

Happenings: New Faculty Stories

English News at the University of Wyoming

Fall/Winter 2008

Letter from the Chair, Peter Parolin parolin@uwyo.edu

We're in the midst of a wonderfully rich and full semester in the UW English department. In September, we hosted Salman Rushdie for an unforgettable day of readings and discussions and a wonderful dinner at the home of University President Tom Buchanan. The morning after Rushdie's events, three of our students flew with him to Denver in the University jet. One of the students, Evie Hemphill from the MFA in Creative Writing, has written a story about the flight for this newsletter. Our MFA program in Creative Writing sponsored readings by the award-winning fiction writer Manuel Munoz, the poet B.H Fairchild, and the playwright Greg Pierotti. In early November, the MFA presented an emerging fiction writers symposium featuring Chris Bachelder, Karl Iag-nemma, and Neela Vaswani. Our MA program in English kicked off a new speaker series this fall with Jim Porter, a scholar of rhetoric and digital writing from Michigan Tech, and Laurie Finke, a medievalist and literary theorist from Kenyon College. We are committed to bringing so many leading writers and scholars to UW because their presence in our midst stimulates us, frames questions for us in new ways, and puts our own work, as professors and students, in a wider national context. Always, when our distinguished visitors come to town, we open our doors to the Laramie community, so that together we can all profit from the intellectual insights and beautiful writing that our guests share. I invite all readers of this newsletter to join us at events for our visiting writers and scholars – you will find upcoming events publicized on our web page.

In addition to the visitors to our campus, we have a great array of talent at home. This newsletter features brief stories about our three new faculty members, Kate Northrop, Nicole Quackenbush, and Jason Thompson, who have all hit the ground running and are impressing students and colleagues alike. There is also a story about our Eminent -Writer- in-Residence, Joy Williams, one of the finest fiction writers in the United States. We are so fortunate to have Joy on our faculty this year, and what a privilege it is for our students, too, to be able to study with a writer of her brilliance.

English department students continue to register great successes, winning grants to attend conferences and conduct research in places as disparate as San Francisco, Mexico, Bermuda, and northern Canada. Thanks to the generosity of donors, the department is able to support graduate student travel so that these outstanding students can go where they need to go to conduct their research. At the undergraduate level, too, generous donors enable us to support student study abroad. For example, this spring, the Tanner Prize will help four outstanding English majors study abroad for the semester by providing them each with a \$3000 stipend. As winter closes in on us, we're finishing classes and planning for the future. We are searching for two new faculty members, one in 19th century American literature and one in creative writing, non-fiction. I hope that by the time of my spring newsletter, I will be able to introduce you to the newest members of our department. In the meantime, if you are looking for a perfect holiday gift, I suggest two new books by our award winning poets, Craig Arnold's *Made Flesh* and Harvey Hix's *Legible Heavens*, both published this fall. I should also mention a fascinating title by our colleague Jeff Lockwood, *Six-Legged Soldiers: Using Insects as Weapons of War* just published by Oxford. (ok, this one may not be everyone's idea of a holiday title, but it is really interesting work!)

I wish you all the very best for the end of the year, for a wonderful holiday season, and for a happy 2009.

With all good wishes,

Peter Parolin

Salman Rushdie, from the Air, by Evie Hemphill, MFA Candidate

Exactly 20 years after his highly acclaimed and controversial novel *Satanic Verses* was first published, Sir Salman Rushdie boarded a small propeller plane in Laramie, Wyoming—along with three awestruck University of Wyoming English students.

“I pretended that I was not nervous,” said Eileen Pfefferle, a senior English major whose name was picked along with those of graduate English students Davin Dearth and Evie Hemphill in a lottery for the trip. “Sir Rushdie asked if any of us felt uneasy as we lifted into the air above Laramie. I have no idea how Evie or Davin responded. I shook my head no, and I realized I’d been holding my breath.”

The students’ opportunity to accompany the world-renowned author on his way to Denver International Airport following a much-anticipated UW visit was made possible through the cooperation of the University President’s office, the English department and Rushdie himself. The private flight marked the conclusion of Rushdie’s stay in Laramie, where he spoke first at the Public Library and then to a packed house in the Arts & Sciences Auditorium on Thursday, Sept. 25.

That the three students looked forward to the one-of-a-kind trip might be a bit of an understatement. Dearth reports that he slept little during the nights leading up to Rushdie’s visit and, in an attempt to cure himself of the excitement-induced insomnia, tried to think of “as many intellectually challenging questions as [he] possibly could” for the famous figure. Hemphill also started a list of queries, taking notes at the campus and community events.

“I found myself constantly jotting down word-for-word quotes because what he had to say was really thought-provoking, both in terms of writing and just being a human in the 21st century,” Hemphill said. “The intensity of his mind and his words came across to me on the page, from the podium and on the plane.”

Rushdie’s approachable personality also made an impression on the three—and quickly put them at ease during the in-flight conversation. As Pfefferle put it, Rushdie “had likely responded to questions like ours before, hundreds of times, but his answers were fresh.” Soon the students were firing away: How do you like teaching at Emory? Do you ever get writer’s block? What role has your first novel played in your career?

“We spoke of topics as different as the War on Terror and the role of religion in European and American society to his favorite spy novel, but I came away from my flight with Salman Rushdie feeling impressed and inspired,” Dearth said. “I feel lucky to have had such a unique learning opportunity which I won’t soon forget, and as a result of the flight I am once again inspired to continue down the path of literary and academic inquiry that people like Sir Rushdie continue to make so interesting and engaging.”

After signing the students’ copies of his work while the plane taxied into DIA, Rushdie walked into the airport and wished his fellow travelers well. Asked what was on the agenda for his weekend in addition to a Library of Congress gala, he casually shrugged his shoulders, mumbling something about having breakfast with Laura Bush and company.



As far as overall impressions go, *magical* perhaps best describes the opportunity. And considering the magical realism that marks Rushdie’s work, Hemphill said, “somehow the dreamlike quality of that flight above the Front Range that morning couldn’t be more fitting.”



Left to right: Eileen Pfefferle, Salman Rushdie, Evie Hemphill and Davin Dearth

Paying Attention: Kate Northrop, by Randy Koch, MFA Candidate

Poet Kate Northrop, wearing a tan sweater, her black hair falling across her forehead and pushed behind her right ear, leaned both elbows on the desk. The late October sun lit up the west window behind her. “I don’t want the poems to be stained with me,” she said, meaning those she’s working on for her next collection. Her most recent book, *Things Are Disappearing Here* (Persea Books, 2007), earned considerable recognition; it was an Editor’s Choice for the *New York Times Book Review* and a finalist for the 2008 James Laughlin Award. But in the new poems, she explained, “stuff is more and more absent” and, consequently, she often relies on only “one or two images.” She’s attracted by places where things disappear to, places frequently unpeopled but heavy with the implications of people, like Laramie’s junkyard or alleys bordered by barking dogs with noses jammed between fence boards and where the exchange between feet and earth is mediated by nothing more than gravel. Places where she’s reminded that “one of the gifts of writing is paying attention to the world.”

This attraction clearly is connected to her approach to teaching the MFA poetry workshop this fall: students choose material focused on a theme and two creative modes—poetry, of course, and then a second, such as photography, film, painting, or music—that encourage writers to cut through the alleys of composition, in order to “learn poetry,” as Kate put it, “through the backdoor.” This approach, like the MFA program’s requirement that each student take one cross-genre workshop, she points out, not only forces writers to consider how the way “we name things affects what we see” but also “allows people to fail in interesting ways.” This is precisely the sort of gift a workshop can and should provide writing students when in the right hands, like those of Kate Northrop, the newest member of UW’s MFA faculty.



Kate Northrop



Jason Thompson

A Cool Rhetorician: Jason Thompson, by Matt Renaud, MA candidate

This fall the University of Wyoming English department was lucky to welcome assistant professor Jason Thompson. Jason was the first member of his family to go to college, attending Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. Although Jason’s main focus of study was Classics, he was drawn to a minor in publishing by the small platinum press run by the University. Whereas we all know that Classics are for serious people with serious study, according to Jason the press was, “Just cool.” Moving from the small world of the platinum press to the world at large, Jason won a Fulbright scholarship and moved to South Korea to study comparative mythology. For one reason or another, working in South Korea was not for Jason, and he returned stateside to the University of Arizona where he would receive both his MFA in poetry and his PhD. While in Arizona, Jason fell in with a group of misfits led by a Marxist game programmer (We should all be so lucky to meet such people in our lives). The group wanted to design a game based around Aristotle and his life of political intrigue. However, this was proving rather difficult, because nobody in the group spoke either Greek or Latin. With his background in Classics and mythology, Jason was more than willing to help with the language aspects of the project even though he admits that, “Nobody ever masters Greek.” While working on the game, Jason saw the potential of video games, both in their value as rhetorical forms, and in the amazing ways in which they teach people. After looking at many schools, Jason was drawn to the University of Wyoming by its amazing landscapes and the welcoming attitude of the English Department. While at the University of Wyoming Jason will continue to look at the power and potential of video games in his *Rhetoric of Video Games* class. Although to many it may seem that Jason’s fields of study have been disparate, from the classics to poetry to video games, they cohere for Jason in that, “It’s all just language.” And really, as those of us in the department know, what isn’t “just lan-

Unflappable: Nicole Quackenbush, by Lucas Street, MFA candidate

In just a few months at UW, Nicole Quackenbush has emerged as a true advocate for students, whether her Synergy class or her neophyte GA mentees. Despite her advocacy, she's about as easy to rile as Barack Obama. Only by harassing her students can you elicit an angry response from her, in which case you'll witness the frowning and fist-shaking that seems totally out of place for this devoted mother of beautiful 15-month-old Isabelle and wife of the expert video gamer/retired poet Jason Thompson.

I wondered: behind Nicole's graceful exterior, might there lurk a barely submerged rage? Hence, the following questions sure to bring out her darker side:

You speak very highly of your baby daughter, but tell me the truth: what about her really pushes your buttons?

These days, if Iz wants to reject her food, instead of just saying no, she picks it up and chucks it across the room. So Jason and I—having read about time-outs—simultaneously say, "No. That's a warning." Then she looks at us and does it again. So she's in the playpen for one minute as a timeout and her face turns purple as she curses and bellows at the injustice. Jason and I are so upset, we can't sit down and eat—it's a time-out for *us* for the whole minute! I think she thinks this is some sort of random ritual where halfway through dinner, Mom and Da put her in the pen and hide out around the corner.

Your faculty bio on the English Department website only lists fiction and creative nonfiction as your favorite genres to read. Why do you hate poetry so much?

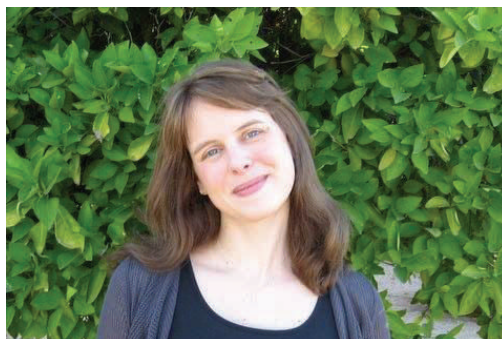
Oh, poetry. Oh, dear. I do enjoy reading poetry. I think because I was a fiction writer, what I've always been attracted to is a sustained narrative that I can become lost in. Reading poetry, I feel a bit electrified. I do most of my reading at night, and especially if I'm reading fiction or nonfiction, I can feel myself relaxing into the narrative. When I read poetry, it doesn't relax me; it can make me feel electrified to write. I remember when I was a fiction writer, I would often read poetry before I sat down to write a story, just to get into that rhythm of the language.

What bugs you the most about teaching?

I like to get to know students individually, as people and as writers. My favorite thing is when I see them growing as writers, and in a way that I think they value too—not just because it'll help them do well in class, but because it helps them to articulate their ideas.

The worst thing for me, then, is when I feel I'm not succeeding in this. I know it can't happen all the time, but if it isn't, I feel sort of constantly anxious and compelled to revise whatever I'm doing.

Well, I was a bit disappointed that I couldn't incite more anger in her, but despite being utterly imperturbable, Nicole is an outstanding addition to UW's English Department.



Pursuing the Uncanny: Joy Williams, an American Original

by Brad Watson, Assistant Professor of Fiction

Joy Williams, one of the most innovative and acclaimed writers working in America today, is the University of Wyoming's Eminent Writer-in-Residence for 2008-09. Although known primarily for her novels and short stories, Williams is also a highly original essayist, with two collections of essays that typically bend the rules of the genre.

Reading Williams, one might decide that she couldn't have an unoriginal approach to telling a story, describing a character, or arguing an idea if her literary life depended on it. Critics, attempting to sum up her prose, generally fail and air either their frustrations or their helpless admiration, sometimes both. Readers not faced with the daunting task of explaining the unexplainable (Williams) are generally, simply, stunned by the often simultaneously diamond-edged incisiveness of her observations and the blunt force of her vision, which isn't pretty.

One critic noted that Williams is "no believer in that American article of faith that everything wrong with us is correctable. Rather, she seems to believe that everything that is wrong with us is potentially fascinating, and almost certainly funny."

This same critic goes on to argue that "Williams seems to toy with this rather simplified notion of human analysis, exposing the underlying absurdities in believing that all behavior is decipherable. Inevitably we'll either be disappointed or deluded, as we end up expecting epiphanies that can only be contrived."

This very quality has led less sympathetic critics to fume that Williams is too dark, too difficult, an uncaring steward of her characters. Nothing could be further from the truth, or further off-target. Williams is interested enough in her characters, or should we say in the world and its people, to present them as she sees them, and to not alter them to fit some ultimately demeaning and diminished version of their lives for the sake of "tidy" fiction. The humanity in her work comes from her honest presentation of the difficult things, not in some false resolution of the problems. If there is hope, it comes from the recognitions, not from the reductions. Because it may exist in the one recognizing, and not because it is delivered in-hand.

UW MFA students who read Williams' work in anticipation of her arrival have been awed by her writing and the chance to study with her. One student said he was "utterly blown away" by her stories in the collection, "Honored Guest." Others have made similar comments, excited by the chance to work with a writer who so obviously challenges whatever assumptions they may have made about how to write fiction, about what a story is or can be.

Faculty Tidbits

Emeritus Professor **Lewis Dabney** recently appeared on the Washington, D.C. television program “Dialogue,” hosted by George Liston Seay and run through the Woodrow Wilson Center on International Affairs. Lewis discussed the twentieth-century man of letters, Edmund Wilson, about whom he has written so influentially.

Val Pexton won the Wyoming Arts Council creative writing fellowship for 2008-09, which carries a prize of \$3,000 and requires Val to write in Wyoming for a year, which she does wonderfully. Congratulations, Val!

Bruce Richardson, who teaches for us so superbly at UW / Casper College, was awarded an Arts and Sciences award for Extraordinary Merit in Teaching this fall. Congratulations, Bruce!

Caroline McCracken-Flesher, on sabbatical this year, has been wowing audiences abroad. She addressed a standing-room-only audience at the University of Edinburgh on October 16th 2008. Her talk was sponsored by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, on behalf of Edinburgh as Unesco City of World Literature, and hosted by Edinburgh University's research group on Scottish Writing in the Nineteenth Century. Professor McCracken-Flesher also spoke at Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, and at the University of Glasgow and the University of Stirling. Congratulations, Caroline – you do us proud.

Alyson Hagy won the 2008 Best Woman Writer Award from the Zonta Club of Billings for her novel, *Snow, Ashes*.

Kate Northrop was offered residencies at Caldera and at the Baltic Center for Writers and Translators in spring, 2009.

In summer courses abroad, **Caskey Russell** taught “Indigenous People and the Environment” in Mexico and **Duncan Harris** taught “Shakespeare in England and Italy” in summer 2008. The Shakespeare course will be offered again, for the seventh time, in May 2009.

Craig Arnold is teaching and writing in Colombia in fall 2009, supported by a Fulbright grant. In spring 2009, Craig will be writing in Japan, supported by a fellowship from the Japan-US Friendship Commission Creative Artists Program.

Julianne Couch and **Susan Frye** have both been awarded sabbaticals for the 2009-10 academic year. Julianne's sabbatical will take place in Fall 09. Her project is titled “Energy: From Land, Sea, or Sky,” a book about the impact of energy production and consumption in the Rocky Mountain Region and in the nation. Susan's sabbatical will be a full-year sabbatical. Susan's project is titled “The Iconography of Mary Queen of Scots: Agency and Multi-National Identity,” a book in progress that takes into account not only how Mary was represented as a political figure in the visual arts, poetry, and pageantry of France, Scotland, and England, but also how she came to represent herself in her poetry, letters, politically-inspired needlework, commissioned portraiture, and architecture. Congratulations, Julianne and Susan, and good luck on your research!

Mortar Board, UW's senior honorary society, has chosen its “Top Profs” for 2008 and our colleagues **Duncan Harris** and **Ric Reverand** are both on the list. Congratulations, Duncan and Ric!

All of us in English owe a huge debt of gratitude to our friends and alumni who so generously donate to the Department to support our endeavors. This Fall, your contributions strengthened our ability to bring so many exciting visiting writers and scholars to campus; to support student research, conference travel and study abroad; and to help graduate students at those inevitable moments of crisis when, for example, a computer breaks down and a replacement is desperately needed.

One fund in particular, the Janice Harris Student Excellence Fund, was started this spring by an anonymous \$25,000 donation in honor of our dear colleague and former department chair, **Janice Harris**, who retired in May. The Janice Harris Fund will support students in Janice's name. My thanks to all who have donated to this fund. If you would like to contribute to the Janice Harris Excellence Fund or to the General English Department Fund, please fill out and return the donor card on this newsletter.

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