

Graduate Humanities



students and faculty collaboratively exploring
the arts, history, culture, and literature in an
open experimental multidisciplinary environment

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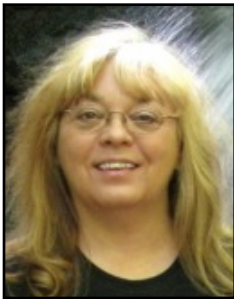
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Life and Teaching

By Trish Hatfield ('08), Program Assistant

For this issue, we invited two of our newest faculty members to write about themselves with two broad questions as starting points: 1) What do you do? and 2) What is your approach to teaching? We asked these questions because we wanted to gift our readers with a sense of the diversity, profound kindness, and deep scholarship that characterizes our faculty. These qualities are not unique to these two; indeed, they could be said of all our faculty members. But because Cat and Anne have recently joined the program, we thought you would like to hear them speak in their own voices about their lives and teaching. Enjoy!



It's All There on the Page: A Life in Writing and Teaching with Cat Pleska, Faculty, MU Graduate Humanities Program

I was lucky as a child in one key respect: my mother read to me. As her voice lulled me into a sweet reverie with images she read on the pages, I became Goldilocks eating someone else's porridge or Red Riding Hood running from the wolf. Later, when I read on my own, I searched for clues in the old clock. I joined the Hardy Boys on endless adventures. Eventually, I'd shut the pages of a novel and then imagined I was the hero in the story.

Perhaps that was an extraordinary dream for a young girl to imagine. No one in the books said I couldn't, or at least, I never let it stop me. Maybe my mother's early words led me to believe it was possible: "If you were Red Riding Hood, what would you have done?" she asked. I did not grow up and become a hero, but I sure wrote about them in my spiral notebook. My well of ideas for writing was filled constantly with the stories and books I read.

Along the way I studied the craft of writing, and I also read voraciously about writers. I read their biographies, what they had to say about writing; I noted what they did in their lives to survive if writing itself did not pay the bills. Often, that was teaching. I wasn't sure that I could teach, but I studied my professors, who became my role models and mentors.

The more I read and wrote, the better I became at the craft of writing. Booker T. Washington said, "Nothing ever comes to one, that is worth having, except as a result of hard work." It has taken me decades of practice, money, spirit, energy and dreaming to get here. Before I began my higher education, however, I tried many things: artist and craftsman; business owner; speaker and performer. But always, in the back of my mind, writing and teaching remained constant. Finally, I fulfilled a long-time dream: a bachelor's degree in English, professional writing. But I could not stop there. I went on to earn graduate degrees, one from Humanities, which afforded me a broader context and background for my writing, and a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction. I realized that the possibility to teach at a university was real, so I taught part time. Now, I teach writing and literature full time at West Virginia State University, as an adjunct in Marshall University's Graduate Humanities program, and in community and professional writing workshops across the region.

See Pleska, Page 4

...everyone has
a story to tell.



Living and Teaching with Anne McConnell, Faculty, Graduate Humanities

I graduated college from Illinois Wesleyan University as a French and International Studies double major, and I knew I wanted to continue going to school. I had spent time studying abroad in France as an undergraduate student and decided I might

continue in that vein, applying to French literature programs across the country. I chose The University of Colorado at Boulder, which had an excellent program in French literature. And, to be honest, I was equally drawn to the prospect of traveling west of Illinois for the first time, and living in the beautiful Rocky Mountains.

The University of Colorado offered me a graduate-instructor position in beginning French language courses, which not only funded my education but gave me the much-desired opportunity to try my hand at teaching. As a 21-year-old at the beginning of my first semester, I found myself in front of a classroom with students roughly my same age (and probably maturity level). Luckily, they generally remained gracious as I tried to figure out how to teach a room full of college kids an unfamiliar language. I discovered that creating a fun, dynamic atmosphere helped everyone to struggle through the potentially embarrassing moments of mispronunciation and lack of comprehension that go with learning a foreign language. We laughed at and with each other, enjoying the often ridiculously simplistic and childish conversation: “I like giraffes. What about you?” “I prefer hippopotamuses, and I also love the color red.” I would like to think that such experiences took my students beyond some of the assumptions we make and things we take for granted as native speakers of English; that perhaps an entry-level French course exposed my students to the challenge of second-language acquisition and encouraged them to develop sensitivity to the many non-native speakers of English in our communities.

I completed my M.A. in French literature but decided that I wanted to expand my field of study to other countries, and other arts. The University of Colorado offered a comparative literature program, and so I changed course for my doctoral studies and moved to a new department. Comparative literature, as a field, is difficult to define—partially because most people in the field engage in vastly different kinds of study. In general, “comparative” means that a scholar in the field works with more than one national tradition and

language; it also implies a comparison of literature with different arts, such as film, fine art, or music. Most comparative literature programs, including mine, require graduate students to read at least three foreign languages and to develop expertise in literary theory and criticism. As I began the doctoral curriculum, I expanded my studies into Germany, England, and South America. By my second year in the program, and with my Ph.D. comprehensive exams quickly approaching, I decided on a specialization in 20th century European and Hispanic literature and critical theory. I also selected the writers whose work would serve as the backbone of my dissertation—the French writer Maurice Blanchot and the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges.

I began instructing courses in the Humanities Department. For the most part, I taught world literature, but I also had the opportunity to teach critical theory and the visual arts. This represented a significant transition from foreign language teaching, since I would need to engage students in very different ways. I found that the skills I learned teaching French helped me inject liveliness into a crowd that might at first prefer silence and disengagement. *See McConnell, Page 4.*

Excerpts from Economic Health: Universities should educate – employers should train

By Max Blouw, chair of the Council of Ontario Universities and president of Wilfrid Laurier University.

Universities are not, and should not be, in the business of producing “plug and play” graduates – workers who can fit immediately into a specific job Universities are primarily in the business of positive human development. They focus on enhancing the abilities of our graduates to communicate clearly and effectively, to analyze, to confront ambiguity with clear methods and confidence, to break down problems into manageable parts, to think critically and to question deeply. All of this has real value in the workplace. When a university graduate is recruited, the employer has in their new hire an experienced communicator, an adept researcher, a problem solver and a critical thinker – skills that have long been valued. *See Blouw, Page 3.*

Spring 2014 Seminars

See www.marshall.edu/humn for more information, including seminar classroom assignments.

LINKS FOR REGISTRATION AVAILABLE END OF OCTOBER 2013

* Currently enrolled graduate students may register Nov 11

* New or currently unenrolled graduate students may register beginning Nov 25th

CULS 620: Women, Men, and Cultural Change (Lassiter) Wednesday, 7 – 9:50 p.m. Did you know that some societies name and recognize three or four genders? Did you know that women and men may have different dialects in some parts of the world, even though they speak the same language? Did you know that in some places men and women can live in altogether separate households throughout their adult lives? Did you know that same-sex marriage is not a modern phenomenon, that in some societies it is actually a very old practice? Learn about this and more in CULS 620: Women, Men and Cultural Change, a course about sexuality, gender, and a process of cultural change between and among women and men that is centuries old. *Dr. Lassiter, director of the Graduate Humanities Program and professor of humanities and anthropology, has authored and edited several books on anthropology and culture change including Invitation to Anthropology and Explorations in Cultural Anthropology.*

HIST 600 – SelTp: Glenwood (section 231: 1 hour) and the History of Charleston (section 232: 3 hours) (Billy Joe Peyton), Tuesday, 7:00 – 9:50 p.m. This seminar will meet at Glenwood, an iconic 1850s estate that stands in the hills of Charleston's West Side. Students will get up close and personal with the past as they utilize elements of the historic Glenwood collection to examine the 150-year development of Charleston from a small 19th century village into a modern 21st century capital city. Sponsored in part by the Historic Glenwood Foundation.

This seminar is split into two sections: HIST 600-231, Glenwood (1 hour): OPEN TO THE PUBLIC; APPLY AS NON-DEGREE STUDENT TO MU; and HIST 600-232, History of Charleston (3 hours): SCHOLARSHIP AVAILABLE FOR COURSE; APPLY THROUGH THE HUMANITIES PROGRAM. **CONTACT PROGRAM OFFICE FOR DETAILS: 304-746-2022**

Dr. Billy Joe Peyton, associate professor of history at West Virginia State University, is the author of Charleston Then and Now, and has researched and written extensively on the history of Charleston and West Virginia.

HUMN 650 – Selected Topics as independent study arranged between instructor and student (contact Director to arrange course). For students who need to conduct independent research and/or reading in a specific topic in the humanities, the Program will offer independent studies in those topics as funds allow. Contact the Director for more information. Examples of Special Topics might include: Film Criticism, Museum Studies, Studies in Appalachian Music, Studies in Poetry, Language and Communication.

HUMN 680 – Independent Research Symposium (Dr. Lassiter), Arranged. A pro-seminar required of all Humanities degree students who are beginning the thesis or final project. Arranged with the Program Director.

LITS 600 – SelTp: Appalachian Literature: Exploring the Soul of a Region (Cat Pleska), Monday, 7 – 9:50 p.m. This seminar will engage selected literature by Appalachian writers to explore the region's history and culture. Some authors covered will include Denise Giardina, Charles Frazier, James Still, Scott McClanahan and several others. Readings will examine the past and present public perception of Appalachia, as well as noting what comprises the soul of this vast region. *Ms. Pleska teaches writing at West Virginia State University, where she is also the Director of the WV SU Writing Center. She earned her MFA in creative nonfiction writing at Goucher College in Baltimore and is an essayist for West Virginia Public Radio. She also is the Editor-in-Chief of Mountain State Press and Senior Editor of Fed from the Blade: Tales and Poems from the Mountains.*

Blouw Continued from Page 2

Businesses – and regional and global economies – flourish when fresh, creative ideas are allowed to flow freely and employees at all levels are encouraged to think critically and be innovative. The university experience enhances self-awareness and personal competencies. This breadth of development provides the kind of intellectual flexibility that enables employees to more easily move from this career to the next, and even into careers we can't yet imagine will exist.

Our economic health depends on the critical thinkers our universities are graduating. The next generation of leaders in our knowledge-based economy will emerge from these institutions and can only truly be great if employers understand and value a university degree as a broad education, not specific skills training.

Blouw, Max (2013, September 3). Universities should educate – employers should train. The Globe and Mail. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com>

Cat Pleska Continued from Page 1

Whether in a university classroom or in a public workshop, my approach to teaching writing begins with this: a belief that everyone has a story to tell. Whether that story is one from their life or one from their imagination, my job is to help them bring that story to the page. I offer them good, strong models of engaging and enriching reading selections. We read, we discuss, we dissect. It's not only how the writer did it, but also about the "story" and how it matters to us as humans.

Probably one of the most important attitudes I bring to the classroom is to allow the participants the freedom to say what they need to say and to appreciate it, to further it in their minds, and to show them that they can draw from their own experience. I encourage the story and the writer; I offer constructive words that bring the written piece closer to the writer's own truth and to increase their expertise. What a pleasure it is to see the appreciation for their work grow. Always, I learn from my students as well.

The students in my classroom have endlessly entertained me with their skill building, their crafting of text, and their feelings that abound in the stories they write. Like fireworks at the end of a celebration, I watch their imaginations fire. I watch them set goals for an essay, a story, a memoir. They become the observers, the listeners. They have learned to create a world with heroes, right there on the page. ##

Cat Pleska holds a BA in English (West Virginia State University), an MA in Humanities (Marshall University), and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction (Goucher College). She is a regular writer for Wonderful West Virginia magazine and is an essayist on West Virginia Public Radio, with 30+ essays aired since 2007. Cat's radio essay, Unexpected Harvest, was published in 2008 in Hamilton Stone Review. She also has essays published in Folklife; Constellations; Appalachian Writers Anthology; and in the Encyclopedia of West Virginia. She portrayed famous WV photographer Frances B. Johnston for the WV Humanities Council's History Alive! Program and also Anna Jarvis, for the Mother's Day Foundation of Grafton, West Virginia. Last year, she was Senior Editor of Fed From the Blade, which was nominated for the 2012 Appalachian Book of the Year Award.

Cat teaches English at West Virginia State University, is an adjunct in Marshall University's Graduate Humanities Program, and the director of the WVSU Writing Center. Visit her blogs, "West Virginia Literary Soul," "Mouth of the Holler" and webpage at <http://www.catpleska.com>.

Anne McConnell Continued from Page 2

Keeping students active in class, making them responsible for leading aspects of the discussion, and encouraging them to debate their interpretations in a friendly, fun way created more of a community environment and provided an opening for me to teach students the important literary, social, and historical aspects of texts without losing them along the way.

Now, as an Associate Professor in the English Department at West Virginia State University, I teach a wide variety of courses: English major courses in world literature and literary criticism, interdisciplinary courses in art and film, literature surveys at all levels, and freshman composition. One of the most memorable courses I taught at WVSU was called "Postmodernism Across the Arts." I worked with a professor in the Art Department, and we

*My continued
scholarship helps
to keep
my teaching
fresh . . .*

created an interdisciplinary course exploring the works of many artists and writers—from Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov to filmmaker Sue Friedrich, and from photographer Sherrie Levine to pop star Madonna.

In addition to writing and publishing several articles I recently published a book, *Approaching Disappearance*, (Dalkey Archive Press)—a project that was seven years in the making. *Approaching Disappearance* explores the question of disappearance in Maurice Blanchot's critical work and then turns to five narratives that offer a unique reflection on the threat of disappearance as it pertains to the demand of literature. The study includes chapters on short fictions by Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Louis-René Des Forêts, Nathalie Sarraute, and Blanchot. My most recent projects focus on the work of Dominican-American writer, Junot Díaz, and also that of contemporary American writer, Lydia Davis. My continued scholarship helps to keep my teaching fresh, encouraging me to add new writers and critical approaches to my syllabi and hopefully inspiring students to explore their own academic interests in the Humanities.

I look forward to bringing my experience to the Graduate Humanities Program at Marshall University and am thankful to have the opportunity to share my passion for literature and the arts with students in the program. ##

Recent Graduates

Kelly Pruett '13

Kelly's thesis/project was "In the Presence of God: Changing Religious Practices among U.S. Slaves, from Bondage to Freedom." (Cultural Studies) Kelly is the Financial Development Director at the YMCA of Kanawha Valley.

Seth Davidson '13

Seth's thesis/project was "Good Night in the Morning: Family and Food In Logan County, West Virginia." (Cultural Studies) Seth works for Frontier Communications, is a sheep farmer, does tattooing.....you name it! He's also gathered a crew together to produce a short a mockumentary on a local band.



Kelly Pruett

Seth Davidson

"What's It Mean to You?"

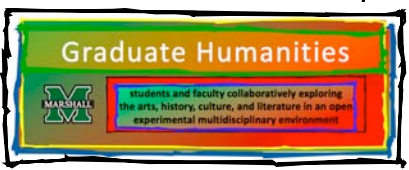
Here is a sampling of what our graduates are saying about the program:

"The writing.
I love to write and the program expanded my ability to write. Also the artistic aspect did the same. I gained critical thinking skills – being in an environment that challenged me to think and critique was very useful...evaluating culture and how to think about culture. All of these skills I still use today." J.S. '08

"I loved the close knit classes and personal attention given by the faculty. The classes were great for allowing and encouraging creative thought and expression. The program offered the best opportunity to meet and collaborate with a broad spectrum of viewpoints and interests." K.P. '13

"I valued the intellectual challenge it offered through instruction, and through those involved and fellow students. The program offered the means by which I could learn to look beyond analysis and the process of breaking things down and to consider meaning and experience a relevant to understanding anything." R.B.'11

"It is most difficult to put into words...the program helped me not only academically but culturally. It was truly enriching and helped me fit in by getting to know the region and the people." A. J-G. '10



"It has allowed me to open my eyes to both the good and the bad that this world has to offer. Without humanities I feel as though many people would go through this world with blinders on and not really seeing anything as it really is." A.K '09

"I am 75 years old and completed my degree when the program was on the WVSC campus. The blend of younger students and older was an experience all by itself. I did not do the Humanities program to enhance job opportunities but (laughing) it will look good on my obituary." A.L. '92

"Classes were always filled with interesting, stimulating discussions, and thought-provoking material." J.A.'10



Glenwood Estate Memories & Histories

Glenwood Estate represents a complex intersection of the North and South. It has been the focus of a collaborative project that marked its 7th year with a presentation on June 30, 2013. The day included reports on research and dissemination activities and culminated with discussions and the sharing of fond personal memories of the house's last owner and inhabitant, Lucy Quarrier. See <http://muwww-new.marshall.edu/graduatehumanities/the-glenwood-project/>



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