THE BROADSHEET

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The Merrimack College English Department has been changing rapidly over the past year, adding exciting new concentrations, co-curricular internships, and courses. Professor Scherwatzky and Professor Plasse kindly agreed to answer some questions about these exciting and highly anticipated new courses.

The Undead 18th Century

Professor Scherwatzky's new course will examine the 18th century roots of Gothic Horror. This new class will be offered Tuesdays and Thursdays at 9:30 during the Fall 2014 Semester, and is sure to fill up quickly! Interview questions composed by Laura Stevens.

Why did you choose to teach this course?

Given the current pop-culture predilection for the walking dead, the time is right to offer a course in the eighteenth-century origins of English Gothic literature. What do the undead tell us about being alive? Why are so many of us fascinated by ghosts, vampires, and zombies? Where do the conventions of Gothic horror -- misty castles, moldering dungeons, bloody torture, eerie twilight, and spectral phenomena— come from? Long before True Blood, World War Z and American Horror Story, these questions inspired the literary imagination.

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Michael Jackson as Cultural Text

Professor Plasse is offering a new course on Michael Jackson next fall. The course will be offered MWF from 11-11:50 AM and will no doubt be a battle to get into. Interview questions composed by Diana Le.

What does a course on Michael Jackson have to do with the English curriculum?

I'm really excited about teaching "Michael Jackson: Reading the King of Pop as Cultural Text." The main focus of this new Michael Jackson course will be Jackson's short films, so the course falls into line with film studies as one of the new areas in the revised English curriculum. More broadly speaking, the English curriculum is about learning to read all kinds of texts, and I think that the Michael Jackson phenomenon presents a uniquely engaging text for us to explore.

I was glad to hear that you were so excited and surprised about the prospect of a new course on popular culture offered by the English Department at Merrimack. In fact, English departments have a long history of working with popular culture. Many departments started offering popular culture courses – often focusing them on popular literary genres such as detective fiction or science fiction – shortly after popular culture was established as a distinct field of study in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here at Merrimack, many members of the English faculty have been teaching and doing scholarship on popular culture regularly over the past 20 years or so, and more and more of us are incorporating pop culture into the courses we teach. Our courses on Detective Fiction and

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An official publication of the Merrimack College English Department, The Broadsheet is published monthly during the academic calendar year. Its mission is to celebrate the English Department's role in promoting the literary arts on campus, to acknowledge the accomplishments of faculty and students, to profile students and alumni, and to create a forum in which issues relevant to English studies can be discussed.

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How does this course contribute to the new curriculum initiatives in the English department?

Like so many of our new English department courses, "The Undead Eighteenth Century" draws upon a topic of current interest that has deep literary roots. I also plan to focus on the ways in which sense of place -- from landscape to climate to architecture -- shapes our sense of self. Gothic literature can seem farfetched and fantastic, but it also provides an exciting and attractive framework for exploring real-life questions of gender, sexuality, nationalism, and religion.

How is this course different from the other 18th Century courses you offer?

"The Undead Eighteenth Century" will be much bloodier and far sexier than my other period-based courses. Gothic literature is transgressive: it explores the liminal spaces between the rational and the irrational, between the tame and the titillating, between the possible and the impossible. Inquiries into the dark corners of consciousness can shed much light on whom and what we are and who and what we might become.

What are some of the texts you will be reading?

We'll be reading some "graveyard poetry" such as "Night Thoughts" and "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" along with novels such as *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Monk* (which is truly wild!), and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Even prim and proper Jane Austen gets in on the action with *Northanger Abbey*. Aside from the required books, I might also ask students to stock up on candles, crosses and garlic!

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Literature and Film, for example, have been part of our curriculum for many years. More recently, English courses have examined comics, graphic novels, horror fiction, video games, and other elements of popular visual and digital culture. So while the Michael Jackson course is unique in that it's the first of our courses to focus on a pop star, it's also related to all of the existing pop culture offerings that we already have in our curriculum.

MJ is a touchy subject--would you recommend those who are against him to take the course or would it not be as enjoyable for them as it would be for a fan? As the instructor, are you yourself a fan of Michael Jackson?

Jackson certainly has been a controversial figure over the years, and that's part of what makes him so captivating as a focus of study. Rather than presenting an occasion to square off as either "fans" or "haters," the course is an opportunity to look beyond the tabloid versions of Jackson in order to explore the wider significance of his art. I think of Jackson primarily as an artist and cultural presence whose work as a musician, songwriter, dancer, actor, and film-maker intersects with and comments meaningfully on late twentieth-century ideas about race, gender, sexuality, media and celebrity culture, and the role of the popular artist in society. I'm interested in what we will learn when we "read" all these facets of Michael Jackson.

I have enjoyed and followed Jackson's work over a long period of time, and yes, I'm a fan. I grew up listening to the Jackson 5 and many other Motown artists in the 60s and 70s, and like nearly everyone else in the world, I watched Jackson's rise to global super-stardom after *Thriller* appeared in 1982.

You specialize in Shakespearean & Renaissance drama--what are the qualifications that make a professor eligible to teach a new course on a modern-day entertainer?

It was actually my specialties in Shakespearean, Renaissance, and other forms of drama that sparked my interest in the serious study of popular culture. My Shakespeare scholarship has focused on the intersections between the literary and performative aspects of drama, and, in particular, on the role of the performing body in drama. As I began originally to work on these issues, it was not only natural but also really fun for me to look at popular performers and analyze their work using the same frameworks that I was using to study Shakespeare – close-reading, drama theory, performance studies, and various forms of literary theory. I became especially interested in 1980s popular music figures like David Bowie, Madonna, k.d. lang, and Prince, artists whose self-presentation and performance styles seemed particularly theatrical, involving elaborate costumes, deliberately assumed personae, and complex video productions. I've been presenting scholarly papers on these kinds of topics for many years at the annual meetings of the Popular Culture Association, a professional organization for scholars of pop culture, and I've published several articles as well. I think that it's the ability to apply various analytical tools to popular culture, rather than any particular area of literary specialization, that qualifies me and my English colleagues to teach contemporary popular culture.

Lastly, of all the celebrities that ever lived, how did MJ become the focus of a course? Who decided on him? Why?

Over the past several years, in addition to general retrospectives and reconsiderations of Jackson in mainstream media, there have been a number of new books and scholarly articles that focus on Jackson's work as an artist, rather than on his notoriety as a celebrity. These studies cut through the many layers of tabloid distortion under which Jackson's important contributions as a performer, writer, and philanthropist have long been buried and endeavor to analyze the cultural significance of his work. I myself began researching Jackson after his death in 2009, presenting a paper on him at the annual Popular Culture Association meeting in 2012. Not long after that, the English Department began revising its curriculum to allow students more opportunities to explore areas of study like pop culture, opening up a perfect opportunity to propose a course on Michael Jackson.

Why Fiction Cultivates Empathy

by Laura Stevens

Avid readers and lovers of fiction understand the feeling of "getting lost" in a narrative. Characters become friends we root for, strive to empathize with and understand. A steadily growing interest in conventional and electronic forms of fiction has prompted psychologists and philosophers to consider the questions readers and literary scholars have always pondered: how does fiction affect society? How does the empathy we experience when reading translate to our experience in the real world?

Psychologists from Washington University examined what happens in the brain when an individual reads fictional stories. They found that "readers mentally stimulate situations...weaving new scenarios together with their own lives to create new neural pathways" (Alice Thomson. "We can't understand the world without books." *The Times* 13 Nov 2013:19). Furthermore, fiction readers consistently score higher in empathy than nonfiction readers. These studies control for the possibility that, for a number of other reasons, people with high empathy would gravitate toward fiction. This means the act of reading fiction makes us more empathetic. Jonathan Gottschall of the *Boston Globe* writes, "This research consistently shows that fiction does mold us" ("How Fiction Changes Your World" April 29, 2012: K1). When we read fiction we are absorbed in the story and are less likely to be suspicious and skeptical of what we read, whereas with nonfiction, readers tend to have an intellectual guard up, which causes us to be more critical.

Given that fiction is a mechanism for cultivating a more empathetic mind, it has enormous potential to affect society. Fiction is cross-culturally dominated by the theme of justice. While there are certainly exceptions, the majority of fiction celebrates and rewards justice and morality, and punishes corruption and evil, according to Gottschall. So, people who grapple with more nonfiction, such as watching news and reading newspapers, tend to be exposed to unjust parts of society, and learn that bad things can happen to good people. Fiction lovers, alternatively, tend to view the world in a more positive light. While this may seem naïve, the fact that people believe the world is just "seems to be an important part of what makes human societies work," Gottschall observes.

This research makes clear that fiction really can change our views on society, making us more positive and willing to understand one another. Given this finding, it is possible that fiction, rather than intellectual debate, may be the key to social change. It might be argued, for example, that the extreme divide between Republicans and Democrats in this country stems from lack of understanding one another. Fiction exposes us to people from different communities who have different values and life experiences. Reading fiction gives us the ability to step out of our own perspective, and explore someone else's--an experience that non-fiction reading and intellectual debate cannot possibly provide, and there are historical illustrations to support this idea. Gottschall writes that Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, is credited with laying the groundwork for the civil war, convincing many readers that slavery is wrong. A more current example provided in Gottschall's article is ABC's *Modern Family*, which shows a gay family in a positive and nonjudgmental light. Viewers then, according to these studies, are more likely to carry this understanding to their actual lives.

This research shows exactly how critical fiction is to creating a functional society. It seems ludicrous, then, that some policy makers and school systems are dropping literature out of core curricula. Not only does fiction bring great joy to students and adults, but also it is possible that fiction is our best hope for creating an empathetic and just society. As individuals and as a society, we have much to gain from grappling with the complicated emotions experienced by those who have different values, experiences, and viewpoints than we do. The best way for us to do this is through embracing fiction.

Why English is the Hot "New" Major

by Diana Le



According to many recent articles, an English degree is not as useless or impractical as many assume. Numerous experts, including economists and hiring managers, are coming to their senses and endorsing the English major as a potentially lucrative option for college students.

According to Katie Bardaro, a PayScale economist, "The problem with business majors is that it's so common. There's so many of them, and not enough jobs to go around" (*Business Insider's* "Business Majors Are The Most Underemployed Graduates in America." Vivian Giang. June 18 2013.) This trend has resulted in a rising level of underemployment among those with a business degree. One reason is that high-powered executives are opting for "individuals who have a degree in the humanities." One CEO sums it up by saying his technology company doesn't "need mono-focused people. We need well-rounded people" (Bruna Martinuzzi. "Why English Majors Are the Hot New Hires." *American Express Open Forum.* 11 July, 2013).This is where the English major comes in, bringing the desired expertise to the table, which includes excellent skills in communicating, writing, researching, and critical thinking.

So fellow English majors/minors/prospective English majors/minors, tell Mom to stop worrying about your "unemployable"-degree. There's a good chance you'll fare better than your cousin, the marketing major. Soon, you won't have to face the constant questioning from family and friends about why in the world anyone would want to major in English. We've all heard it: "Oh, so you want to become a teacher?" Knowledge in the humanities is increasingly appealing to high-profile business people, as more and more are realizing the value of well-rounded graduates, as they should.

Allie Lynch Talks About Co-Curricular Internship



courtesy of Allie Lynch

Looking to bolster your resume, gain some hands-on experience and put your English skills to good use? The English department's new co-curricular internships are a great way to do all of that! Senior English major Allie Lynch currently serves as the field assistant intern for ENG 4102, The New England Shore, taught by Professor Paul Vatalaro, just one of the new positions open to students. Allie filled us in about her experience with this unique internship below. For more information about this and other English co-curricular internships, please contact Professor Vatalaro.

What are the basic responsibilities/activities of a co-curricular intern?

The basic responsibilities and activities of a co-curricular intern vary from internship to internship. Through co-curricular internships, English majors are given the chance to finally put all they've learned to work. Doing this within our department is both exciting and comforting and brings on a new relationship with the professors who have taught you all you know.

What are some of the specific tasks or projects you've done so far (or plan to do) for the New England Shore class this semester?

The New England Shore course, with a focus on modern and contemporary naturalist writers, is all about hands-on learning and allowing students the chance to write creatively. Because of this, the course holds field excursions that allow students to write and be inspired in the same manner the authors they are studying have. Being my main focus as the Field Research Intern, I have done immense research on all of the potential sites to visit. This eventually led to my second, most recent project of creating pamphlets for the students to refer to when they do visit the sites that made the final list.

Do you need to be enrolled in a specific course to serve as its intern?

As a co-curricular intern you are not enrolled in the course but rather you are enrolled in a non-credit bearing opportunity, ENG 4852 Co-Curricular Internship, directed by Professor Vatalaro.

Do you find the internship manageable to balance with your classwork?

I most definitely find the workload manageable to balance with my class work. Given that your advisors are professors on campus, there is a great deal of understanding. Professor Vatalaro gives me a fair window to get my duties done and tells me ahead of time to ensure I can space it all out. Things like extra-curricular activities are also taken into account; Professor Vatalaro made sure to leave the week I was performing in the college's production of *Doubt: A Parable* free from due dates.

Would you encourage students to apply for this internship? Why?

I would encourage all students to apply for co-curricular internships. No matter what sort of English career you are looking to head into, co-curricular internships are extremely marketable experiences that look great on your transcript. With this, because they are so focused within our field, they are enjoyable! Thus far I have been so thoroughly invested in the New England Shore Internship that I have borrowed the course books off of students and even show up for a handful of classes with the group. Along with my internship for The New England Shore course, I was also recently hired as the co-curricular Community Outreach Intern for The Writers House. Under the advisement of Andrea Cohen, director of The Writers House, I have helped to set up opportunities for students to train with Andover Bread Loaf and prepare students to design writing activities, events, and other programming that creates a space for youth voice through literacy.

Interview questions composed by Alison Leonard.



courtesy of Michelle Norton

The New England Shore seminar explores the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island.

Louder than a Bomb: Why Poetry Matters

by The Broadsheet Staff

The film *Louder than a Bomb*, which screened at the Writers House January 28, underscores poetry's ability to cement communal bonds. Though a number of twentieth-century critics expressed concern that poetry was becoming less and less relevant to the educated reading public, particularly because poets had begun retreating to the financial safety of university creative writing programs, it would appear poetry has found a new (public) life in the form of spoken word performance and poetry slam competition. As evidence of this revival, poet Jamaal May, whose presentation of his own work rocked the Writers House last September, told those in attendance he got his start writing hip-hop lyrics and eventually began writing for and competing in slam competitions in his home town, Detroit.

Louder than a Bomb is a documentary that focuses on the largest high school poetry slam competition in the nation. Held annually in the city of Chicago, at which teams representing area institutions perform individual and group compositions before a large audience and a panel of judges. The LTB event underscores that writing and performing poetry in a public forum can transform the lives of writers and listeners.

The student poets featured in the film perform original works treating a wide range of topics, from gang violence and school shootings, to economic hardship and alcohol dependence. *Louder than a Bomb* establishes poetry's relevance to the contemporary world and to the lives of all individuals, regardless of background or academic training. Despite winning or losing, participants said that they left the competition with a strong sense of familial connection with all their competitors, something they would value above all else.

Lou Bernieri, who teaches English at Philips Academy and runs the Andover Breadloaf community outreach program, hosted the Writers House screening. Bernieri talked about an initiative he helped launch in the Lawrence Public School system that invites families to attend events at which they write and then share poems they've composed. He said that over 300 people were expected to turn out for an event being held that night, emphasizing that poetry is clearly making a difference amongst the large Dominican population in Lawrence. The Dominicans, he said, are a creative group always searching for new outlets for expression.

Writers House Director Andrea Cohen told the audience that the Writers House plans to work with the Andover Breadloaf program to create for Merrimack students opportunities to become involved in an outreach initiative that will bring poetry to local area schools. Any member of the Merrimack community will be welcomed and should contact the Writers House to find out more.



The latest Keohan Fund acquisitions

At Home in the Coastal New England Climate: 10th Annual Keohan Book Fund Lecture

by The Broadsheet Staff

Professor Geraldine S. Branca and Professor Paul Vatalaro delivered the latest Keohan Lecture at the Writers House Friday, February 21 at 3:30. Associate Professor Robert "Bud" Keohan, who donates $1,000 each year, so that rare or noteworthy editions can be purchased to serve as classroom tools for special courses taught in the English program, attended the lecture.

The lecture celebrated the purchase of four editions for the Keohan collection: a 1936 edition, complete with beautiful black-and-white photographs of the Outer Cape, of Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*; an 1873 edition of Celia Laighton Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals*; an illustrated 1963 edition of John Hay's *The Great Beach*, signed by the author; and a very fine illustrated 1981 edition of Robert Finch's *Common Ground*, also signed by the author.

The books will serve a new course called The New England Shore, the first in a series of seminars incorporating hands-on learning and field work. Professors Branca and Vatalaro conceived of the course together, but Professor Vatalaro alone is teaching the current pilot version.

Professor Branca opened the lecture by discussing the special features of each of the four editions purchased, providing background on the publishers, illustrators, photographers, print style and types, volume size, the standard condition rating scale, and other aspects relevant to the craft of book making.

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Bobby DiSorbo (left) an Ben Burke (right) perform at the Writers House Coffee House

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Professor Vatalaro spoke to the substance of the books and their relevance to the main focal point for his course, that is, the shaping force of climate, specifically weather, on the human imagination and on written expression. He said that he and his students are examining whether or not a distinctly New England coastal signature emerges in the six texts he and the group are studying (the other two are Wyman Richardson's *A House on Nauset Marsh* and William Sargent's *A House on Ipswich Marsh*), but he also said that the class has become more and more interested in the idea of what binds a writer to a particular location, what he called the magnetic pull of home.

Professor Vatalaro read aloud a passage from Beston's *The Outermost House,* in which the music of waves and tides exert shaping force on the author's consciousness and imagination, and another from John Hay, in which the author compares his move back to the New England coast to the journey of alewife fingerlings out to the sea, the "image" of which is "in them." Hay was born in Ipswich.

As part of the current program reform movement in the English Department, other faculty are working on creating additional seminar courses that will emphasize the idea of location and climate and that will include site visits and hands-on learning.

Upcoming Events

March 11, 6:30 PM at the Writers House: Baba Brinkman performs *The Canturbury Tales Remixed.* *The Canterbury Tales Remixed* ran for three months off-Broadway in 2011/2012 and has since toured college campuses from Texas to British Columbia. The performance is an electrifying lyrical tour of Geoffrey Chaucer's beloved stories, plus the epics of Beowulf and Gilgamesh, retold in a modern poetic voice that brings them to vivid life. Stories of divine intervention, greed, lust and jealousy transport the audience, while performer Baba Brinkman draws out the many surprising links between today's hip-hop culture and the troubadours of old.



Baba Brinkman, photo and text from bababrinkman.com

New Courses for Fall 2014

Michael Jackson as Cultural Text
The Undead Eighteenth Century

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