English
AT CORNELL
A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Representative Man

A Conversation With Ken McClane

Kenneth McClane, the W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of English at Cornell, arrived here as a freshman in fall 1969. Three years later, he published his first volume of poems, Running Before the Wind. *After receiving his BA and MFA, he taught for a year at Colby College in Maine, then returned to his alma mater as assistant professor of English and stayed ever since. Seven more poetry collections followed, including* Take Five: New and Selected Poems *(1986). Shortly after the death of his younger brother, he began writing the personal essays that have given him a reputation as one*

of the nation's masters of the genre. Walls *(1992), which has just been re-issued by University of Notre Dame Press, was followed by* Color: Essays on Race, Family and History *(2009). The final essay of that collection, on his father's struggle with Alzheimer's, concludes with the passage we have excerpted below. A passionate teacher as well as writer, Ken won a Weiss Presidential Fellowship in 2003. His many contributions to Cornell and to the larger world of African-American letters—as poet, memoirist, critic, teacher, colleague, and public citizen—are unified by a moral exuberance and generosity all his own, especially well characterized by the aim he mentions below: to "give everyone as much of an endorsement as I can." In the fall of 2012, a new course proposed by Ken will be offered in his honor, entitled Freedom Writes: The Literature of Global Social Justice Struggles. He and Paul Sawyer shared the following pre-retirement interview at his home this past July.*

PS: When you arrived at Cornell as a freshman, you weren't a "typical" student; you weren't a "typical" black student. Tell us about your life before Ithaca, New York.

KM: I was a black kid from a famous independent school. But I had also grown up in Harlem—with parents who were socialists, although they wouldn't term it that way, but who had committed themselves very early on to living in the black community, even though they themselves had been college-educated and could live elsewhere. My father was a doctor and he never made more than $17,000. Two-thirds of his patients couldn't pay, so in fact, there was a great deal of barter going on. My mother did a lot of work off-Broadway, and did interracial theater in Cape Cod, deliberately using professional actors working with civil rights activists, including William Kunstler, Roy Wilkins, Eli Wallach, and Anne Jackson, to name but a few. In the '50s and '60s to have blacks and whites performing together was to actualize the American dream, not just talk about it. And for the activists, playing at acting was fun—the stakes, though high, were not life and limb. In my house, famous people used to stay with us, and I always thought this was a normal thing. Duke Ellington, for example, was a brilliant musician, but he was also very nice to me. I remember he would always let me sit on his leg when he played the piano.

PS: Dr. King was also a guest of your parents. What impressed a young boy about him?

KM: Yes. It was the magnitude of his interest in others that was actually his charisma, I think. When people would meet him, they would move from calling him Dr. King to, "I just spoke to Martin." And they would do this in minutes. There was something about him that was irrepressibly vulnerable. Humanizing. Everyone evolved in his presence and became larger than he or she thought possible. And, just as important as his greatness, he made people realize that they could do things they never thought imaginable on the world stage. He made us realize that we had within our humanity all the provender we need to change the world. The other strength he possessed was that he could both lead and follow: where he was tired, others were not. One of the things I always loved about my parents was that they always said to me that I was supposed to pay attention to those people who, in their daily motions, expressed courage.

It's funny growing up in the school I went to, the Collegiate School. I was the first black there in 320 years, and that was complicated; it was also an all-male school, which was a drag. But I'll never forget

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when I was in the fifth grade, and I was invited to a dance at the Brearley School, Collegiate's sister institution. Since we were all shy at that age, we would gather at the home of a Brearley parent before we journeyed, in small groups, to the dance. My parents always said if the door opens, you must walk through, no matter how difficult the passage. My problem, of course, was that I was terrified. My hands were sweating. I knew that I was going to a dance where there would not be any black girls. And I didn't know if anyone would dance with me. And I remember, as I'm entering the door to the lavish apartment for the pre-dance dinner, I see a black woman. The housekeeper. And she gently puts her hand on me and says, like the world's great foremother, "really, really good to see you, dear." That moment of affirmation and acknowledgement got me through that entire evening. It inspires me even now. That basic sense that "we realize that this is frightening: it was frightening for me to take this job, it is frightening for you to be here, but this is the whole history of a people. This is what we do."

PS: Simply attending the Collegiate School must have required a similar kind of courage from you.

KM: Surviving that time was an astonishment. I mean, it's really funny now. I was asked to go back and give what's called the Henry Adams lecture. It's a big deal. They put your name up on the wall, on a plaque. And I remember, I put that visit off five times. I was so frightened by that place. And when I got there the place seemed puny. I had thought it was gigantic, monumental.

PS: One of my favorite moments in your essay collections is the story of when you wrote about *Invisible Man* for Henry Adams, who was your English teacher.

KM: Collegiate was a very traditional place, and we never read books by anyone living—and no texts by black writers. Henry Adams gave us this optional assignment to write about any book we wanted, so I wrote about *Invisible Man*. And of course I had always been interested in that part where the narrator, who is given no name, the "I," finds himself literally swallowing blood; he is always in this predicament of never being able to articulate adequately his own agency. So I hand in my paper and Mr. Adams writes in the margin, "forget you're black when you write this." And I remember writing, though I didn't give it to him, "forget you're white when you grade it." Of course I was never able to convey that to him. I realized at that moment—and at many other moments at Collegiate—that I was swallowing blood.

But let me say something more to be fair to Mr. Adams. In my senior year, when it came time to apply to colleges, Henry Adams asked me, "have you thought of this?" And he presents me the catalog for Dartmouth, his alma mater. He didn't do that for any other Collegiate student. And in truth, I was not doing well in his class; he was always saying, "this shows too much imagination." Whatever else was going on, it was clear that Mr. Adams thought I was smart. He was a conundrum, and probably so was I.

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PS: You arrived here in fall 1969, the semester after the takeover of the Willard Straight. Did that event have anything to do with your choosing Cornell?

KM: I came to Cornell because I wanted a school that I felt was responsibly dealing with race. I came because of the Straight takeover. I remember getting here and feeling very quickly that this was going to be a very interesting four years. Cornell, however tentatively, was not lying about the great gulf between black and white people, between the haves and the have-nots—this was not a school that prided itself on only taking black kids from prep schools. It was a school that, no matter how difficult the process, and it certainly was that, was truly engaging America's racial maelstrom.

Being eighteen at that time was truly heady stuff, with the war in Vietnam and the omnipresent Civil Rights struggle. For example, the bottom fifth of the class was draftable. We forget this, you know? When we talk about education being a life- or death-affirming thing, it really was. You might well end up in Vietnam killing people or being killed. In my first two years at Cornell, we ended the academic term in turmoil. The first year involved the burning of the Africana Center. The next year was the bombing of Cambodia. So in both years, the term ended precipitously—my first year, in fact, without final exams. It was a very odd time in which to go to school. And yes, I was terrified. On the other hand, I wouldn't have liked to be anywhere else.

PS: Was Cornell the place where you discovered you wanted to be a poet?

KM: I had actually known Langston Hughes, because he was often at the Afro-American bookstore on 125th Street, and I would visit him when I was a young kid. He would read to us every Saturday. And at some point he said to my father, "I think your son is going to be a poet." And this was my father's worst fear. How's my child going to make a living, right? And yet my father never voiced his discomfort. It is only as I get older that I realize how saintly my parents were. As James Baldwin reminds, "the problems of keeping children alive are never real for children."

Anyway, I got to Cornell, and I started to write what I thought were poems. They were simply terrible. I mean, they were true *merde*. But I didn't know it. And I had a friend who said, "you should show Professor Ammons these things." I didn't know who Professor Ammons was, at that point, but I gave him a sheaf of these prattlings. And he said, very nicely, "come back in a week's time." I heard his Southern drawl, and I said to myself, "there's not anything a Southerner is going to be able to tell me." And so I didn't come back. Next term, I took English 280. And who was the teacher? A.R. Ammons. And he was incredible. He didn't mention my previous lapse, and I certainly didn't mention it. And I well remember the first class. I wrote a poem that was very self-conscious, far too overtly Romantic, but it had one line that he admired. And it was something like: "His hand – Oh! How it trembled." And Archie particularly liked the exclamatory "Oh!" And he said, "that's wonderful." That was my first moment of validation, which was as needful to me as air. And from that moment, we became incredibly close, and remained that way to the end of his life.

The wonderful thing about writing is that I often don't understand what I have experienced until I have written about it: it's as if I need to write to live, not the other way around. And the other thing is that it allows me—and I'm talking about the non-fiction stuff—to argue for others, for their inviolable sacredness.

PS: Why did you start writing essays?

KM: I stopped writing poetry when my brother died of alcoholism. I realized that I couldn't write poems anymore because I always felt that poems shouldn't be didactic. In fact, I only composed one poem that was 100% autobiographical. And that poem was one I regret to this moment; it was about my mother who was clinically schizophrenic. She was in and out of the hospital a lot. One of the reasons I find life so—and poetry—so full of joy, is that, given everything that happened to my family, we always had undiminishable love. That was an essential calibration. I've been so blessed because of that. There was never a question that my parents weren't always behind us. As a teacher, my job is to provide everyone as much of an endorsement as I can, to corroborate him or her. At times it's difficult, but boy are we lucky, particularly in the kind of work that we do. We have really smart students and we are permitted to talk about those things that are ineluctable, the heart's music.

PS: So in the essays, you could be both confessional and didactic in ways that didn't work in poems.

KM: Yes. The death of my brother Paul was the first essay, and to be honest with you, it was pure therapy. That essay has been re-printed 15 times. Let me put it this way: if horrible things happen, all there is, is horror. The wondrous thing about an essay is that at least you can give suffering shape. In some sense you can have the person back. And you can say things you wish you had uttered. And you can also understand things about that person that he tried to express and actually did express, except you didn't see it. My brother was incredible. At bottom, we all are.

PS: It's of course a natural human impulse to try to find reasons for why one person survived and someone else didn't.

KM: That's what the book was about. My brother and I had the same exact IQ, to the point. And that's the truth. I would do something and people would applaud, and he would do something and get sent to jail. Brutal but true. Paul was a person who didn't talk much. He would just act. I remember when I was applying to graduate school, I only applied to Cornell and to Brown—but I didn't know much about Brown. So my brother comes to Ithaca…all of a sudden I hear this screech and he says, "get in the car." And he drives me all the way to Providence. Then he says, "talk to these people." He had all these friends—and they tell me about Brown. And, just as abruptly, he states, "get back in the car." Drives me back in a day. That's the way he was. That was the way he functioned. There was no quiet art of compromise. He would simply act, and you had to understand it. He was mysterious in another way. He tended to internalize other people's misfortune to such a degree that sometimes he thought it was his. Sometimes he would say, "yeah! yeah! yeah!" And he'd be talking about my parents' alleged misanthropy. And I'd say, "what are you talking about, Paul?" And he'd say, "oh yeah, they didn't really do that to us, did they?" It was a weird sense of transference that I couldn't quite understand. I don't think he was inventing; I think that his empathy was such that it didn't have any bounds. In any event, it didn't give him the sustenance he needed. I remember when Paul and I visited the slave quarters at Mount Vernon, George Washington's homestead. I was gazing at the waters of the Potomac, caught in my usual mental wanderings; my bother, barely four years of age, simply sunk to his knees, like a bag of stones.

Walls was the Paul book, *Color* was the Alzheimer's book. The book I'm working on now—I'm in a peculiar quandary, because I don't have the anchor essay yet. I've got all these essays, but this is the way my mind works: I've got to find something that brings it all together and I don't know what it is and it hasn't come yet.

PS: It'll get there. Tell us about one of the ideas you've been thinking about.

KM: Sure, although this will be sketchy. One essay is about going to Bahrain. Helena Viramontes and I went there four years ago to talk about American ethnic literature. Bahrain is considered by many to be the historical Eden, and that, of course, is in the back of my mind. And we're there at a time of rising anti-Muslim feeling in the West and the ongoing war in Iraq. Amazingly, people in Bahrain see me as a representative American. First time in my life anybody's ever seen me an exemplar of anything. And they're asking, "why do you all hate us?" And I'm sitting there, thinking "huh?" I'd just come back from a rally in New York protesting against the war. Then, to add insult to injury, when I came to give my lecture, the professor who invited us commands, "let me show you something," and he points to a plaque on the wall that proclaims: "American Studies Center, given as a gift from the United States Government, University of Bahrain, on September 11th, 2001." Since there was a twelve-hour difference in time, (this room was being dedicated), they were celebrating the great connection between the American people and the Middle East as the Twin Towers were exploding. Truth is stranger than fiction and the world is always "too much with us."

When I arrived in Bahrain, the first thing a taxi driver tells me is, "you come from Egypt." I have this generic Third World face, and people often would say, "you're this or that nationality." Whatever they don't like or deem dubious, I am. I could be Puerto Rican, Moroccan, Cuban, or Salvadorian.

So I was giving these lectures, and I was saying to myself, I don't know… where *did* I come from? Black people, as you know, because of the slave trade, rarely can tell you where they were born. My friends can say they came from here; their family was from Italy or Surinam, and yet I have no idea whence I came. And then, amazingly, in Bahrain, I become the representative person. Which doesn't help, because I don't know what I'm representing. There are these identities flying around, like voices from an unnamed sea. And then there's this astonishing moment after we'd been there for a week. There were about 300 people in an auditorium, we're about to say our goodbyes, and all of a sudden, a young man stood up and heralded, "would Professor McClane come forward please?" And then a group of young men, with great fanfare and yet with great delicacy, offered, "you are an honorary Bahraini." So I had gone from this position of being an infidel into this incredible sense…that it might be true. Yes, I might be Bahraini. I could be from anywhere. It was worthy of *Invisible Man*. Still, it was such a lovely, moving gesture.

PS: I would be happy to have you represent me anywhere on earth. Shall we come back home for the last question? Cornell won't be the same place after you retire. But maybe there's something you hope will remain—something you especially value about the place you've given so much to?

KM: One thing I've always felt is true at Cornell, but particularly in the English department, was that it tended to bring together people that might not be employed anywhere else. Cornell was willing to give people the benefit of the doubt. I like the fact that this is a place that really does value difference—values the strange, the peculiar, the clearly brilliant but often difficult to assimilate. I've always wanted this place to be a school that keeps taking risks. That keeps mixing it up. Cornell, at its best, values the truly original, the truly menaced, the truly inspired. Where else could I, and many others, find such a community?

Near the end of my father's life, as he was sitting in the nursing home, he suddenly looked up at me, his head almost jerking. "Ken," he said, "would you like to take a drive? We could drive down the West Side Highway and go to the Village." I knew what he was suggesting. My father worked six days a week, from 8:00 A.M. until 9:00 P.M., seeing patients. On our wonderful, rare outings, we would often travel to the Village, where we might get a sausage sandwich, or to O'Henry's, where we might purchase a hamburger and he, a planters punch; or, most wonderfully, have *paella* at La Seville—a marvelous Spanish restaurant on Charles Street, where my father was treated as royalty. These were among the best moments of my childhood, when Paul and I, the boys, would be with our father. Interestingly, my mother would only rarely join us on these sojourns. I think she wanted us to love our father on our own terms—it was she, doing what she always did best, effectuating something, even if it demanded her orchestrated absence. It was, in Coltrane's terms, "a love supreme," since I know how much she missed us, even for those precious few moments.

I thought for a second about my father's proposition. I could, of course, remind him that there was no automobile, that we were in a Massachusetts nursing home, and that he was near the end of his days—I could tell him that. But I was *driving* with my father, the car was slowly snaking from our Harlem brownstone, down Riverside Drive, and we'd soon cross over into Seventy-second Street to get to the West Side Highway. We'd brush along the Hudson River until Twenty-third Street, and then we'd turn and go down Seventh Avenue, which would be full of people hawking wares—and possibly a street concert would provide us with congas, or violins, or a tender drift of Brahms; there might be a small art show near St. Mark's Place, and he'd comment on how much better my mother painted; but I could also sense, for the first time, my father's growing impatience with the transgressive jaywalkers—he was tight in the shoulders, his breath labored—and so I suggested, with great tenderness, "Dad. Let's swing by Central Park. It's lovely this time of year."

—from "Driving" (2009)

The Cornell Reading Series: **The First Five Years**

The last five years have been a veritable Golden Age for lovers of literature at Cornell. Thanks to the extraordinary generosity of two anonymous alumni, the English department has been able to invite a richly varied succession of poets and novelists to campus to read from their work. These visitors have ranged from world luminaries like Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie to homegrown rising stars like Junot Díaz, MFA '95, and Téa Obreht, MFA '10. Most of these readings were introduced by members of the creative writing faculty, though occasionally a scholar or even a university president got to take a turn. Below we present a sampling of these eloquent introductions, together with a complete list of all the readings since the series began in 2007.

Molly Hite on Sandra Cisneros

September 13, 2007

When we polled the graduate students in Creative Writing in our *very selective* Master of Fine Arts program for their absolutely top choice of writer to invite to campus, they said Sandra Cisneros.

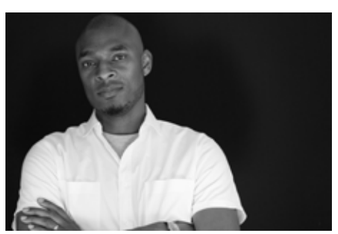
With good reason. Both a poet and a fiction writer, and someone who often weaves the two modes until they fuse—as fic-etry, or po-tion—Cisneros opens up extraordinary possibilities in the woven and sometimes nearly fused languages English and Spanish. She is a literary risk-taker, a violator who is also—and best of all—a creator, who makes wonderful people out of language and clothes them in atmospheres, neighborhoods, dream lives, shifts in emotion and modality, passion, absurdity, and of course—a Cisneros trademark—lists.

Lists can be excruciating. Think of the tolling roll call of grief in the short story "Eyes of Zapata." "Pots, pans, jugs, dishes axed into shards, our shawls and blankets torn and trampled. The seed we had left, what we'd saved and stored that year, scattered, the birds enjoying it. / Hens, cows, pigs, goats, rabbits, all slaughtered. Not even the dogs were spared, strung from the trees." But notice too how the sounds of horror collude, how the sentences fall sonorously into lines and stanzas. This is history precisely imagined and strung out in lines, the minute details—birds enjoying the seeds saved for springtime, the establishing technique for absolute verisimilitude, the Brueghel background touch that establishes "about suffering she was never wrong, / This contemporary master."

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon on Terrance Hayes

October 30, 2008

I like to give folks a taste of what gets said about them behind their backs when they come to visit. When I mention Terrance Hayes to the general populace out here I hear most often "oh, gosh, I love his work!" often followed by "and have you seen him!" Like particularly good food perversely makes me want to go into the kitchen and slap the chef, Terrance Hayes' poems make me almost angrily joyous. When I last saw Terrance at the Callaloo Conference in Baltimore, he casually approached the podium, reached into his back pocket, and pulled out a sheaf of poems, then took off the top of my head.



They were about Elizabeth Cotton, a Black American musician who, by the way, lived up the road in Syracuse and whose self-taught, left-handed style influenced just about any guitarist in America that you can think of or name right now, and added the phrase "cotton pickin'" to the American lexicon. As I sat in the audience in Baltimore and listened to Terrance read, I honestly found myself thinking, "how dare he write a poem that good, he must be out of his cotton pickin' mind."

Anyone who wants a glimpse of our country at the precipice, its images and languages played upside down and left handed, and made more real and dazzling, buy and read *Muscular Music*, and *Hip Logic*, and *Wind in a Box*. Brand names crowd the poems in *Muscular Music*, a collection filled with an angry humor that stops you and makes you think. "Where are my goddamn fries?" the speaker in "What I Am" demands. "Ain't I American?" And in "Buy One, Get One," the speaker quietly wonders, "how much do I deserve?" Rereading Terrance's work in the context of this historical moment, and the week that is to come, I ask myself, "do we deserve this beautiful American poet?" He makes us smile, but he does not spare us.

David Skorton on Toni Morrison

October 1, 2009

As many of you know, Toni Morrison is an alumna of Cornell, having earned a master's degree in English here. She has returned to campus several times for public lectures and interaction with our students, especially during her tenure as an A.D. White Professor-at-Large from 1997 to 2003. On one of her previous visits, Toni Morrison said: "literature stanches that wasteful draining away of conscience and memory. Literature experiences us as multidimensional persons." In such comments, and especially through the power of her work, Ms. Morrison reminds us of the value of the arts and humanities in our increasingly technological world. She reminds us that each individual's conscience and memory have something to contribute to our world, and literature can be an activating force. Unexpectedly, rather than saying "we experience literature" she says, "*literature experiences us* as multidimensional persons"—claiming for literature an active role in bringing out all we have to offer. It could fairly be said only of the greatest literature—like the novels of Toni Morrison, who has established herself, since the publication of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970, as one of the greatest writers of our time.

Toni Morrison's compassionate novels illuminate many variations of the African-American experience, with power and humanity, humor, and poetry. Her vision brings that multifaceted experience before us with stunning originality. It's an honor to have her with us tonight.

Alice Fulton on Billy Collins

March 11, 2010

Well, what can I tell you about Billy Collins that you don't already know? I could say he's the most beloved and well-known American poet since Robert Frost, I could cite his many honors—two terms as Poet Laureate, Guggenheim and NEA fellowships—but that kind of thing fails to suggest his importance. I could say his poems are winsome, reader-friendly. And that would be true. But as Collins writes, "poetry is a place … / where meaning only one thing at a time spells malfunction." I really want to say that while his poems are delightful on a first reading, they're even better on a second or third. Their worldview is ambiguous, sophisticated, subtle. His work has been praised for its simplicity; it, supposedly, contains no "dictionary words."

But in addition to delicious riffs on slang and adages, his poems feature some wonderfully recherché words—revenant, gastropod, hibernaculum, crepuscular, oligarchy, lanyard, aubade. That's just a short list. His poems are rife with literary ghosts—Wallace Stevens, Philip Larkin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti—as well as allusions to philosophy, history, and popular culture. He's a great fan of Looney Tunes, and of music from Cole Porter to The Byrds.

No wonder his work is often called "entertaining," "hilariously funny." But as Lucy said to Ethel, "that's not funny, that's tragic." The adjectives bitter, sardonic, dark, frightening, and vengeful also describe the poetry of Billy Collins. His devastating irony and wit can dismantle hypocrisy and expose cruelty. The epigraph to his poem "Flock" notes that each copy of the Gutenberg Bible required the skins of 300 sheep, and the poem wonders which sheepskin page will carry the news that the Lord is a shepherd.

In book after book, Billy Collins gives us the great abstractions—time, love, mortality—imagined freshly, as news that stays news. That he can keep the stakes so high while pleasing hundreds of thousands of readers is nothing short of astounding. We're so lucky to have his poetry as a counterweight to pomposity and despair. He is nothing less than a national treasure, and I'm thrilled that he's here to help us think and feel and laugh tonight.

J. Robert Lennon on Margaret Atwood

March 29, 2011

When I was a sophomore in college, and first flirting with the notion of becoming a writer, Atwood was one of the writers I discovered on one of my many late-night, study-avoiding library recon missions. I started with *The Handmaid's Tale*, which many of you are likely to have read. The book, a harrowing dystopian metafiction about a concubine living in a phallocentric theocratic dictatorship of the near future, explored gender, race, and American-style nativist ideology, employing Nabokovian textual layers and a cracking good story line. Its emotional honesty, black humor, and disrespect for the boundaries of genre would prove mainstays of Atwood's entire oeuvre, which I devoured over the next couple of years with growing amazement and delight—the wry early novels of feminist self-actualization, the comedic élan of *The Robber Bride* and *Lady Oracle*, the big, thick books of historical depth and narrative breadth, like *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*. And there have been short stories—good ones, really good ones, such as in my favorite Atwood collection, *Wilderness Tips*, and fables, and poems. There have been essay collections illustrated by the author, and an anthology of Canadian literature, *Survival*, which she has spent years carefully curating.

And then there's the ongoing *MaddAddam Trilogy*. In a career already lousy with masterpieces, these new novels seem to me an extraordinary high-water mark. So far we have seen two, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, which posit a drugged, corporatized, engineered near future where genetic experimentation has resulted in massive environmental catastrophe. In their commingling of myth, folklore, politics, gender, sexuality, and wilderness survival, they stand as works that epitomize the woman—one feels that Atwood has managed to find a way, at last, to give form to all her personal obsessions at once, without clutter or confusion or excess. That they are science-fiction novels is beside the point. All of Atwood has always been science fiction, or speculative fiction, anyhow; her fictional worlds have always been fantastic versions of this one. The only difference has been degree.

An Exciting Look Ahead!

We've saved the best news for last. Our previously anonymous donors are providing an endowment that will fund the Barbara and David Zalaznick Reading Series in perpetuity. Now we can look forward to decades of great readings at Cornell, and our gratitude to these special donors is boundless. We look forward to formally announcing and celebrating this very generous gift in the spring.

Cornell Department of English Creative Writing Program Reading Series

Spring 2007
Elizabeth Alexander
Junot Diaz
Yvette Christiansë
George Saunders
David Barber
Sandra Gilbert
Emily Rosko
Alice Friman
Heather McHugh

2007–2008
Willie Perdomo
Sandra Cisneros
Gabrielle Calvocoressi
Salman Rushdie
William Kennedy
Lee Smith and Hal Crowther
Denis Johnson, Mark Doty, and Paul Lisicky
Sarah Mkhonza
Ernesto Quiñonez, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, and J. Robert Lennon
Alison Bechdel
Eavan Boland

2008–2009
Irakli Kakabadze
Shauna Seliy
Patrick Somerville
Charles Simic
Terrance Hayes
Brenda Hillman
Melissa Bank, Junot Díaz, and Julie Schumacher
Emily Rosko, Helen Schulman, and Lisa Steinman
Ken McClane, Jonathan Monroe, J. Robert Lennon, and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon
Stewart O'Nan, Crystal Williams, and A. Manette Ansay

2009–2010
Susan Choi, David Friedman, and Charity Ketz
Cornell Writers on Cornell Writers
Sharon Bryan and Gina Franco
Toni Morrison
Michael Koch, Manuel Muñoz, and Lydia Peelle
H.G. Carrillo, J. Robert Lennon, and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon
Sana Krasikov, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, and Angela Shaw
Alice Fulton and Ken McClane
Martha Collins
Philipp Meyer
Natasha Tretheway
Jill Bialosky
Billy Collins
Paul Muldoon
Téa Obreht

2010–2011
Julia Alvarez
Bonnie McEneaney
Gabriel Packard
Lydia Davis
Carl Phillips
Michael Silverblatt
John Murillo
Stewart O'Nan
Nicholson Baker
Peter Balakian
Margaret Atwood
Joseph Klein, Alice Fulton, and MFA Poets
Laura Furman

Careers in English

by Kathryn Ling, AB '11

Kathryn served as president of the English Club and graduated with honors. She will be teaching 4th grade in Mississippi through Teach for America.

As the end of the year approached, the English Club Executive Board began brainstorming ideas for our biannual panel discussion. At first we planned on organizing around a much-discussed topic, "what to do with an English major," but as we looked at the club members, we realized that our audience had become much more academically diverse than it had been in previous years. The club comprises students who come from backgrounds in creative writing, chemistry, sociology, history, and more. The biggest question the E-Board faced was not, what do we do with an English major, but what can we do in the field of English? And the topic was born.

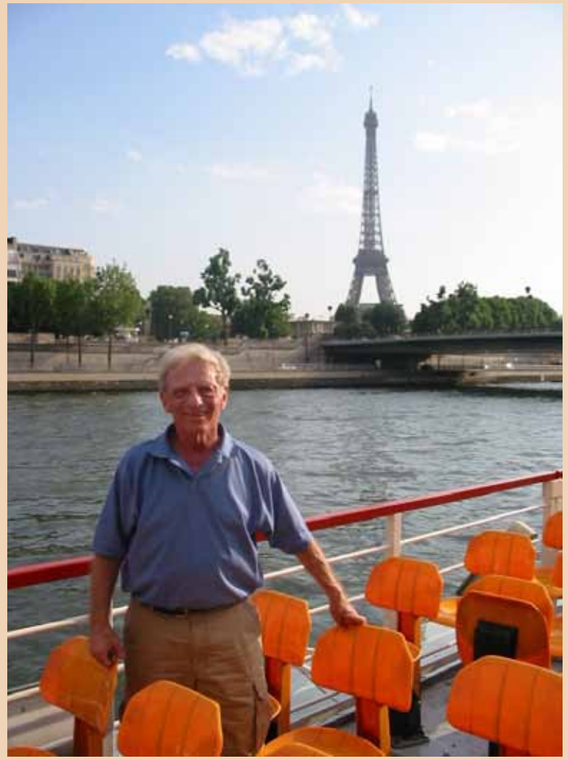
The panelists represented a few different fields. Professors J. Robert Lennon and John Murillo provided insight into the lifestyle of young academics and successful creative writers. Katherine Reagan, curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts, gave an intriguing presentation on the more aesthetic aspect of literature—the physical books themselves—and inspired any burgeoning rappers in the audience with a glimpse of Kroch Library's hip hop collection. Finally, Gary Weissbrot discussed his business, the local Ithacan bookstore called Buffalo Street Books (formerly The Bookery). Weissbrot emphasized the necessity of community networking in both running the literary haven and maintaining an eclectic mix of contemporary novels. The panelists represented various fields in English that at once contrasted and complemented one another. Though the foundations of the fields are the same, the lifestyles, backgrounds, and complex interests are not. Perhaps the only downward note of the panel was the explicit confession of each panelist: this field is hard. Getting here was a grueling journey. And yet, no panelist had any regret, and each similarly acknowledged that they truly loved what they did.

Tracing back to the E-Board's decision on this panel topic, I realize that the rationale behind the Careers in English panel closely resembles my own rationale for majoring in English. At the very base of it is the fact that I love reading and I love writing. Graduating from high school, I was convinced that literature was the only subject in which I could passionately invest myself. As I proceeded through my education, however, my English classes broadened my interests in a number of different areas. At the culmination of those four years, I walk away having been prepared for essentially any job that requires strong writing, comprehension, and analytical skills, whether it revolves around magazines, legal cases, literature, speeches, or research.

In the end, the Careers in English panel presented a lovely denouement to my own Cornell English major experience. It reminded me of the vast number of possibilities that come with a degree in English, and the sheer satisfaction that comes with pursuing what you love.

English Major, **But Not English Teacher**

by Peter Linzer '60



And not a novelist, poet, editor or publisher. I am by trade a lawyer and a law professor, and I get rather tired of Garrison Keillor's self-deprecation of English majors, as if we are all hopeless weenies who can't earn a living.

Even if one accepts the notion of undergraduate education as trade school, I can think of no major that is more useful vocationally, for a lawyer at least, than English. Much as I love and admire the superstars who taught me, among them Vladimir Nabokov and Mike Abrams, I learned an awful lot about how to write a sentence and a paragraph in Steve Parrish's freshman English class, English 111, elegantly titled Introduction to Reading and Writing.

Reading and writing is exactly what most lawyers do. We read cases, books, and law review articles so that we can write briefs and opinion letters, and we both read and write legal documents such as wills and contracts. (Trials, which are primarily oral, make up a very small, and diminishing part of the practice of law, compared with motion practice, which is primarily written. Almost every judge and appellate lawyer agrees that a written appellate brief is ten times as important as an oral argument.) I've done pretty well in my career because I write very well and read carefully. But many lawyers don't. Too many majored in stuff like finance or communication, which I believe don't emphasize papers and discussion the way a good liberal arts course (economics or English, for example) does.

Of course, it doesn't have to be English that a pre-law or a pre-med or a future diplomat or someone else who works with his or her head should study; but English has the advantage of professors who focus on words. I minored in creative writing, but learned that I was a lousy writer of fiction and a worse poet. I didn't start out as a good writer of essays, but over four years I learned a lot about good writing from the fact that I wrote poorly. Eventually, I got better, and I've made my living ever since out of writing, whether as a brief writer, a contract draftsman, a treatise writer, or a writer of law review articles, some heavily footnoted, others irreverent.

But that's not the point. Universities aren't trade schools. While majoring in English gave me writing skills, more importantly, it opened me to reading serious stuff for fun. Of course, I also read well-written mysteries, but I've read each of Jane Austen's novels 10 or 20 times, and I picked up and reread the 17 cantos of Lord Byron's *Don Juan* a couple of years ago, about 50 years after I first read it for Professor Abrams. Tom Pynchon was famous among the *literati* at Cornell when I was there, already recognized as a first-rate writer. He writes long novels with very complex plots, but let me tell you, *Against the Day*, his 1085-page novel from 2006, is immense fun, despite dozens of important characters and plot turns. It's well worth reading, as is another book that scares readers off, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. The book's 999-line poem has hundreds of pages of endnotes in which the novel (a romance, a psychotic dream, or the truth, who can tell?) evolves.

It's not that I read a lot of highbrow stuff. It's that I read. Some of it is Scott Fitzgerald's early writing, some of it is Ngaio Marsh, and some of it is *Flashman*. (And if you don't know Flashie, you should check him out.) I took only the one required science course when I was at Cornell, but somehow, majoring in English also lead me to read popular books on physics and cosmology and to read several science magazines aimed at the unwashed, but not dumbed down.

Surely this is the reason for studying the liberal arts (in which I include the hard sciences). It is to open us up—for the rest of our lives—to whatever is out there. There is a mural in Willard Straight under which is Terence's statement, "Humani nihil alienum puto"—"I think that nothing of humankind is alien to me." That's why we speak of the humanities. Everything that makes us human is relevant, and majoring in English is one path, one way of realizing that we never run out of things to find out about—fact, fiction, or somewhere in between.

We'd like to know how your Cornell English major has helped you in your career. Please email your reflections to english_dept@cornell.edu.

Donald D. Eddy, 1929–2009: A Lover and Giver of Books

Donald Eddy, emeritus professor of English and former curator of Rare Books at the Cornell Library, died on November 30, 2009. Don came to Cornell in 1961 after earning his PhD from the University of Chicago. A specialist in 18th-century English literature, he was a passionate bibliophile who, for many years, taught a course on the History of the Book. Students and colleagues who only knew his bookish side may be surprised to learn that Don was also an ardent outdoorsman. For 25 years he and his wife Edie co-chaired the annual 10-day canoe outing held at Paul Smith's College in the Adirondack Park.

A memorial service was held for Don on January 16, 2010 at St. John's Episcopal Church, of which he was a long-time member, and where he sang bass in the choir. The program for the service contained many touching remembrances from Don's friends and colleagues, addressed to his daughters Evelyn and Elizabeth. Here are some excerpts.

Laura Larson: "Your father was always a little larger than life to me. So much more the character of what one thought an English professor might be…but right from the start, even though he intimidated the hell out of me, I thought of him as a soul-mate of sorts. He was the first adult I knew that loved books as much as I did. I envied you that house full of wonderful old books, layered on the shelves, crammed in every nook and cranny! In my fantasies I always thought someday I'd live in a house like that…the books your father so generously gave me (and for which I did nothing to earn!) are on my mantle along with a few other treasures I keep there. Honestly, I have thought…of your father every time I look at some old and fabulously traveled book."

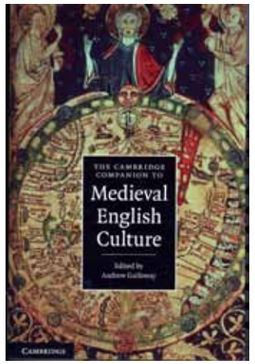
Kimberly Bryant-Smith: "[Don Eddy] was a librarian-scholar who loved the Adirondacks as much as he loved 18th-century literature; generous with book recommendations and dinner invitations, he took more joy in hospitality than anyone else I've ever known. There's a whole shelf of books in my office that he convinced me to get! I will miss him and remember him always."

Robert DeMaria: "Whenever I saw Don, almost from the first time we met, it was like seeing an old friend. He welcomed me warmly into the Johnsonians when I was a newcomer, and I was always happy to see him. I also consulted with him on many occasions, over a 25-year period, and I considered him the most knowledgeable and reliable bibliographer of his generation. For me, in the best senses of those words, Don was a gentleman and a scholar."

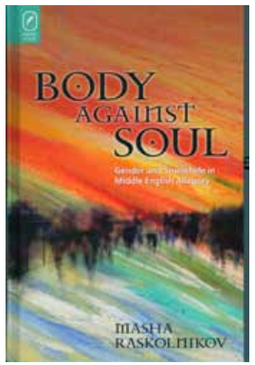
David Vander Meulen: "Over the Christmas break I spent a bittersweet but satisfying time going through my correspondence with your father over the years. I figure we must have known each other since about the mid 1980s…I've made steady progress on the huge pallet of books that arrived in November. I remember well the beginning of this deluge. During drinks before the Johnsonian dinner at the Grolier Club in 1995, Don asked me whether I would like his Pope books. That took me by surprise, and I politely responded that I probably had most of what he was offering. Silly me. "Do you have Abbott's 19th century concordance of Pope?" he asked. "Yes, I do," I replied with gentle dignity, not wanting to disappoint him. "How about the bound proof sheets?" he countered, as my humility suddenly grew. "Do you have the Roxburghe Club edition of *Essay on Man*?" "Well, no." And so it went. When I stayed on Renwick Drive for a few nights the following spring, I was able to get a good sense of the role that books played in the house and in his life….

On numerous occasions I've used his beneficence to illustrate the traits of a true book lover. He could have sold the books, which because of their generally excellent condition would have commanded a ready audience, but he preferred to have them go where they would be appreciated and used meaningfully. The arrangement over the years has been that I would keep what I could make use of myself and over time pass the other ones on to students or colleagues who would be similarly receptive. Though the supply has now gotten considerably ahead of distribution, that has worked, and his gifts have made their way as far as Beijing and western Australia."

Faculty Publications

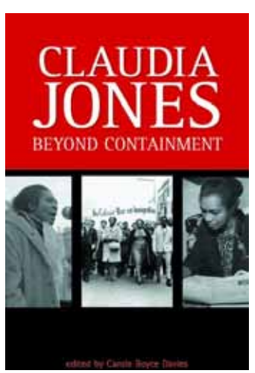


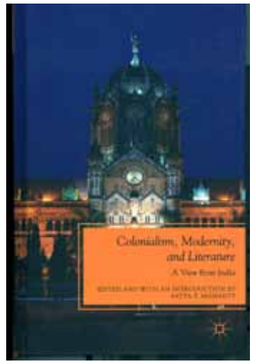
Andrew Galloway has edited *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Culture*, which offers an introduction to the range of cultures in medieval England, spanning the 11th through 15th centuries from the time of King William I through the reign of Henry VII. Essays by a variety of experts address political and legal history, archaeology, social history, art history, religion, history of education, and especially the literature of medieval England. Galloway writes in his introduction, "the fields presented here may offer a rather unusual fit with standard courses and disciplines, but the pressures on modern frameworks are intended." He concludes, "every chapter and field in this volume is meant to help in the situating of something else. The volume seeks to present as 'companions' a wide array of fields for whatever research and teaching scholars and students take up in the period." The volume includes two essays that examine the ways in which the Middle Ages has extended its cultural impact into the present. The book was published through Cambridge University Press (2011) as part of their Cambridge Companion to Culture series.



Masha Raskolnikov's first book, *Body Against Soul: Gender and 'Sowlehele' in Middle English Allegory*, published by The Ohio State University Press (2009), examines 13th- and 14th-century allegories, including *Piers Plowman*, in which body and soul are personified and pitted against each other in debate. Raskolnikov uses the body/soul portrayals, as she writes in her introduction, "in order to query how the self was being gendered, divided, and dramatized, to what ends and with what implications." Philosopher and theorist Judith Butler says of the book: "Raskolnikov deftly shows how gender is staged in the context of allegorical debates on death and life. Raskolnikov's brilliance is to show how voices are split and allocated to various figures, often personified as male and female, and how these talking figures debate not only the place and meaning of the body, but questions of moral harm and the possibility of true knowledge." *Body Against Soul* is part of the Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture series.

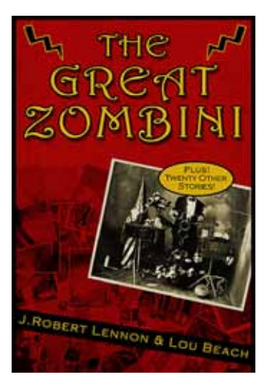
Carole Boyce Davies is the editor of the recently published *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment* (Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2011). The book brings together for the first time the essays, speeches, poetry, and autobiographical writings of Claudia Jones, a radical activist, feminist, and human rights advocate whose work impacted the international struggle against racism and the oppression of woman and laborers in the 1950s and early 1960s. Jones was editor of the *West Indian Gazette*, the first black newspaper in England and is known as the founder of London's Notting Hill Carnival, an annual celebration of Afro-Caribbean culture and the largest street festival in Europe. University of Southern California professor Robin D.G. Kelley writes of the collection: "Davies not only underscores why Jones stands among the world's most important radical theorists and organizers of the 20th century, but she reveals the Trinidadian-born, transnational intellectual as artist and visionary."





Satya Mohanty has edited *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View From India* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) as part of the Future of Minority Studies series. In the introduction to the volume, Mohanty writes, "focusing on literary, and primarily comparative, analyses, this volume presents one distinct and complex view from the Indian context, but it is a view with wider implications." The essays use the 19th-century novel by Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, as a representative work. University of California, Berkeley professor Vashuda Dalmia writes: "this wonderfully stimulating collection of essays brings out the multiple facets of the novel with almost equal freedom by juxtaposing and comparing it to novels across time, regions, as well as cultures. Surely a first in postcolonial studies!" The book includes an essay by Cornell professor Paul Sawyer, "Views from Above and Below: George Eliot and Fakir Mohan Senapati."

J. Robert Lennon recently released a new ebook, *The Great Zombini* (2011). The 21 stories in this illustrated collection were inspired by images created by artist Lou Beach, using found photographs, pictures of animals, and Photoshop. A few of the stories, which have been described by the publisher, Red Willow Digital Press, as "cautionary tales for adults," previously appeared in *Paris Review,* and *BOMB*. In spring 2011, Lennon also published stories in *Weird Tales*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Michigan Alumnus*.



Focus on a Course: **Shakespeare and the 20th Century**

by Stuart Davis

Stuart Davis has been a senior lecturer in the Department of English since 1984.

English 2080 opened its 14th season this spring with a modest title change—now Shakespeare and the 20th and 21st Centuries—and ended with the Ithaca premiere of an all-but-undistributed filmed version of *The Tempest*. Cornell Cinema and the Department of English partnered in screening Julie Taymor's film for students and the public, inspiring reflection on the last play solely authored by Shakespeare and the latest picture by this world-class director. In Taymor's opulently envisioned version, Prospero becomes Prospera (Helen Mirren), exiled Duchess of Milan and Miranda's mother, a change which triggers realignments in the traditional text while delivering, in the end, a remarkably conservative vision of the play. Such changes typify *some* (far from all) of what English 2080 tries to capture: the large differences and surprising continuities between the early modern texts and their recent reception around the world—in theatre and film, in scholarship and theory, and in public life and the literary imagination.

Shakespeare and the 20th began in 1997, the product of a sense that there were things we hadn't yet done with Shakespeare and of comparatist Walter Cohen's willingness to cross national boundaries and high and popular cultures in a 200(0)-level lecture course. (Barbara Correll of the English department taught it next, and I reaped the fruits of their practice.) Another factor was the éclat of the 1990s Shakespeare film boom; another was the flowering of new critical approaches friendlier to innovation and subversion than their predecessors. Why not (it was asked) combine close reading of five or six plays with study of adaptations, spin-offs, critical reception, and the cultural politics of the Shakespeare industry—and the fun of discovering new Shakespeares?

Over time, Shakespeare and the 20th has renewed its content often. It has paired *King Lear* with Balzac's *Père Goriot* or with Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Akira Kurosawa's film *Ran* (once with Wendy Wasserstein's play *Third*); played *Romeo and Juliet* against *West Side Story* and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*; looked at the uses of *Macbeth* by Barbara Garson (*MacBird*, her takeoff on the Kennedy assassination) and Tom Stoppard (*Cahoot's Macbeth*, aimed at the cultural life of communist Czechoslovakia); tested modern *Hamlets* (Kozintsev's, Branagh's, Almereyda's) against traditional *Hamlet* criticism and against Margreta de Grazia's revisionist *Hamlet Without Hamlet*; brought on *The Merchant of Venice* with a strong Schwartz Center production and with Trevor Nunn's film of 2000; followed *Othello* through India, the Caribbean, and South Africa; explored festive comedy with *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*; followed *The Taming of the Shrew* to Broadway with *Kiss Me, Kate*; and read *Richard III* against Brecht's *Arturo Ui* and Richard Loncraine's 1995 film, both diagnostics of fascism. It has also tracked Shakespeare in parody and popular allusion and put hard questions to what has been called "the Shakespeare myth"—in America, an unstable compound of democratic idealism and elitist anxiety, whose dark side emerges in onetime Cornell professor J.Q. Adams' "Shakespeare and American Culture" (1932). It has also assessed the biographical inventions of *Shakespeare in Love* and the art-historical recreations of Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*.

Which brings us back to *The Tempest*, that bookend of Shakespearean authority (for those who see it as the playwright's farewell to the stage) and workshop of imperialist poetics (as Eric Cheyfitz's 1991 book shows it to be). Those who ponder the play's handling of its historical sources—Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" and the exploration literature known to Shakespeare—find in it authorization for colonizing the new worlds and subduing the natives, at least if their names sound like anagrams of "cannibal." And those who follow the play's afterlife must cope with its powerful prescience both of a colonial global future for Europe and of the end of that era. It is hard for moderns to handle *The Tempest's* idealization of patriarchal Prospero's lordship over his "savage and deformed slave" Caliban, justified in the text by that rebellious "demi-devil's" lack of a proper culture and his attempted rape of Miranda. When Caliban resolves to "be wise hereafter / And seek for grace" and Prospero returns home to his dukedom, there's uneasy relief. But as the Martinican Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969) shows, it's not that simple; in his version, Prospero, a cynical bully, decides not to go home but to stay locked in a master-slave struggle with his former chattel. History is that hard to undo.

What does Taymor's 2010 film make of *The Tempest's* problems and opportunities? As students were quick to notice, the film is intelligently, visually glorious—nearly as much so as Taymor's 1999 *Titus*. Take after take (shot mostly in Hawaii) works the camera's rough magic on details of text and tradition. Her project, Taymor says, allowed her "to combine the literal reality of location…with conjured visual effects that subvert the 'natural' and toy with it," a remark worth pondering, for to stage nature storming and throbbing under Prospera's art accomplishes one aim of good Shakespeare reading: to make the "natural" confess its artful, cultural constitution. The storm at sea, the mock banquet with which Ariel torments the Italian visitors, the lava dogs that chase Caliban and Stephano and Trinculo—all stand out against the film's raw volcanic landscape, and so do the human forms (Felicity Jones' Miranda is a pre-Raphaelite angel; Russell Brand's Trinculo almost a Rubens satyr). Then, many students agreed that Helen Mirren managed Prospero's sex-change masterfully, pun intended. She is stern and tender, confrontational and forgiving, smoothing Prospero's patriarchal edge without loss of authority, which is now more clearly rooted in the alchemy she practices. (Does the change subvert patriarchy, some students wondered, or refine it?) And she enjoys a superb relationship with the androgynous Ariel (Ben Whishaw)—who was shot in green-screen and made fluently present in water, sky, storm, and night.

Prospera's relations with Caliban (Djimon Hounsou) may be another story. He too is a work of art—laboriously made up for four hours a day (says the screenplay), patched of black and white skin with Shakespearean curses written on it, a "mooncalf" and a "strange fish" (as the play text calls him), discernibly African. He has good scenes with Stefano and Trinculo and some very strange ones with Prospera and Miranda. It may be that the lines of force easing Prospera's relations with Ariel stiffen her will to power over Caliban. Some course members questioned his extreme deformities and abjections, objecting to the racialization of the character and his clownish posturing. They were unmollified by nervous excerpts from the screenplay's introductions praising this Caliban as "both beautiful and grotesque…, [himself] the island; nature personified." Here, denaturalization may have failed, and the scariest European fantasies of the African been realized. "This thing of darkness" Prospera, like Prospero, acknowledges as "mine," but who is speaking here? The artist-duchess, the playwright-filmmaker, or the culture? A long final silent stare between Prospera and Caliban (who does not "seek for grace") leaves that pointed question open—like many others defined, but not answered simply, by the course this year.

NEW FACULTY
Members

The English department welcomed **Margo Crawford** as an associate professor in the fall of 2009. Margo is a 20th-century Americanist focusing on African American literature and intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Her research and teaching interests range from race and American modernism to 21st-century African American literature. She is the author of *Dilution Anxiety and the Black Phallus* (2008), a study of the body politics of lighter- and darker-skinned blackness, and is the coeditor, with Lisa Gail Collins, of *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (2006). Margo is a key figure in the recent wave of scholarship on the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. She is now completing a book connecting word and image interplays in the Black Arts Movement and the 21st century.

At Cornell, Margo has organized an ongoing Comparative Ethnic Studies lecture series. This year, she begins a term as faculty advisor for the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program. In spring 2012 she will serve as director of undergraduate studies in English.

Joanie Mackowski joined the English department as an advanced assistant professor in the fall of 2010. Joanie is the author of two books of poems, *View from a Temporary Window* (University of Pittsburgh Press 2010) and *The Zoo* (University of Pittsburgh Press 2002), which was awarded the Associated Writing Programs' Award Series in Poetry and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Her other awards include a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Grant, and the Emily Dickinson Prize from the Poetry Society of America. Her third collection of poems, currently underway, explores lyric poetry from an ecocritical vantage point. Before coming to Cornell she taught for six years at the University of Cincinnati.

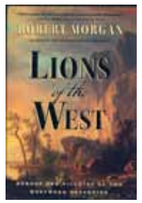
Joanie Mackowski read her poem "Prayer" at the 2011 English Commencement ceremony.

Prayer

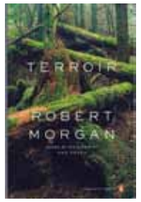
That the hole in my skull never quite grows over
with mosses or brick. That no lover
on a ladder can patch it, no permissive meadow
can fold its field over. For there's too much to know.
There's too much to want never to contain.
That the backbone beanstalk shoots up through the tiny
roof that I stand for, that I'm never too cluttered
with mud to reflect: for the tongue grows tired
of holding up the sky. That the flood never fails,
each puddle an ocean, each rise a falls,
each salt breath coaxing new oxygen
from the deep's own lungs. That the skull bones join
together as clouds, first easing out the storm
then breaking apart.

A Banner Year for Robert Morgan

It's hard to remember when any Cornell writer has had as spectacular a season as Bob Morgan did in the fall of 2011. Within the space of three weeks he published a book of poems called *Terroir* in the prestigious Penguin Poets series and an epic work of American history, *Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion*. Neither productivity nor versatility is new for Bob. He began his career as a poet, and has by now published 14 books of poetry. Eventually he opened up a second front as a fiction writer, authoring three short story collections and five novels, including the highly acclaimed *Gap Creek*. In 2008 he claimed yet another realm with the publication of *Boone: A Biography*, his gripping account of the life of the great American frontiersman Daniel Boone. Now, with *Lions of the West* he has enlarged his scope to take in a panoramic view of 10 figures central to the history of U.S. expansion: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, John Chapman (also known as Johnny Appleseed), David Crockett, Sam Houston, James K. Polk, Winfield Scott, Kit Carson, Nicholas Trist, and John Quincy Adams. The portraits he draws of these very different personalities and the diverse roles they played are unfailingly vivid, but what allies this book with all of Bob's work in verse and prose is its attention to geography, especially the allure of wild or lightly settled places. The book is full of detailed maps that give a fine-grained picture of the changing territorial contours that define much of American history in the 19th century.



Place is also a running concern in *Terroir*, as suggested by its title, a French word that names the special character that climate and soil bestow upon local wines and other products. These short, loosely metrical and lightly rhymed poems offer precisely etched descriptions of wildflowers, ferns, and insects along with everyday human pleasures like squirt guns and milkshakes. Every phenomenon that catches Bob's eye, however small, proves under his steady gaze to open onto the infinite, provoking both wonder and fear; as he notes, "terroir" is very close to "terror."



Terroir

That quality that seems unique,
as thriving from a special spot
of soil, air flow and light specific,
and also frost and winter sleep,
conditions of particular year,
as every instance comes just once
with mix of mineral and grease,
what Hopkins chose to call inscape,
or individuation, sounds
so close to terror you'd confuse
the two, as if the finest and
the rarest blend would come with just
a hint of fear or pain, the sting
and shiver of revulsion with
the savor of the earth and sun,
of this once, not returning, sung
for this one ear, on this one tongue.

Celebrating **Reeve Parker**

On April 9, 2010, English department students and faculty gathered at the A. D. White House to toast Reeve Parker on the occasion of his retirement. Reeve joined the department in 1967 as a specialist in Romantic literature, a field in which Cornell had long enjoyed preeminence. From the start he was held in high esteem by his colleagues, as evidenced in a letter to the local draft board from his chair at the time, David Novarr, which Jonathan Culler, Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature, quoted at the retirement party:

> It would be virtually impossible to find an adequate replacement for Professor Parker. Young men of his ability, promise, and experience are becoming more and more difficult to find. There is no doubt in my mind that if we lose men like Professor Parker, we would have to settle for inferior substitutes, and as a result, Cornell would be unable to offer the kind of education which our students have a right to expect from a first rate university.

To this Jonathan added:

> Fortunately, Cornell did not have to accept inferior substitutes. We have had the thing itself for 43 years.

As a teacher, scholar, mentor, and administrator (he served as department chair from 1978 to 1984), Reeve helped guide the department through a period that saw an influx of new theoretical approaches and fields of study. At the party, Tim Murray, director of the Society for the Humanities, reflected on Reeve's contributions:

> To me, Reeve Parker stands as the beacon of the new generation's English department. His leadership as chair and mentor of the department instilled into our practice the verve of intellectual risk; the urgency of expanding the diversity of our faculty, graduate students, and curricula; and the bedrock importance of writing, creative and prosaic, to our endeavors. His hires from 1978 through 1984 brought theory and feminism into the heart of English studies, locally, nationally, and internationally, just as his sage hires infused lively energy into creative writing and the teaching of prose.

Reeve's inveterate love of wordplay also came in for comment, in the form of a limerick by his one-time colleague Neil Hertz:

> A serial punster named Reeve
> Started early—it's hard to believe!
> He emerged at his birth
> Shouting "What are Words worth?"
> And "Who said I have to bereave?"

Retired though he may be, Reeve clearly has no intention of fading into the woodwork. Last April he published *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (see sidebar). And he continues to work with graduate students, several of whom offered their own eloquent tributes to their teacher at the party. Giffen Maupin identified one of Reeve's key pedagogical principles:

> Any actor playing Reeve Parker in a movie would have to know how to revel in serendipity. How to be a teacher and a scholar who delights in unexpected connections and happy accidents, and who quietly encourages his students to do the same. I arrived at one of my first meetings with Reeve seeking advice about course selections or reading lists. I don't remember the topic of our conversation, but I do remember the feeling of wanting him to give me a road map, a plan. Instead, Reeve looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "why not let yourself be guided by serendipity?" I can't hope to articulate how important those words have been to me, so for now, just this: thank you, Reeve, for teaching me to read and write with serendipity by my side.

And John Robbins spoke for generations of students who have benefited from Reeve's unstinting attention and care:

> Reeve's famous pointedness and precision of language is remarkable. Only in a class with Reeve Parker will you be asked, "what is the word *was* doing here? Is Blake rushing in this passage? Can you say more about the word *behold*?" This careful attention translates onto those around him; you know that Reeve respects and takes seriously your ideas, and you get the sense when he's talking with you that there's nowhere else he'd rather be.

Reeve Parker, *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley* (Cambridge, 2010)

Most of us associate the Romantic era with dramatic events in politics and the history of ideas, but not with literary drama, which has long been overshadowed by the period's great achievements in poetry. In fact, each of the six great British Romantic poets wrote plays. Reeve Parker's retirement from Cornell coincided with the appearance of his long-awaited book on Romantic theater, focusing on three neglected masterpieces.

The Borderers, Wordsworth's tale of melodramatic betrayal on the Scottish border, was written in the shadow of his visit to Paris in the 1790s when he witnessed the tragedy of the later French Revolution unfolding on the stage of history—as well as performances of two sensational French adaptations of *Othello* and *Macbeth*, which, Reeve argues, find their echoes in the young poet's dramaturgy of evil.

Coleridge's *Remorse*, which was successfully staged at Drury Lane, is pervaded by "dreams, fancies, wishes, reveries, promptings, forebodings, and—especially—hauntings" that Reeve traces back to the turbulent events in Coleridge's life at a time when he was locked in a tense, erotic triangle with Wordsworth and Sara Hutchinson.

The Cenci, the Renaissance tragedy Shelley based on the true story of Beatrice Cenci's murder of her incestuous father, reflects Shelley's own "embittered and satirical sense of Regency England's political, religious, and literary culture."

In his readings, Reeve focuses on key textual features that have not been noted before: the pervasive imagery of water (as flooding, as drowning) in *The Borderers*; the obsessive trope of listening in *Remorse*; and the terror wrought by eyes and looks in *The Cenci*. In this way, he brings these works alive for the modern reader, not just for their biographical interest, but also for their originality and power as dramatic works.

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Letter from the Chair

> … departments grow haired and blackhaired
> and shade away into white and dome-shine *at the top*:
>
> the dissolve moves through tenure, or a job elsewhere,
> part time, retirement, death: there never is
>
> a department really but a slow flow you can't step
> in twice…
>
> —from *Garbage*, A.R. Ammons

Whether he was looking at the Jersey Shore, the Ithaca Farmers' Market, or his own backyard, the late Archie Ammons's eye was always attuned to what he called "the event of change," minute fluctuations within a seemingly stable environment. Even so staid an organism as the Department of English revealed itself under his gaze to be undergoing constant metamorphosis. As much as we like to see the Cornell English department as a rock of institutional and intellectual constancy, it's more like a slow-moving river whose course changes gradually with time.

Some changes occur more rapidly than others. Undergraduates, to our sorrow, come and go in four years; graduate students cycle through in slightly longer intervals. This newsletter is one of the ways we try to keep all of you connected to the department you once called home. We don't want the channel of communication to flow in just one direction, of course. Elsewhere in this issue there's a call for reflections on how studying English at Cornell has helped you in whatever walk of life you've chosen. But all of us are eager to hear from our old students individually as well.

When I first joined the Cornell English department in 1987, I had colleagues who had taught my parents in the 1950s. Now, almost 25 years later, more than half my present colleagues weren't even here when I arrived.

Turnover happens more slowly among faculty than students, but it happens. In this newsletter we mark the recent retirement of Reeve Parker. At the end of this year, two of our stalwart creative writing teachers, Ken McClane (see our cover story) and Maureen McCoy, will retire. In December we'll also be saying a fond farewell to our longtime undergraduate coordinator Darlene Flint.

If there's an undeniable sadness in seeing old friends retire and move on to new chapters of their lives, there's a corresponding joy in welcoming new faculty and staff to the department. This newsletter contains brief profiles of two recently arrived colleagues, Margo Crawford and Joanie Mackowski; in future issues you can expect to read about many others. This fall we also welcome Maude Rith, who takes over as undergraduate coordinator. Two other recent additions to the office staff are Keith Daniels, who replaced the late Robin Doxtater as accounts coordinator, and Karen Kudej, who is serving in the newly created position of events coordinator.

For all the comings and goings that keep the English department in constant motion, those of us who spend a significant part of our professional lives here are grateful that the flow is slow, that we have time to grow attached to our students and colleagues. None will be here forever, but all of them add to the intellectual and creative culture that remains at the heart of our shared enterprise.

Roger Gilbert
Professor and Chair
Department of English