

# Study Guide

*for Elementary Schools (3<sup>rd</sup> grade and up),  
Arts Councils, Theaters,  
and Performing Arts Centers*

*hosting*

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

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

## Table of Contents

About Ken Waldman and How to Use this Study Guide . . . . .	1
About Poetry . . . . .	2
About the Fiddle . . . . .	4
About Alaska . . . . .	6
What You Can Expect from a Ken Waldman Visit . . . . .	7
Two Sample Poems (and a quick poetry lesson) . . . . .	9
Additional Resources, and a Discussion . . . . .	11

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

Ken Waldman combines original poetry (and poetry written by elementary-school-age children), 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 elementary schools when working with third graders and older, 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 or any piece of creative writing can't be about 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.

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, family, the environment, health issues, 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

In October 2009, Ken Waldman was invited to lead a session called *Making Poetry Fun* at the Mississippi Library Association's annual conference. Ken explained a number of the techniques he used to interest children in reading and writing poetry, and mentioned in passing that while he himself occasionally writes sonnets and other rhyming verse, he doesn't teach rhymed poetry to younger children. The comment led to a lively discussion. Ken said that children are already getting rhymes in so many places, and sometimes are being taught “that poems have to rhyme.” While poems may indeed rhyme, Ken explained that in contemporary poetry not only do the vast majority of poems not rhyme, but the ones that use rhyme effectively do it subtly or ironically.

Ken Waldman mentions this story because even though people might already say they think poetry is fun and like 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 elementary school children, 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. Good poems really make you think. They're fun. The trick is finding them. It's like what American poet, Billy Collins, wrote starting his poem, “Introduction to Poetry”:

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

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 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:

With poems, not only did every word make a difference, but every syllable did too.

When revising, it often helped to cut and cut. So often there were extra words.

Poems could be about anything: they could be like super-short stories; they could be a description; they could be a mood; they could be words that pay attention to sound; they can be part of a riddle or game. A contemporary poet, Tod Marshall, when asked how he'd describe poetry to a seven-year-old, answered, "An arrangement of words that matter to you."

Paying attention to sound doesn't mean rhymes. Most poems these days don't rhyme in obvious ways. Poetry is much more subtle than that. With elementary school children, instead of using rhymes, Ken Waldman encourages repetition, which feels more natural and authentic. It's easy, fun, and effective. Rhyming often feels forced. Ken Waldman also shares acrostic poems with elementary school children.

Something the poet Emily Dickinson said has stuck with Ken Waldman: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."

Another helpful 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 "takes your head 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.

six terms (and the name of an advocate, and anthologist, of children's poetry):

haiku	voice	line	
acrostic	stanza	line break	Paul B. Janeczko

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 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).

Five artists to look up and get you started:

John Hartford  
The Wilders

Carolina Chocolate Drops  
Bruce Molsky

Erynn Marshall

## 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:

moose  
grizzly bear  
wolf

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

gold and oil  
long summer days  
cold winters

## 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, and pull out another bag. He'll go into this bag, and pull yet another bag. It's a bit of a comedy routine that lightens the mood even further and creates even more expectation. Eventually, he shows some of his books and CDs, briefly explaining them. That's only the beginning of his show-and-tell. After showing the published books and the CDs, he'll also briefly show some of his chapbooks: self-published stapled collections. He has 26 altogether. 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 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 story 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 an hour with a class of two dozen students means plenty of time to answer questions along with time to write. With groups of 25-50, there's still time to answer questions, share poetry and music, 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:*

“I can give you a 100% endorsement of Ken and the quality of his work with elementary school children. . . . I intend to continue bringing Ken to Whittier for our Educational Outreach Program for as long as he'll be able and willing. He's not not your average poet—or musician. He's quirky, unique, and fun to have around. And if you like foot-tappin' music, you'll dig his program.

*--David Palmer, Theater, Manager, Whittier College, Whittier, CA, (2009)*

“He managed to engage our entire school of 600 plus students, from the wiggliest kindergartners to the most jaded 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Ken combines a gentle folksy spirit with toe-tapping, traditional Appalachian fiddling, and eventually gets all the children writing poetry before they even realize it. I wouldn't have believed that a man who teaches university writing courses could work so well with such a wide range of elementary students, if I hadn't seen it myself. I had a kindergarten teacher tell me afterward that Ken should be an elementary teacher, he was so great with her kids!”

*--Heidi Almy, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, Lyseth Elementary School, Portland, ME (2007)*

“Thank you for opening doors to writing, music, and Alaska in a manner that was easy for students to enter. Sometimes I worry that kids have given up on wonder. You proved me wrong.”

*--Candace Tippett, Community in Schools Program, Granite Falls Middle School, Granite Falls NC (2007) (in response to Ken Waldman's outreach show at the Broyhill Center)*

“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)*

“By far, Alaska's Fiddling Poet has been our most successful residency to date. . . . We received glowing comments from our patrons, especially the elementary teachers at the Art in Education shows. The children were delighted with your performances. I knew they were hooked when you started the Art in Education shows with a poem for Carroll County. They were eager to participate, not only with the fiddling tunes, but especially with the poetry. Also, writing poems based on sounds made by instruments was a clever idea that the teachers appreciated. . . . I highly recommend Ken Waldman, Alaska's Fiddling Poet, to any presenter in search of Art in Education, children's shows, family shows, and residencies.”

*--Robert Jennings, Director, Townsend Center, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA (2005)*

## Two Sample Poems (and a poetry lesson)

### My Grandfather

My grandfather, Jack.  
My grandfather, Joseph Schwartz.  
My grandfather, pipe-smoker and chess player.  
My grandfather, married to a chatterbox.  
My grandfather, businessman with an office.  
My grandfather, who never told jokes.  
My grandfather, who built a summer house on a lake.  
My grandfather, who liked strolling late at night, alone.  
My grandfather, who enjoyed mowing the lawn and gardening.  
My grandfather, who fixed broken machines.  
My grandfather, who carved roast beef and turkey.  
My grandfather who could rock in a rocking chair all day before a fire.  
My grandfather, who grilled hamburgers on the barbecue.  
My grandfather, my grandfather, my grandfather.

### D is for Dog Team

Days pulling a sled  
on snow and ice, on  
good trails and bad,  
  
twenty miles or more.  
Every run is different.  
A winter bonus.  
Moonlight shines.

**And a quick poetry lesson: the same six words five different ways**

She is walking down the stairs.

She is  
walking  
down  
the stairs.

She  
    is  
        walking  
            down  
                the  
                    stairs.

She  
is  
  w a l k i n g  
    d  
      o  
       w  
        n  
      the  
   s  
  t  
   a  
    i  
      r  
       s.

Reading these offers a quick possibility of the power of poetry and of language.

She is  
  walk  
    ing  
      do  
       wn  
        the  
          st  
           ai  
            rs.

Does anyone have a question for Ken Waldman about poetry, or music, or about Alaska?

## Additional Resources, and a Discussion

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

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” of “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.