing in.

### The Three Stooges Cheat Death

*Moe:* What's with you numbskulls, parking the car  
on top of train tracks? Why I oughta poke  
the two of you in the eyes. *Larry:* I broke  
the gas gauge. See? *Moe:* Get outa the car  
and fill the tank before I stub this cigar  
in your face. What, you think I made a joke?  
Get going! Scram! *Curly:* Moe, I just woke  
from a dream—a big choo-choo came from far  
away and . . . *Larry:* Yikes, he's right! A train's  
aiming right for us! Oh god! *Curly,* Moe--  
what'll we do? *Moe:* Peaheads, use your brains.  
Move the car. *Curly:* Oh-oh, hold your nose.  
I just cut one. *Larry:* We're saved! What luck!  
Gas! *Moe:* Step on it. *Curly:* Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk.

15,000 Feet, Denali  
*for Jim Lawhon*

Blue ice  
chips and skitters.

Three breaths. Step.  
Right foot. The ax.

His pack  
would have him backwards,

tumbling. He trembles,  
feels sweat trickle

and clump in his beard.  
Above, God's porch,

his summons.  
Climb, he hears.

So he kicks.  
Foot in. The ax.

Purple

Pretend you're a cat  
on your eighth life:  
the sky, the clouds,  
the trees—the world's  
a bruise as you leap  
clawing ledge to ledge.  
One fabulous death left  
to fritter, your purr  
knows gravel, your meow  
a memory of strawberry.  
For the first time  
you find yourself musing  
about muskrat, rabbit,  
the meaning of mouse  
Lucid, vulnerable, shy,  
you edge to your ninth.

*Three questions:*

How are these four  
poems similar and different?

Which is your favorite—why?

If you could ask Ken  
Waldman a question  
about writing, music, or  
Alaska, what would it be?

## Additional Resources, and a Discussion

Ken Waldman  
3705 Arctic #1551  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
[www.kenwaldman.com](http://www.kenwaldman.com)

It can't be emphasized enough that when a teacher grows more comfortable as a writer, he or she will be more comfortable as a writing teacher. For a teacher that could mean taking advantage of every professional development opportunity. It could also mean joining an informal, or formal, writing group in the community. It could mean taking a Creative Writing class at a community college, or attending a writers' conference. It could mean a self-study. While the internet is an incredible resource, it's an incredibly immense and ever-growing resource.

For instance, while Ken Waldman can recommend going to the *poets.org* website, he won't go so far as to recommend any one way to navigate it to best meet any one teacher's needs, but if you start at the *For Educators* link and click, you'll find plenty of useful information, including information about Teachers & Writers Collaborative at *www.twc.org* (highly recommended!) and the National Council of Teachers of English at *www.ncte.org*. We're individuals with individual tastes and needs—and there's always going to be random serendipity when doing research. That said, it's generally helpful to read interviews by practicing writers. *The Paris Review* is a venerable literary journal that always features those kinds of interviews. Ken Waldman has read plenty of interviews there, and elsewhere. And, no, it didn't surprise him to read how highly successful writers sometimes had opposite habits. Some made meticulous outlines; some never outlined. Some wrote with a special pen or on a manual typewriter; some used computers or talked into a tape recorder. Some wrote early in the morning, still in bed; some wrote late at night, fueled by coffee. The lesson, Ken Waldman believes, is to offer student writers a variety of ways to succeed, and to have fun with the process. Teachers can point students to writers who interest them, who are writing stories and poems that intrigue and fascinate. Teachers can then offer assignments that follow up on that interest. And none of us can ever forget that this is all a process.

Any of us can go to an online search engine and type a few words and continue the search, but with *www.poets.org* and now *www.twc.org* and *ncte.org* you have an excellent start.

For music, again, you won't go wrong starting with some of the names listed, and perhaps add “YouTube” or “clifftop” (Clifftop is another name for the Appalachian String Band music festival in West Virginia) to the mix. Pretty soon you'll have more of this music than you'll ever know what to do with.

For more Alaska information, once again you have a very good start.