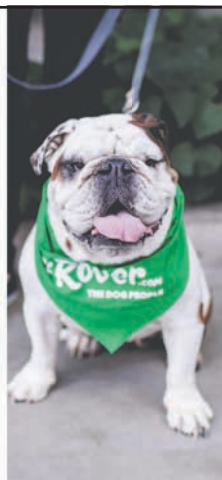




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Jeff Ewing prefers short stories to novels.

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## Dispatches from the dark side

Sacramento writer Jeff Ewing's new short story collection examines loneliness, regret and Northern California

### It must be nice to write short stories so

compelling that a literary journal publisher creates a small press just to publish your collection.

That's what happened to Sacramento author Jeff Ewing. His new book *The Middle Ground*, which published February 19, collates wonderful, sometimes disturbing, stories.

"They don't always seem that dark to me," Ewing says. "And then later people say, 'Oh, they're dark.'"

Ewing, who has written most of his life, started publishing short stories in small literary magazines about 15 years ago. Two appeared in *Into the Void* in 2017 and 2018. That journal's editor-in-chief, Philip Elliott, says Ewing's work helped set him on a new literary path.

"I had always hoped for [the journal] to grow into a small press one day. Jeff's excellent short stories proved to be the catalyst," Elliott says.

His new press, *Into The Void Publishing*, plans to put out a handful of books annually.

One of the stories that so caught Elliott's imagination, contained in the new book, is "Ice Flowers." It imagines the life of Snowflake Bentley, a real-life Vermonter who first photographed snowflakes in the late 1800s by catching them on black velvet before they melted.

BY ERIKA MAILMAN

"It's a strange, solitary thing to do," Ewing says. "And a slow process to develop film back then ... I was curious what drove him to that and how single-minded he would have to be."

The haunting, foreboding story rewards re-reading, and contains a fire versus ice theme that another Vermonter would appreciate: Robert Frost.

Other stories in *The Middle Ground* hone in on lonely people and lonely places.

"The settings are isolated places, with not a lot of city settings. The stories are mostly isolated to just a few characters; they're sparse, not quite empty, with not a lot of stuff going on around them," Ewing says.

He credits Elliott with helping organize the stories in ways that highlight thematic coherence.

"He could see a progression or pattern better than me; I didn't see the interconnections," Ewing says. "It's more of a complete book than just individual stories."

Throughout, Ewing examines his characters' choices.

"I get interested in people being stuck in certain places and not making decisions at all, or making the wrong ones," he says. "In a few stories, there's some regret. In a way, I like that—not living with regret, but opening that up to how things might've gone a different way. There's a positive side to regret."

For those who want a local edge to their literature, the story "Tule Fog" describes Sacramento. "You want to get away from where you grew up—everyone does—but then as you get older, the memories change and you get fond memories," Ewing says of his hometown.

The tale "Silo" takes place in the Sutter Buttes, where active missile silos are rumored to be hidden in the underground tunnel network built by the U.S. Air Force.

With the release of *The Middle Ground*, Ewing intends to continue writing short stories. While he has started several novels, he says he feels more comfortable with a more concise form.

"That length seems more suited to me. I do get hung up on individual sentences to get it just right," he says.

That meticulousness also works well for his day job; he's a technical writer for a large Rancho Cordova-based company.

"It's so straightforward. You still have to whittle text down and get it succinct. You don't want to waste words."

Jeff Ewing will read from *The Middle Ground* at 1 p.m., Saturday, February 23 at the Hop Gardens Taproom, 2904 Franklin Boulevard. <https://jeffewing.com/>