English
AT CORNELL
A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FALL 2009 VOL. 12

A Century Plus Five: Creative Writing and the Department of English

Beginning in the spring 2009 semester and continuing through this fall, Cornell's Creative Writing Program is celebrating its "Centennial Plus Five"—105 years since the first creative writing course at Cornell, and a hundred years of continuous creative writing offerings in the English curriculum. The program has invited dozens of Cornell writers to return, deliver readings, and discuss their time here; guests have included bestselling novelists Stewart O'Nan and Melissa Bank, Pulitzer Prize–winning fiction writer Junot Díaz; award-winning poets Lisa Steinman and Crystal Williams; the novelist and screenwriter Richard Price; and Nobel Prize–winning novelist Toni Morrison. The centennial readings are a continuation of the immensely successful ongoing reading series made possible by two anonymous donors, also Cornell graduates. This issue of ***English at Cornell*** *highlights these events by giving a long look at creative writing. The lead article, prepared by J. Robert Lennon, surveys the entire "centennial plus five"; the second article, drawn from a talk by Roger Gilbert, is devoted to Archie Ammons's 37 years in the department. Finally, the "Books" page brings the achievements of the creative writing faculty up to date by surveying four outstanding books published in the past year.*

By J. Robert Lennon

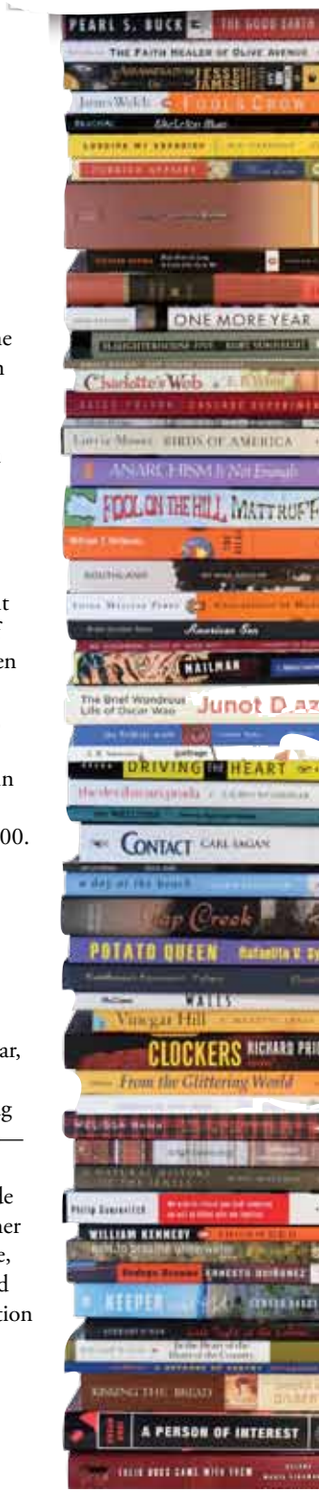
The English Department at Cornell offers more than forty sections of undergraduate creative writing each year, which are taken by between six and seven hundred students. Its MFA program in fiction and poetry, which admits about eight students per year, is one of the most competitive in the nation. That program in turn produces *Epoch* the nationally revered literary magazine.

James McConkey

How did it all get started?

Professor Emeritus James McConkey recently searched for clues to the origin of our program in the University archives. He discovered a student magazine, the *Cornell Era*, which, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, had been devoted to news, sports, reviews, and "some informal essays." But in 1900, the magazine's mission changed. Volume XXXIII opened with an introduction that declared the magazine to be "outliving its usefulness." The *Era* was due for a change, to a more literary focus. Indeed, the introduction announced a contest: "to encourage literary activity at Cornell," President Jacob Gould Schurman was offering "a prize of twenty-five dollars to the best short story written by an undergraduate and appearing in the *Era* during the year to come." President Schurman, the introduction went on, made this offer in order to counter "a lamentable lack of interest in things literary at Cornell." Twenty-five dollars, McConkey notes, was "a handsome prize in 1900. Apparently President Schurman felt Cornell needed to emphasize literary achievements—including creative writing—and this new emphasis is reflected not only in the *Era* but in the offerings of the English Department."

The first short-story course was taught in the second semester of the 1904–1905 academic year, and was open to students who had previously taken Advanced Composition. It is worth noting who taught that Advanced Composition course—William Strunk, Jr., who, a little over a decade later, would publish *The Elements of Style*, a guide for writers of prose. Forty years after that, another Cornellian, Strunk's former student E. B. White, would revise and expand the book, which would sell more than two million copies of its first edition since 1955. The description of this first creative writing course, as printed in the 1904–1905 course register, reads:



Cornell University

continued on page 2

> 7. The short story. The study of selected specimens, with frequent exercises in story-writing. For students wishing further practice in narration and description. Open (except by special permission) only to students who have had course 3. Two hours a week during the second term. T-Th, 9. (Room to be announced hereafter.) Dr. ANDREWS.

Dr. Andrews's name lives on today in the Arthur Lynn Andrews Prize, given each year to the best short story written by a Cornell student.

By the 1909–1910 academic year, creative writing had become a staple of the English curriculum, with three courses offered, in the short story, the novel, and playwriting. The fiction classes were taught by Andrews, the playwriting class by Martin W. Sampson. According to Morris Bishop's *History of Cornell*, Sampson, at that time chair of the English Department,

Michael Koch

was an early and enthusiastic proponent of bringing more creative writing into English. In addition to his teaching, Sampson was known for his Saturday night "Manuscript Club," which (though Bishop does not elaborate) we can imagine was an informal writing workshop for students.

Cornell's fledgling creative writing classes produced a number of literary luminaries in these early years. In addition to his edition of Strunk's writing guide, E. B. White, of course, wrote many essays and much-loved books for children. 1905 graduate Jessie Fausset, a poet, essayist, and novelist, played a vital role in the Harlem Renaissance and would publish four novels in her lifetime. Kenneth Roberts, a historical novelist and travel writer, would win a "special citation" Pulitzer Prize in 1957, and Pearl S. Buck, who graduated in 1925, would win the Nobel Prize for literature only 13 years later, the first American woman to earn that honor. Laura Riding Jackson was the author of poems, essays, criticism, novels, and stories, and would loom large in twentieth century letters, particularly for her poetry of the twenties and thirties. And bestselling novelists Laura Z. Hobson (Class of 1921) and George Harmon Coxe (Class of 1923) were also Cornell writing students.

English
AT CORNELL

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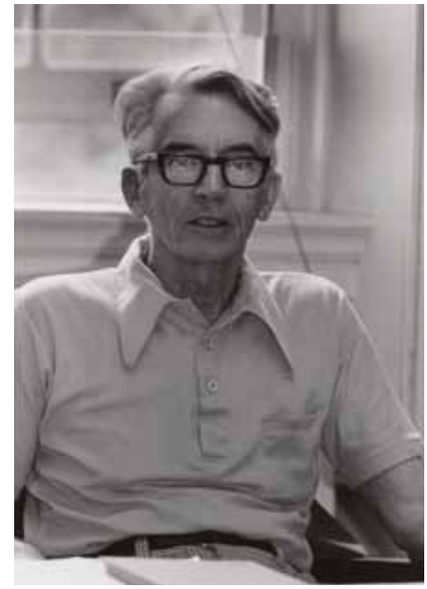


Baxter Hathaway

Although Cornell offered creative writing classes through these years, it wasn't until after the Second World War that the notion of a creative writing *program* gained traction. In 1946, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences was C. W. de Kiewiet, a prominent historian who had come to Cornell from the University of Iowa, which by then had begun its Writers' Workshop. De Kiewiet recruited Baxter Hathaway from the University of Montana and asked him to create a formal program in creative writing.

Hathaway is, indisputably, the father of the modern creative writing program at Cornell. A brilliant writer and teacher of broad interests and great energy, Hathaway would eventually achieve legendary status on campus. In a profile published in 1998, his colleague Edgar Rosenberg wrote: "By the time he died, [Hathaway] had published 11 books, ranging from a novel he'd written at 27 to books on transformational syntax, Renaissance criticism, and stylistics; and he had established, ex nihilo, one of the most durable programs in creative writing." By January of 1947 he had presented Dean de Kiewiet with a detailed plan for a writing program, which he described in a 1979 history of writing at Cornell:

> [It involved] a series of courses so that a writer could take a writing course each semester from his sophomore year through an MA degree; plans for the launching of a national literary magazine to keep the Cornell writing community in touch with the rest of the country; the publication by the Cornell University Press of an annual volume of the best short stories written by Cornell students; and the encouragement of an undergraduate literary magazine. . . The emphases in this projected program were put upon cultivating an environment for writing to flourish in.

The dean approved the plan, formalizing creative writing at Cornell—but he rejected the notion of spending university money on a national magazine. Hathaway, however, understood the importance of such a literary magazine to the nascent program's reputation. He and a group of other writers (including Hathaway's wife Sherry Hathaway, James W. and Carol Hall, John and Vivian Sessions, Robert H. Elias, Henry H. Adams, and Morris Bishop) launched the magazine with their own money and convinced the dean to give it a campus address. This magazine, of course, was *Epoch*.

The new program was in place by the fall of 1947, and, Hathaway wrote, "proceeded to grow, sometimes rapidly, sometimes unevenly":

The curricular plan called for sophomore courses for which all kinds of creative writing could be done. . . In junior year, specialization took over and fiction writers and poets were separated as each engaged the problems specially pertinent to the genre. . . In the senior writing seminar, all came together again, where they were joined by graduate students until their numbers became too many for one group.

Aside from the inclusion of graduate students in upper-level courses, which would end when a separate MFA program in writing was established, this model of teaching writing has remained in force to this day, with undergraduates studying poetry and fiction together in the 2800-level courses and reuniting in the advanced level workshops. This approach

to the subject is part of what makes Cornell's program distinctive and provides writers with experience outside their normal boundaries, offering fiction writers lessons in rhythm and verbal economy, and poets experience in narrative momentum and character development.

The first issue of *Epoch* appeared in 1947, under the editorship of the late Robert Elias *(see page 9)*. "As a result of notices in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The Writer*, and *Writer's Digest*," Hathaway wrote in his brief history of the magazine, "manuscripts began to come in, and the first issue appeared...Sherry Hathaway, Vivian Sessions, and Helen Elias have done much of the mechanical work on the magazine, and students have given occasional assistance." This "occasional assistance" would later become compulsory for graduate students, after the English Department received funding for teaching fellowships that would make the MFA program essentially a four-year program in teaching and writing. The new magazine received praise from the beginning. The editor of *Harper's* wrote, "For some time it has seemed to me there was a yawning gap in the publishing world, and I believe that your magazine is going to fill this gap quite competently." Writer Ray Bradbury, then fresh off his first book of short stories, wrote, "Just a brief note to tell you how pleased I am with the first issue of *Epoch*. The material therein is exceptional." Columbia professor William A. Owens was so impressed with the first issue that, "I have been passing copies around to students in my short-story writing classes here at Columbia and urging them...to send stories to you."

In spite of the auspicious beginnings of both the magazine and creative writing program, the 1950s would present difficulties for creative writers at Cornell. In part because students at the time could take only a limited number of courses in the department of their major, a split began to form between creative writing and literature. Hathaway explains: "All attempts by the literary historians to prepare undergraduates properly for entrance into the best graduate schools put demands upon them that did not allow them enough time to develop themselves as writers...the age-old split between scholar and writer widened." By 1953, there was only one faculty member in the Writing Program with a rank above instructor, yet half of English majors were writers; this situation endangered the program, and a movement to abolish the separate writing curriculum gained traction in the department. But in 1948, an annual Festival of Contemporary Arts had come into being, and the committee that organized it grew in power over the next two decades, protecting, Hathaway writes, "the interests of all the fine arts up until the formation in the late sixties of the Council for the Creative and Performing Arts." The writing program was saved in the English Department by the requirement that majors complete fifteen course hours in a "related field." Writers could use their writing courses to fulfill this requirement. It was a poor solution, however, and Hathaway described the consequences: "For many years then the English Department became in effect two departments and lost the opportunity of effecting a union of interests that would have allowed for a common core of humanistic education without blighting diversity of interests away from the center."

Nevertheless, by the late fifties, Hathaway had been joined by Edgar Rosenberg, Walter Slatoff, and Jim McConkey, gifted teachers of writing who also held PhDs. And they encountered some exceptional talent. When M. H. Abrams, teaching his survey of English literature, received an essay that seemed clearly beyond the capacity of an undergraduate, he invited the author to his office for a chat. It became immediately clear that the shy engineering student with the pencil-thin moustache was the legitimate writer of the essay; but when Abrams asked him what honors courses he was taking in English, he replied that he wasn't smart enough for them. Fortunately, the young man, whose name was Thomas Pynchon, did take some creative writing courses. As his teacher Walt Slatoff recalled years later, when Pynchon finished reading one of his stories in class, his fellow students broke into applause. Slatoff rushed to the *Epoch* office with the manuscript in his hand, but it was refused; as a result, Pynchon's publishing debut occurred through an undergraduate literary magazine, *Rainy Day*. (Pynchon palled around in those days with another, more flamboyant literature student, Richard Farina, who lived in an apartment on Linden Avenue in Collegetown—the basis of Farina's phantasmagoric novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*.) When Slatoff died in 1991, his colleague Dan McCall received a phone call from the now

Walter Slatoff

famous author, with a moving message of tribute that McCall read the next day at the memorial service.

In the 1960s, the MFA degree was gaining popularity nationwide, replacing the MA for graduate students in creative fields. In 1967, the MFA degree in writing was approved at Cornell. Nevertheless, for some time, the status of the Cornell MFA program, and MFA programs in general, remained controversial. Cornell granted tenure only to holders of the PhD—until A. R. Ammons became the first tenured professor without an advanced degree *(see page 5)*. At the same time that writers were struggling to have the MFA accepted as the appropriate terminal degree for a teacher of writing, colleges and universities were going through hard times. The baby boom was over, and the humanities—and creative artists in particular—had become identified with "anti-war protesters and alternative life-styles," Hathaway wrote.

> Even while enrollments in writing courses increased while those in other areas of the humanities declined, often drastically, the PhDs closed ranks…most departments in the humanities were built on a PhD base, accrediting agencies were accustomed to recognizing only the PhD as a terminal degree, and it is never quite clear whether the arts should be classed with the humanities or not. The result at present at Cornell is that the MFA in Writing Program is going strong…it faces grudging support at best from the rest of the English Department, and at worst outright hostility. The job market for its degree holders is in a sad state.

That was 1979, and things were soon to change for writing programs nationwide, and for Cornell's in particular. The 1980s would prove to be a renaissance for the short story, leading to a gradual rise to prominence for the MFA degree (both fiction and poetry) and for Cornell's program.

At the forefront of Cornell's, and the nation's, surge in creative writing was *Epoch*. In a *Cornell Chronicle* article about the magazine's 50th anniversary, Joshua Harmon (a 1997 MFA grad) wrote, "Phillip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, and Thomas Pynchon all published short fiction in *Epoch* early in their careers. Poets and writers as diverse as Annie Dillard, Stanley Elkin, Jayne Anne Phillips, Ron Hansen, Andre Dubus, Amy Hempel, Charles Simic, Leslie Scalapino, Harriet Doerr, Denis Johnson, Jorie Graham, and Rick Bass have appeared in the magazine." So did Don DeLillo's first piece of published fiction; and we can add National Book Award–recipient Denis Johnson, whose story "Out on Bail" appeared before *Jesus' Son* became one of the best-loved collections of recent years. Yusef Komunyakaa appeared in *Epoch* before he won a Pulitzer Prize for his collection *Neon Vernacular*. And Jhumpa Lahiri, whose story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* has sold well more than half a million copies, first published one of its stories, "This Blessed House," in *Epoch*, as well. Many of these luminaries were brought on board by long-serving editor Michael Koch, who remains today at the helm of this now more-than-60-year-old publication. With the assistance of MFA graduate students, Koch has continued to publish work that is regularly featured in the annual O. Henry and Best American anthology series. In 1997, *Epoch* was awarded a special prize by the O. Henry Awards, its first best magazine prize.

The 1980s and 1990s were also boom years for the MFA program, producing such writers as Lorrie Moore (*Birds of America, Like Life*), Melissa Bank (*The Girls' Guide To Hunting And Fishing, The Wonder Spot*), Junot Díaz (author of *Drown* and the Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*), Alice Fulton (current faculty member, poet, short-story

continued on page 4

Timeline

1904
First creative writing course at Cornell is offered by Arthur Lynn Andrews.

1938
Pearl Buck (CU '24) wins Nobel Prize in Literature for *The Good Earth.*

1947
Baxter Hathaway draws up a plan for a program in creative writing. First issue of *Epoch* magazine appears.

1959
Thomas Pynchon graduates, after publishing his first story in the undergraduate literary magazine *Rainy Day.*

1962
A. R. Ammons is hired after giving a poetry reading. Seven years later, he becomes the first tenured professor of English to lack an advanced degree.

1967
MFA degree in writing is approved at Cornell.

1985
Alison's Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* receives the Pulitzer Prize.

1997
Epoch receives the first O. Henry Award for best magazine.

2008
Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* receives the Pulitzer Prize.

writer, and both a MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow), A. Manette Ansay (*Vinegar Hill*), Susan Choi (*American Woman, A Person of Interest*), and Stewart O'Nan (*Last Night at The Lobster*). Undergraduate writers from these years have also fared well; they include Philip Gourevich, the editor and journalist; Matt Ruff, author of *Fool on The Hill* and other novels; Lauren Weisberger ('99), the author of *The Devil Wears Prada*; the novelist Philipp Meyer ('99); and fiction writer Sana Krasikov ('01), winner of the 2009 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature.

In 2006 two anonymous Cornell alums made a donation intended to raise the profile of the Writers At Cornell reading series. With an expanded budget, and a mandate to bring the world's best writers to campus, the Cornell writing faculty invited fiction writers Salman Rushdie, Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, William Kennedy, George Saunders, and others, and poets Charles Simic, Mark Doty, Heather McHugh, and Elizabeth Alexander, as well as cartoonist Alison Bechdel, to give readings, and to speak with students.

In 2009, both the undergraduate and graduate writing programs remain strong. Over the past few years, the MFA program has matriculated only 2 percent of its applicant pool, making it one of the most selective programs in existence. Our graduates have maintained a stellar record of publication and university teaching. Though recent budget cuts represent a setback to creative writing—graduate students have lost a full year of support in the form of work as lecturers—Cornell's program remains one of the finest in the country. *Epoch*, meanwhile, continues to offer some of the best American writing; it has twice had four stories collected in a single issue of the O. Henry anthology, and the magazine has received a citation of excellence from the Council of Learned Journals for its 2004 double issue devoted to A. R. Ammons.

It was Archie Ammons who once suggested—mischievously but earnestly—that the writing program be disbanded. Lamar Herrin tells the story, in a 2005 article for this newsletter:

> Archie explained to us...that the second you institutionalize creative writing you kill it. I was unprepared for the cogency and high-seriousness of his argument. Good writing will always be subversive, will always serve as an instrument of dissent. Its mission is to rattle the status quo to its foundations. When the status quo is your employer, you find yourself in a moral bind, and the only thing to do then is to sever the ties.

In the end, those ties were not severed. But the decision to maintain them necessitated a change in the philosophy of the English Department and in the relationship between literary scholarship and literary creativity. Today's English Department enjoys greater comity among writers and critics than it did in the seventies. Writers and critics, by and large, have learned to benefit from one another's often divergent views on the creation and interpretation of literature, perhaps understanding what Herrin eloquently expressed in 2005:

> Creative writers tend to take everything personally, and reading, when it strikes the right chord, constitutes a discovery that will inevitably lead them back to their own work. Scholars (and I'm not one, but I suppose) cultivate a sort of double vision that allows them to single out a work's most relevant detail and place it in its most meaningful context—or the context in question. The creative writer can profit from the scholar's sophistication and broad view, and the scholar needs to see and feel (in his bones) that some works of literature will not allow themselves to be disengaged from so easily...the English Department needs to encourage more of this cross-fertilization. It won't be restful (fertilization never is), but it will yield a better fruit.

Author's note: I'm grateful for the assistance of Helena Viramontes, Stephanie Vaughn, Lamar Herrin, and James McConkey in completing this history.

Creative Writing Program

Department of English / Cornell University

Spring 2009

Centennial Plus Five

Reading Series

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Go to www.writers.cornell.edu which lists over two hundred Cornell writers along with other information and links of interest to readers and scholars.

These events are made possible by the generosity of two anonymous donors who are alumni of Cornell University.

For more information about the Spring 2009 Centennial Reading Series or about on-campus parking, email lrg29@cornell.edu or call 607.255.6800.

www.arts.cornell.edu/english/creative/

Cornell University

Melissa Bank · Junot Díaz · Julie Schumacher
Emily Rosko · Helen Schulman · Lisa Steinman
Stewart O'Nan · Crystal Williams · A. Manette Ansay

February 20
Friday 7:30 pm
Schwartz Auditorium
Rockefeller Hall
Centennial Reading
Melissa Bank, *Fiction Writer*
Junot Díaz, *Fiction Writer*
Julie Schumacher, *Fiction Writer*

February 26
Thursday 4:30 pm
Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium
Goldwin Smith Hall
Centennial Reading
Emily Rosko, *Poet*
Helen Schulman, *Fiction Writer*
Lisa Steinman, *Poet*

March 4
Wednesday 4:30 pm
Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium
Goldwin Smith Hall
Cornell Scholars on Cornell Writers
Roger Gilbert *on A. R. Ammons and his influence on Alice Fulton and Kenneth McClane*
Molly Hite *on Thomas Pynchon*
Mary Pat Brady *on Manuel Muñoz and Loida Maritza Perez*

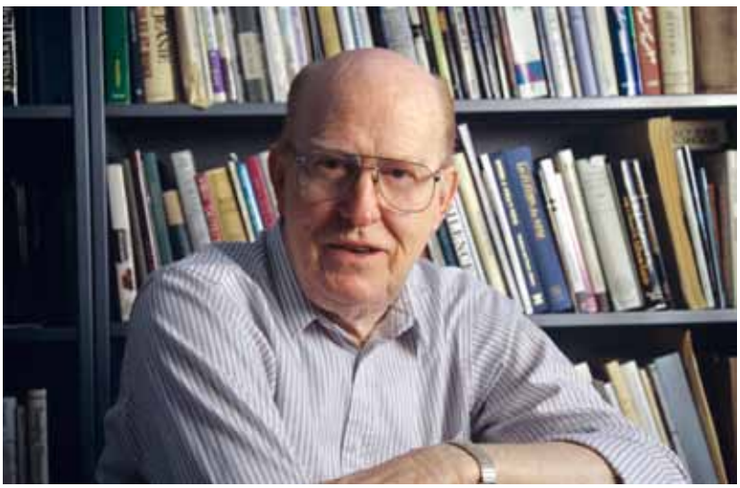
March 26
Thursday 7:30 pm
State Theatre
107 W. State St, Ithaca
State Theatre Community Reading
Short readings featuring over 20 local fiction writers and poets.

April 2
Thursday 4:30 pm
Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium
Goldwin Smith Hall
Publication Party
Celebrating the publication of new books by:
Kenneth McClane, Jonathan Monroe, J. Robert Lennon, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

April 16
Thursday 4:30 pm
Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium
Goldwin Smith Hall
Centennial Reading
Stewart O'Nan, *Fiction Writer*
Crystal Williams, *Poet*
A. Manette Ansay, *Fiction Writer*

Taking Root in Windy Sand:
A. R. Ammons at Cornell

by Roger Gilbert



Apart from three semesters as a visiting professor at his alma mater Wake Forest, Archie Ammons spent his entire academic career at Cornell. Few poets have been so closely associated with a single institution. His loyalty stemmed in part from his abiding gratitude for Cornell's offer of employment at a time when he was in desperate need of a job. In 1961, he resigned his position as a sales executive at his father-in-law's medical glassware company in New Jersey, where he had worked for almost ten years while struggling to establish his reputation as a poet. After several business ventures fell through (including a magazine he and a friend started called, believe it or not, *Country Club Woman*), he was beginning to panic. On the bright side, his poetry was finally creating some buzz; after years of rejections his second book had been accepted for publication. But the lack of a steady income and, perhaps just as important, a steady routine was taking a psychological toll. In his quest for work Ammons briefly tried his hand as a realtor and a night school teacher, and even visited an employment agency in Philadelphia.

Salvation arrived through a fortuitous series of events. In 1962 Denise Levertov asked Ammons to take her place for a few months as poetry editor of *The Nation*. In that capacity he accepted a poem by a young Cornell instructor named David Ray, who promptly returned the favor by arranging for Ammons to read at Cornell. Ray's invitation was facilitated by the fact that *Epoch* had recently accepted a group of Ammons's poems (after having rejected his work on two previous occasions); as a result there was already considerable interest in him among the creative writing faculty, who all helped edit the magazine in those days. The reading took place in Willard Straight Hall, and according to Jim McConkey the room was so crowded that some latecomers had to sit on the floor. Though Ammons had given very few poetry readings, he evidently turned in a mesmerizing performance, speaking in a quiet voice that commanded complete attention. McConkey was so impressed by the quality of Ammons's poems that he urged him to apply for a teaching position at Cornell. Baxter Hathaway, the director of creative writing, was also enthusiastic, and in due course Ammons was offered a one-year appointment as an instructor.

The job Ammons took as Cornell's junior poet had for years been something of a revolving door. Among his predecessors were Harvey Shapiro, William Dickey, W. D. Snodgrass, and David Ray, all of whom went on to have distinguished careers after leaving Cornell. At that time a doctorate was required for tenure-track professorships; while these poets all had master's degrees, they were hired as instructors on fixed-term contracts. (The creative writers who held professorial appointments—Baxter Hathaway, Jim McConkey, Walter Slatoff, Edgar Rosenberg—all had PhDs.) Ammons had taken three semesters of graduate study in English at UC Berkeley, but never finished his MA; moreover his undergraduate degree was a BS in general science. Yet though his academic credentials fell short of his predecessors', within five years he had been made a tenured professor. In part his rapid ascent reflects the incredible burst of productivity and recognition that coincided with his arrival at Cornell. Between 1963 and 1968 he published five books, including *Corsons Inlet* and *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, which brought him increasing acclaim, including consecutive Guggenheim and American Academy fellowships. Cornell responded quickly, granting him tenure in 1969 and then, a few years later, after he had won the National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize, making him the Goldwin Smith Professor of Poetry.

When he first arrived at Cornell, Ammons struggled with feelings of insecurity vis-à-vis his more scholarly colleagues. In the summer after his first year he even returned to Berkeley in hope of completing his MA, but quickly found being back in the classroom as a student impossible. As his confidence in his intellectual abilities grew, however, he began to enter into active dialogue with critics and scholars, while insisting on his special authority as a writer. He observed new developments in literary theory with interest, often commenting on them in poems, essays, and interviews. For many years he presided over an informal salon in the Temple of Zeus, and while most of the regulars at his table were writers, scholars were always welcome to join the discussion, whose topics ranged from Derrida to dentistry. Both by his example and his influence, Ammons showed that creative writers were capable of engaging with ideas at the highest level of philosophical abstraction and with a degree of imaginative freedom denied most critics. As the first tenured writer at Cornell without a scholarly degree, he helped to legitimize creative writing, establishing it as more than simply a handmaiden to criticism but a field of study with its own wisdom and expertise.

Archie never took a creative writing course as an undergraduate, but at the end of his last semester at Berkeley, he showed some of his work to the poet and critic Josephine Miles. As he recalls, her first words when he went to her office were "Well, Mr. Ammons, you really have something here." The poems he gave her, many of which later appeared in his first book, *Ommateum*, were stark, enigmatic parables about a mysterious wanderer named Ezra. Her enthusiastic response was crucial in giving him the faith in his abilities to continue writing despite many obstacles. His own teaching philosophy clearly reflected his desire to do for at least some of his students what Josephine Miles had done for him. This did not mean bestowing indiscriminate validation, of course, but it did mean helping his students to locate their own sources of strength, rather than imposing external norms and procedures on them. In an essay in his new book *Color (see page 10),* Ken McClane recalls that Ammons taught his creative writing seminar:

> in a gentle, non-hierarchical way.…What Ammons desired was for students to write as their imaginations dictated. It was the writing (and the need to write) that would offer the impetus for refining and divining craft: it was the writing that would suggest one's own individuality. Here, of course, Archie was listening to his own experience. He had not been taught to write in a writing program; he, in truth, had little respect for them.

For Ammons the central challenge in teaching creative writing classes was to see his students as individuals rather than an agglomerated mass. He always made a special point of arriving in class before his students; McClane remembers Ammons saying that this allowed him to greet each student as he or she entered the room, thus combating the tendency for them to merge into a faceless group. (Ammons also preferred to imagine his readers as distinct individuals; this was one of the reasons he disliked giving poetry readings.) For these reasons, Ammons tended to see his office as the place

continued on page 6

Roger Gilbert

where he did his real teaching. His accessibility was legendary; as Alice Fulton recalls, he held

> what amounted to daylong office hours. Students were encouraged to wander in and chat whenever he was there. His only request was that such meetings be spontaneous.... For many writing students, Archie's office became the focal point of their studies.

It was here that he offered his students the more intimate kind of instruction that he had received, albeit briefly, from Josephine Miles. Ammons was keenly aware of the power dynamics and emotional pitfalls that often accompany the teaching relationship, and describes them in a 1989 interview with William Walsh:

> Can you imagine in a creative writing class the interplay between the teacher and the student—how complex that is on both sides? Superficial, no matter how profound. It's so superficial and so mixed, "Help me, don't help me. Criticize this poem but only say good things. Don't tell me what my next move is. Tell me, but don't let me know that you told me what my next move is, so it will seem that I discovered it for myself. When I owe you something please be the first one to say I owe nothing."

Ammons devised an ingenious solution to this pedagogical double-bind—"Help me, don't help me"—that involved a kind of triangulation. An incurable contrarian himself, he encouraged his students to defy the counsel of their elders and their peers and to magnify their own flaws and eccentricities. Alice Fulton remembers Ammons saying, "If anyone tells you not to do something in your poems, do more of it." Karl Parker recalls being told "All you have to do is this: locate the active difficulties. That's what any poet has to do, locate their own active difficulties." Ammons even incorporated a version of this precept in his long poem "Garbage":

> I say to my writing students—prize your flaws,
> defects, behold your accidents, engage your
>
> negative criticisms—these are the materials
> of your ongoing—from these places you imagine,
>
> find, or make the ways back to all of us, the figure,
> keeping the aberrant periphery worked
>
> clear so the central current may shift or slow
> or rouse adjusting to the necessary dynamic:

Mistakes, flaws, accidents, difficulties, peculiarities: all these for Ammons were potential manifestations of an underlying originality, to be explored and even cultivated. Ammons's deep-seated Emersonianism shows itself in his self-consuming advice to do the opposite of what others advise, presumably including Ammons himself. In this pedagogical scenario, the primary value of the creative writing classroom is as a place to learn what others think of your work, the better to ignore them.

Though he almost never put his own poetry forward as a model, some aspects of Ammons's poetics inevitably rubbed off on his students, many of whom were after all drawn to Cornell chiefly by their admiration for his work. But the influence did not all go one way; I was intrigued to discover, for example, that Ken McClane's long poem "Ship: Perfunctory Note" makes use of double columns two years before Ammons takes up the same device in his 1977 book *The Snow Poems*. Clearly Ammons was reading his students' work as carefully as he was being read. For all his vaunted loneliness, Ammons found at Cornell a community of fellow poets, students, and colleagues alike, that sustained and enriched his own work even as he sustained and enriched theirs. Though he once wrote that "being here to be here with others is for others," the variously casual and intense dialogues Archie Ammons held with his fellow Cornellians in classrooms, the Temple of Zeus, and his office in Goldwin Smith (which is now Alice Fulton's office), were for almost forty years the life's blood of Cornell's literary culture. Archie died in 2001, but for many of us his voice still echoes through these halls.

Retiring: Phyllis Janowitz

This past spring, English faculty and students gathered to celebrate the life and career of Professor Phyllis Janowitz, who retired after nearly thirty years of service to Cornell. Educated at Queens College and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Janowitz is the author of three books of poetry: *Rites of Strangers, Visiting Rites*, and *Temporary Dwellings*. She taught at Princeton and Harvard before landing at Cornell for good, where she has twice served as director of our Creative Writing Program. Those of us who count her as a friend know her work as an expression of her inimitable personality, one that comprises equal measures of intelligence, wit, generosity, and style. Ken McClane spoke about these qualities at PhyllisFest:

> "Phyllis and I would often meet for dinner—never as frequently as I would like—and we would complain about our lives, which, even at times of true sadness, seem, in the company of Phyllis, miraculously to develop a wonderful patina and equanimity. With her, everything finds its proper measure. She has a wicked, unbridled sense of humor, vitality, and proportion—it's a veritable life force, survival's metronome. It is in her brilliant poems, of course. In the darkest of times, she'll say something that is both the most humorous and the most appropriate quip imaginable.
>
> "Her clothes, like her person, are a gift to us. Make a statement, don't take yourself too seriously, love the improvisational, she admonishes. And all of us know her omnipresent Rissie, that lovely dog, which she carries like a precious amulet; Rissie, who is a veritable love machine, with her generous high-pitched sound that might have found its way into Phyllis's magnificent "Lulu" poem sequence.
>
> "When I think of Phyllis, I think of a fundamental decency—one that surrounds and empowers, but is as selfless as mist on a robin's egg. She has taken into her house and heart every manner of waif, because it was the right thing to do, yet she or the lucky recipient would never see it that way. She exudes grace—and we, even we curmudgeonly ones, return it in kind. There are no weeds in Phyllis's Garden. As she would say, 'we are all perfectly perfect.'
>
> "When I think of what a poet should be—in temperament, talent, and heart—it is she."

Cornell at Auburn:
An Experiment in Teaching and Learning

by Winthrop Wetherbee

2008–2009 was the first year of the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP), funded by the Provost's Office and a generous grant from the Sunshine Lady Foundation. In association with a local community college, the CPEP offers for-credit courses at two federal prisons, which can lead to an associate's degree. This past year, eighteen faculty taught eleven courses in such fields as economics, constitutional law, genetics, medical anthropology, and government, as well as literature and creative writing. Although the CPEP as a funded program is new, Cornell's engagement with the education of prisoners began some fifteen years ago when Pete Wetherbee, professor of English, began his Tuesday evening sessions in basic writing. Over the years, Pete was joined by slowly growing numbers of colleagues, graduate students, and undergrads in English and other fields. His colleagues in English include the writers Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon and Helena Maria Viramontes, as well as more than a dozen graduate students. (The powerful poem "Bop: The North Star," the opening poem in Van Clief-Stefanon's new collection, draws upon the experience of driving past Harriet Tubman's house on her way to the nearby facility. See page 10.) In the fall Pete will work with Jim Schechter, the PEP's executive director, assuming the title of faculty director. But the title he's proudest of is the single name by which, for some fifteen years, he's been known by his students behind bars: "Doc." The impact, of course, runs both ways. The reflection by Pete on his years of teaching and learning in Cornell's "other" campus is accompanied by an account of the impact of prison on graduates and undergraduates in the English Department.

There was a time when education was part of the basic correctional and rehabilitative mission of the prison system. As recently as the early 1990s the great majority of state corrections systems offered college-level programs that enabled inmates to earn two- or four-year degrees. And every state could cite studies and statistics demonstrating that education had a direct, significant effect on recidivism, that men who had served their time had a better chance to avoid further crime and remain free by expanding their social horizons and making them more employable.

The studies and statistics are still there, those for New York readily available through the Department of Correctional Services' website. But the programs are largely gone. In 1994 Congress declared prison inmates ineligible for the Pell Grants that had made college programs behind bars possible. In New York programs of this kind, some of which had long and distinguished histories, virtually disappeared within the next two years.

Education is of course only one casualty of the changes that have taken place in the operation of state and federal prisons over the past twenty or thirty years. The effects of this withholding of valuable resources went well beyond incapacitation and containment. Not only were prisoners being left at the mercy of their addictions, anger, and lack of practical skills, and hence truly incapacitated for reentry into society at large, but they were being denied an important means of socialization within the walls, an opportunity for the kind of dialogue and self-realization that could help them withstand the brutalizing effects of prison life.

In 1997 I was invited by the Office of Volunteer Services at Auburn Correctional Facility to begin meeting with a group of inmates who were interested in higher education. Over the next couple of years a sort of one-room schoolhouse took shape, with a constituency that fluctuated between ten and twenty, but which at one time or another involved perhaps eighty different inmates. Several group members studied for and passed College Level Examination Program exams in English composition and mathematics offered by the College Board, while others took correspondence courses of various kinds—paralegal skills, communication, sociology—offered by universities around the country.

But successes of this kind could provide only a limited satisfaction. We found ourselves spending more and more time just reading together, and I was pleased to see the men willingly take on more and more demanding kinds of literature. In 1999, Lynne Abel, associate dean for undergraduate studies in Arts and Sciences, agreed to authorize the offering of courses that would correspond to courses normally offered at Cornell, and Glenn Altschuler, dean of the School of Continuing Education, generously agreed to sponsor such courses, tuition free, and provide the administrative resources for processing grades and issuing transcripts. In January 2001 we began our first official class, a survey of American literature. Other departments joined in, and seven years later, under the able leadership of Professor Mary Katzenstein (Government), the present Cornell Prison Education Program was born, with a full-time director who recruits faculty and volunteers to teach a full syllabus of courses leading to a degree.

In *The Shawshank Redemption* the wise old con, Morgan Freeman, gives new inmate Tim Robbins a lesson about prison life: "the first thing you got to realize is that every man in here is innocent." Freeman's words express a hard truth about the vital role of fantasy in the life of somebody serving a long sentence for a violent crime. A real-life Morgan Freeman would be talking about the kind of fantasy that enables you to keep believing that you have a right to exist; a little dignity and value; significant personal relationships; a sex life; something to hope for. Without the ability to believe these things you are going to become uncontrollably angry or unbearably depressed, and the same thing will happen if you believe in them too much and so set yourself up to be blindsided by some shocking act of violence or injustice.

I have had to remind myself again and again of just how complex the relationship is between a long-term prison inmate and the world at large. The men we work with are very much like Philip Nolan, the hero of Edward Everett Hale's *The Man without a Country*, an army officer who cursed the United States in open court and was punished by being kept continually at sea for the rest of his life. Like Philip Nolan, these men are recurrently tormented by the sense of having been disqualified for life in the outside world, of having renounced their right to live in it. Even younger men who may be serving relatively brief terms on drug charges—and thanks to the infamous Rockefeller drug laws there are many such at Auburn—are apt to feel deeply anxious about their ability to reenter society and survive there. A great deal of recidivism occurs among men who upon release have returned to crime because criminals are the people they know and, for better or worse, feel they can trust.

For this reason teaching in a prison situation has to be radically Socratic in method, with professorial authority as inconspicuous as possible, and always ready to be guided by student response. Inmates are acutely conscious that we, the teachers, represent the world they dread, long for, and fantasize in countless ways, and this gives us an extraordinary power. To be in dialogue with us is to be testing their sense of what's out there, and we can hardly be aware of the extent to which our every move helps to validate or undermine their sense of relation to society. It

continued on page 8

took me years to build a relationship of trust—a trust that depends on an assurance that you will be coming back week after week, on sensing that you, like them, are feeling your way into the relationship, on seeing you make stupid mistakes and recognizing you will not be harsh or scornful when they make mistakes. Gradually a guarded intimacy takes shape, limited but genuine enough to enable us, the outsiders, to begin to feel with some degree of clarity what it is like to be incarcerated, what it does to a man, and what it teaches him.

Formalizing our relationship to our inmate classes by offering them for credit has meant that there is even more at stake in our negotiations, and our relationship to the inmates has changed in interesting ways. It means a tremendous amount to the men to be working with faculty members from a prestigious university, and we are continually being surprised by some new manifestation of the respect and appreciation they feel. But the relationship has two sides. When we are unraveling a few difficult lines in Shakespeare, the word is "Shut up, man, listen to Doc!" But there are also times when I am told, affectionately but firmly, "Doc, you the man, but sometimes you don't know shit"—and this too is immensely satisfying.

Maintaining an open dialogue is not just a matter of tact and consideration on our part but a means of ensuring that we, too, learn from the experience. Mirroring the prison population generally, three quarters of our students are black, and reading canonical American literature with such a group is genuinely and painfully enlightening. I was made to realize every wrinkle and nuance of the ambivalence about race that is the greatness and the failure of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the beauty and depth of meaning of the call-and-response sermon that begins Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. A profound sensitivity to race is continually lurking just under the surface of every serious exchange we have, and one of the important functions of our classroom is to serve as a neutral zone, where black, white, and Hispanic inmates can talk candidly, with the text on the table between them as a control, about issues that surface in complex and often violent forms every day as part of life in the Yard.

But while race is often the catalyst for discussion, it does not circumscribe it. I am continually impressed by inmates' ability to extrapolate from their situations to those represented in the books we read, to recognize that the prisons created for Troy, the protagonist of August Wilson's play *Fences*, or Arthur Miller's Willie Loman, by their inability to rise above their dead-end situations, have a lot in common. Perhaps the most wonderful experience of this kind that I have had came with our reading of James Welch's relentlessly painful short novel *The Death of Jim Loney*. As we discussed the slow psychological deterioration of Welch's hero, an alcoholic half-breed whose Sioux mother is long dead, while his ne'er-do-well white father refuses to acknowledge him, inmates registered an extraordinary sympathy with the many layers of loneliness that enveloped him, recognizing clearly that he too was in prison, his alienation and his paralyzing hopelessness a worst-case version of their own burden as incarcerated men.

It is times like these that make teaching in prison the extraordinary experience it is, keep us coming back and ensure that our classes are at least as rewarding for us as for the inmates. I have been a teacher for more than forty years, and nothing in that time has been more fulfilling and satisfying than [the "campus"] at Auburn. It changes your life.

I have been bringing Cornell students to Auburn for nearly as long as I myself have been going there, first as volunteer tutors in the GED program, more recently as teaching assistants in our Cornell classes. They have had no difficulty fitting into our classroom routine, and their age has proven to be one of their greatest assets. Young inmates are fascinated to meet people whose backgrounds are totally different from their own, yet who can share many aspects of their view of the world. Such encounters are immensely enabling for men whose cultural horizons have been severely limited—who indeed may know little more of the world than a single inner-city neighborhood. And a validating response from a Cornell undergraduate to an inmate's thoughts or written work is often much more meaningful than that of a faculty member. Inmates naturally find it possible to talk frankly about their doubts and perplexities with undergraduates than with middle-aged professors, and because of this rapport the undergrads have been able to pass along information that helps us make our classroom presentations more accessible and discussions more inclusive.

Valuable as such social interaction is in itself, Cornell student participation has extended a good deal further. Having to write essays is one of the most challenging components of our classes for most inmates, and a good many promising students have been literally scared away by the threat of having to expose their writing to our scrutiny. By working patiently one-on-one with such students, and candidly acknowledging their own limits as grammarians and rhetoricians, our undergraduate TAs have helped us retain a number of potentially first-class students who are now ready to do the kind of work that had seemed so threatening before.

Tomorrow the World. In the meantime, the Prison Education Program lives, and we look forward to its playing an ongoing and valuable role in the lives of Cornellians inside and outside the walls.

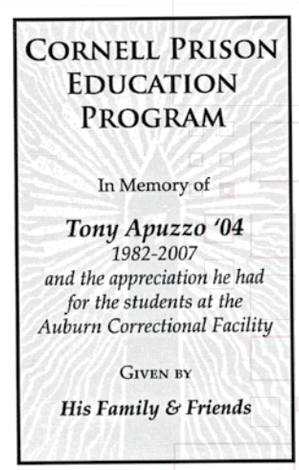
Student Voices: Learning Behind Bars

The potential value to the undergraduate experience at Cornell was a crucial factor in Provost Biddy Martin's decision to help fund the Prison Education Program. As she saw, the work of undergraduates frames the project as an educational mission that contributes two ways (inmates and collegians learning from one another) and helps redefine what the mission of a university can be in a society facing times as troubled yet hopeful as ours today. Though in the past, undergrads have volunteered their labor, they may now receive academic credit under the Independent Study rubric.

For a few undergrads, the experiences at Auburn have not only changed their lives but determined their choice of career. In 2005, Ross MacDonald graduated from Cornell as an English major and began training to be a physician at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. When he finished his MD, MacDonald found that the various high-paying specialties now open to him were less satisfying than the new field of community medicine. He interned at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, with the plan of making mass incarceration in the United States the focus of his career. As he wrote recently, "I've had tremendous help here in the form of many social medicine doctors and researchers who see the bloated system as both an injustice that impacts the health of prisoners and communities and as a point of intervention for one of the most vulnerable populations in the nation. We are in the process of starting a medical clinic for prisoners released from prison back into the Bronx." He and another student will soon be providing primary medical care within Riker's Island. He concludes: "I'm not exaggerating when I say that teaching at Auburn changed the trajectory of my life."

The experience at Auburn has had a different kind of impact on the family of Tony Apuzzo, an English major who volunteered at Auburn in his senior year. After Tony died of a rare terminal illness in 2007, his family, looking for an appropriate way to memorialize him, donated their son's book collection to Auburn, with memorial bookplates inserted *(see below)*. They also established a fund to buy books for writing courses at Auburn. At an average cost of $1,200 per course, the Apuzzos hope to fund ten years of books. As they write about Tony in their letter of invitation, "Although he certainly was capable of helping his students edit their writing, he learned a great deal from them. He was often surprised and moved by what they revealed about themselves in their work and in conversation." Through the fund in his name, Tony will continue to affect the lives of men who never knew him personally.

Donations, marked "In memory of Tony Apuzzo," can be sent to James Schechter, Executive Director, Prison Education Project, 101 McGraw Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-4601.



Faculty Notes

In Memoriam: Robert H. Elias (1914–2008)

Robert Henry Elias, professor emeritus of English at Cornell University, died August 16, 2008, in Brookline, Massachusetts.

He grew up in New York City, attended Williams College, and completed his PhD at the University of Pennsylvania in 1949. In the late 1930s, while pursuing a master's degree in English at Columbia, he became acquainted with Theodore Dreiser, whose work became the subject of his doctoral thesis. The manuscript, based on numerous interviews with Dreiser and his acquaintances, was published in 1948 as *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*, becoming the starting point for virtually all later work on Dreiser.

Elias came to Cornell in 1945 as an instructor. There he met his future wife Helen, whom he married on Friday, June 13, 1947—a choice of date that, according to their oldest son, all who knew them found entirely in character. The date notwithstanding, their marriage became 61 years of good fortune that included the births of their four children, Jonathan, Abigail, Sara, and Eben.

In 1959 Elias became full professor, when he was named the Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies; he was named Goldwin Smith professor nine years later. He also served as associate editor of the literary journal *Epoch* from its founding in 1947 to 1954. In 1951 he was a co-founder of the American Studies Association of New York. In addition to the critical biography of Dreiser, he was the author of *"Entangling Alliances with None:" An Essay on the Individual in the American Twenties* (Norton, 1973), as well as numerous articles, including a scholarly account, published while he was in graduate school, of "The First American Novel" (1941).

Following retirement in 1980, Bob and Helen moved to Martha's Vineyard, then after sixteen years moved again to the Cape, where they lived for a decade before moving to Brookline in 2007.

These are the facts of Elias's career. Since he left Ithaca nearly thirty years ago, a new generation has risen to prominence in the department. For those who knew him, the vividness of memory makes those years seem brief, but does not make it easier to convey to all who have come after what kind of person he was. His manner was gracious, even courtly, but never condescending. He could convey fondness, bemusement, and irony with the same twinkle of the eye. The irony he could readily turn on himself, as when he wrote in the preface to the revised Dreiser, "I have, for example, delayed Dreiser's arrival in Chicago a whole year, transferred him from a philosophy class at Indiana University to one in 'philology,' removed Thomas B. Reed temporarily from the Speakership of the House of Representatives, and given Greenwood Lake back to New Jersey."

A deep sense of social justice was part of Elais's clear-sightedness, evident from the beginning of his career in his interest in Dreiser's work. It's wholly characteristic of his commitments that he should have been the advisor of a master's thesis on the theme of alienation written by a young African-American woman named Chloe Wofford, known today as Toni Morrison. His generosity, bestowed most characteristically on his students, junior colleagues, and underdogs, was freely given and in the best way—without illusions.

New Faculty

Elizabeth Anker

Elizabeth Anker received a law degree from the University of Chicago in 1999 and practiced for two years before returning to graduate school at the University of Virginia, where she completed her PhD in English literature in 2007. Her interest in human rights law continues to inform her literary scholarship. She works on the twentieth century, especially contemporary world literature, but she's also interested in postcolonial theory and debates about law and literature. Her book manuscript, *The Human Rights Paradox: The Postcolonial Novel and the Claims of Theory*, examines how Anglophone writers such as J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy respond to the global migration of human rights. Last year at Cornell she taught courses on Post-9/11 Literature, Human Rights and Literature, and Contemporary World Literature; this fall she will teach a graduate seminar in human rights.

Faculty Notes

In July 2009 **Laura Brown** became vice provost for undergraduate education, the second-highest academic officer in Cornell University.

English Department faculty continue to chair other departments or serve in important administrative posts. **Eric Cheyfitz** will continue as director of the American Indian Program and as faculty co-ordinator of the Mellon-Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program. **Jonathan Culler** will continue as chair of Romance Studies, **Timothy Murray** as director of the Society for the Humanities, **Neil Saccamano** as chair of Comparative Literature, **Shirley Samuels** as chair of Art History, and **Paul Sawyer** as director of the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines. **Shelley Wong** is chair of the Asian/Asian American Center Committee, which is charged with a proposal to create a new international center at Cornell.

Cornell faculty continue to publish widely, to organize conferences, and to serve the university. **Mary Pat Brady** is associate editor of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Sixth Edition), of which five volumes appeared in the past year. **Jonathan Culler**'s *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* was translated into Tamil, Japanese, Arabic, Kurdish, Chinese, Russian, Georgian, and Latvian. **Tim Murray**'s newest book is *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (University of Minnesota, 2008). **Shirley Samuels** is an editor of the *Wadsworth Themes in American Literature*, of which three volumes appeared this past year. **Dan Schwarz** is editor of *Damon Runyon: Guys and Dolls and Other Writings* (Penguin 2008). **Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon**'s chapbook *Poems in Conversation and a Conversation with Elizabeth Alexander* came out this year from Slapering Hol Press (2008).

On March 20, 2009, **Eric Cheyfitz** appeared as an expert witness in Ward Churchill's First Amendment suit against the University of Colorado. A jury subsequently found for Churchill.

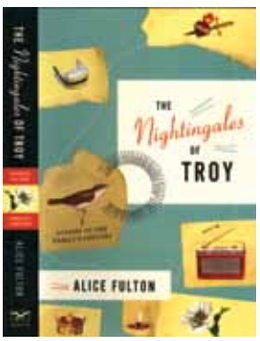
Farewells

In addition to **Phyllis Janowitz**'s retirement, the English Department will lose two members next year. **James Eli Adams** has accepted a position as professor of literature at Columbia University. As author of the forthcoming *History of Victorian Literature* and other writings, Adams has become a recognized authority in English literature of the Victorian era. **Jami Carlacio** has departed to accept a job as editor of a Cornell publication. In her years as lecturer in the English Department, Carlacio was an indefatigable and dedicated teacher and course leader who won the gratitude of many students. Their contributions will be badly missed.

Books by Faculty

Alice Fulton *The Nightingales of Troy: Stories of One Family's Century* (Norton, 2008)

Annie Garrahan, the visiting nurse, is the heroine of the fourth story in this collection, of which there are ten—one for each decade in the past century telling the stories across generations of an Irish-Catholic family in Troy, New York. There are, apparently, no nightingales in Troy; heroism belongs to the Troy of Homer, and miracles to a similarly legendary past. But the phrase in the title actually refers to a water show on the Hudson, planned during the Depression by an alcoholic priest to honor Annie's profession (Florence Nightingale's profession)—even though she has no power to raise the dead except in her strict adherence to cleanliness, duty, and medical fact. But after the priest drowns, she begins to have unscientific visions of him "dancing" in the wintry waves: "It was limping and spinning, genuflecting and elevating its clasped hands on high as it hoofed and tripped and flung itself north. 'Walking on water,' Nurse Garrahan said disapprovingly."

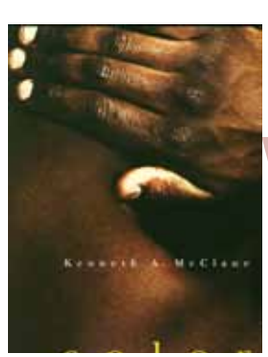


Alcohol, drowning, miracles, medicine, water, saving, eating, starving: no short notice can do justice to the intricate connections, macabre comedy, or fully realized characters that inhabit this brilliant collection, the first work of fiction by a gifted poet. The language, in J. Robert Lennon's words, is "intricate and baroquely comic, packed with all manner of period detail; the power in Fulton's prose, as in her poetry, is in its self-contained richness." As Fulton told Lennon last spring, the people are based on her mother's sisters, and the writing came gradually. In the first story, "one character takes arsenic to keep herself fashionably pale. And you could actually buy Bayer Heroin over the counter! My character is tempted by that—it's one of the drugs in the life of the farm woman. And opium concentrate, which is given to her by a nun."

"The voice for the first story," she continues, "came to me through tales of my grandmother, the oral tradition of my family—I almost was channeling her. I never knew her, but I could almost feel the voice coming through these tales. I didn't even know I was writing a book. I just got this notion to try a story—I'd always secretly wanted to write a narrative. That was 'Queen Wintergreen.' . . . Then I went on and did everything wrong, and learned very slowly how to do it on my own. Second was the one that's set in the fifties, about three spinsters based on my great-aunts. After that I went back and wrote the first one, and I began to think, 'This could be a collection.'"

Kenneth A. McClane *Color: Essays on Race, Family, and History* (University of Notre Dame, 2009)

In his new essay collection, McClane insists uncompromisingly on the reality, for American identities, of race. The well-meaning call for a "race-neutral society" on the part of people who have only recently "been made to see themselves as white" conveys to people of color the message "that their historical experience is either a hindrance to community, or is of no importance. . . . If I am the beneficiary of the Collegiate School, the oldest private school in America, I am also the offspring of 147th Street in Harlem, where I learned to celebrate the quiet decency of those around me. To deny race is, at bottom, to deny them." Yet this insistent awareness of the markers that distinguish humans also informs the "gift of imagination" which, in McClane's generous account, "is the gift to appreciate another: to see, alas, that I am in you and you are in me." In each of these essays, he uses his imaginative gift to bring to life a variety of remembered people, many realized in a sentence or paragraph, but others in the fullness of pages—primarily his parents, to whom above all this memoir belongs: his artistically gifted mother, who travels to Boston to officially change a mistake on her birth certificate (she had been identified as "white"), and his father, a brilliant New York surgeon. In the last and most moving of the essays (which has been selected for the forthcoming anthology *The Best African-American Essays*), McClane details his parents' slow decline into Alzheimer's, each shining forth in wit and grace even through the late stages of deterioration. His father, an inveterate teller of anecdotes, managed to structure his stories in beginnings, middles, and ends even when, in his final days, the content evaporates. McClane is also, of course, an inveterate teller of anecdotes; in that resemblance, his parents shine through these pages, but also in the honesty, fierceness, and crowning generosity of the writing itself. "The pasts of his ancestors lean against/ Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity," writes Gwendolyn Brooks in the epigraph McClane chooses for his essay on affirmative action; but in these pages, he shows that the pasts of our ancestors define us and sustain us precisely because we don't walk alone.

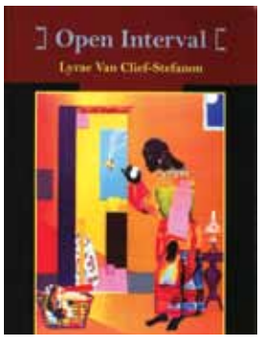


J. Robert Lennon *Castle* (Graywolf Press, 2009)

Eric Loesch buys a tract of land outside the town in upstate New York where he grew up; guarded, formal, and suspicious of strangers, he discovers in the dilapidated house he now owns a child's drawing of a castle, and then—in the heart of the nearly inaccessible woods beyond—the half-ruined stone structure itself, along with a mysterious white deer. But who is the mysterious Dr. Avery Stiles, former owner of the property and one-time professor whose career has been shadowed by a grim scandal? Does the castle stand as the emblem of the darkness and loneliness within, or the elusive recall of a childhood lost? Is the deer a guide supernaturally appointed for his rescue? Does Stiles still lurk in the castle as its crazed hermit or as Loesch's own dark projection? That would be to read allegorically a book that, in its dryly precise renderings of a decaying small town and its inhabitants (a plumber, a real estate agent, a hardware salesman) seems to be firmly rooted in everyday reality. Like all his fiction, Lennon's seventh novel—masterfully paced and compulsively readable—challenges its readers to orient themselves in an unfamiliar, unpredictable world. As we move deeper into the dark and tangled wilderness Loesch owns, we also move deeper into his harrowing past and then to an American prison facility in Iraq, until we realize we are beholding a hallucinatory portrait of American masculinity, constructed out of pain, rigor, hardness, and solitude. As reality and memory collide, we confront not just Loesch's buried experience but our own and our nation's.

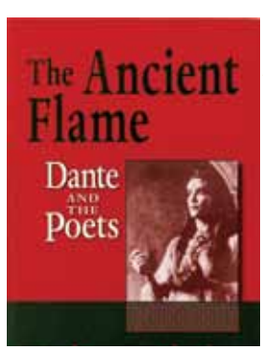
2009 National Book Award Nominee Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon *] OPEN INTERVAL [* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009)

When examining the papers of the deaf British astronomer John Goodricke (1754–1786), Van Clief-Stefanon learned that he'd given the name "RR lyrae" to a new type of pulsating star. The presence of "her" name inscribed in a document 220 years old could be considered a figure for her own reciprocal self-inscription in the heavens of poetry—an African-American woman laying claim to the Western literary tradition—which in the developing imagery of night and stars that structure this volume also



becomes a "mirroring" of blackness. In another twist, the deaf astronomer becomes the "muse" of Van Clief-Stefanon's lyrics, as music reaches across silence. Since the "Dear John" poems addressed to Goodricke bear the same title as letters a woman writes to a former lover (the figure of an absent husband lurks behind many of the poems), darkness and space become attributes not just of the night sky but of human life in its essential solitude and insubstantiality. As heavenly bodies, constellations are the subject of astronomy; as myth, they're the subject of poetry. But for sailors, they're a means of orientation (the lyrae stars turn out to be especially useful in measuring distance); the answer to isolation, then, is not Emersonian self-affirmation but celestial navigation—or poetry as the measurement of distances. Van Clief-Stefanon's title denotes the particular kind of distance she's most interested in. "Open interval," the term used by mathematicians to describe a line that does not contain its end points, is for Lyrae a figure for life—and also for poetic structures like sonnets. When, for example, two inverted brackets (the symbol of the open interval) enclose the words "Dear Phillis" in a poem to Goodricke, we realize that Van Clief-Stefanon is writing Phillis Wheatley into her sonnet, symbolically breaking its self-enclosure. People, voices, names, flow together across time. Thus, Rilke supplies the refrain of a "bop" addressed to Harriet Tubman, who followed the north star to Auburn, New York—where Van Clief-Stefanon teaches writing in a penitentiary *(see page 10)*. In the third of the "Blackbody Radiator" series, the first names of nine female African-American poets spread out italicized on the page, in silence, like a constellation. In the astonishing poem for Amadou Diallo (beginning "This is your fifteen minutes/ of fame"), Van Clief-Stefanon compares the homicidal policemen to paparazzi popping cameras and the death itself to a supernova—a macabre conceit that develops in a mere sixteen lines into tragic power. With poems like these, this volume becomes a moment in the open interval of American literature.

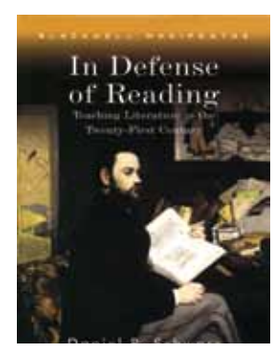
Winthrop Wetherbee *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets*
(University of Notre Dame, 2008)



What would it mean for Dante, the first great Italian poet, to believe that philosophical and spiritual truth belonged to the Christian revelation, whereas great poetry belonged to the pre-Christian world of antiquity? And what would be the function of poetic imagination within a Christian universe? The usual answer to the first question among Dante scholars has been theological: Virgil, Dante's trusty guide in the first two parts of *The Divine Comedy*, demonstrates how pagan knowledge must be "completed" by Christian revelation. But in that case, the second question remains elusive. In a subtle shift with profound implications, Pete Wetherbee takes seriously Dante's engagement with four great Latin forebears, constructing an account of Dante's reading that is also a portrait of human relationships—and giving ways to answer the second question above as well as the first. Dante in his poem interacts with his poetic predecessors as people (Virgil and Statius have speaking parts in the *Comedy*), as poetical works (Dante habitually alludes to or tropes upon characters and passages in Latin), and as profound apprehensions of human experience. As Pete talks us gracefully through intricate allusions and subtle echoes, he converts what could simply be a set of scholarly references into a composite literary universe, in which Dante's text intersects with Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and Statius' *Thebaid*. As a result, a statement like "Ovid is everywhere and nowhere in the *Comedy*," instead of being straightforward (Ovid doesn't appear, but Dante's characters are "metamorphosed" as spirits in Hell or Purgatory) becomes shorthand for the complex way Ovid's language and attitudes pervade Dante's own. As a result we can see Dante (the poet and the character in his own poem) as a figure of emotional complexity and depth, a savvy political thinker, and the astutest of readers. By the time we have finished *The Ancient Flame*, peering with Dante the pilgrim at the celestial "sea" that for Wetherbee is poetry itself, the impact of this multiple journey (Wetherbee moving/reading with Dante moving/reading through the Latin poets) is as grand and exhilarating as the experience of great literature itself.

Pete was also honored this year by a festschrift—*Through a Classical Eye: Transcultural and Transhistorical Visions in Medieval English, Italian, and Latin Literature in Honour of Winthrop Wetherbee*, ed. Andrew Galloway and R. F. Yeager (Toronto University Press, 2009). The subtitle gives a sense of the range of the collection, which reflects the immense range of Pete's scholarly contributions. But not all the essays are primarily for scholars. Anyone who knows Pete (or the book's author, Andy Galloway) will love the generous and astute appreciation that is the book's introduction ("The School of Wetherbee"), which adapts the title of an early Wetherbee book (schola means a "school" or group of scholars and friends) and expands it to include, among other groups, Pete's work among prisoners. And all will love the concluding essay by Pete's colleague, the poet and fiction writer Bob Morgan, on "Thirty Years of Lunches."

Daniel R. Schwarz *In Defense of Reading: Teaching Literature in the Twenty-First Century*
(Wiley-Blackwell, 2008)



As a Jewish graduate student trained in the formalism of the New Criticism, Dan Schwarz recalls reading without noticing, or pretending not to notice, anti-Semitic passages in T. S. Eliot and other writers: "After all, were we not part of that imaginary audience of ideal readers on which New Criticism and Aristotelian criticism depended—even as we ignored the fact that the imagined audience of ideal readers were WASPs." Although the chapter "Eating Kosher Ivy" is the fourth, not the first, in Dan Schwarz's latest book (his fourteenth), his discussion of being both Jewish and Ivy League undergirds the whole book, which passionately argues that literature is always "by humans, for humans, about humans." This humanism, which insists on our ability to connect with people, times, places, and values unlike our own, just as strongly insists that as readers we must also read from our particular set of values and our position in the world. Reading therefore becomes both an ethical act (by which we align ourselves with or against other readers and groups of readers) and a "transaction" with the author and the text that differs with every reading. How, then, does being Jewish affect Schwarz's sensibility as a reader? Among his various answers, he notes that "because Jews have historically lived on the margin…we have tended to be skeptical of sweeping universals and to dwell in particulars." As part of the Blackwell *Manifesto* series, this book is in many ways Schwarz's most personal. With a commitment to pluralism and open-endedness, he brings the experience of forty years to bear on questions that will interest anyone who cares about literature: Why do we read? What can literature teach us and how can it change us? What makes a good teacher? And what is the future of teaching and reading in the new century that meets us?

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letter from the chair

How does an English Department grow stronger in difficult economic times? First of all, by pulling together and rethinking how we do what we do. We had less money to work with than we thought we would have, and yet it has been an extraordinary year for events, new hires, new courses, and faculty and alumni achievements. We are welcoming two new professors, Tejumola Olaniyan and Margo Crawford, who specialize in the literature and culture of the African diaspora, and we also have visiting professors in Romantic literature, American novel, feminist theory, and creative writing. Emily Lordi, a visiting professor, has been teaching courses on the work of Cornell alumna and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, who visited us this past October to give a reading from her new novel, *A Mercy*. Students had the rare opportunity to study the novels of a great writer all semester and also engage her in discussion in person. Alongside perennially popular courses on medieval romance, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Oscar Wilde, we have new courses on William Faulkner, law and literature, and Gothic literature. We have also created new Gateway Courses, which we now require for the major and which we hope will appeal to students across the university who want to experience a broad range of great books in English, from Beowulf to contemporary world literature and literary theory.

Thanks to the generosity of our alumni, we have had a busy roster of events this past year. The Creative Writing Program has been celebrating the centennial (give or take a few years) of the first creative writing course at Cornell. One of the high points of the year was a reading by Charles Simic, who was Poet Laureate. Numerous MFA alums returned to give readings, among them Junot Díaz, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction last year, and Melissa Bank, who was our distinguished visiting professor. We also celebrated the accomplishments of the poet Phyllis Janowitz, our colleague who retired this year.

On the more scholarly side, we had conferences on medieval Judaism, Shakespeare and sexuality, academic freedom, literature and human rights, James Baldwin, and the philosopher and critic Giorgio Agamben. If you want to see what's happening in the department or you are planning a visit to Ithaca, you should check out our new and improved website, which has a calendar of events that are open to everyone, news items about the department, and spotlights on faculty publications, including new books by Alice Fulton, J. Robert Lennon, Masha Raskolnikov, Daniel Schwarz, and Samantha Zacher, among others. Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon's second book of poems was a nominee for this year's National Book Award.

Finally, I want to thank those alumni who have stepped forward to help the English Department in a difficult economy, and that includes the funding for the publication of this newsletter through part of a generous grant from Cynthia Leder, Class of '77. With the help of these English majors, Cornell continues to be a leading university for the study of literature, and we owe a debt of gratitude to our students and alumni for carrying on that tradition.

Ellis Hanson
Professor and Chair
Department of English