This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sail the unshadowed main,—
The venous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,—
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year’s dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathed horn;
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!

- Oliver Wendell Holmes' "The Chambered Nautilus"
Dear English Department community,

My message to you, in this first issue of The Chambered Nautilus, encapsulates our achievements as a department during the 2009-2010 academic year. We are proud of our role in the larger university community through our mission to teach students to read and think critically, and to write effectively. The First-Year Writing Program taught almost 8,000 students, and the Writing Center, having moved to its new location in Lloyd Hall, conducted 5500 tutorials (both face-to-face and online). We supported Freshman Learning Communities, Freshman Living-Learning Communities, and the development of online courses. Steffen Guenzel, coordinator of the FLCs, worked with Dr. Michael Oldstone to incorporate his book, Viruses, Plagues, and History, and take advantage of Dr. Oldstone’s presence on campus in the spring. We continue to experiment with the large lecture model for the 200-level literature surveys, including the development of a digital archive for all to use when teaching those courses. We revised the creative writing minor and the English honors program this year. We also participated in the initial group of departments undergoing Core Curriculum review. Yolanda Manora arranged for the appropriate involvement of Professor Trudier Harris in undergraduate classes during the week that she was available to us. Tricia McElroy led the largest Alabama at Oxford Program ever, at 45 students.

The 2009-2010 year saw the smooth implementation of our instructor review process, and the chair initiated periodic meetings with our instructors. The renovations of office space for professors, instructors, and GTAs in Rowand-Johnson Hall were completed, along with a kitchenette. We used course fee money to send instructors to present at pedagogically-oriented conferences, such as the Alabama Conference of Teachers of English. We began a process of developing guidelines for appropriate service for instructors, to fulfill the Provost’s requirement.

We also began to explore ways to increase the visibility of the English Department and to develop ways of communicating to our students and others the value of an English degree on the job market, initially under the leadership of Justina Strong and continuing under the leadership of Shanti Weiland. Part of this process has been the exploration of resources for our departmental website and the creation of a model for a new electronic newsletter, which you now see in The Chambered Nautilus!

In the spirit of intellectual community, we are proud of a number of initiatives. Phil Beidler co-directed our English Department Symposium in the fall with colleagues in Religious Studies and the Hoole Library. The theme was “Race and (Dis)placement,” and it combined plenary addresses by established scholars (Huston Baker, Trudier Harris) with the showcasing of work by graduate students, one of whom came in from Germany. Fred Whitaker continues to lead the Americanist Workshop, which brings together colleagues from all over campus. James McNaughton founded the Modernist Reading Group, which began by reading some work by the critical theorist Adorno. David Ainsworth inaugurated the Southeast Milton Seminar, which will be held annually in Morgan Hall. Sharon O’Dair provided leadership in pursuing the Digital Humanities Initiative as organized by Dean Pitschmann of University Libraries. As part of the UA System Provosts’ Scholars Institute at UAB last May, Emily Wittman shared her creative pedagogy using a wiki in a World Literature class. We also established the Robert Milton Young Memorial Lecture in African American Literary and Cultural Theory, which is featured on the next page of The Chambered Nautilus.

We expanded our international connections. In addition to the Alabama at Oxford Program, we piloted a program in New Zealand with Tim Croft. Both Phil Beidler and Nikhil Bilwakesh participated in the Cuba Initiative in 2009-2010. The chair and James McNaughton represented the department in a delegation to Ocean University of China in Qingdao in November of 2009, where we interviewed possible Ph.D. students. Two students have now been admitted under a special arrangement worked out by Dean Olin. One is teaching Chinese for the Department of Modern Languages and Classics, and the other has received a Chinese government scholarship.

Our outstanding faculty continue to win awards: Robin Behn received the Outstanding Faculty-Initiated Engagement Award for 2008-2009 from the UA Council on Community-Based Partnerships (CCBP); Emily Wittman received the Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Award; Joel Brouwer was awarded a Pushcart Prize for poetry as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship, and Albert Pionke was awarded a very competitive NEH Summer Stipend for the project, “Education as a Rite of Privilege.” A sample of placement for our Ph.D. students includes Don Gilliland at the Alabama School for the Fine Arts, Merinda Simmons as assistant professor in the UA Department of Religious Studies, and Norman Golar as assistant professor and chair of the Department of English at Stillman College.

Finally, we conducted four successful searches during 2009-2010. We were joined in Fall of 2010 by Dave Madden in Creative Nonfiction, Kellie Wells in Fiction, Cassandra Smith in African American Literature, and Michelle Bachelor Robinson in Composition and Rhetoric Studies.

We invite you to keep abreast of departmental activities through our new English Department master calendar on the front page of our website at http://www.english.ua.edu.

Best Wishes,

Catherine Evans Davies
Professor of Linguistics and Chair
To remember is to keep from forgetting. I remember Dr. Robert Milton Young as though sunlight followed his every move within Morgan Hall—moments invaluable to my studying his demeanor and his teachings. Moments...as if I can snow globe “perfection” and keep from forgetting his warm smile amid his seminar discussions about literary theory. Why did I frown, or why was I frowning? How come his face had not contorted the way my face had? He was comfortable teaching structuralism, deconstruction, and critical race theory. On the blackboard, he outlined the various schools of thought and inserted where each theorist, each author, and/or each scholar considered himself most to be effective. Every class meeting, an outline. He taught me consistency.

He remembers me as “Chi-town” or “Kanye” because he and I would keep from forgetting our respective inner city roots and talk about the influence of hip-hop where Black French men claimed the music originated over there. We laughed in mockery because we knew about the borough called “Brooklyn,” a place not so distant from his birthplace. Talks...as if he was not an introverted individual, shelled away in numerous pages of books. In the hall, in his office, or in our stride away from Morgan Hall, he spoke through his heart and wanted me to understand the meaning of resources. He became my resource.

When we keep from forgetting, we perform customs, like Dr. Young’s eye-to-eye contact in conversations, showing respect to all persons; like his actions as a family man, re-introducing his family to his world in the department; like his crisp professional attire, avoiding any indicators of slothfulness; like his pedagogy in the classroom, supporting a theory his students acquire from his courses; like his visits to his office, developing a theory in a quiet space.

On January 22, 1968, Robert Milton Young entered the world; on January 31, 2010, he passed away after retaining aspects of a life he would be proud to repeat without any reservations. To honor Dr. Young’s legacy, the Department of English initiated the Robert Milton Young Lecture in African American Literary and Cultural Theory Fund. The purpose of this fund is to sponsor an annual lecture in African American Literary and Cultural Theory, with a focus on the interactions of social class and race. The first of these lectures took place on January 27, 2011 and included an inaugural address by Dr. Vincent Odamten of Hamilton College on “The Pleasures of Influence and Reciprocity.” The spirit of this lecture series perpetuates Dr. Young’s gift for teaching.

- Dr. Norman Golar

The Robert Milton Young Lecture in African American Literary and Cultural Theory Fund:
https://www.ua.edu/advancement/giving/donate
AN EVENING WITH NEIL GAIMAN

On February 18, 2010, a rock star came to Alabama. When asked about what he had in his closet, he said, “Well, on the left I keep the black clothes; on the right, I keep the black clothes, and in the center, I keep the black clothes.” The Bama Theatre filled up an hour early as eager fans sought good seats. When the rock star finally came on stage, unrepressed devotion burst from the crowd.

“You have no idea what I went through to get here,” someone hollered—something about a broken window and a two-hour drive. “You won’t impress me by telling me you drove two hours to get here,” he replied. The crowd laughed. Gaiman, composed and unassuming, immediately got personal, addressing Tuscaloosa especially. He admitted he’d never given much consideration to Alabama, or the South, partly because of commonly held stigmas and partly because he’d been led to believe there wasn’t enough of a fan base. “My publishers don’t send me here,” he said “but the tickets for this reading sold out in 120 seconds.” 1200 seats in 120 seconds. He marveled at the statistic, but the crowd seemed unsurprised.

As the recent winner of the Newberry Medal for The Graveyard Book, author of the Hugo and Nebula award-winning novel and writer of the DC Comic Sandman, Gaiman has fans. He has fans in high school girls, as evidenced by the high pitch of the Bama Theatre that night. He has fans in nerd culture, what with his eye on fantastical worlds. He draws a literary crowd, and was in fact, brought to campus thanks to Hank Lazer, UA English professor and Kate Bernheimer, former UA professor, both prominent writers themselves. Creative Campus and the Creative Writing Program combined resources to bring Gaiman to Bama, and he didn’t disappoint.
There was the threat of it — in the weeks leading up to Gaiman’s visit, glossy fliers peppered the campus and tickets were a commodity like bottled water in a blizzard. Even English professors didn’t have easy access.

Before he began reading, he asked the audience “Do you want creepy or goofy?” Creepy won out and so he opened with a new story, “Feminine Endings,” about a man who works as a living statue in Oxford Circus. He delivered his eerie tale with clarity and expert timing. He went on to read “My Last Landlady,” a horror story that takes place in a small British beach town during the off season, when everything is cold and gray. The stories themselves were engaging, but it was the person, Gaiman, who was of greatest interest.

“This is me,” he said in response to a question about who he was in real life. He conceded that off stage he might be a bit shyer. Between the reading and the Q&A which took place in Smith Hall the following morning, Gaiman offered practical advice to aspiring writers. Foremost, you must “write a lot,” he said. He told of his life, working as a journalist with a young family in his twenties, trying to transition to fiction.

He made it clear that having a life separate from his written work forced him to be productive. Important also is worldly experience, he said. If you find that you’re not being published, “Go out and get your heart broken.”

He was open. He said that his greatest regret in coming to Tuscaloosa was that he didn’t have time to sign everyone’s books. At the Q&A, he read from Chapter Seven of *The Graveyard Book*. It was a book he’d spent decades trying to write, sitting down and getting stuck, time and again. After a couple decades, and great successes, he said to himself, “Ok, I’m not getting any better, I have to write this.” So when he sat down the last time to write, he began in the middle. Among his other advice to the audience—begin in the middle.

"A Mermaid" by John William Waterhouse
Philip Beidler is Professor of English at the University of Alabama, where he has taught American literature since receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1974. His most recent books are *Late Thoughts on an Old War: The Legacy of Vietnam* (2004), *American Wars, American Peace: Notes from a Son of the Empire* (2007), and *The Victory Album: Reflections on the Good Life after the Good War* (2010). He grew up in south central PA, on the outskirts of Gettysburg.

**When and why did you decide to pursue a career in teaching and writing?**

Teaching, probably about the end of my junior year in college, when I was a combined pre-med and English major. I was in an English honors program, on the Oxford/Cambridge tutorial model, and it occurred to me that talking with students about books was good work. Writing was an undergraduate flirtation with fiction and poetry, at neither of which I was any good. My academic writing career got its start with some mentors in my Ph.D. program at Virginia who believed in me.

**In what ways has your career turned out as you planned? What were some surprises?**

My biggest surprise was my writing career. I had thought initially I would be most happy at a good college like the one I went to, where distinguished teaching came first and writing second. Instead, I got this great research university job and suddenly realized I like the writing every bit as much as I liked the teaching, and vice-versa. I still do. Most days it would be hard to say which I like best.

**What was one thing you learned in your English program(s) that you didn’t realize you would use until later?**

I got a lot of really good rhetoric and composition training at Virginia, and my early work with Jim Raymond here at Alabama compounded the knowledge and the interest. It helped to make me a better writer, I think, and also a better teacher of writing across the range of students I work with, from sophomores to dissertation researchers.

**What are your reading habits? What are your favorite books?**

I read lots of history by a bunch of British contemporaries of mine—Max Hastings, Richard Overy, Niall Ferguson, Antony Beevor, to name a few. I get hooked on particular fiction writers and read multiple titles—Ian McEwan is a good example; or the late G.W. Sebald. It breaks my heart he was killed in an auto wreck. I also set up projects, when I read major writers over again completely. Lately I did Dickens and Shakespeare that way. My favorite all-time book is Robert Graves's *Good Bye to All That*, about a son of the British ruling classes who wound up on the Western Front the way I wound up in Vietnam, and about the ways combatants have to deal with the experience of soldiering.
On what projects are you currently working?

My first priority is the text of a photo-volume centering on my recent trip to Cuba. Two photographers, one American—Chip Cooper, and one Cuban—Nestor Martí, will be publishing together their work in Havana—the old city now being restored as the “living” city. I will be writing a narrative on the work of both and on how both have been influenced by the work of Walker Evans—who photographed both Cuba and Alabama in the 30s.

Next will be a book about Cuba—with a title maybe like “On the Forbidden Island of Revolución.” It will be a combination of personal and cultural reflection with a variety of chapters on particular subjects. An example might be an essay I plan entitled “The Two Ernestos,” discussing how/why the two great cultural icons of Havana still seem to be Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Ernest Hemingway. Go figure. Another may be “Esto Automovil Es Mi Juventud” (That Automobile is My Youth)—about the incredible numbers of 40s and 50s American cars still on the road in Cuba. A third will be “Romancing Cecilia Valdez,” focused on the Havana locales of Cuba’s greatest 19th century novel.

For a person of my generation, beyond the cultural richness, an experience like mine in Cuba has the strange quality also of a journey in time. A week short of my eighteenth birthday, I distinctly recall watching President John Kennedy on flickering black-and-white TV saying that there were Russian missiles in Cuba and that we might have a nuclear war. Now, nearly fifty years later, I have traveled to the forbidden island of Revolución. It has all been quite stunning and revelatory.
What is your writing process? When/where do you write? What is your biggest distraction as a writer? What is the one thing you must have by your side when you write?

I like to write very early in the morning and write until I'm written out. I try to get it all down as rapidly as I can, in big chunks; and then I go back and re-write as many times as it takes, from beginning to end. When I'm teaching intensively, I don't write a great deal. When I get blocks of writing time, I try to make good use of them. I need coffee with half-and-half at my left hand.

What advice do you have for students pursuing a degree in English and/or a similar profession as you?

If you want it badly enough, give it a shot. The odds are terrible, I know, on getting the kind of chance I've had at the career of a lifetime. They were terrible when I started out, too, and I know I've been very fortunate. But still give yourself a chance and try hard.

What's the best piece of advice anyone's ever given you?

From an army sergeant teaching dumb lieutenants how to write a mission order--K.I.S.S.--Keep It Simple, Stupid.

What's the worst piece of advice anyone's ever given you?

I can't remember, I suppose, because apparently I didn't listen.
ASHLEY MCWATERS: English Instructor

Ashley McWaters was born and raised in Memphis, received a BA in Art History from University of Memphis, a MA in English from University of Memphis, and a MFA in poetry from UA. She has lived in Tuscaloosa for eight years.

How has art informed your writing and teaching?

Because I love studying art, it often comes up in my poetry, which is quite image-driven. I’ve done several ekphrastic poems, with varying degrees of success — mostly because I secretly wish I didn’t have to use words to make art at all.

I think it would be terrific to paint and to let the mind wander — not to lose the craft, but to let the words around it burn away and to have the act of creating be more closely intuitive, less “logical.” In terms of teaching, I often use multimedia to project images that go along with the texts we examine — sometimes to show art that the writer has actually created, sometimes to provide cultural context for the literature. To me, it’s important to show the students how the texts of a period existed in conversation — sometimes quite literally — with the other arts of the day.

In what ways has your career turned out as you planned? What were some surprises?

Haha! This is a trick question, no? It depends upon which plan! I decided in grad school to have a career in teaching, and I do teach – so in that respect, it came out as I’d planned. I’ve thought many times that other doors might open and lead us to jobs other places, so in some ways it’s a surprise to have been at UA this long. But it turns out to have been a lucky situation. I love what I do, and I could never have predicted that I could enjoy any job this much. That’s actually true, though it sounds like bunk.

What was one thing you learned in your English program(s) that you didn’t realize you would use until later?

At U of M, we had a great class on pedagogy while we started teaching Freshman English that seemed like a bunch of irrelevant theories and tired practices; in fact, I still use a lot of those ideas in teaching comp.

When and why did you decide to pursue a career in teaching and writing?

I had moved back to Memphis from NYC to take over direction of an art gallery there, which I did for a couple of years — during which time I grew more and more disillusioned with the prospect of making a living selling art. At the same time, as I got to know our artists better, I became increasingly jealous that they got to make art; I thought, who told them it was okay to make art as a career? So I went back to grad school, thinking I’d be a fiction writer and teacher. Hilariously, my first fiction teacher told me to get out of the fiction business, so poetry it was. It did turn out to be a much better fit. Too, teaching has worked out much better for me than selling anything ever did.

Who and/or what inspired you to choose your career path?

Shara McCallum at University of Memphis, my first poetry teacher, was quite generous with me, and encouraged me from the beginning to focus on poetry as a vocation. Also at U of M, I started teaching, and loved it right away. Like so many writers, I started out thinking I’d teach to supplement my writing habit, but I quickly discovered that the teaching itself would become really important for me.
What are your reading habits? What are your favorite books? What is your favorite “guilty pleasure” book?

I read nightly before bed, religiously, even if only for five minutes. It’s the one good habit I’ve actually been able to maintain! Favorite books: *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë), *Blood Meridian* (McCarthy), *The English Patient* (Ondaatje), *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll), *My Emily Dickinson* (Howe), *Ways of Seeing* (Berger), *Invisible Cities* (Calvino), Guilty Pleasures: *The Magus* (Fowles) and the *His Dark Materials* trilogy (Pullman)

On what projects are you currently working?

A poetry manuscript called “Bright Refuge” about the late American model and beauty expert Candy Jones, who is believed to have been brainwashed by the CIA and used as a secret agent during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. Allegedly, a prominent physician working for the government successfully fractured her personality into two parts using hypnosis, mind-control experiments, and psychotropic drugs. Candy herself only recalled the incidents during a series of hypnotic sessions directed by her husband in the 1970s, in which he was able to draw out Arlene Grant, Candy’s cruel alternate personality. The manuscript explores ideas of ego and alter-ego, roles of women and questions of beauty.

I’m also gathering the submissions for the undergraduate creative writing awards and planning the Spring Reading. In addition, I have had my own readings scheduled this past year in Memphis, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Denver (AWP).

What is your writing process? When/where do you write? What is your biggest distraction as a writer? What is the one thing you must have by your side when you write?

I’m afraid I don’t have much of a writing routine. I write mornings in my home office, after dropping Posey and Lucian at school, when I have time. I am distracted by everything! Probably the internet is my biggest distraction, though. I usually have some water and the phone nearby – in case I need a distraction!

What advice do you have for students pursuing a degree in English and/or a similar profession as you?

Without trying to crush their spirits, I do warn them in pretty straightforward terms about the competitiveness of the field. In terms of grad school, I tell them it will be a lot of hard work and a great opportunity to participate in a community of somewhat like-minded folks – and to go for it! I do like to see students take some time off between undergrad and graduate work, though; it enhances their actual lives and gives them a chance to decide what they really want to do.

What advice do you have in general?

For creative types, read more. For scholars, experiment and create more. I think it’s very important for people to work and play outside of their normal routines – to be expansive and voracious.

What’s the best piece of advice anyone’s ever given you?

That would be Nick Saban, “Finish!” Not directed at me, of course - You know, not a lot of people give me advice. I should start asking for some. I could use it!

What’s the worst piece of advice anyone’s ever given you?

To do my undergrad degree in my hometown, Memphis. It would have been neat to have gone away at that age.
When and why did you decide to go to graduate school?

I started writing about five years ago. I showed a short story to my friend Emil Kresl, who was also the admissions coordinator for the Michener Center for Writers. He encouraged me to keep writing and attend MCW lectures and events.

Who and/or what inspired you to choose your career path?

I’ve been a librarian, a musician, an actor, a performance artist, a donut delivery driver, a stage manager, a director, a secretary, an administrator, an advisor, a tutor, a reporter, a graduate student, an instructor, and a writer, plus a few gigs I’m too embarrassed to mention. I don’t know about a path. I think I bore easily.

How has theater informed your writing and teaching?

I revise with specific theater jobs in mind. What would the lighting director do with this scene? Costumes? What about the conductor? If I cast an actor in a certain part, would she really say some bit of dialogue I’ve constructed? Is that margarine or real butter on the popcorn? I try to imagine the physicality of the scene.

A friend of mine once held a playwriting workshop where students read their work in the settings they chose. For example, he workshopped a play set in a bowling alley in an actual bowling alley. I’ve always wanted to try something like that.

How do you hope to use your degree in the future, directly or indirectly?

I may have t-shirts made, or coffee mugs. I hear people make good money on Café Press. Seriously, I don’t know. Some of my colleagues in Liberia are trying to talk me into a Ph.D. I don’t think that’s going to happen.

What have you learned so far in your degree program that you believe will be helpful in the future?

I have to eat a bit of crow now. I told Prof. Niiler that I had no interest in running Writing Centers. I’m currently setting up the Cuttington University Language Center, where we’ll study Kpelle and French as well as English. Standard Liberian English is partially based on African American Vernacular English, so the class I took in African American Rhetoric informs most of my teaching. But the main thing I got from grad school was how to keep writing, no matter what. I really have to thank my faculty – Yolanda Manora, Michael Martone, and Wendy Rawlings.
What was one thing you learned in your undergraduate program(s) that you didn’t realize you would use until later?

Sewing.

On what projects are you working?

I’m sponsored by the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help, or IFESH. (ifesh.org) IFESH works in nine sub-Saharan countries, including Liberia. IFESH is funded by USAID.

My main assignment is Cuttington University. Here, I teach classes and will help restart the English department. My secondary assignment is working with the We Care Library, the only free, public library currently operating in Liberia.

IFESH and another NGO, Books for Africa, have partnered to distribute textbooks. I headed the book distribution in Liberia. We sent 40 tons of books (one shipping container) to schools throughout the country. That sounds like a lot, but the average Liberian student shares every book with three others.

Recently, I consulted with CESLY (Core Educational Skills for Liberian Youth) on a revision of their teacher training materials. I’m also editing an anthology of Liberian writing gathered and published by the Liberian Association of Writers. I’ve just gotten a DJ slot on the college radio station. And I’m finishing my thesis, “Please Save Dog Named Slim.” I have a few other stories in my head, but those will have to wait until the thesis is completed.

What are your reading habits? What are your favorite books? What is your favorite “guilty pleasure” book?

I read quite a bit here – there’s no TV, and no internet. When I left, there was no inexpensive shipping to Liberia, and the airlines limited my luggage to 100 lbs. I only took a handful of books – Mulata (Asturias), The Salt Eaters (Bambara), Fences (Wilson), The Monstrous and the Marvelous (Ducornet), and a few others.

What is your writing process?

In Alabama, I usually wrote at sunrise on my back porch, with a cup of coffee, a small bowl of oatmeal, and my cat, and never once appreciated the luxury. As I’m writing, I have no electricity or drinkable water at my house, and the early rains have kicked off the mosquito season. However, I can purify my water. The electricity will return. I can afford a mosquito net. Some of my neighbors live in mud huts with palm roofs, and talk about getting malaria the way Americans talk about getting the flu. So to answer the question, I write whenever and wherever I can, with whatever I can.

What advice do you have for undergraduate students who are thinking about pursuing a graduate degree in English?

When you do something you love, the money will follow. Love rarely follows the money.

What advice do you have in general?

Every writer should travel, especially to Africa.

What’s the best piece of advice anyone’s ever given you?

“It’s hard to write about a train wreck while the train is still wrecking.” - Michael Martone

What’s the worst piece of advice anyone’s ever given you?

“Get a teaching degree, so you have something to fall back on.” Who wants that teacher?
JENNY RUSH: English Education Major

When and why did you decide to major in English?

I am actually an English Education major, which means I will graduate with a degree in Education and one in English. I was torn between business and education for quite some time and finally was won over by a scholarship that I received to major in English and teach. This was not decided till summer after my senior year when I finally decided to attend the University of Alabama because I had competing scholarship offers.

Who and/or what inspired you to choose this major?

I was inspired by my high school honors English teacher in the 10th grade. She is still a close friend. I realized that my passion for reading could be translated to inspire other students to read for fun.

What did you learn in high school that prepared you for this major?

Writing! I had great AP teachers and that helped me learn how to get my thoughts down on paper very quickly.

How do you hope to use your degree in the future, directly or indirectly?

By showing students that English can be fun!

What have you learned so far in your degree program that you believe will be helpful in the future?

Adolescent literature and all of my other lit classes have provided me with material that I think students will be challenged by and also enjoy. I keep a running list of great literature that I think students would like to read.

What projects are you working on?

I am planning a summer trip to Germany to help some family friends by interacting with their children to improve their English.

What are your reading habits? What are your favorite books? What is your favorite “guilty pleasure” book?

I read constantly. I really love quality adolescent literature. Jonathan Swift is my favorite classics author. Harry Potter got me through my teenage years and a lot of rough times.

What is your writing process? When/where do you write? What is your biggest distraction as a writer? What is the one thing you must have by your side when you write?

I tend to write at the very last minute. Bad idea... I know! I like to write in any quiet space other than the library. I have a very hard time getting started but once I do, there is no stopping me. I also never seem to be able to write more than four pages. I have to have food by my side when I write.

What advice do you have for undergraduate students who are thinking about pursuing a graduate degree in English?

If you enjoy reading then this is for you, but if not, find something else.

What advice do you have in general?

Find a comfortable place to sit because you are going to be reading all of the time!

What’s the best piece of advice anyone’s ever given you?

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent” Eleanor Roosevelt

What’s the worst piece of advice anyone’s ever given you?

Be patient! (Why be patient when you could just be impatient and make it happen even faster?)
Alabama at Oxford is one of the longest-running study abroad programs at UA. The English and History departments, in collaboration with university professors at Oxford, develop courses that are particularly relevant to Oxford or to the United Kingdom. This year, Professor Nikhil Bilwakesh taught a South Asian Literature and Culture course that examined the UK’s complicated relationship with its former colonies in the years following imperialism.

The students lived and attended class at Worcester College, one of Oxford’s many constituent colleges. The books they read include Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, *The Enigma of Arrival* by V.S. Naipaul, Guatam Malkani’s novel *Londonstani*, Monica Ali’s book *Brick Lane*, Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Black Album* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. In introducing highly discordant voices in conversation with one another, Bilwakesh sought to open a dialogue interrogating the very genre itself.

Crucial to his effort to engage the students in South Asian culture, he screened important films. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Big Hearted Will Take the Bride)*, a Bollywood film so successful it has continuously run in theatres in India since its premier in 1995, was shown. A movie that captures the essence of racial and societal tensions in London in the 1980s, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, was also part of the mix. Students listened to popular music by well-known, controversial singer MIA, a Sri Lankan native. Another musician the students studied, deejay Apache Indian has several albums influenced heavily by his African/Indian background.

The students had the rare opportunity to walk through South Asian neighborhoods in both Oxford and London. There, they sampled the food from various regions and shopped in clothing stores in order to gain a visceral understanding of the various cultures that, in conjunction with their course work offered a truly unparalleled experience.

While Bilwakesh’s course is the only one featured in this article, there are other options. The students also had the opportunity to take day excursions outside of Oxford, to Stratford and London, and other locales.

To find out more about Alabama at Oxford and UA’s other study abroad opportunities, visit www.studyabroad.ua.edu.
When Instructor Tim Croft speaks with his students about his home country, New Zealand, he finds that their knowledge of the beautiful far-off land doesn’t go beyond *The Lord of the Rings* and the television show, *Flight of the Conchords*. And while he’s happy to exploit their knowledge of these things, he’s also interested in expanding their knowledge on other aspects of New Zealand life such as its literature, filmmaking, theatre and art. “This year we’re offering four courses: a Travel Writing class, a World Literature II survey class, a class on New Zealand Literature, Theatre and Film, and a class on Lord of the Rings and the way the books were adapted into films,” Croft says. “But we’ll have an opportunity to see other aspects of New Zealand life, such as Maori art and language, and ask ourselves how New Zealand’s identity has been constructed as a bi-lingual and multi-cultural country at the edge of the world.”

Last year, nine students experienced both the rural and metropolitan during this three-week trip. They stayed in Christchurch, New Zealand’s second largest city, along the South Pacific Coast and visited Wellington, New Zealand’s cosmopolitan capital on the lower North Island, and they also visited Croft’s father’s sheep farm where they tried their hand at shearing several sheep and feeding cows kale. “Of all the things we did last year,” Croft says, “I think the students enjoyed going to the farm the most.” He says they also enjoyed the visit to Akaroa, New Zealand’s only French settlement and a visit to Hanmer Springs in the Waipara wine-growing region. This year, Croft says he’s trying to improve the program. “Courses offer an array of credit choices including Journalism, English, Creative Writing, Blount, World Literature, and Honors credit, depending on the course,” he says. In addition to more courses, Croft will be joined by fellow Instructors Ashley McWaters, who will teach the Lord of the Rings class, and Scott McWaters, who will teach the World Literature II survey class. “It’s an exciting opportunity for everyone, students and faculty.”
**WHAT WE’RE READING**

**Sharon O’Dair:** I’m reading *Gamer Theory* by McKenzie Wark, which is a very hot work on gaming, computer culture, and social life. It’s organized like web pages with no page numbers. Each chapter is focused around a video game: “In the game it was an algorithm that determined when something could end, but it was the storyline that made this end point seem natural, inevitable, and necessary….The storyline is the gamer’s alibi.” I’m also reading *The Myth of Digital Democracy* by Mathew Hindman, which attempts to debunk the notion that the internet opens up our political system to voices previously unheard. Hindman’s conclusion is that, yes, it is easy to broadcast yourself, and vastly more difficult to have yourself heard.

**Karen Gardiner:** I have just started *Velva Jean Learns to Drive* by Jennifer Niven. It is set in the Appalachian mountains in the 1930s. Much like the memoirs of Rick Bragg, so far this debut novel feels like it’s about my people and the stories they tell: growing up in the depression-era South, hard-scrabble farming, and families-full of the oddball folks that only my grandma could love. Besides, who can resist a novel with characters named Velva Jean, Sweet Fern, and Beachard, that partly takes place at the Three Gum Revival and Camp Meeting, and that begins, “I was ten years old when I was saved for the first time”?

**Nikhil Bilwakesh:** I’m teaching Salman Rushdie’s, *The Satanic Verses* in English 411. More than the issues surrounding its purported blasphemy, I find the depiction of mid 1980s London by the anglophile turned stinking alien in the attic Chamcha compelling. Many of the students were born in or around the year the novel came out. What one reader might see as a “contemporary popular culture” reference - a joke about Margaret Thatcher or Shami Kapur - becomes a somewhat obscure historic reference for another. It makes me think of how much different it might have been for someone in the 1920s to read *Ulysses* when someone like Billy Sunday was in the popular contemporary imagination, and not the historic imagination.

**Luke Niiler:** I’m reading Patrick O’Brian’s *Master and Commander*, the first of a 20-volume series of historical fiction depicting in scrupulous detail early 19th-century life in the British Navy. Not only this, but O’Brian brings us striking renditions of class, manners, and in particular, language. Sometimes I get a little lost in the sheer sweep and volume of nautical terms—plenty of stay’sls, main’sls, jibs, and topmasts, and you wouldn’t believe how complex firing a cannon from a moving vessel actually is—but I look at this as a learning experience. I would think that by the time I get to, say, the ninth or tenth volume in the series, I’ll be slinging British Navy lingo with the best of them.

**David Ainsworth:** I’m reading *In the Best Families* by Rex Stout. The book is the last of a long series of Nero Wolfe mysteries by Stout. Stout’s craft is marvelous and his characters’ voices compelling. I rarely read anything written so precisely, despite being in a profession where precision in language is valued. Part of my pleasure in reading such a text involves the ways in which Stout plays upon the expectations of the mystery genre. *In the Best Families* in particular generates its mystery from those expectations, from the assumptions we as readers make about how a mystery novel works and from the conventions we accept transparently (for instance, that the detective never meaningfully ages within the scope of the stories). This book, then, both exhibits the highest craft of a mystery writer and comments upon the mystery genre and our expectations as readers. What more can one want?

**James McNaughton:** I’m in a reading group, and we just read Theodor Adorno’s lecture series entitled *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, given in the 60s. As a teacher, I’ve been humbled by Adorno’s generosity towards his students, his clarity of presentation, and his integrity in distinguishing the value of ideas in their own time and in his. The last six lectures are an astonishing and moving meditation on the state of meaning and the challenge for art in a world where genocide and torture are ever possible. It’s been great to read his work with others.

**Amy E. Dayton-Wood:** I just started reading Dave Eggers’s book *Zeitoun*, which tells the story of the disappearance of a Syrian-American man who stayed behind to protect his property while his family fled from Katrina. The book uses an oral history approach based on Eggers’ collaboration with the family involved, and it’s written from their perspective.
Unique to UA English Department, the Book Buddies program provides graduate students an opportunity to join a grassroots campaign to help educate local kids. Started by first-year MFA Juan Reyes, whose wife teaches the first-grade at Crestmont, the program helps provide more structure for the school’s reading curriculum. The program enlists students to read aloud to groups of first-graders at nearby Crestmont Elementary School on a weekly basis.

Not only does the program provide more structure for the school’s reading curriculum, it also relieves pressure on the teacher, allowing more time for reading and for reading with an adult. Volunteers stop by during one of the daily reading lessons, typically around midday, and lead a small group of students in that day’s reading.

The children at Crestmont are not all “at-risk,” but many do not have the ideal socio-economic foundation for high achievement in the classroom. At this crucial stage in the learning process—just as a child is beginning to read—the added support provided by Book Buddies pays untold dividends, all for a half-hour a week. Students are less likely to get lost in the shuffle of the class as a Book Buddy will allow them a more private, directed lesson that would otherwise be impossible. Furthermore, bad reading habits are less likely to spread from student to student as a Book Buddy can help keep them in check. It can never be a bad thing to surround kids with as many qualified, enthusiastic role models as possible.

With all of the good that the Book Buddies program has done, there is still plenty left to do. Currently, with only eight volunteers, they are only able to service a single first-grade class (at a 3:1 Buddy to student ratio). Reyes hopes not only to approach a 1:1 Buddy to student ratio, but hopefully to expand to the entire first grade and to other schools. English departments are nothing if not well-stocked. Anyone can help, no matter your age or rank. Currently, participation consists mostly of graduate students but undergrads are more than welcome.

Besides, if we don’t help children learn to read now, what will English departments do ten years from now? There’ll be no one to teach.
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If you are a UA English Alum with a success story, please contact Dr. Shanti Weiland (sweiland@bama.ua.edu). We want to publish your story!

This is our first issue of The Chambered Nautilus, and we welcome your feedback. Please contact Catherine Davies with any questions or comments.

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