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This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,  
Sails the unshadowed main,--  
The venturous bark that flings  
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings  
In guls 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”
Letter from the Chair

Dear English Department community,

In my message as chair I continue the pattern of encapsulating our achievements as a department during the previous academic year. Last April was a very difficult time, but we took care of each other and acted as a presence in the community to help where needed. Our department was very fortunate in that the only destruction our members experienced was to material things.

To give you an overview of our operation, during 2010-2011 the English Department had 35 tenure-track faculty (15 Assistant Professors, 6 Associate Professors, and 14 Professors), although 2 of the professors serve elsewhere in the University in administrative capacities. We also employed 40 Full-time Temporary Instructors and 30 Part-time Temporary Instructors. Our professors had 120 pieces of scholarly or creative writing accepted for publication and made 55 presentations at professional conferences. Our instructors had 42 pieces of writing accepted for publication and made 10 presentations at professional conferences. We had 5 office staff (Admin Specialist, A&S Office Associate, and three Office Associate Seniors). At the graduate level we had 113 GTA lines and 135 graduate students overall. At the undergraduate level we had approximately 500 majors and 200 creative writing minors. Including Interim term and summer school, we taught 864 classes in 2010-2011 (390 in FWP, 387 in 200-400 level UG, 52 at graduate level, 35 during interim and summer school) with approximately 19,000 students (8,588 in FWP, 9,308 in 200-400 level UG, and 650 in graduate program + interim and summer school). In the 2010-2011 academic year, we graduated 95 undergraduate English majors, 34 M.A. or M.F.A. recipients, and 6 Ph.D. recipients.

I am proud to cite the awards to our faculty and students during 2010-2011. Joel Brouwer was awarded a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for achievement in poetry. Emily Wittman received the Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Award and also was selected as an A&S Distinguished Teaching Fellow. Sharon O’Dair was named the Hudson Strode Professor of English. Robin Behn served as Distinguished Fellow of the Ragsdale Foundation. Carolyn Handa was a Faculty Fellow of the McNair Scholars Program. Michelle Robinson received the Whetstone-Seaman Faculty Development Award from the Alabama Humanities Foundation. Cassander Smith was selected to attend a seminar at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. Kellie Wells had a story chosen for Best American Fantasy. Slash Pine Press and Projects received the first annual Druid City Literary Arts Award from the Tuscaloosa Arts Council. Ed Geisweidt’s dissertation (directed by Sharon O’Dair) won the Departmental and College Awards for Outstanding Dissertation; B.J. Hollars’s thesis (directed by Michael Martone) won the Departmental, College, and University Awards for Outstanding Thesis. Seventeen members of Sigma Tau Delta, our undergraduate honor society, presented their creative and scholarly work at the annual conference.

The Writing Center conducted 5656 tutorial sessions during the 2010-2011 academic year. Luke Niiler hosted the Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference. He is also co-PI on a $248,000 grant, “The Coach,” that was awarded from the National Science Foundation.
In terms of our undergraduate program, there were a number of new developments. We implemented the new models for the Departmental Honors Program and Creative Writing Minor, introduced group advising for beginning English majors, and increased membership in Sigma Tau Delta. The First-Year-Writing Program transitioned to themed 102s (all spring sections) with support from a CAISS grant to Gardiner and Kidd; doubled First-Year-Writing Program/Honors College EN 103 collaboration to 14 sections (243 students); and held the 4th annual FWP Writing Fair in April involving 90 students total, with first-ever juried prizes for top projects. In addition, the Department approved a proposed redesign of the course sequence for GTA training.

Our graduate programs received recognition and support. We were awarded five regular Graduate Council Fellowships (1 Literature Ph.D., 2 Literature M.A.s, one Strode PhD and 1 Strode M.A.); one Graduate Council Dissertation Fellowship for a student in the CRES program; and department travel funding for our graduate students increased from $4,800 to $8,490, matched by the Graduate School. Our MFA program was ranked by Poets & Writers magazine (Sept/Oct 2010 issue) #17 overall and #2 for funding out of the roughly 135 residential MFA programs in the USA. The MFA program received a new guarantee from the Graduate School of five Graduate Council Fellowships for extraordinarily promising incoming students. MFA students received 16 travel awards totaling $4,240, matched by Graduate School. Through the generosity of the Truman Capote Literary Trust, beginning in Fall 2011 there will be two Prison Arts Fellows each semester, one funded by the Graduate School and one by the Capote Trust.

The English Department continues to foster intellectual community in both traditional and new ways. Dilin Liu organized the English Department Symposium, a tradition begun in 1974, on corpus linguistics, with founders and pioneers in the field as keynote speakers. David Ainsworth organized the Southeast Milton Symposium, an event that he initiated last year. The Strode Program organized a Symposium on Digital Humanities. Fred Whiting and James McNaughton continued to organize the Americanist Workshop and the Modernist Reading Group, respectively. In terms of new events, we were very happy to see the inaugural Robert Milton Young Memorial Lecture in African American Literature and Cultural Theory, delivered by Professor Vincent Odumten on “The Pleasures of Influence and Reciprocity.” The Department also launched two new publications, this electronic newsletter and a new undergraduate journal christened Dewpoint.

Finally, we conducted two successful searches for tenure-track faculty during 2010-2011. We were very happy to be joined in the Fall by David Deutsch in Modern Drama and Steve Tedeschi in British Romanticism.

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

Best Wishes,

Catherine Evans Davies
Professor of Linguistics and Chair
Remembering Elizabeth Meese

Professor Emeritus Elizabeth A. Meese died in October, 2010, just a few years after retiring from a long and dedicated career as an English professor at the University of Alabama. Her commitment to students, the University, and to feminism was unparalleled. Her vision helped establish UA’s Women’s Studies program—one of the first of its kind and the very first in the Southeast. This homage to Professor Meese is in the spirit of a few of her many passions and intellectual interests: language play, identity theory, and always, Gertrude Stein. –Bebe C. Barefoot

The Autobiography of Bebe Barefoot by Elizabeth A. Meese

Before I Came to Tuscaloosa

Before coming to Tuscaloosa in 1998, I met Elizabeth Meese but I did not meet Elizabeth Meese but I did meet her by reading her books. He said he wanted to see if I was as interesting as my book was. I said I was.

My Arrival in Tuscaloosa

Elizabeth Meese was not here but on sabbatical so I still did not meet her but I did meet her because Elizabeth Meese inhabited Morgan Hall, a fierce not-there there a force for reckoning a construction of collective grad student consciousness tales spun in two off-campus lecture halls—Jackie’s Lounge and Egan’s Intellectual Saloon—an unfolding legend a fearsome goddess Elizabeth Meese who lucky for us didn’t cook and eat aspiring feminist theorists and deconstructing dilettantes because she didn’t like the taste of arrogance but rather chewed them raw unformed then spit them out for sport and they (the chewed up raw unformed) landing wet weeping mewling in offices down the hall or peeling themselves off the sidewalk moseying on over to the library science program. The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it, you are what you or anybody else knows you are and as everything in living is made up of finding out what you are it is extraordinarily difficult really not to know what you are and yet to be that thing.

Elizabeth Meese in Tuscaloosa 1999-2006

I never really did care very much about hearing any one lecture. My eyes always have told me more than my ears. Anything you hear gets to be a noise, but a thing you see, well of course it has some sound but not the sound of a noise. So the legend was as some legends are not legend at all but gossip of the lazy unimaginative, just that, so no one ever had or ever did become Elizabeth Meese-spittle at least no one who didn’t deserve it and so fast-forward she becomes my friend/mentor/dissertation director/sometimes psychologist and I was not alone she gave generously to those who ventured past the imaginary
sentinel that lurid lore can be one person even came to call her “Mama Meese” though Mama never knew so the sidewalk stayed clean.

But now well now how can you dream about a personality when it is always being created for you by a publicity, how can you believe what you make up when publicity makes them up to be so much realer than you can dream. And so autobiography is written which is in a way a way to say that publicity is right, they are as the public sees them. Well yes.

Elizabeth Meese liked Roland Barthes and Elizabeth Meese loved Gertrude Stein or maybe Elizabeth Meese loved Roland Barthes too but she for sure liked him and she for sure loved Gertrude Stein so Elizabeth Meese decided to marry them make a three-way in a course really a lover’s (dis)course called Book/Life. She played matchmaker so she could finish a project Barthes never started called The Book/Life (“take some classic book and relate everything in life to it for a year”) and she knew that what he meant was either that Elizabeth Meese should read her life through a book or she knew that what he maybe meant was that Elizabeth Meese should read the book through her life. She pondered that and decided she did not have to decide that was what grad students were for so she made the lover’s (dis)course and I was there and there were eight or maybe ten of us in the three-way lover’s (dis)course. I was I when I had no written word inside me. It was very bothersome.

So Elizabeth Meese had to choose her book for the lover’s (dis) course and she first thought of A Lover’s Discourse by who but Roland Barthes or even Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (also by Roland Barthes) because after all that is where he lists the books he wants to write but never did and Book/Life is there and there would have been no Book/Life lover’s (dis)course without it. But then Elizabeth Meese remembered that she forgot that we should always write the book we want to read and also she did not like her French so she decided to read the book that would write herself or maybe write the book by reading herself depending upon what the grad students decided Roland Barthes meant so she remembered that she always already wanted to write a book about Gertrude Stein. So she chose Everybody’s Autobiography and decided either to write the Stein book which was already Stein’s book but now it was Elizabeth Meese’s book if you believe Roland Barthes that reading is writing and writing is reading so she decided to write that book through her life or else she would read herself through what Stein wrote thus write her life as Stein’s book thus Stein’s life and also everybody’s. Elizabeth Meese said “Every vs. auto, Stein’s auto having been read as and through every. For me too, every is an important part of auto.” Perhaps anyway there is no beginning and no end.

Of course naturally in the meanwhile I went on writing. I had always wanted it all to be commonplace and simple anything that I am writing and then I get worried lest I have succeeded and it is too commonplace and too simple so much so that it is nothing anybody says it is not so, it is not too commonplace and not too simple but do they know anyway I have always all the time thought it was so and hoped it was so and then worried lest it was so. I am worried again now lest it is so....I like anything that a word can do. And words do do all they do and then they can do what they never do do.

Elizabeth Meese Before She Came to Tuscaloosa

When I was about eight I was surprised to know that in the Old Testament there was nothing about a future life or eternity. I read it to see and there was nothing there. There was a God of course and he spoke but there was nothing about eternity. This could not happen again....Identity always worries me and memory and eternity.
If things do not take long it makes life too short.

2005-2010

If I remember what I remember then why do I remember that. I did remember that but it did not look like that and so I did not remember that and if it did not look like that then I did not remember that. What was the use.

Dear Elizabeth,

One has to remember that about imagination, that is when the world gets dull when everybody does not know what they can or what they cannot really imagine.

My memory helps when I imagine. Here is what I do not remember: my birth; my death; my vague recollections of things that happened over and over again; heckling Joseph Campbell and all that “myth shit”; vivid moments; you and Sandy at my wedding reception; my base story; the diploma “signed in the margins”; your letter to the grad school defending the already defended indefensible auto read through every; photographs (with the exception of the people who are not in them); anonymous letters, which were really sticky notes signed E. (except the one from John Donne and the roses); scenes I made up to introduce memories; ethical considerations; moments of revelation (which would be so useful for plot, so this pains me); my ground situation; my climax; my denouement; scenes at which I was not present; how to use a little knowledge; how to ignore too much knowledge while using it; my memories; places of safety; dialogues; my inner child; my inner censor; my new family; my narrative voice; the gift you told me to embrace; that disco ball.

Here is what I do remember: my birth; my death; my vague recollections of things that happened over and over again; heckling Joseph Campbell and all that “myth shit”; vivid moments; you and Sandy at my wedding reception; my base story; the diploma “signed in the margins”; your letter to the grad school defending the already defended indefensible auto read through every; photographs (with the exception of the people who are not in them); anonymous letters, which were really sticky notes signed E. (except the one from John Donne and the roses); scenes I made up to introduce memories; ethical considerations; moments of revelation (which would be so useful for plot, so this pains me); my ground situation; my climax; my denouement; scenes at which I was not present; how to use a little knowledge; how to ignore too much knowledge while using it; my memories; places of safety; dialogues; my inner child; my inner censor; my new family; my narrative voice; the gift you told me to embrace; that disco ball.

Sincerely and love and best regards,

The Sparkle and the Spin and the I of your Eye.

And then we went somewhere and we met every one and I always do like to be a lion. I like it again and again, and it is a peaceful thing to be one succeeding.

I like what I have and now it is today.

[AUTHOR’S NOTE: All sections in italics are from Everybody’s Autobiography by Gertrude Stein]
AFTER THE STORM: FIRST THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS

I have always been one to ascribe to the mantra of “first thought, best thought.” It is something that I preach to my students constantly when they are at the beginnings of something: whether that be brainstorming for research paper topics, or if they are starting a poem or a short-story in a Creative Writing class. The saying has been re-appropriated a number of times: Allan Ginsberg is the person of which the quotation is most accredited to, but he gives a nod to Buddhist Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa as to the creator of the phrase. However, one can argue that the quotation’s origins are rooted in William Blake, who once claimed, “First thought is best in Art, second in other matters.”

With respect to Blake, after the April 27th tornadoes, there was little time for a second thought—the majority of us in the English Department were acting solely on instinct: there was a pull to do something, and yet, we were uncertain as to what that might be. Some of us brought brooms down to Forest Lake, operated chainsaws, hauled trees, sorted clothes, cooked meals, answered phones. During the first couple of days after the tornado, I received an amazing outpouring of support from the outside Tuscaloosa-world: people I’ve never met, editors, publishers, other writers, people I’ve said hello to at a conference once were e-mailing me nonstop asking for ways to help, sending care packages or wondering where they could donate food and money to the relief effort. In true “first thought, best thought” action, I wanted to encourage a way to have these members of the writing community donate money to the relief effort and also create something that we here in Tuscaloosa could feel good about. This was the beginning of “Tuscaloosa Runs This,” an eBook showcasing Tuscaloosa writers in hopes of bringing awareness to our city as well as the amazing talents of those who call or have called Tuscaloosa home. It started as an idea one morning: a handful of Facebook posts and Tweets later and the submissions started rolling in—incredibly moving pieces about Tuscaloosa pre- and post-April 27. I took a weekend to put the pieces together in InDesign and released it online with a link to a PayPal site to donate to the relief effort. After about a week, we had over 1000 individual downloads and were plugged by everyone from rappers G-Side to James Spann to Margaret Atwood.

In early June, former English major/Creative Writing minor and Slash Pine Intern Stacey Oliver put on a benefit reading at Wilhagan’s in Tuscaloosa where contributors read from the eBook—furthermore, former MFA, Bard Cole, put on “Tuscaloosa Ink,” a reading in Memphis that raised over $1000 dollars for the relief effort. Former MFA student Nik DeDominic, curated a series of Tuscaloosa writers for the literary journal The Offending Adam, which raised money for the Red Cross, and MFA student Greg Houser put out a screen-printed book, which raised money for Holt Elementary school. Currently, I am in the process of removing the “e” from “eBook” and looking to publish a physical, hardcover copy of the book in time for the anniversary of the storms, where hopefully we will be able to raise more money for the recovery effort.

When the storms hit, the common saying was “play to your strengths.” To me, strength was found, as it is for most writers, in creating and assembling—it is something that seemed well within the normal course of things during an extraordinary event. When the other matters encompass art, sometimes there is no waiting for the second thought.

--Brian Oliu, English Instructor
Phil Beidler: Teaching at Ocean University in Qingdao, China

Phil 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. Last summer, he was invited to teach two graduate American literature courses at Ocean University in Qingdao, China, with whom the College of Arts and Sciences has a relationship. It is the chief oceanographic science center in the nation, but also has graduate programs in the various university disciplines.

What were your first impressions when you arrived in China?

I couldn’t believe, upon arrival in Qingdao—a very popular seaside resort and “small city” of eight million—how that big a place could be so crowded with that many people. The last time I went to Asia, I was an armored cavalry platoon leader in the Vietnam War. I thought it was time to go back and try to experience the life and culture of this important part of the world before it was too late.

What were your first impressions of the university?

The campus on which I stayed, in an old 19th century German villa, carried the atmosphere of the late 19th and early 20th century, when the city (then called Tsingtao) was first a German concession and then occupied by the Japanese. I had to ride a shuttle to teach at the new university, up the coast about 45 minutes away, at Laoshan. That campus is huge, lavish, and brand-spanking new. It reminded me of a big modern state university campus in the U.S. The English Department is part of the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics. The English students are linguistics-trained and notably fluent orally and in writing. They are also frequently interested in translation studies. They seemed to regard learning about early American literature as a cultural eye-opener.
What previous understanding of Chinese culture and education prepared you for your travels?

I tried to familiarize myself with the basic timelines of Chinese political and cultural history, the dynasties, the major artistic figures, the colonial and modern political evolutions. Though the language is nearly insuperable for a beginner, I tried to understand how it operated from a cultural and linguistic standpoint.

What insights did you gain from your trip?

I found out that the Chinese colossus is even more colossal than most people can imagine. The building, infrastructure, transportation, and industry-technology activity is off the charts. At least in Qingdao, where I was, as well as in Beijing, the nation truly seems to have become a consumer society, often at what we would call the high end.

If you could have spent the rest of the academic year in China, what would you have wanted to do/accomplish?

I would have certainly tried to immerse myself in the language. I would have also done as much traveling as I could into the major and very distinct regions of the country.
How has your time in China informed your own teaching and research back home?

As with my work on Cuba, where I will return for a second research trip in February, I am just blown away by seeing the world from the perspective of once “forbidden” nations, in Asia and in our own hemisphere.

As to direct outcomes, I have already finished an article on the 20th century geopolitical ramifications—in the World War II Pacific and on mainland revolutionary China—of the 1914 Battle of Qingdao—the single major World War I battle fought on the Asian continent.

What were the highlights of your trip?

The teaching was wonderful. The students were extraordinarily well prepared in English, and they were also culturally literate about matters of politics and history. The women in particular were nearly all serious feminists with strong opinions on career opportunities, political participation, reproductive rights, etc. Among most of the academic people I met generally, there was great willingness to discuss controversial government policies, censorship, control of the Internet, etc. This struck me as courageous in a country where they still regularly put artists in jail.

As to travel, I got to go climb Taishan mountain, the mountain of the emperors, and I got to spend a weekend in Beijing, staying just a few blocks from Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. My favorite visit in the city, however, was to the Temple of Heaven compound. It just knocked me out.
PRESTIGIOUS ALUMNUS RETURNS TO CAMPUS

The day before the tornado struck in Tuscaloosa in the spring of 2012, students in my two sections of EN 102 had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Michael B. A. Oldstone. After the class read his book *Viruses, Plagues, and History* and extensively researched the author and viruses for various projects, Dr. Oldstone was eager to comment on students' brochures reflecting their research projects. He answered their questions about his life as a scientist, his many publications, and about writing in the discipline. After the visit, teams of students composed articles about the class and visit. The editors of *The Chambered Nautilus* selected the article below to be featured in this edition.

On April 26, 2011, there was a familiar face in Tuscaloosa: Dr. Michael B.A. Oldstone, UA Alum and author of *Viruses, Plagues, and History*. In spring semester, Dr. Steffen Guenzel’s English 102 class explored viruses, both scientifically and historically with the assistance of Dr. Oldstone’s personal accounts and wealth of knowledge. After a semester of diligent study, Dr. Guenzel’s class had the privilege of meeting Dr. Oldstone and discussing his book and experience with viruses.

Dr. Michael B. A. Oldstone is one of the most accomplished scientists when dealing with certain types of viruses like polio and the measles. He attended The University of Alabama where he studied History and English. He then attended University of Maryland to earn his medical degree. After determining what he wanted to pursue later in his life, Oldstone decided to attend Johns Hopkins University to earn his Ph.D. in microbiology. Once he received his Ph.D., Oldstone went to work at the Scripps Research Institute to study and experiment in virology and pathology. Presently, Oldstone is a Professor in the Department of Immunology and Microbial Science. He oversees a Viral-Immunobiology Laboratory in which he studies pathogenesis. He has earned national status and has received many awards for his contributions, including the Cotzias Award in 1986 and the Pioneer in NeuroVirology Award in 2003. He was also elected into the National Academy of Sciences in 2008.

Before Dr. Oldstone came to speak with Dr. Guenzel’s class, he was sent the brochures that students had made focusing on their topic of interest related to viruses. When Oldstone arrived to meet with the class, he provided students information and discussed research about certain viruses. He further answered questions we had for him about certain types of viruses.

Dr. Michael B.A. Oldstone’s talk to Dr. Guenzel’s class was very captivating. From the moment he walked in the door, all eyes were on him. He began with some background information to give the students a better understanding of how he got his start. From then on, the students gained great insight on different viruses, such as measles, HIV, and polio. Many students in Dr. Guenzel’s class are pursuing a career in the medical field, so Dr. Oldstone was able to provide students with an idea of what their future might hold. After having spent the past semester studying Michael B.A. Oldstone’s research, we felt privileged and honored to meet such an accomplished, iconic alumnus of this University.
TRUDIER HARRIS: English Professor

I was born in Greene County, Alabama, and moved to Tuscaloosa after my father’s death in 1954, when I was six years old. I attended 32nd Avenue Elementary School, which is now Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School. After matriculation at Druid High School (on the site where the new Westlawn Middle School is located), I attended Stillman College, from which I received a B.A. in June of 1969. Six days later, I was enrolled in the graduate program in English at The Ohio State University in Columbus, from which I received my M.A. in 1972 and my Ph.D. in 1973.

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

Writing came before teaching. As early as elementary school, I was invited to present talks at church functions, which means that I had to write the presentations. In high school, my social studies class always presented the news as a part of class. Instead of straightforward, boring recitals, I wrote skits about news items that my peers and I joined in presenting. I also wrote the school play that was presented on the evening of our commencement. (I had been in the drama group for a couple of years and always had an interest in how plays were developed and produced. I also acted in college and graduate school.)

One of my cousins maintains that I was equally committed to teaching at a young age. She says that I would gather the neighborhood children and hold classes with them. Since she is younger than I am, and she remembers this happening when she was in elementary school, that means that I must have been in early high school. For me, the decision to teach was made in part after I lost an intramural race in college to a young woman who was about half as tall as I was—which ended my desire to be a Physical Education teacher—and after I decided that I didn’t want to listen to people share their problems all day—which ended my vague interest in becoming a psychiatrist. The final decision to pursue teaching came as I was about to graduate from Stillman. I realized that, as my peers were going off to become public school teachers, I was not ready to teach anybody. So, off to graduate school I went to learn more and to get ready to teach. Still, I think it was more the impulse to keep learning than the realization that I was preparing to enter classrooms that I found most engaging. In some ways, I guess teaching was a consequence of the education instead of having been the specific objective of the education.

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

My major inspiration was and remains my mother, Unareed Burton Moore Harris, who died in 2001 at the age of 86. A single mother with several children to raise after her husband died of a heart attack in 1954, my mother was a staunch advocate of education. Although she herself only managed to graduate from the 10th grade (she dropped out to care for ailing parents), she still saw education—as lots of black people did—as the path to upward mobility from the limitations of poverty and race. I was also inspired by my general love of literature, of story-creating and story-relating. My mother was a great raconteur as well as a reciter of poetry she had learned in her Rosenwald School in the country in Alabama. I loved to hear her recite long poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar or tell involved tales of growing up with her sister and three brothers in rural Alabama. She
made me aware of the power of words. In addition to my mother, my teachers in high school and college deserve credit for setting high standards and demanding that I perform in their classes at high levels of intellect and creativity.

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

In 1982, nine years after I received my doctoral degree from Ohio State, I read an article about African American women who were very successful in their various professions. I compared myself to them and felt as if I were muddling around in what I was doing. None of them, I determined, had more education than I did, and I did not believe they had more motivation. I therefore decided that I was going to set a standard of performance for myself that I would continue to raise as the years went along. While I was certainly on track in my career as a tenured associate professor at that time, the decision in response to that article led me to increase expectations of myself and to make being an English professor just as successful—or more so—as I would have been if I had become a corporate executive, the owner of my own company, or an astronaut. From that perspective, therefore, my career has indeed turned out as I planned. There have been a few surprises, such as getting fellowships on a regular basis and getting articles and books published without too much difficulty, but perhaps the best surprise came when, in 1984, I received a call from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill informing me that I had been appointed to a Chaired Professorship. I was 36 at the time and thought, “Oh my goodness, what am I going to do for the remainder of my career?” Of course I was absolutely delighted with becoming J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of English. I had the pleasure of meeting my namesake, a former Chancellor at UNC, and, over a period of years after his death, I interacted on several occasions with his wife.

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

I didn’t realize fully the extent to which good writing would serve in all arenas of life. When I think about the numbers of times that writing has made the difference in communications to governmental agencies, banks, notary companies, department stores, credit card companies, politicians, and general public idiots, I am pleased that I learned my writing lessons well. They also enable me to be family editor, editor for the writings of non-academic friends, and—on a couple of occasions—obituary composer for a couple of distraught families.

**What are your reading habits? What are your favorite books? What is your favorite "guilty pleasure" book?**

Folks who read for their professions sometimes have to prod themselves to read for pleasure; that has never been the case with me. For years, I made lists of summer reading that I would assign myself (sometimes 20-25 books). It was an effort to keep up—as much as
possible—with new texts in the field as well as for enjoyment. While I’m teaching, I read new things if friends recommend them, if I happen to read good reviews of them, or if they strike me when I walk into a bookstore. For example, a friend of mine reviewed Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench* and Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women* in a journal early in 2010. I immediately ordered both those books and read them (though, when I reduced my library significantly in 2009, I had sworn that I wasn’t going to buy any more books). Then I emailed my friend and cursed him out for costing me money. Nonetheless, I used *Wench* in the grad seminar I taught in the spring of 2011, as I did with Daniel Black’s *Perfect Peace*, which I had seen advertised and read early in 2010. I have known Black since he published his first novel, so I keep up with him. I call this kind of reading a type of “reading in self defense.” As a professional, I need to know what’s out there; that’s what makes me keep up with writers whose works I routinely teach and write about, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Still, my absolute favorite book remains Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, with Morrison’s *Beloved* holding a close second. I also like to pick up poetry anthologies or anthologies of African American folklore every now and then and read through them. I do the same for volumes by particular poets, such as Marilyn Nelson’s *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. I don’t think I have any guilty pleasure books, though I did read a couple of romance novels once. And I like reading cartoon volumes such as Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* and graphic novels such as Mat Johnson’s *Dark Rain: A New Orleans Story*. My pleasure is in returning to works I have already read. For example, I love Anne McCaffrey’s *Dragon* series and Octavia E. Butler’s psionic series. If I’m stuck on a long flight, I’ll re-read McCaffrey’s *Dragonquest or Dragonflight*. If I’m on a really, really long flight, I return to Butler’s *Patternmaster* to get me through the flight. I’ve also been known to read Ian Fleming novels as well as bad mysteries by writers whose names few would recognize.

**What projects are you working on?**

Currently, I am working on a book manuscript as well as a couple of shorter pieces. The book manuscript, which has languished for several years, is entitled “Martin Luther King, Jr., Heroism, and African American Literature.” Some observers would perhaps find surprising the extent to which King has been assimilated into the creative imaginations of African American writers. I am exploring that phenomenon, from the time that many younger writers objected to King and his philosophy during his lifetime, to immediately after his death when those same young writers embraced him as martyr, to the 1990s when novelist Charles Johnson wrote about him in *Middle Passage*, to Katori Hall’s treatment of him in her award-winning play *The Mountaintop* (2011). I read King as heroic in terms of African American folkloristic traditions and explore how those traditions in turn influence his portrayal in African American literature. While my literary analyses probably won’t raise eyebrows, some readers will probably object to my casting King in the traditions of Brer Rabbit, Staggolee, Railroad Bill, and the figure of the womanizing preacher/lover. Literary portrayals of King move from the derisive to the respectful to the iconic to the referential, the near touchstone without substance that defines a lot of his contemporary incorporation into the literature.

In terms of shorter pieces, I just completed a keynote address turned article on racial reconciliation in African American literature. I argue that compromise is a better term than reconciliation, for any peaceful co-existence that can be found between black and white literary figures almost invariably necessitates that black characters give more than their white counterparts. A case in point is Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), in which a black family must lose its only son in a riot before the local prominent white family, whose mother and wife is sister to the black wife, will acknowledge that humanity and that connection. I also want to return to an article idea that I have developed about Richard Wright’s short story, “Long Black Song.” Sarah, the black wife and mother in that story who has a sexual encounter with a white man, is often viewed as a slut, yet Wright’s construction locks her into sensuality that he writes as natural and inescapable. Why, then, should he—and readers—blame her for
being what he created her to be—in cahoots with whites for the destruction of black men?

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 write everywhere, all the time—when I’m out walking (which is my major exercise), when I’m driving or eating, when I’m cooking, when I’m in the shower, or just before I fall asleep at night. I’ve come up with great ideas while I’ve been riding a bike at the gym, and I once got a great title when I was on a boat off the coast of Barbados. Once I get a title, I’m on a roll. Usually, when I am working on an idea, I turn it over to my subconscious and let it work while I’m doing other things. Then, when I actually sit down to the computer, I merely empty my head onto the screen. I seldom sit down “to write”; I sit down to record what I have already written and to edit what I may have written before. That means that I write “in bunches,” so to speak. If I have thought about an idea long enough, I can write 10 to 15 pages on it in a single sitting (my record is 17 pages one day and 40 pages one weekend). I don’t have any particular time to sit down and compose, though I am more of a morning person than not. For the longest time, I loved to compose in longhand on yellow or white tablets. Then, I was forced to join the computer craze (though I still use longhand if I’m writing on planes). Distractions? Very little distracts me once I’m at the computer. However, I can procrastinate for ages before I actually get to the computer (my younger sister has difficulty believing this). When I have multiple assignments, therefore, I complete first the one with the deadline that’s farthest away (say a month or two from now); that way, I know I will be forced to get the one done with the deadline next week. Ah, the games we play. They do not involve, however, any kind of fetish item. There is nothing, therefore, that I must have by my side as I write. But I could have a lot of things—pen and paper to make additional notes, a non-alcoholic drink, a phone, a cookie or two, some peanuts, or a Snickers!

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

If you don’t love research, words and composition, and a lot of time alone, then quit now. If you are not highly self-motivated, quit now. And if you don’t have an overactive imagination, please quit now. Just run for the hills and be done with it. If you do have all those things and are excited about them, then welcome to the club.

What advice do you have in general?

It’s so boring and such unnecessary stress trying to please other people; just be you.

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

When I arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of my senior colleagues came to my office to introduce himself. He encouraged me to apply for fellowships and told me that, if I should receive one that was less than my salary, the University would make up the difference. That advice—and my own interest—started me on a path of national fellowship applications that yielded many
good results over the years. Beyond that, the best advice always came from my mother, who often quoted the following: “Whosoever you are, be noble; whatsoever you do, do it well; whenever you speak, speak kindly, and have joy wherever you dwell.”

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

Also when I arrived at UNC, one of the senior couples in the department hosted a dinner party for me and another new female faculty member. They invited two young men from the local community to meet us. While the finishing touches were being put on the meal, we were in the basement shooting pool. When I made an especially good shot and the shouts rang up the steps to the main level, the wife asked what had happened. When someone told her, she responded, “Trudier, let the men win!” What?!?!? I wasn’t tying their hands behind their backs. Also, since I had been taught to shoot pool by one of my brothers, who is the closest thing to Minnesota Fats I have ever known, why in the world would I “let the men win”? Perhaps her advice was a testament to the status of academia back then, or to the status of prospective relationships. At any rate, I did not alter my playing. The other woman went on to date for years the young man to whom she had been introduced. And the young man who had been selected for me? I can’t even remember his name. Perhaps he didn’t like being beaten. On the other hand, I don’t think I have suffered—in any way—for having beaten him.
After practically dropping out of Central High School in Philadelphia, I took time off post diploma and worked in the restaurant business, ultimately working as lunch and brunch sous chef. Then I started to get stress nightmares and decided to try school one more time. I went to Goddard College in Plainfield, VT (Dewey-influenced, self-directed education), then on to Brandeis University where I earned my BA. I moved to the Southwest where I completed my MFA in Poetry in 2000.

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

For me, writing started after high school. I sucked at it because no one I knew particularly valued literacy (let alone literature), but it kept me afloat. And so it was writing that lead me through undergrad and grad school. I came to teaching the way most people come to college teaching: grad school. But for me, teaching felt immensely liberating--to close the door and discuss and collectively work through ideas. I've always loved that aspect of my job.

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

I don't know if “inspired” is the correct word. Writing was a necessity for me, and other jobs never provided the intrinsic rewards of teaching undergrads. If there was anyone who inspired, it would have been my professor at University of Arizona, Jon Anderson. He was the most intuitive, smartest reader I ever met, and he treated the classroom as a place where poetry was important, but also just an aspect of larger life. He never said that art was meant to exist as a precious gem.

If you have degrees in other subjects, how have they informed your writing and teaching?

I studied Russian in high school and in college. That literature and culture taught me that America is not the end-all, be-all, and it gave me more appreciation of the real-world impact poetry can have, especially in the face of tyranny. It can, at its best, be a cultural cohesive.

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

My surprise is that I have a career in teaching. I never expected any of this to come my way. I never assumed any education was my right or my due. If anything, I'm surprised at how hard I've worked at cultivating my art and my career, but these strike me as intuitive choices and lucky accidents as opposed to pre-assumed plans.

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

Rhetoric. Seriously, in grad school, I thought composition to be trifling, and at first, a means to an end. Then I started to grant-write and co-create The Slash Pine Projects internship, and, wow, did that chicken come home to roost.

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

There’s nothing consistent about my reading. I read to work on a writing project; read new work so I don't get left in the proverbial dust; read ancient texts to remind me of the human condition.
Favorite books are all over the place—I can't name even two or three (well, *Jesus' Son* and *In Sepia* I return to again and again). Ross McDonald noir mysteries are fun.

**What projects are you working on?**

Well, I just finished a manuscript of serialized triolets, which still need some tinkering. I over-revised them to hell. More globalized project is *The Slash Pine Projects*, a student internship in book arts, arts events (often non-traditional), and creative writing exchanges. At its best, the project functions as a community. Patti White is the director of the project, and Brian Oliu, Luke Southworth, and I are in charge of different aspects of the internship. But at its best, the class functions as a cohesive community where students are given direct agency in creating events and designing books. It's the closest thing I've encountered to a merger between being a teacher and being an artist. The students are truly collaborators when things are hitting all cylinders.

**What is your writing process? When/where do you write?**

I never have been one to write every day for 40 minutes. Usually, I take 4-6 months off, then spend 3 months writing trash lines or quick poems with no desire for anything to be "finished." But something then kicks in, and I ride a wave where the writing is meeting some intuitive goal and continue on until things begin to go stale. Then it's time to back off. I almost always write at work. Work is for work. Home is for family.

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

Everyone gives the usual advice about the dying job market, the decline of tenure, etc. If we are talking about creative writing, I tell students it's not a career: it's a vocation. If you need to write, you will write anywhere and not force the issue. Let life lead you where it may. But time has shown me that even many of the people I've seen come and go through MFA's, publishing, etc., will not continue if they don't need to write.

If we're talking about pursuing literature or creative writing as a profession, I tell students that writing is marketable as hell, but you've got to know your audience and what you might want to do; academic jobs are not the end game. If students want to go that route, I tell them what I've observed, but ultimately, it's the student who needs to possess agency.

**What advice do you have in general?**

Have a full life. Seriously. Writing and academic work can be so lonely. Make time for friends and family, and always be curious about the world, especially things you don't know. Be in as many iterations of the world as you can be.

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

Wood, you're a good writer, but you say the same damn thing over and over. Say it once, undercut, and move. That advice was the value of grad school.

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

Your writing should be easily summarized so publishers will want it.
Nicholas Helms: Ph.D. Candidate

Born and raised in northwest Georgia, and graduated with a B.A. in English from Mercer University in Macon, GA in 2006.

When and why did you decide to go to graduate school?

While attending my last week of classes at Mercer, and with zero ideas about what I wanted to do in the future, I realized that I wouldn't be happy with my life if I wasn't in the classroom. I took a year off from school, saved money, and applied to as many grad programs as I could.

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

I was a huge Anglophile in high school, and professor/writers like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien were my idols. I'm always striving to find a balance between the critical and creative sides of writing and teaching.

If you have degrees in other subjects, how have they informed your writing and teaching?

My undergraduate minor was in philosophy, and I've worked with the philosophy and the theatre faculty here at UA on my research. I'm most interested in philosophical models of the mind and how those affect the way we read Shakespeare and see his plays in performance.

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

Teaching. I'm also interested in plugging my knowledge of Shakespeare into performance at the local or professional level.

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

Honestly, a sense of failure. It's easy to sail through high school and undergrad without any serious challenges. In grad school, failure is inevitable: lackluster seminar papers, publication rejections, and the looming nightmare that is the job market. With that in mind, it's a lot easier for me to enjoy what I'm doing now: teaching, reading, writing, performing. Yes, I'm here to get a degree, which will hopefully earn me a job. But more importantly, I'm here because Tuscaloosa is exactly where I want to be. Give me a cup of coffee, a dog-earred Norton Anthology, and a few attentive students. That's my bliss.

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

My undergrad Shakespeare professor, Stephen Bluestone, taught me how to read a sonnet. He also taught me "chutzpah." You can guess which one gets more accomplished on a daily basis.

What projects are you working on?

Improbable Fictions is a Shakespearean staged reading series I co-founded in 2010 with Alaina Pangburn, a recent UA English graduate. We started the series to give our British Literature students a chance to see Shakespeare in performance as they were reading the plays in class. We're currently producing three staged readings a semester of Shakespeare and other classical works, and our performances involve students and faculty from English and Theatre, as well as community members. It's Shakespeare for
In the groundlings, dilettantism at its finest! Few things are as contagious as the enthusiasm of live performance. Here's the blog for the series: http://improbablefictions.wordpress.com.

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

One of the sad truths about grad school is that it puts your reading time in a stranglehold. Before grad school, I used to while away my summers reading epic fantasy fiction or dystopian science fiction (Tolkien, Dan Simmons, George R. R. Martin, Ursula Le Guin). Now I'm far more likely to read short, rich texts: the Tao Te Ching, Rumi's poetry, or an issue of Neil Gaiman's comic Sandman. I don't have a lot of time to read purely for pleasure, so I make sure that what I do read sticks with me.

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?

Tons of iced coffee and orchestral music (especially movie soundtracks), preferably while sitting in a public place like Crimson Cafe or the Ferguson Center. The caffeine buzz and the white noise from a crowd let me zone in on what I'm writing. Oddly enough, I find silence and solitude to be far more distracting than random noise. I've written dozens of papers while listening to Howard Shore.

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

Don't do it because you enjoy reading. Don't do it because you can't decide on a "more practical" major. Don't do it because you can't find a job during the recession, or because you think your high school English teacher would be proud of you. Pursue a graduate degree in English only if literature is your passion. Teaching isn't a profession: it's a life. If you don't love it, you'll be happier elsewhere.

What advice do you have in general?

I've been teaching Rumi in my World Literature class, so I'll just "borrow" one of his insights that I wish I could have written!

"Let the beauty we love be what we do. / There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

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

"I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." Alice Walker. My high school English teacher Rae Smith had this written on her classroom wall. I still prefer to write in purple ink.

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

"Live so that you never have to apologize." Maybe that's a nice ideal, but I think Beckett had a better grasp of the situation: "You're on Earth. There's no cure for that." Failure, regret, grief: these are greater teachers than strength and success.
I grew up in Tuscaloosa and left for two years to attend the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham. I have the same birthday as Joyce Carol Oates, Geronimo, and Tupac.

When and why did you decide to minor in Creative Writing?
I became a creative writing minor the summer after my sophomore year. I really tried to resist it. I was worried that writing was the only thing I was good at, and this seemed problematic when every person I met said, "Oh I write a little myself." But poems and stories kept intruding on all my studies, coming to me at inopportune times. I decided I might as well get course credit for all my troubles.

Who and/or what inspired you to choose this minor?
It was inevitable. I have always wanted to be a writer—though when adults asked me as a child what I wanted to be when I grew up, I thought it wiser to say "paleontologist."

What did you learn in high school that prepared you for this minor?
The Creative Writing department at ASFA taught me to think critically about my work. It couldn't be just a whim or a compulsion or a notebook I filled to please myself. I thought for the first time about what I was trying to communicate, about the mechanics of that communication. The unofficial adage of that department was “Good writing is good thinking.”

How do you hope to use your degree in the future, directly or indirectly?
I think writing classes teach you to be deliberate with language in a way that compels people to listen. Most people aren't concerned with language in a big way. It's kind of a strange hang-up to have. When it comes to job interviews and portfolios, it is important to make words work for you. Also, prospective employers will look at my transcript and know right away how dreamy-headed I am.

What have you learned so far in your degree program that you believe will be helpful in the future?
Don't trust the word “inspiration.” Be disciplined in your investigation of what moves you. It is easy to talk in mystical terms about inspiration, as if it comes like a gift out of the gloaming. And while I have certainly felt that, I have also been wracked with anxiety when the muses were missing in action. Writing, for all its weirdness, is still work.

What was one thing you learned in high school that you didn’t realize you would use until later?
How to be awkward and lonely and own it.
What projects are you working on?

I am currently working on final projects for Ashley McWaters's graphic novel class and Dave Madden's fiction class. They are mostly concerned with dream logic and men with swan wings. I am also trying to write a screenplay, which I know nothing about.

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

I read too many things at once. Some favorites are 100 Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Moby Dick by Herman Melville and The Passion by Jeanette Winterson. I have a catalogue of guilty pleasures, but reading is not among them.

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 write in quiet places. I am distracted by most things and very suspicious of people who write in public. I start with images and let them lead me. I only edit in the morning. I don't have a talisman to speak of. Though it would be a real task to write without a pen.

What advice do you have in general?

Be curious about everything.

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

T.J. Beitelman, a graduate from the MFA program here and my high school teacher, once told me in private that I needed to stop writing about beautiful things. It wasn't beauty so much that was at fault but misgivings about ugliness. I was being too delicate in my work and my considerations. I needed to put some blood in it.

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

“You are so sweet I just know you would make a really good doctor.”
JOSHUA CLARK: English Major Alumnus

I grew up in Jasper, AL. Of course, I was an English major and a Creative Writing minor, and I’m a first-year at the University of Alabama School of Law right now.

When and why did you decide to pursue an English Degree?

I originally planned to pursue music, but decided that English might be more beneficial in a going-to-law-school sense. That decision was made before I registered for my first college courses.

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

For the first two years I was in college, I worked for a small firm back home. The partner who served as my mentor is a graduate of UA’s English and Biology programs, because he planned to pursue either medicine or law. If I had to pick one person who most directly influenced the decision, I’d go with James C. King.

How do you hope to use your degree in the future (or how are you using it now) directly or indirectly?

I’m getting a great deal of use out of it at the moment. To attain the degree, you have to learn how to express yourself with coherence and concision. Law school requires just that. Searching the language of a statute or a holding is really not so different from dissecting a poem or a short story, except the language in the poem or short story is apt to be a great deal more accessible.

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

Using research and also having to make an argument without the benefit of research.

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

I remember enjoying reading for pleasure. At present, my reading habits consist of the mountain of homework reading I have for the most part, though I have discovered that listening to audiobooks in the car provides an excellent opportunity to get an infusion of fiction without having to feel guilty that I should be working (On the Road works especially well). My recent favorite books include American Gods, No Country for Old Men, and Salem’s Lot. I suppose, given Stephen King’s relative critical stigma, the last one could be a guilty pleasure.
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 really bad with process. Generally speaking, I’ll let an idea, or an image, percolate until I have a line, at which point I’ll put the whole thing down and then spend the next few days editing. Sometimes that happens in an hour, sometimes fifteen minutes. I’ve written in a computer lab, in the back of a class (not any UA classes), and in my car. I’m pretty schizophrenic about when and where I write. My biggest distraction lately has been the massive stack of law school work. When I write, it’s helpful to have a cup of coffee and my MP3 player.

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

I couldn’t give any real advice on the graduate degree, though it was next on my list if law school didn’t work out.

What advice do you have in general?

Read and write as much as possible. Vary styles, approaches, subjects, forms. I don’t think I quite appreciated the fact that I wouldn’t always just be able to pick up a book or spend time crafting a poem or a story.

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

That’s a tough one. I once had a fortune cookie tell me I’d make a good lawyer, and that’s been panning out so far. I think I’ve taken to heart just about anything I’ve ever heard in a creative writing class, so those have been invaluable to me.

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

I think I’ll hearken back to the fortune cookie. No, though I don’t think I could really say what the worst piece of advice I’ve ever been given is yet. Generally speaking, if it’s that bad, I don’t keep it around long.
What We’re Writing

John Crowley:

During a research leave for the spring semester of 2010, I completed several essays, one on a case of Grand Theft Biblio in the English Department during 2002-03, another on the current crisis in Creative Writing over the practical limits of academic patronage, and several more on the appearance of Frederick Chopin in important American texts around the turn of the twentieth century. These pieces ultimately took shape as a brief book, titled Jazz Chopin, which is currently under advance contract to the University of Alabama Press. Along with dozens of articles and reviews, this will be the seventeenth book written or edited by me since the beginning of my career in 1970. Several of these books have been singled out for excellence.

Heather Humann:

One of my recent scholarly projects is an essay entitled, “Seen Through Franky’s Freaky Green Eyes: Domestic Violence, Child Agency, and the Adolescent Perspective in Joyce Carol Oates’s Freaky Green Eyes,” which is forthcoming in the journal Children’s Literature Association Quarterly (CLAQ). This essay considers the novel’s treatment of important questions about adolescent agency and identity. Analyzing Freaky Green Eyes through the lens of child agency enables a richer understanding of the nuances of child action and allows readers to address this novel in a way that acknowledges the psychological costs of oppression.

Another recent project of mine is an essay entitled, “What a Drag! Lady Gaga, Jo Calderone, and the Politics of Representation.” This essay is slated to appear as a book chapter in the edited collection The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga, edited by Richard Gray II (McFarland 2012). This essay examines how the popular and powerful cultural icon we know best as Lady Gaga challenges and disrupts normative notions of gender and sexuality by/through her multiple stage/screen/print personas—including the persona of the male fashion model, “Jo Calderone.” This paper also explores how Lady Gaga’s different incarnations challenge the binaries of man and woman and complicate notions of sexual difference and desire. By/through the persona of Jo Calderone and the multiple other personas she adopts, Lady Gaga pushes cross-dressing into the realm of drag and gender play.

Carl F. Miller:

I am currently completing an article on Cormac McCarthy’s The Road titled, “The Cultural Logic of Post-Capitalism.” Instead of the utopian abolition of private property giving way to universal social harmony, McCarthy articulates a post-capitalist dystopia that offers merely a reversion to general anarchy. As such, what might initially be viewed as the refutation of materialist culture instead becomes the triumph of it. In The Road, a world devoid of corporate capitalism just as quickly becomes a world devoid of any human collective; the dystopian loss of popular culture means “there is no past” and leads one to question whether there can be a future.

Sharon O’Dair:

I’m writing several essays at the moment. For a keynote at the annual meeting of the South Central Renaissance Society of America, I am preparing: "Exploring the Renaissance: Nice Work if You Can Get It." For a volume entitled, Digital Shakespeare: A Shifting Landscape, I am writing "2014 is the new 1984." For a forum on Open Peer Review for Postmedieval, I have written a short opinion piece, "Saving Tenure, or Helping to Kill it?: A Few Words about Publish, then Filter." At the invitation of Postmedieval, I am also writing an essay called, “Ecomaterialism: Water.”
Brett Riley:

I’m currently shopping a novel called, Mulvaney House, which as of this writing, is under consideration at a New York agency. The book focuses on events that occur in a small southeast Arkansas town, specifically one house that is built by Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century. The narrative follows the house’s different inhabitants through the years and how their lives are impacted by a century’s worth of events. Along with telling a good story, I’m trying to examine the nature of place and the role of fate in our lives; to what extent do we choose our destinies? In addition, I am working on a new story, a new novel, and my first foray into scholarly writing in quite some time. I’m in the very early stages of research for an article series that might become a book. I plan to examine the recent deluge of genre books and films—vampire and zombie texts, remakes, and re-started franchises from the 80s. I believe the sheer ubiquity of these sorts of texts indicates something stirring in our national consciousness; I’d like to explore what that might be.

Shanti Weiland:

I am currently shopping my first poetry manuscript “A Beautiful, Fuchsia Hell” and working on my second manuscript (also poetry) about a woman who joins a Buddhist convent in response to a broken heart. The manuscript begins with the speaker, who names herself “Sister Nun,” escaping over the wall of the convent even though she has, in no way, been held captive. During the rest of the manuscript (and the rest of her life, which spans over 215 years, not including her casual second-coming) she spends exploring her identity, sexuality, and the path to enlightenment by wrestling alligators, vacationing in hell, and traveling through time and space.
STUDY ABROAD: Alabama in Germany

In 2011, The Alabama in Germany program traveled for the first time to Germany’s capital, Berlin. Another first was the collaboration between the German program, represented by Professor Rasma Lazda, and the Department of English, represented by Dr. Steffen Guenzel. While all students took a German language course according to their proficiency level offered through the Humboldt University Berlin, they selected one content course. Dr. Lazda offered a seminar entitled “Nazi Germany: Past and Present” where students explored the remnants of the Nazi regime and toured sites relating to this dark chapter of German history. The other content course, “Communist Germany: Transatlantic Transgressions,” examined Germany’s Communist past with a focus on theoretical and practical explorations of crossing borders, both literally and metaphorically.

The Transatlantic Literary Studies reader, edited by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, provided a theoretical framework for discussions and invited inquiry into questions of place, cosmopolitanism, translation, travel, imperialism and the postcolonial, and the role of comparative literature. Mary Fulbrook’s The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker offered insights into the workings of a political system that had promised to create better life opportunities for its citizens after the defeat of the brown movement. Among other authors, students read W. G. Sebald’s On the Natural History of Destruction and especially enjoyed the chapter on “Air War and Literature,” which attempted to explain Germans’ silence about empty plots along boulevards in Berlin and some facades still exhibiting holes caused by exploding grenades and bullets to this day. Several films accentuated the course theme: The Good German, Naked Among Wolves, Traces of Stones, The Lives of Others, Good Bye Lenin all offered different perspectives on life in East Germany throughout its 40 years of existence.

During an initial week of travel, the group visited Munich, the capital of Bavaria and home to the Oktoberfest, and Neuschwanstein Castle. While exploring the origins of Hitler’s movement, the group witnessed history on Munich’s Odeonplatz, infamous for Fascist rallies. A funeral service for the last crown prince of Austria-Hungary, holding the title from 1916 until the dissolution of the empire in
1918, was being celebrated with attendees clad in Habsburg uniforms. The 98-year-old heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Otto von Habsburg, who died on July 4, was the eldest son of Charles I, the last Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary. Another important experience included the visit to a concentration camp, Dachau, near Munich, and the campus of Ludwig Maximilians University, a center of resistance known as White Rose. A visit to Nuremberg, known for Party Rallies, the Nuremberg Trials, and now the Documentation Center at the site of the unfinished Congress Hall, raised questions on how Germans in former East and West Germany, as well as Americans, negotiate these lessons of history.

Next stop was Weimar, the city of German Enlightenment and classicism in East Germany, and the place where Germany’s first democratic constitution was signed after WWI. A visit to Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar allowed for a comparative inquiry into how two different ideologies preserved markers of the Holocaust. Leaving Weimar, students were excited to get to Berlin, along with Paris and Shanghai, one of the sin cities of the 20th century.

Berlin, at the heart of Europe, became the group’s temporary home. For four weeks students lived in apartments and made friends with many language school participants representing 35 countries. The afternoons were reserved for visiting sites significant to understanding German history and reinforced the discussions on transgressions in past and present. Among others, the group visited the Brandenburg Gate, Checkpoint Charlie, Olympic Stadium, underground train stations as sites of the Cold War, the DDR Museum as well as the Museum of German History, which attempts to fuse East and West German approaches to history. Students followed a trail of rocks embedded in the ground to experience Berlin as a divided a city, took pictures in front of remnants of the Wall called East Side Gallery exhibiting political graffiti and paintings, toured the German Parliament called the Reichstag, and traveled to Potsdam to see the Gardens and Castles preserved during East Germany as the place where the four allies signed the Potsdam Agreement in 1945. Faculty and students agree that this study tour in the Old World has changed perceptions and required some painful realizations. However, Berlin emerges once again as a cultural center where alternative and pop cultures determine the daily beat.
What We’re Reading

Joel Brouwer:

I’m reading The Untold War, by Nancy Sherman of Georgetown University and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics. The book examines the paradoxical (and often untenable) moral and psychological requirements a society imposes on its soldiers. Nations seek out psychologically healthy people to fight wars, then ask them to suspend certain aspects of their moral assumptions while they’re fighting, and then require them, when their service is complete, to reassert socially-sanctioned behaviors and beliefs. Many people are able to complete this process successfully; many others are permanently damaged by it. I would also recommend, along these same lines, Lethal Warriors, by David Philipps.

Mark Jackson:

This semester I finally got around to reading a book I’ve owned for two years now, Shop Class as Soulcraft by Matthew B. Crawford, and I’m very happy that I did. Crawford has a Ph.D. in political philosophy from the University of Chicago and works now as a motorcycle mechanic in Virginia. Through many personal stories and a lot of deep thinking about how human beings learn and work, his book breaks down the facile dichotomy that our society continues to enforce between intellectual labor and manual labor. Given the routinization of many office jobs now, Crawford argues that college graduates and bright students who opt out of college altogether might lead much happier and even more thoughtful and responsible lives if they enter the kind of mechanical repair and building trades that keep hands and minds obedient to the real. In all, the book has many provocative things to say about how technology influences the way we think and act and about the future of business and higher education. A coincidental bonus for me: one of its chapters worked very well in my EN 102 classes.

Eric Parker:

I recently read an interview in Creative Nonfiction where Susan Orlean mentioned a handful of books all aspiring nonfiction writers should read. Included in that list was John Hersey’s Hiroshima, a short 117-page book originally serialized in The New Yorker in 1946. Hersey weaves the stories of six survivors of the atomic blast into a compelling narrative that has incredible echoes of survivor tales from last spring’s tornado in Tuscaloosa: people weary from weeks of false alarms; people being in the right, or lucky, space as the blast passed over; the immediate confusion; and the total destruction of the central blast. Of course, it was not mother nature, but we, who inflicted this destruction, and Hersey does a wonderful job putting a human face on one of our country’s most controversial decisions.

Wendy Rawlings:

I’m in the glorious midst of Alan Hollinghurst’s most recent book, The Stranger’s Child. Even as a fan of anything Hollinghurst puts to paper, I’m wowed by this novel, which begins before World War I and makes large leaps in time into the middle of the 20th century while chronicling the lives of the family of a poet killed in WWI. If you’re unfamiliar with Hollinghurst’s work, he’s especially good at rendering the psyches and lives of gay men in England as they struggle to come to terms with their sexual identities. The Stranger’s Child is an even more fascinating examination of Hollinghurst’s favorite subject because he transports the reader back to a time when gay men were closeted and gay culture existed almost entirely in subtext and subterranean culture. Hollinghurst’s rendering of the gradual emergence of the individual’s and the culture’s acknowledgment of homosexual desire is exquisite and excruciating.
Emily Wittman:

Right now I'm making my way through Agapē Agape (2002) by the late American novelist William Gaddis. John Crowley recommended this book after I admitted that I had read Thomas Bernhard's Wittgenstein's Nephew at least fifteen times. Gaddis himself admitted his indebtedness to Bernhard countless times. Indeed, this book is, in part, an explicit tribute to Bernhard. I find myself looking for Bernhard in the book--probably an unfair approach. Reading as stalking? Agapē Agape is a shocking book in many ways—the last book Gaddis wrote and the shortest by a long shot. The currently fashionable notion of "late style" is no doubt relevant here... I have been recommended Gaddis countless times since I became a reader, but I never had the patience for his enormous projects, his (masculinist?) maximalist assault on the novel. Agapē Agape is 98 pages and just as Gaddis' output shrinks, you can also see the narrator diminishing, dying, in pain, and going mad. Overall the novel is draped over/engaged with Gaddis's fifty-year obsession with the player piano and the mechanization of the arts. There is no remedy, no hope, just a narrator looking back at "what we have destroyed." I can only read Agapē Agape in spurts... Look, as Nietzsche wrote (indulge my translation): "If you look long enough into an abyss, it will look back at you." Yet, it is a fascinating and mesmerizing novel; Gaddis's experimentation with syntax is astonishing and makes the novel worth excavating on that account alone. But Agapē Agape is ruthless, unrelenting, unflinching, menacing even. Bernhard brings me the misery I need, but with confidence that emotions like despair augment us, make us cosmic, even in our pain. As Bernhard wrote in Extinction, one of his last novels: "We must be grateful for all the sleepless nights of our lives, for they allow us to progress philosophically." I don't know what I will do with Agapē Agape when I finish it; I don't know how or if I will return to it. Is it admirable in so many ways. His knowledge of music (like Bernhard's knowledge of music) is astonishing and deeply nontrivial. In fact, it is worth reading just for these insights into music: what it is, what it has been, what it could be, what it has become. This is certainly not the story of an old man who feels superannuated and thus criticizes a contemporary world that has no use for him. It is not the book of a grouchy old man who hasn't been sufficiently recognized, at least not in any conventional sense. It is a remarkable and terrifying book, the fruit of a half decade of obsession. I recommend it to all of you. I also recommend alternative ways of reading it. I'm thinking of Augustine opening the Bible, pointing at a passage with his eyes closed, and reading his fate in it. Here is my passage: "Because it's easy to let the piano become your enemy because it symbolizes the terror of

the performance, if I hadn't met Gould I wouldn't have given up the piano, no more piano! (38). Check this one out.

Heather White:

I just finished Alan Hollinghurst's The Stranger's Child. I thought his previous novel, The Line of Beauty, was perfect, a revelation, and I've read it at least five times in the last seven years, so I was both excited and nervous about this one. At the 100-page mark I was disappointed, but I should have known better than to judge so early: by the end the Hollinghurst magic was in full force.

Patti White:

I'm reading 1Q84, a novel by Haruki Murakami. It's 900 pages of oddness laced with philosophy. Included in the oddness: a ghost writer, an assassin, a religious cult, a parallel world, a dyslexic teenage storyteller, an extra moon, a mysterious dowager, and an exploding dog. Not to mention the air chrysalis. Or the bodyguard. Included in the philosophy: the balance between good and evil, the development of the self, the nature of imagination.
The Chambered Nautilus is a production of the Department of English at The University of Alabama.

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