This year has been a good and fruitful one for the MFA program on many fronts. Our students and alums have had a brilliant year writing, publishing, and winning grants, UW teaching and thesis awards, and national prizes (see our student news section for the details too numerous to recount here). Our faculty published a marvelous collection of books. Our Eminent Writers in Residence wowed us. Rattawut Lapcharoensap won the Whiting Award while here; Jan Zwicky and Robert Bringhurst presented an innovative series of lectures accompanied by a string quartet; Rebecca Solnit worked with Alyson Hagy to catalyze a mapmaking project, the Gem City Atlas, created by students from the MFA, Art, and ENR. The atlas will have its debut at the UW Art Museum in early May. We’ve been busy.

The most significant news of all was the announcement last fall that Neltje—an abstract expressionist painter, benefactor, and founder of the Jentel Foundation in northern Wyoming—plans to leave a major bequest to the arts at UW. Her gift will be the largest estate gift in UW’s history, and its focus is the literary and visual arts: in particular, the MFA program, the Art department, and the UW Art Museum. Anyway fortunate enough to meet Neltje knows that her commitment to artistic freedom and boldness is unflagging. We are extraordinarily lucky to be included in her vision for the future of the arts in Wyoming.

This spring we’ve been focused both on the manuscripts of our current students and the writing samples of our new student cohort. At the start of April we held our first ever “open house” weekend: we invited all of our admissions candidates to join us for a weekend of readings, meals, meetings, and hiking in the high winds of Vedauwoo. Eight candidates took us up on the invitation. It was a fantastic time, and I’m thankful to the weather gods for keeping the snow at bay until the last day of our guests’ visit. We’re still in active recruitment mode, and I look forward to announcing our new class in our next newsletter.

My thanks and warm regards to all of our readers and supporters of the program,

Beth Loffreda, Director
WATSON FINALIST FOR PEN/FAULKNER AWARD

University of Wyoming English Associate Professor Brad Watson is a finalist for the prestigious 2011 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, America’s largest peer juried prize for fiction.


“It’s a surprise and a real honor to be among this distinguished group of finalists in fiction. I feel fortunate, lucky and happy just to be one of the five, whoever is named first,” Watson says. He adds that he’s also grateful to the UW Department of English for giving him some crucial time during the Fall 2008 semester to, “really pull the book together.”

“I am lucky, also, to work every day among such a group of very smart, very talented and very pleasant-to-be-around colleagues and students in the MFA Program and the department as a whole,” Watson says.

Beth Loffreda, UW MFA Program in Creative Writing director, says the nomination is a major recognition for Watson.

“The PEN/Faulkner Award is easily one of the most prestigious honors in American fiction, right up there with the National Book Award,” she says. “To be named a finalist is to be recognized as one of the most important fiction writers working in the country today. It’s marvelous to see one of our own, Brad Watson, receive that recognition.”

Directors of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation say the winner, who will receive $15,000, will be announced March 15. The remaining four finalists will be awarded $5,000 each. In a ceremony that celebrates the winner as “first among equals,” all five authors will be honored during the 31st Annual PEN/Faulkner Award ceremony Saturday, May 7, at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

Judges considered approximately 320 novels and short story collections by American authors published in the United States during 2010. Submissions came from more than 125 publishing houses, including small and academic presses. There is no fee for a publisher or writer to submit a book.

“Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives” is steeped in the Southern gothic tradition. Watson steps beyond the borders of the traditional south to inflect even southern California with the lush trauma of its influence and the absurdity of its humor. “His prose is sure enough to carry this mantle and his plots are brutal enough to earn it,” the judges wrote.

One of “Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives” stories, the wrenching “Water Dog God,” tells about a teenage girl in Alabama who was raped by her brothers and impregnated by her father. She flees their tortured company in the wake of a tornado to seek refuge in the house of her cousin and the company of a pack of stray dogs.

Stories such as this prompted the New York Times to identify Watson’s “great gift to be his portrayal of the hardscrabble lives of odd but everyday people, their relationships to the surrounding land freighted with privately held histories and traumas.” Earlier this year, the Boston Globe named “Aliens in
the Prime of Their Lives” among the year’s best fiction books.

“And yet, Watson’s real gift is the humor and restraint that accompany these portrayals. His characters come to their own slow terms with life, providing us a reading experience both searing and hilarious,” the judges say.

Watson is the author of a previous short story collection that won the Sue Kaufman Award for First Fiction, as well as a novel, “The Heaven of Mercury,” that was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Originally from Mississippi, Watson teaches in the MFA in Creative Writing Program at UW. He previously taught at the University of Alabama, Harvard University, University of California-Irvine and University of Mississippi, and has held fellowships through the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lannan Foundation.

Celebrating the 31st year of the award, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation is committed to building audiences for exceptional literature and bringing writers together with their readers. This mission is accomplished through a reading series at the Folger Shakespeare Library by distinguished writers who have won the respect of readers and writers alike.

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation is an outgrowth of American novelist and short story writer William Faulkner’s generosity in donating his 1949 Nobel Prize winnings, “to establish a fund to support and encourage new fiction writers.”

**FACULTY NEWS**

**Harvey Hix** has a “selected poems” just out, called *First Fire, Then Birds*. Etruscan Press ([www.etruscanpress.org](http://www.etruscanpress.org)) published a hardback edition in the fall of 2010. Early reviews have been favorable. The book was featured on the *Huffington Post* as one of the “17 Most Important Poetry Books of Fall 2010,” and in the article Anis Shivani described Harvey as “one of our most daring poets, his oeuvre a rebuke to timidity, apathy, and retreat in any of its manifestations.” In a review in *The Believer*, Stephen Burt called Harvey “a late Romantic (like Rachmaninoff, like Pete Townshend) with an almost-gregarious taste for comprehensible excess.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anis-shivani/poetry-most-important-books-2010_b_795312.html#comments](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anis-shivani/poetry-most-important-books-2010_b_795312.html#comments)

**Mark Jenkins** published a story in the January 2011 issue of *National Geographic* entitled “Conquering an Infinite Cave,” and a story in the February issue of *Mens’ Journal* entitled “The Last Climb.”

**Jeff Lockwood** recently returned from the “Author Visitation at Virginia State University” and the “Chesterfield County Public Schools Science Visiting Author Program” (the university works with the public schools to coordinate a reading and visitation program). The university and public schools chose *Six-Legged Soldiers: Using Insects as Weapons of War* (Oxford, 2009) for their respective reading programs. He spoke at three programs at the high schools (October 20th) and three at Virginia State (October 21st) to about 300 students altogether. They’d been assigned various portions of his book that had been integrated into science, history, and general education courses. The university also sponsored an essay contest based on the book.


**Brad Watson** received tenure and promotion to associate professor in Spring 2010.

**Andy Fitch**’s book *Ten Walks/Two Talks* received mention by The Millions’ Anne Yoder as one of the best reads of 2010. He recently published a chapbook, *Island*, his book *Not Intelligent, But Smart: Rethinking Joe Brainard* is forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press, and *Sixty Morning Walks* is forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Press.

**Kate Northrop**’s collection of poems, *Clean*, is due out from Persea Books in June. Poems from this book have recently been published in *The American Poetry Review*, AGNI and *Raritan*.
REBECCA SOLNIT

The MFA program in Creative Writing welcomed its last 2010-2011 Eminent Writer in Residence, Rebecca Solnit, to campus in January. Solnit is an activist, art critic, cultural historian, and acclaimed author of numerous celebrated works of nonfiction, including most recently A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster, and Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas.

Solnit spent four weeks at the university guiding an interdisciplinary group of UW students in the creation of a unique creative atlas devoted to Laramie and its region. MFA faculty member Alyson Hagy said of Solnit’s residency, “Rebecca Solnit believes maps and atlases can lead us toward a new way of understanding the places we live in. The sense of place is strong in Wyoming. Solnit’s Laramie Atlas Project will invite students to make new maps--some of them traditional, some of them innovative and even eccentric--of the region to chronicle its unique nature and its ties to the larger world.”

Solnit gave two public presentations during her residency: The first presentation, Infinite City/Gem City: Reimagining Maps and Atlases, was an introduction to the Laramie Atlas Project and a discussion by Solnit of her latest book Infinite City. It was held Wednesday January 12th, at the Albany County Public Library. The presentation was followed by a booksigning. An echo of Solnit’s work on the “Infinite City” project in San Francisco, the Laramie Atlas Project is a unique creative endeavor, and Solnit solicited input from Albany County residents as she kicked off the creation of an innovative set of local maps with university students.

The second, The Laramie Atlas Project: Work-in-Progress Discussion, was held at the UW Art Museum on January 31st. Solnit discussed her effort with university students to “remap” the community and its resources. The students chose to name the project Laramie: A Gem City Atlas. All university and community members were invited to come to this presentation of the Laramie she and her collaborators had mapped so far.

Solnit also visited university classes across campus and consulted with MFA students on their writing during her residency. Her visit was co-sponsored by the Albany County Public Library Foundation, the UW Art Museum, The Helga Otto Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, and the Social Justice Research Center.

All the maps solicited from the community and created during Solnit’s stay will be included in a museum presentation of Laramie: A Gem City Atlas at the University of Wyoming Art Museum in May and June.
STUDENT NEWS

Stephanie Dugger had a nonfiction essay published in *Arts & Letters* and a couple of poems published in *Zone 3*. She was also the recipient of the A&S Summer Independent Study Award and the Haub School Student Research Grant. She won the Ellbogen Outstanding Graduate Assistant Teaching Award.

Katie Flagg traveled to China on a Middlebury Fellowship in Environmental Journalism (as well as with support from the Cheney International Grants, the MFA program, and the Haub School Creative Activities Grant) to research cloud seeding and weather modification for a piece of narrative journalism. Her poem “Dead Reckoning” appeared in the October 2010 issue of *The Hollins Critic*, and her poem “Oogenesis” is forthcoming in the April issue of Honeybee Press’s *The Salon*. In February, her newspaper series on dairy farming in Vermont was named the “Best State News Story” among all Vermont newspapers by the Vermont Press Association. Also this spring, she published a feature on local foods and butchering in *Vermont Life* magazine.

Kelly Herbinson’s essay “Natural Selection,” about love and the mating habits of the California grunion, was published in Issue #40 of *Creative Nonfiction* in December. She received a writing residency at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology in Oregon.

Adam Million was awarded a position to team-teach with Nell Hanley the Intro to Creative Writing course in the spring semester. He placed his poem “Arguing from Sources: a Draft” with Touchstone last spring, and his poem “When a Series of Pulses” was given special mention by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Natasha Trethewey in the *Copper Nickel* poetry contest this past summer and will be published in *Copper Nickel 15* this winter/spring. His review of Phebe Davidson’s collection, *The Surface of Things*, was published by the *South Carolina Review* last spring, and he is currently at work on a review of her new chapbook, *Seven Mile*, to be published by the *South Carolina Review* as well. Adam worked on gathering, reading, and choosing submissions for the spring publication of the 2011 edition of the *Owen Wister Review*.

Scott Rosenberg received a three-month residency at the Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos for summer 2011. He published in *A Public Space and Ships That Pass*, and read at the REDCAT theater in LA in December.

Estella Soto was awarded grants from the Helga Otto Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources and the Dick and Lynne Cheney Study Abroad program through International Studies. She travelled the Ring Road around the island nation of Iceland, studying the interconnection between landscape and modes of storytelling. She launched a blog for the MFA program at http://ibrokemythesis.com/.


Luling Osofsky was awarded a Cheney grant for research abroad about the experience of Jewish boxers forced to fight at Auschwitz. She was also awarded an A&S Summer Independent Study.

Irina Zhorov was awarded a Cheney grant for research abroad to study mountaineering in Uzbekistan. She and Katie Flagg
Kris Kastler is enjoying her new job in the English department and loves working with students and faculty. She has a lot of knowledge about how the university operates. Kris is hired after Keith Kanbe was transferred to the Anthropology department, but she is not a direct replacement for Keith. Kris was hired after Keith Kanbe was transferred to the Anthropology department.

Kris Kastler was awarded grant support from the SJRC for her project on hunting.

Callan Wink was awarded a grant from ENR for his novel on the ivory-billed woodpecker and its human obsessives.

Katie Schmid won the AWP Intro Journals Award for her poem “Daughter Psalms.” It will be published in Quarterly West.

Samuel Renken received the Holland Prize from Logan House press and will have his collection of poems published this fall.

Christine Ingoglia was offered a lectureship at Columbia College in Missouri and has been promoted to assistant professor.

Meagan Ciesla won University of Missouri’s Margaret Finney Short Fiction Award for her story “Somebody Else’s Romance.” Her story “24 Points” was published in Prime Number Magazine and her story “Incubator Baby, World’s Fair 1939” was published in Kenyon Review Online.

Lucas Street’s MFA thesis Terra Australis was named a finalist in the Black Lawrence Press Spring 2010 Chapbook Competition.

Emilene Ostlind won a UW Outstanding Thesis Award for 2011.

NEW STAFF MEMBER

Gwynn Lemler joined the English department as our newest staff member on October 25. Gwynn comes to us from the UW Libraries where she worked as Library Assistant, Senior, in Technical Services. Having worked on the UW campus for ten years, Gwynn has a lot of knowledge about how the university operates. Gwynn was hired after Keith Kanbe was transferred to the Anthropology department, but she is not a direct replacement for Keith. Gwynn will be the office associate responsible for graduate studies—she’ll be supporting both the MA and MFA programs, working closely with their directors and students. She’ll also be doing general English department support.

Gwynn is a native Wyomingite. She was born in Evanston and raised in Moorcroft. She moved to Laramie for college and never really left. She received her Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology in 1998. She worked briefly for StarTek, Inc. before landing part-time jobs at the Albany County Public Library and Coe Library. She moved into a full-time position at Coe Library a year later.

Gwynn is enjoying her new job in the English department and loves working with students and faculty on a daily basis.

INTERVIEW WITH RATTAWUT

By Irina Zhorov*

Rattawut Lapcharoensap will have a return engagement as one of the University of Wyoming’s MFA program’s writers-in-residence next year. He is the author of a collection of stories called Seeing and winner of the Whiting Award and the Asian American Literary Award. He was named one of Granta’s Best Young American Novelists in 2007. He is also an excellent teacher, an attentive, smart reader, and, well, just nice guy. Lapcharoensap spent the Fall 2010 semester dazzling students in the MFA program and will return in Fall 2011 to do more of the same.

As a follow-up to that, is teaching at a University something you’re interested in in the long run? Do you prefer to steer clear of the academy, only visiting for long enough to leave students pumped and ready to do the same for my students: provide them with a serious and attentive reader for whom their work matters a great deal.

Though you say yourself that you’ve drifted far and often throughout your own life and no place feels truly like abroad or like home, I wonder how you perceive Laramie and why you’ve decided to return here. (Personally, I tell people it’s one of the stranger places I’ve been…) Does this place make you more or less productive as a writer and/or teacher? Creative? How is it different than where you did your MFA or programs in places with more going on? Or do you prefer to steer clear of the academy, only visiting for long enough to leave students pumped and then go about your own work?

I’m interested in any work that I can find. I enjoy teaching. And so I consider myself outrageously lucky to be able to consistently find work doing two things that I genuinely enjoy: writing fiction and teaching literature. Nevertheless, I would be lying if I said that I relish departmental meetings or the idiosyncrasies of creative writing’s post-war professionalization in the country. Hence, perhaps, my itinerancy. Hence, my rather naive if not Pollyanna-ish sense that writing and teaching are “vocations” rather than “careers.”

Several things have drawn me back to Laramie: the wonderful students I met there; the MFA program itself, which is wonderfully run; and my very limited sense of Laramie as a place to live. Laramie is certainly different than, say, Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I went for my graduate degree. (But then again people have a tendency, I think, to over-emphasize Wyoming’s strangeness. They speak about Wyoming as if it were...
some kind of alien anomaly in the contiguous forty-eight, which it certainly is not. If growing up in Bangkok taught me anything at all, it is that when a place's strangeness gets habitually overemphasized, we're not talking about the place any longer.) At the risk of sounding incredibly pretentious, or maudlin, where I write has never mattered to me all that much: you sit down at your desk and if all is going well it doesn't really matter where you are, who you're with, whether there are birds twittering outside your window or hip hop blaring through your neighbor's speakers or teenagers flirting on your stoop or unremitting monastic silence. If all is going well, there's just the language and the story and the sense that something urgent needs to be said. If all is going well, you really don't care--and may not even be able to remember--if you're in Laramie or Bangkok or Kalamazoo. If all is going well, nothing else matters much but the writing. But that is if things are going well--which, in my experience, is usually the exception rather than the rule.

Lynne Tillman says one should write fiction as if it were nonfiction and nonfiction as if it were fiction. You're a fiction writer but your stories seem to have at least some autobiographical elements to them. You also, from my brief conversations with you about it, seem wary of giving too much criticism to the poets and nonfiction writers that have sought your advice. How important do you think genre actually is and how valuable, if at all, do you think cross-genre work is for a writer?

I'm not sure what Lynne Tillman means. I'm not quite sure how one would operationalize such advice. But there seems to be a great deal of excitement these days about the blurring of so-called “genre” boundaries. Well, my general feeling is that I don't care. The writing that I love, and that has moved me, has always felt immediately “true” to me somehow. To ask if Moby Dick is a work of fiction or non-fiction or theater or poetry or fantasy or adventure or philosophy -- or to claim that Moby Dick is successful because it blurs generic boundaries -- is to commit a grave error not only in logic but also in aesthetic judgment. Nevertheless, all that said, I do believe that one should read as widely and omnivorously as possible, and that if something moves you it may be best to figure out why and how and what you might be able to learn from it.

Your daughter was born during your last stay in Laramie in Fall, 2010. How has her birth affected your writing habits and interests?

I'm not quite sure yet -- she's only seven-months-old -- but I suppose that it's lowered my usual high narcissism a bit, which is always a good thing. And it's restored my sense of wonder about things, too, since I spend most of my days trying to imagine and empathize with a nominally helpless pre-linguistic infant for whom everything -- everything! -- is new and amazing.

Can you give us a brief list of some writing that has you excited lately?

Evan Connell's Deus Lo Volt!
Dinaw Mengestu's How to Read the Air.
Eric Puchner's Model Home.
Karen Russell's Swamplandia!

The recent translation of Chekhov's short novels.
I've also been doing some re-reading:
Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping and Edward P. Jones' Lost in the City, both of which I found as unimpeachably magnificent as I remembered them.

What are you working on these days? Are you writing a novel now that you've been recognized as one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists?

I don't want to jinx myself by talking too much about it -- but, yes, I've been working on a novel.

*Irina Zhorov is a first-year MFA student in non-fiction.