

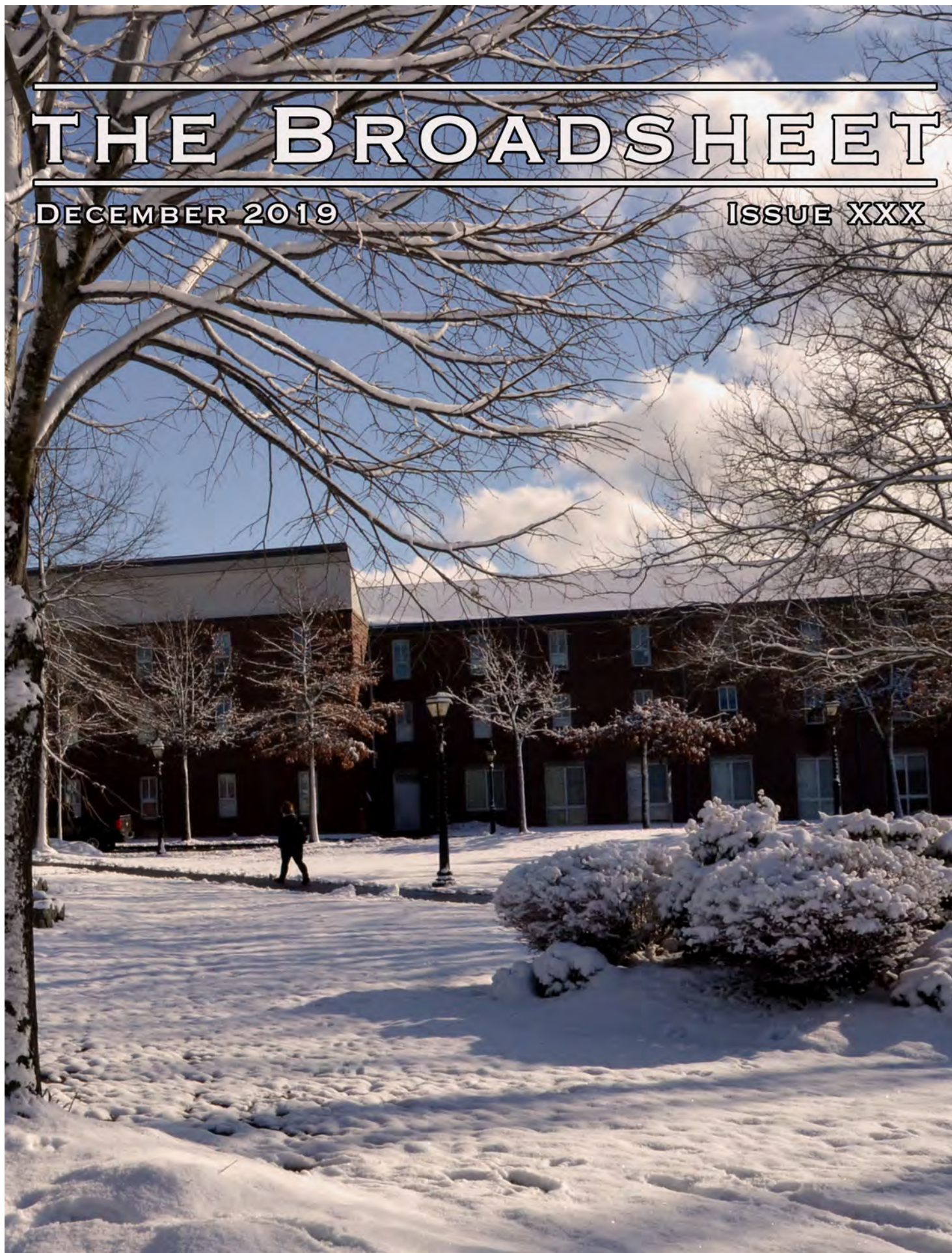
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# THE BROADSHEET

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Note to English Alumni:

Those of you who would like to receive paper copies of *The Broadsheet* should email Professor Vatalaro

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## Editor's Note

Good publishing practice includes regular internal assessment of performance. That practice has become a bylaw for this production staff and one component of that process involves using the magazine's mission statement as its benchmark. Lately, we've done a pretty fair job of running articles celebrating the English Department's role in promoting the literary arts on campus. Our next issue, for example, will feature a piece on the pilot section of a field internship course taught by Assistant Professor Emma Duffy-Comparone. The course, ENG 4750 Field Experience in Creative Writing: Jail Education Assistantship, represents a new initiative in the Jail Education Project conceived, overseen, and taught by Duffy-Comparone and Associate Professor of Criminology Brittnie Aiello. The addition of a News and Notes section, furthermore, represents our effort to showcase the accomplishments of members of the English program community. And, though we've not directly published articles that cultivate dialogue regarding broad disciplinary issues germane to the field of English studies, we have indirectly engaged in analyses of ways in which literary and contemporary forms of popular cultural expression represent important topics, including sexuality, gender, race, cognitive and emotional challenges. We have wandered away, though, from our expressed commitment "to profile students and alumni." I wrote this component into the mission statement for *The Broadsheet* years ago, because I envisioned this publication as an opportunity to create and foster a stronger bond among all those who enter and complete the Merrimack English program. A number of reasons account for our straying away from this priority. Those reasons notwithstanding, the staff and I want to redress that lapse, particularly by drawing alumni narratives consistently back into our pages as we move forward. All of this buildup is my way of inviting our English alumni to contact us about the possibility of telling their professional development stories or sharing professional accomplishments with our readership. I can still be reached at [vatarop@merrimack.edu](mailto:vatarop@merrimack.edu).

Cheers!

*An official publication of the Merrimack College English Department, The Broadsheet is published four times 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.*

## REVISITING THOREAU'S EXPERIMENT IN LIVING

PHOEBE CHETSAS

"The squirrel that you kill in jest, dies in earnest."

Henry David Thoreau

Many people are embracing vegan and vegetarian diets. Once considered radical lifestyles, these diets have become increasingly popular in the last decade, a move resonating with a rise in animal activism. Social and mass media posts urge average Americans to embrace a cruelty-free lifestyle, as one can see reading the comments of any Facebook page promoting ethical animal treatment. The animal rights movement has also recently associated itself with the growing sustainability movement, which relies on science more than empathy, contributing greater credibility to individual dietary choices. We know that animal agriculture is largely responsible for the global climate crisis, and data indicates that reducing consumption of animal products reduces carbon footprints. Methane and other waste products produced by large scale slaughterhouses impact substantially global pollution rates, which become more and more alarming as our population grows. Methods used to clear-cut forests for grazing livestock reduce the generation of oxygen. This brand of factory farming trashes our planet. However, plant-based diets and sustainable living habits counter these practices. Almost two hundred years ago American writer and activist Henry David Thoreau understood the importance of sustainability. Thoreau's *Walden*, a socio-political manifesto, explores the concept of a plant-based diet and the benefits that lifestyle choice yields for animals and people. Thoreau began to develop a sensitivity toward the cruelty of eating flesh as he got older. With that sensitivity came guilt.

While Thoreau failed to follow an exclusively plant-based diet, he became extraordinarily progressive at a time when his neighbors paid little attention to animal welfare. Issues such as national expansion, commercial economics, and slavery absorbed the minds of most Americans, who viewed animals as commodities. Thoreau recognized the toxic fallout these preoccupations obfuscated. In *Walden* he observes, "Is it not a reproach that man is a carnivorous animal?

True, he can and does live, in a great measure, by preying on other animals; but this is a miserable way—as anyone who will go to snaring rabbits, or slaughtering lambs, may learn—and he will be regarded as a benefactor of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent and wholesome diet." In this excerpt, Thoreau expresses his disappointment in humanity for eating meat, viewing it as a spiritual and ethical corruption. While living in his cabin at Walden Pond, Thoreau experimented with a plant-based diet, perhaps as a means to making himself worthy of the role of "benefactor."

Of course, it took time for Thoreau to convert to a plant-based lifestyle. Throughout *Walden* he describes the guilt that beset him after fishing or craving meat. This confessional timbre emerges consistently in the book and rhetorically it encourages a reader to examine her own eating practices. We are drawn to him because his human desires threaten his moral aspirations. Following a fishing trip, for example, he acknowledges, "but always when I have done I feel it would have been better if I had not fished." Regret nurtures growth. At other points in *Walden* he reflects on his urges to trap and devour a woodchuck that frequently steals from his garden. During the initial stages of adopting a plant-based diet, it can be very difficult to resist the lust for meat; however, Thoreau comes to understand that it is even more satisfying to fill up on vegetables and potatoes. Though his focus remains on the spiritual and on the ethical implications of his actions, the larger implication, that is, that it becomes the duty of each individual to do no harm, serves as a building block for environmentalism.

Many of Thoreau's contemporaries likely regarded his views concerning hunting and eating meat as perverse, and perhaps subversive, particularly when he asserts, "No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does."

At a time when slavery was still legal, some might find it remarkable that Thoreau would concern himself with the well-being of creatures that most people only viewed as food sources. But the two practices are connected. He reveals the motivation behind his move to Walden Pond when he says “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach.” His declaration indicates a determination to pare living down to its barest essentials. He hopes to learn better practices from the ground up, examining, among other things, humanity’s most basic relationship with its own needs (hunger) and nature. Because he goes to the woods not to conquer, but to learn and to coexist leaving the smallest footprint, hunting would have proven to be counterproductive. His goal was to live as simply as possible, and the simplest foods are plants, which Thoreau grew in his garden. As opposed to the cruelty of hunting and fishing, gardening requires cultivation and harms no one.

Thoreau recognized that values implicit in marketplace economics suffocated the non-materialistic individual. He observed that the typical American aspires to acquire, metaphorically, the largest home or farm his or her back will carry. Thoreau’s diet became an endorsement of economy and efficiency, as labor produces its own profit. It makes more sense to consume directly from the source protein and nutrients than to consume indirectly another creature to acquire nutrients. Many of us today find ourselves adopting the same mindset and commitment Thoreau tested.

*Walden* encourages readers to recognize that plants, wildlife, and humanity rely equally on the health of our planet in order to survive. However, as the human population expands and our technology makes us feel invulnerable, we put our very existence at risk. The climate is changing, and the planet is warming at an unprecedented rate, which arguably may or may not result from human behavior. Even if we are not the primary cause of a warming planet, it is still in our best interest to protect it. For example, according to NASA, the global temperature has elevated 1.9 degrees since 1880, causing sea levels to rise roughly 3.3 millimeters annually. As Thoreau said in *Walden*, a life without nature is scarcely worth living. Considering the destructive practices of factory farming, the enormous natural resources necessary to support

large scale manufacturing processes in addition to the wastes those processes produce, and the pollution of air, soil and water, it seems clear we head toward a dead end.

The change that could ultimately save our Earth might be the one with which Thoreau experimented almost two centuries ago. Americans need to consider what it means to live deliberate and meaningful lives and to excise the excesses that our consumerist society has taught us to value so highly. We need to trade our velvet cushions in for pumpkins and explore the interdependence of all things. One easy way to get started might involve gradually abstaining from consuming meat and other animal products. Such an initiative might reduce our indifference to cruelty at the same time that it increases our attention to the condition of our planet. The suffering of one being weighs on the collective conscience of us all, and to live meaningfully, we must alleviate any unnecessary suffering in order to better our world. It is time to make a change and halt the continuation of tradition for our own sake. In *Walden* Thoreau acknowledged, “I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals.”



Illustration of Walden Pond



## ADAM SANDLER: BOX OFFICE ENIGMA ON THE CINEMATIC RISE

### KRISTIN COLE

In my family, the mention of actor Adam Sandler conjures up fond memories of watching slapstick comedies such as *Happy Gilmore* and *Billy Madison*, and silly skits such as “The Thanksgiving Song” and *Saturday Night Live*’s “Operaman.” After years of entertainment farce and mediocre rom-coms, Sandler has accumulated his share of negative film reviews. Nevertheless, my family eagerly gathers to watch when a new Sandler movie is released. Sandler’s popularity at the box office only supports the likelihood that my family’s fondness for him is no anomaly. While Sandler may be known for his obnoxious, screwball characters, his more recent transition into drama and independent films showcases both the ease with which he settles into dramatic acting and the genuine depth he can achieve when he steps outside of what seems to be his comfort zone within comedy.

A native of the northeast, Adam Sandler was born in New York and raised in Manchester, New Hampshire. After years of performing stand-up comedy in Boston, Sandler got his big break on the late-night sketch show *Saturday Night Live* alongside Chris Farley and David Spade. After spending five years on the show, Sandler starred in his first film, *Billy Madison*, launching one of the most startling acting careers of this generation.

Adam Sandler has become somewhat of a box office enigma, occupying space between audience appeal and critical scrutiny. With a net-worth of \$420 million and an Oscar-worthy role on the horizon,

Sandler’s success suggests critical acclaim is hardly necessary for a box office windfall.

Sandler’s roles resonate with audiences, despite numerous grade-F movies and some box-office flops. While some might consider Sandler an untalented goofball who managed to bring the atrocious *Jack & Jill* to the big screen (I cannot defend that one) the actor maintains a rather large and loyal following. In fact, Adam Sandler is more of a household name than current, critically acclaimed actors, such as Armie Hammer and Mahershala Ali. My siblings and I grew up watching *Happy Gilmore*, *Big Daddy*, *The Water-*



Sandler in the 1996 *Happy Gilmore*.

*boy*, *Mr. Deeds*, *The Longest Yard*, *Just Go with It*, *Grown Ups* and its pleasantly absurd sequel *Grown Ups 2*. Audiences find reassurance seeing Adam Sandler on the screen, for his movies (often) promise something funny, something emotional, and something quotable. Currently, viewers and critics praise the 53-year-

old Sandler for the upcoming independent film *Uncut Gems*, suggesting that Sandler has nothing more to prove in the film industry.

Sandler’s professional profile features a split between critical acclaim and box-office success. I consulted movie review sites IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes to examine Sandler’s five highest rated films with his five highest grossing films. The top five highest rated films are *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)*, *Punch-Drunk Love*, *Funny People*, *The Wedding Singer*, and *Reign Over Me*. These films achieved an average critic score of 74.8%, and an average

audience rating of 71.6%. By contrast, Sandler's top five highest grossing films are *Hotel Transylvania*, *Grown Ups*, *Grown Ups 2*, *Click*, and *Big Daddy*. These films achieved an average critic score of 26.8%, yet an average audience score of 65.4%. Additionally, each of Sandler's highest grossing films made over \$230 million at the box-office, while only one of his highest rated films, *The Wedding Singer*, broke the \$100 million box office gross. In *Business Insider* Kirsten Acuna noted that "despite 19 Razzie nominations and five wins, Sandler's movies have amassed more than \$3.9 billion worldwide...Through all of the actor's serious and wacky roles, it's clear that the zanier the role, the bigger the cash grab at the box office." Not one of Sandler's most popular movies were ranked highly by critics, but almost all received a relatively good score from audiences. In the end, customers, not critics, continue to pay big to see these movies.



From left to right: David Spade, Sandler, Chris Rock and Kevin James in *Grown Ups 2*.

Sandler's audience appeal remains robust. His latest Netflix film, *Murder Mystery*, which co-starred Jennifer Aniston, broke the streaming service's record. Despite uneven audience and critic scores (I found the film cliché and boring), *Murder Mystery* became the most successful opening weekend for any Netflix film, with over thirty million accounts watching within its first three days on the platform.

What is it about Sandler that allows him to maintain appeal despite such low ratings? Pondering this question, I am inclined to recall Sandler's *Grown Ups 2*, the 2013 sequel which featured Kevin James, David Spade, Steve Buscemi, Rob Schneider, and many other actors who we recognize as recurring supporting members of Sandler's films. The film is about five

childhood friends moving their families back to their hometown to live peaceful, suburban lives. But even as adults the men find themselves encountering old bullies, past crushes, and frat boys. Despite the strong cast, scathing critical reviews made the film one of his lowest-ranked movies ever. However, rather than I regard this movie as hilariously and pleasantly bad. My friends and I have watched the film a number of times and found it to be just as absurd and funny as the first time. Abrupt and stupid jokes occur at timely moments and are easy to follow. Though old and washed-up, the main characters make light of their outdated antics. This quality of self-awareness makes

*Grown-Ups 2* a pleasure to re-watch. The film never attempts to become anything more than a lighthearted, dumb, and funny family film.

The idea of turning your brain off to watch a movie may speak to the appeal of Adam Sandler's most ludicrous films. After long, stressful days

many moviegoers seek entertainment that help them re-

lax. Unlike critics, who watch films for technique, comedic timing, uniqueness, and artistry, average audiences enjoy the cheap laughs and corny coincidences that remove them from the struggles of everyday life. Even audience members who look for more depth than others can find that in Sandler's romantic-comedy films. Movies such as *The Wedding Singer*, *50 First Dates*, *Just Go With It*, and *Big Daddy* exhibit Sandler's capacity to balance romantic and emotional depth with his unique comedy.

Though many recall fondly Sandler's Happy Gilmore screaming at a golf ball, Sandler has demonstrated capability to generate depth and artistry in his acting. In the film *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) Sandler plays a

character that is both vulnerable and lost. Awarding the film 3.5/4 stars, Roger Ebert expressed surprise: “Sandler reveals depths and tones we may have suspected but couldn't bring into focus...The film is exhilarating to watch because Sandler, liberated from the constraints of formula, reveals unexpected depths as an actor.”

Similarly, Sandler's role in *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)* (2017), his highest rated film to date, was poignant. As a soon-to-be divorcee in need of a hip replacement, Danny Meyerowitz struggles to navigate a midlife crisis, moving in with his ailing, antagonistic father (played by the legendary Dustin Hoffman) and sending his only daughter off to college. Sandler flourishes next to costars Hoffman and Ben Stiller. Glenn Kenny of the *New York Times* refers to Sandler's role in this film as a “revelation” and argues that “it is Mr. Sandler who excels, both riotously and poignantly.”

One moment in particular showcases the raw relatability of Sandler's earnest, heartfelt performance as Danny Meyerowitz. When facing his successful younger half-brother (Stiller's Matthew Meyerowitz) Sandler asks in a wavering voice, “are you disappointed in me?” Though Mathew says he is not, Sandler retorts, “like Dad, you make me feel really bad about myself.” The brothers argue about their familial responsibilities and the burden their father has placed upon them, the moment culminating in a physical altercation that becomes painfully real and raw. The scene, one of the best in the film, expresses beautifully repressed pain, anger, and disappointment. Sandler's upcoming film, *Uncut Gems*, slated to release in December, has received positive critical buzz from film festivals this fall. Garnering 55 reviews, *Uncut Gems* currently rates 95% on Rotten Tomatoes, which may top *The Meyerowitz Stories* as Sandler's most impressive performance.



Sandler and Stiller as Danny and Matthew Meyerowitz in *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)* © Netflix .





Adam Sandler as Howard Ratner in *Uncut Gems* from A24.

This film, in which Sandler plays a compulsive gambler, has been nominated for Best Male Film Lead for the Spirit Awards, drawing Oscar-attention to the actor. Sandler was recently snubbed for a Golden Globe nomination, which caused a social media uproar from fans and critics alike who felt that Sandler deserved recognition for this role. In a review for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Todd McCarthy praised the actor's performance as the flawed gambler, claiming that it "shows that time may have provided him peeks at the errors of his ways, but the fact that he's continued to get away with things gives him the confidence to carry on, without lessons learned. It's a helluva part, and Sandler aces it."

Sandler's success at playing more complex roles does not entirely counter the puerile characters to which most audiences have become accustomed, particularly those produced by his production company Happy Madison. However, they do succeed at establishing that he remains capable of greater range and versatility. Sandler's case reminds us that the cinematic medium enables performers to reshape themselves and the way audiences and critics view them.

## POST-MORTEM (PRE-OSCARS) EDITORIAL

*As the 92nd Academy Awards Ceremony approaches, I must unhappily report that the Motion Picture Academy has overlooked Sandler's Uncut Gems. Because of the oversight, many filmgoers might never bother to see this movie, which I believe embodies adroit filmmaking and inspired acting. After a number of viewings, I continue to regard the film as an anxiety-inducing thrill ride that leaves you on the edge of your seat until the very last scene. In what has been called the best performance of his life, Sandler invests the character Howard Rather with an impressive mixture of comedic and dramatic range. In the film, Rather emerges as an individual that is easy and enjoyable to root for. Uncut Gems will get under your skin in all of the best ways possible, and illustrates that Sandler is still very much on top of his game.*



## CONFESSIONS OF A REFORMED SUMMER READER

### DAN ROUSSEL

Before I confess something, I have to be clear: I am a bad English major. And if you can't handle this, reader, I understand. You could always flip to Phoebe's article, or to Calvin's, or you could close this edition of *The Broadsheet* and never worry about what I'm going to say again. If you did, you might avoid this terrible truth: this bad English major has never read for pleasure very often—until, perhaps, now.

Prior to June of 2019, I hadn't actively read a book during the summer for years. This dark secret I don't divulge often or easily. For most of my life I had resisted engaging in literary pursuits in favor of beaches, picnics, abandoned parks, and a number of other leisurely activities. And that's not to say I hadn't tried—I picked up a novel or two with every passing summer, skimming it by means of half-hearted flipping of pages. Without fail, though, my ears remained tuned and susceptible to the ocean's call. Even in high school, I hunted down book synopses and unashamedly copied the notes of my peers for our assigned summer reading. To my copy of *Song of Solomon*—I am so sorry. Someday, I'll read you (I promise!). And to my copy of *Huckleberry Finn*—I'm much less sorry, and I will never read you. My alma mater, Cranston West, developed a clever strategy for bamboozling students into reading. The administration would permit us to read the latest, worst young adult novels on the market. I still fought that effort every step of the way.

With this article as my apologia, I want to publicize that I have become a reformed reader. Last summer, I gained inspiration from the hundreds of writers and critics I encountered during my service as a Fine Arts Work Center intern in Provincetown. By that, I mean to say that shame spurred me, just a little bit. When I

had to answer “no, I haven't read this” over a dozen times, I knew the time had come for me to change. At the same time, it helped immeasurably to have a healthy reading culture all around me. My friends read; my bosses read; locals and visitors read and were interested in books. Reading engagement, especially for leisure, isn't the same in an academic environment—which I'll touch on later in this article. But in Provincetown, a spate of book recommendations rushed in around me from virtually everyone I knew. And to my own surprise, I picked up one book, then another; soon, I became a voracious reader of anything the library would lend me. In August, I took on the Sealey Challenge—read 31 chapbooks in 31 days—coined by the poet Nicole Sealey, who posted daily book recommendations on her Instagram. While I failed miserably at reading the entire pool of selections, I did burn through over a dozen poetry collections, and two novels. A friend introduced me to Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, and that set me down a path of reading a wide array of selections, from Urvashi Vaid's *Virtual Equality* to Monica Youn's *Blackacre*. I found myself reading at the beach, in the park, and wherever I could find a bench with an ocean view. What's more, I wrote letters to friends with my own self-designed summer reading lists. I posted a copy of Nicole Sealey's *Ordinary Beast* to one friend, raving about her pages-long cento; to another, I sent my signed copy of Joseph Cassara's *House of Impossible Beauties*. Cassara's book, picked up on a whim when he visited the Work Center, quickly became my favorite. Cassara crafts a queer narrative in an urgent, but light way—and when the AIDS crisis emerges from the reality of the 80s and 90s, the book does not shy away from destruction. I read this narrative in one sitting,

on a bench overlooking Cape Cod Bay. Reading this particular work while I was living in Provincetown—where advocates pull red wagons full of informational pamphlets and condoms around the main streets, a reminder of what had devastated the LGBTQ community just a few decades ago—amplified powerfully the experience. Suddenly, I realized how tightly interwoven reality and reading could be. Cassara’s book, among many others, had helped me rediscover wonder within myself.

As I moved forward into September and back on campus at Merrimack, I was delighted to learn that Dr. Donna Harrington-Lueker, now a professor of English at Salve Regina University, would be appearing to speak at our Writers House. Harrington-Lueker, a Merrimack English alumna of ‘76, read from her new publication, *Books for Idle Hours: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the Rise of Summer Reading*, which examines the connections between leisure-time reading and publisher marketing strategies. According to Harrington-Lueker, summer reading became a phenomenon in the 19th century. As greater numbers of people became capable of taking summer vacations (not just society’s elite), the middle class began to emulate leisure practices exercised by the wealthy classes. Summer reading became a social marker and a means to shrinking an economic gap. Individuals began seeking activities that required minimal effort and promoted relaxation. Women, in particular, embraced summer reading as means to self-improvement and strengthening of family connections. Soon, a certain genre of books swelled into existence: the trashy romance novel. The trend, in other words, laid the path for shorter, steamier novels to become national bestsellers in the warmer months of the year and it set the stage for a cultural habit with which most people are familiar—that is, the idea of toting bags of paperbacks to lakes, beaches, and parks. The development of summer reading and composition of summer reading lists by publishers, who were quick to see the implications for their bottom lines, set the stage for a cultural commonplace.

Professor Lueker’s reading and lecture prompted me to wonder about modern summer reading habits. Have they changed and have readers, too? In ways, we have not. Professor Lueker accompanied her presentation with a series of print images depicting women lounging under trees and in the sand clutching books in their hands. During the months of June, July, and August, you’re still likely to come across a similar scene on the beaches—despite the change in fashion since the nineteenth-century. Our devotion to the practice of reading during the summer hasn’t changed all that much. We continue to read while on vacation, or at the beach. But the “summer reading” tag attached to certain books has expanded. We’ve undertaken more complex, serious books over the summer, while also lugging “light reads” alongside us. Furthermore, though leisure reading now seems to serve less as a status-marker, most people read for pleasure, self-improvement, and self-education as so many did over a century ago.

It’s easy to scoff at and take for granted books displayed at the opening of the cash register conveyor belt. But leisure reading remains big business and it continues to drive the market, determining which books succeed and which books fail, regardless of quality. Leisure reading opens the door for publishing anomalies. For example, Anna Todd’s *After* began on Wattpad, a blogging site dedicated to fanfiction (fanfic). In its first iteration, the protagonist’s love interest is Harry Styles, of the boy-band One Direction. The Wattpad-original garnered millions of readers, and not long after this massive boom, Simon & Schuster picked it up with minor changes to the names of the cast. Todd’s work became a *New York Times* bestseller, securing her a ten-book deal with the publisher. As is so often the case these days, *After* found its way to the film medium, becoming a movie directed by Jenny Gage. While critics universally panned the film, it still netted an impressive \$50 million in profit across the globe. For a story that began on the “Notes” app of the author’s phone,



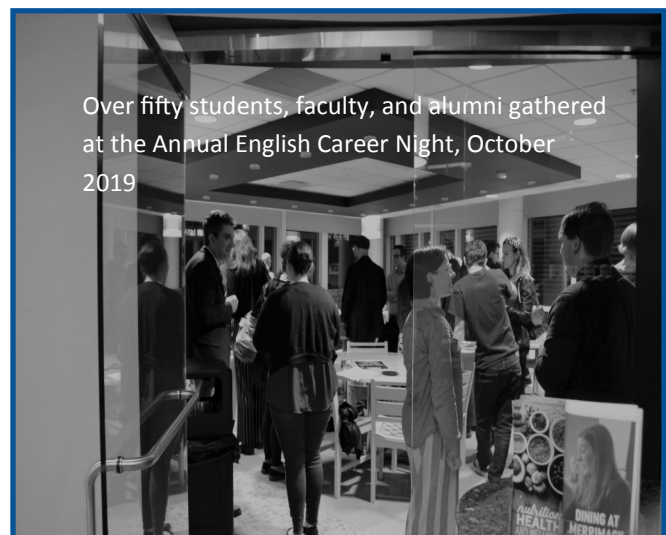
this illustration is not one to scoff at. Calling *After* an anomaly is unfair; some similar fanfic-to-fame stories include *Beautiful Bastard*, *Gabriel's Inferno*, and most infamously, *Fifty Shades of Gray*. Much like the publishing industry's sudden turn to lighter novels with temperature-raising plotlines in the nineteenth century, we find ourselves in the middle of a similar phenomenon. Additionally, summer reading often consists of books originating from free, self-published, established-universe fiction. I've seen many of these books scattered throughout local libraries. Some of my friends feature them on their shelves. And as it turns out, even my high school listed *After* as a summer reading option for students this year (the clever strategy remains!).

I haven't read *After*, or any of the other titles I mentioned, but the enormous celebrity of these books underscores an emerging popular trend in summer reading culture. It's also worthy of notice that one strategy used by nineteenth-century publishers remains strong—that is, the care spent in designing cover art. A *Harper's Bazaar* post from May 2019 reassures readers that in its list of “17 Best Summer Reads,” there's “...a cover to match every outfit.”

Earlier I mentioned internet impact on current summer reading, referring to Wattpad. Social media also remains an important promotional outlet. If you search the hashtag “#bookstagram,” you're likely to find a vast array of books, delicately arranged or precisely scattered. The inner pages might not matter, so much as the aesthetic composition of the photo. The portmanteau of “books” and “Instagram” hints at the wide community of booklovers—but the fingerprints of marketers seem impossible to avoid. I recall when Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* exploded into popularity a second time. Its iconic quote—“nolite te bastardes carborundorum”—has found its way onto tee shirts, coffee mugs, and various pieces of merchandise. The book's resurgence fueled social media outlets, and social media stoked the book's popularity. The catchiest, most commonly-known parts of the book inundated social media out-

lets. Much like the twentieth century's golden era of television, certain bestselling books generate massive cultural capital. Reading a book such as *After* becomes more than a simple activity—it becomes a popular cultural rite of passage.

Reading the “book du jour,” so to speak—*The Fault in our Stars*, *Looking for Alaska*, *The Hunger Games*, for example—provides the reader with the social advantage of knowledge. In 2008, you'd be crazy not to have had at least *some* idea of Suzanne Collins' story behind *The Hunger Games*—at the very least, you'd know of her daring protagonist, Katniss Everdeen. Books like *The Hunger Games* caught footing in the founding pillars of summer reading, such as local libraries' summer reading programs for children and teenagers. From my own experience in such a program, I remember reading it shortly after it came out—and before it gained a massive audience, and a movie deal. The trend of YA-novels-turned-blockbuster may arise from the genre's young, built-in audience. It mirrors the marketing of “light” reading books of the 19th century, while also expanding on it. If you market a book towards a technology-savvy demographic, you have a better chance of getting it to go viral. Therefore, many of the most popular summer reads are intended to be so. It isn't much different from 19th century marketing of certain books. Some books, as always, have more clout as “summer reads.”



Over fifty students, faculty, and alumni gathered at the Annual English Career Night, October 2019

But there's still something to be said for the freedom of summer reading. As much as I've discussed pop culture and popular books, I didn't read anything super-popular over the summer. I know many people who also neglected to bother. In our culture, we hold some books to a great social value. But we rarely adhere to just the popular works. Much like the summer reading culture of the 19th century, readers are just looking for light books. I looked over the summer reading recommendation lists of media such as the *New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and even *Buzzfeed*. They all held plenty of obscure, but promising titles. Part of what makes our literary advancements special comes in the form of books such as *After*—there's less gatekeeping to publishing. If a story can get the attention of the masses, it's likely to be published in physical form. And if not, we have self-publishing resources from small presses to Amazon's publishing services. Anyone can get their novel out there—it's just a matter of marketing and good luck.

And in writing this comparison of summer reading culture through the past and present centuries, I hope I haven't completely destroyed the fun of it. I don't think we use summer reading to show our status anymore—rather, it's a vestigial part of that society. We've evolved past part of its purpose, but we still vacation. We continue to turn to books for entertainment. And sometimes, we need something easy to breeze through. I think that students are likely to redefine our idea of reading due to the pressures of academia. From middle school up to college, we were always assigned some form of required summer reading, and in my experience, teachers frequently offered up the blandest books (such as *Huckleberry Finn*). I think the damage of this practice—of institutionalizing summer reading as an educational bastion, to “prevent idleness” in its own way—has been felt in tremors throughout the education system. When you ruin reading for generations of students, it will resonate for years to come. But, there has been a shift in recent years. I've seen a push to phase out some of the more complex literary canon in favor of contemporary material, and I believe that's the correct

move. Students need to fall in love with reading before they take on literature's more challenging works. There's more initiative now to bring summer reading back to its roots, as a leisure activity. Hopefully, the two concepts will unite once more.

Looking back, that's what ultimately deterred me from leisure reading. We begin to think that all reading must be a means to an end, something to get the grade we want or foster self-improvement. Summer reading solves this dilemma. And I regret avoiding it for so long. During most of the year, you're apt to find me scanning through an assigned book for class, or crying in confusion over some scholarly article. I'll probably be thinking about the next paper, or the next exam. I'll be wondering how that one weird chapter of *Moby Dick* about sperm oil fits any kind of analytical frame. But if you're looking for me between May and August, just try the nearest beach. Look for someone holding a copy of *After*—just to see what all the hype's about. Or, with any luck, I'll find a cover to match my outfit.

#### DAN'S #SUMMERREADINGCHALLENGE

1. *HOUSE OF IMPOSSIBLE BEAUTIES* – JOSEPH CASSARA
2. *I WORE THE OCEAN IN THE SHAPE OF A GIRL* – KELLE GROOM
3. *FIELD THEORIES* – SAMIYA BASHIR
4. *THE MERRIMACK REVIEW: FALL 2019*
5. *THE GOLD CELL* – SHARON OLDS
6. *AS SWEET AS HONEY* – INDIRA GANESAN
7. *THE TESTAMENTS* – MARGARET ATWOOD
8. *THE ENSEMBLE* – AJA GABEL
9. *TAKE ME WITH YOU, WHEREVER YOU'RE GOING* – JESSICA JACOBS
10. *MORTAL TRASH* – KIM ADDONIZIO
11. *GOOD TALK: A MEMOIR IN CONVERSATIONS* – MIRA JACOB
12. *WONDER VALLEY* – IVY POCHODA
13. *ON EARTH, WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS* – OCEAN VUONG
14. *THE ELECTRIC WOMAN* – TESSA FONTAINE
15. *GO AHEAD IN THE RAIN* – HANIF ABDURRAQIB



## A LINEAR NARRATIVE ABOUT A NONLINEAR JOURNEY

### CALVIN EVANS

When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a zoologist. I grew up reading the semi-autobiographical books of James Herriot (the pen name of James Alfred Wright), which recount his experience as an English Country veterinary surgeon. For Christmas in the third grade, I was given my own copy of the Smithsonian's *Animal: the Definitive Visual Guide* – a 600-page tome normally found in the reference sections of school libraries (where I first discovered it). I spent hours pouring over the full-color photographs learning about animal habitats and classifications. Over the years, I refined my interests to mammalogy and big cats in particular (you can thank *Calvin and Hobbes* for that), but my central goal remained the same: train to become a zoologist. So how did I come to be an English major applying to graduate school for an MA in Literary Studies?

To answer that question, I have to go back to the summer of 2011, prior to my senior year. I spent five weeks at an advanced studies program that focused on preparing students for the college experience. Toward the end of the program all participants attended a college fair and met with admissions personnel. This experience, along with my own research into Biology programs around the country, helped me finalize the list of colleges to which I would apply, specifically the universities of New Hampshire, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Oregon, George Washington University, Reed College, and Stanford University. I tailored my senior class schedule to prepare me for entering a Biology program, including an optional class in AP Biology. In that course I learned the valuable lesson that Biology isn't always fun. Though I enjoyed learning about evolution, macro-systems, and animal classification, so much of that course of study concentrated on micro- and plant biology. I

found myself walking outside and identifying plants as either monocots or dicots. I reminded myself that the goal of the course was to provide me with foundational knowledge and that once I got to college, I would be able to focus on what I really liked, that is, on zoology.

Several months later I chose to enroll at George Washington University. This institution was not my top pick; however, its admissions personnel had impressed me at the college fair the summer before. Furthermore, Washington DC felt far enough away from New Hampshire to make me feel that I would be on my own but close enough to make occasional visits home a reasonable prospect. GW also offered me an attractive financial package. But just to be sure, in the spring of 2012, only a few months before graduation, my mom and I traveled to DC for Accepted Students' Day. Activities consisted of touring the campus and listening to administrators talk about George Washington's goal of educating the future leaders of America. At one point on the tour, while we were standing at one of the quads, the guide had us look down at the bricks under our feet. Each one bore the name of a graduate and his or her year of graduation. Name after name spread out before me. All over campus bricks bearing inscribed names paved the grounds. I also noticed blank bricks reserved for future classes. I was hooked. I wanted to share in that grand legacy. I wanted to walk the campus in the future and find my name etched on the surface of a brick. I quickly fell in love with the campus, which surprised me because I usually don't like cities, but at GW I was able to look past my initial fears and feel excited about enrolling there.

At orientation. I stayed in one of the dorms with three other incoming freshmen while my family stayed in a hotel nearby. I experienced a bit of a culture shock at entering this group of new people. One of my orientation roommates came from Colorado and he wanted to know if he could get a concealed carry permit for his handgun on campus. He also said that he didn't think Abraham Lincoln was a great president because he was too anti-states' rights.

One segment of this three-day event grouped students with faculty from their intended majors. A dozen students gathered in the Biology group, one of the largest in the library, where the meetings took place. The professor got our group settled and then spoke about pre-med training, indicating he anticipated most of us would be going into medicine and covering what that track would look like. I did not want to become a physician. What's more, my father had been lobbying for me to enroll in law school after college, become a copyright lawyer, make a ton of money, and then do whatever I wanted. I harbored no aspirations to pursue a career in law either.

At this point, I sat down and seriously reconsidered what I wanted to do with my life. Where was I happiest in school? What could I see myself doing in the future? Eventually I arrived at my answer: History. AP European History became my favorite course senior year. I loved learning about socio-political systems, about the ways in which they interconnect, about the decisions people made hundreds of years ago, and about the ways in which those decisions ramify today. I once explained to a friend what I liked about History using the metaphor of a knotted ball of different yarns. In Biology, if you were to unravel the ball everything you would find at the center would be the same. Unraveling the yarn ball in History, leaves one finding some knots that refuse to untangle, and you end up with a web in which all strands connect in some way. That interconnectivity

appealed to me. When it finally came time to sign up for classes, I recast my schedule with the intention of declaring a History major.

What I hadn't realized, though, was that I remained unprepared for college. My education hadn't prepared me to sit in a lecture hall among 300 students and be talked at by a professor or TA who couldn't remember my name. I wasn't ready for discussion sections consisting of 25 students, each of whom were required to add something insightful to the conversation every class period. I didn't know how to advocate for myself and my needs. Professors intimidated me. Advisors appeared over-worked. Other students seemed to have it way more together than I ever could.



Socially, things weren't much better. I had signed up for an "exploring the city" program for George Washington first-year students, billed as a way for incoming classes to connect with their environment and with their peers; however, I forged no real connections. My dorm room suite housed me and three roommates. We had our own bedrooms and shared living room and bathroom, but we were

all so different I was never comfortable interacting with them.

The dormitory in which I lived, furthermore, was not located on the main George Washington campus. Instead, it formed part of a satellite campus a 15-minute shuttle ride away. The satellite campus resembled a self-contained small liberal arts institution located in the middle of a big city. I thought living there would ease the transition, but I ended up feeling isolated and dislocated instead.

Ironically, my History courses delivered the biggest transitional shock.



At this point in my academic career, I remained accustomed to seeing History as a series of factual events. Discussions confused me, because what is there to discuss if we all agree on the facts? The disconnect might have originated with my lack of exposure in high school to epistemology and alternate histories. However, the way in which my brain organizes information contributed to the confusion. I categorize nearly everything as a fact, which makes recall relatively easy, but cognitive flexibility more difficult. During high school, confidence in my intellectual ability formed a key component to my identity. Over the last two years of high school I had taken five AP tests and scored well on each. Consequently I entered college five courses ahead of the average first-year student. The AP credits fulfilled a number of general education requirements, liberating me to focus on History courses. My confidence eroded quickly, though. I felt out of my depth in the scope of some lectures as well as the intensity of numerous discussions. If I couldn't feel like I was one of the smartest people in the room, then who was I?

My first year at George Washington I spent a lot of time in my room. I stayed up late, occasionally missed classes, and failed to live up to my habitual standards. During my second semester, on a whim, I signed up for Introduction to Archaeology. I loved that class. It was History the way I envisioned it. Instead of reading old primary documents and trying to generate insightful interpretations, Archaeology involved uncovering the past and bringing new, tangible artifacts to light. I like learning history, but I don't like *doing* History. Archaeology proved different, not in a swashbuckling, problematic, Indiana Jones way, but the down-in-the-dirt, painstaking excavation of pottery and glass shards that add to and reshape our understanding of the past. I formed a new goal: combine History and Archaeology degrees in order to pursue a field of inquiry I actually found fun again.

But even beyond discovering my love of ancient history, living in Washington DC wasn't all bad. Despite

my lack of social life and my intense academic expectations, I would still carve out time to do touristy things. My sophomore year dorm building was about half-a-dozen blocks north of the Lincoln Memorial, so I liked to walk there to sit on the steps in back of the memorial. The back provided a great view of the Arlington Memorial Bridge and Arlington, Virginia. Honestly, it wasn't the prettiest view in the city, but it was quiet. There could be hundreds of people clamoring over the front of the memorial, but behind I saw almost no one. On my more studious days I would take any reading homework I had or a notebook to write out the first draft of a paper. I was never as productive as I wanted to be, but it was nice to be outside. I also took full advantage of the free Smithsonian museums on the Mall. Walking out of the subway station, turning around and seeing the Washington Monument (or the Washington Pencil as one little boy called it) will always be one of sights. The National Gallery of Art also has my favorite painting on display: *Two Women at a Window* by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. I must have spent hours just sitting on the couch in front of it, staring back at the woman looking out the window while her friend covers her mouth to hide her laughter. I was also lucky enough to be in the city during Barack Obama's second inauguration. A friend from high school, who was going to school in Maryland at the time, came into the city and we got to be on the Mall during the swearing-in ceremony.

But for all those highs, the lows seemed much lower. Despite my passion for archaeology and all the parts of DC I loved, I wasn't happy. I began missing more classes, eating less, staying in my room more. I consistently struggled against an undercurrent of anxiety running through me when I attended high school, but this was getting so much worse. But the only way I knew how to get out was through, so over winter break my sophomore year (the end of 2013), I ran the numbers, checked class availabilities, looked into graduate programs, and realized that, if I took enough

classes and majored only in History, I could graduate a year early. From there, I could apply to graduate programs and become a high school History teacher, preferably at a private school where I'd make more money and have more flexibility when it came to following the curriculum. It wouldn't be easy, but it was doable. I just had to get back into the habit of going to class regularly.

Recently, I was talking to a friend from Merrimack about my experience at George Washington, and she asked me if pushing myself that hard caused me to burn out. At the time, I said that I didn't think so. But after I got home, I found pictures of my old schedules from GW, and I decided to add up the minutes of classroom time. Not including any meetings, time devoted to assignments and study, during my final semester enrolled at George Washington I was taking 17 hours and 40 minutes of classes per week. At that pace, burnout became inevitable. But at the time, I didn't see it as such. I could only see it as failure. High levels of anxiety flooded me with self-doubt and guilt, curing me from moving productively forward. Every time I stepped outside, I thought everyone was judging me, my clothes, the way I carried myself, my reasons for being out. Staying inside was the only way to stay safe.

I'd like to say that something major happened that shook me out of my funk and got me back on track. I'd like to say that I woke up one morning, realized I was at rock bottom, and pulled myself back up. But nothing like that happened. One day, I wrote my mom the hardest thing I ever wrote. I don't remember much of it, but I do remember saying that I needed to come home because if I stayed at George Washington University, I couldn't picture my future anymore—not as a zoologist, not as a historian, an archaeologist, or a History teacher. Nothing. I told her not to call because I wasn't able to speak. She called anyway. She booked the soonest flight she could to DC and arrived within 12 hours. We packed up my room, went through all the bureaucratic exit procedures officially withdrawing me from GW, and we flew

home. I had stayed at GW for fewer than four semesters.

To this day I still have trouble processing the year that followed. When we got back to New Hampshire, my mom found me a therapist, and something he said in one of our early sessions still sticks with me: I deserve to be on planet Earth and take up space, just like everyone else. Anxiety has a way of making you feel invisible and worthless, but anxiety is a liar. Despite this mantra, I did not enjoy my time with this therapist. One of the major sticking points was that he wanted me to start taking SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) which would help chemically regulate the hormones which cause anxiety. I didn't want to because I didn't know who I was without anxiety. My time in college had destroyed any confidence I had in my own intellectual abilities and anxiety was all that appeared to remain. By July, I was out of therapy, and for the rest of the year I mostly stayed in my room and in front of my laptop.





This all came to a head early in 2015. For the past year I had been living with my dad in the house in which I grew up while my mom was living with her boyfriend in Andover. My dad was spending a lot of his time with his now-wife and I was left to my own devices with the expectation that I would go out and look for a job. I couldn't do it. One day his insistence got so bad that I had what I now understand was a panic attack. At the time, I just wanted him to go run the errands he said he needed to do and leave me alone. Instead, I became non-verbal and was unable to do anything. My dad brought me to the ER. By the end of the day, I was released on the condition that I start therapy again, schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist for an evaluation with med recommendation, and have a follow-up appointment with the hospital social worker to confirm I was following the plan. This happened almost a year to the day I left GW.

My mom got her own apartment in Andover and I moved in with her. I started going to therapy again, this time with a therapist I actually liked. In addition, I started taking Citalopram, an SSRI that, contrary to my previous beliefs, did not change the core of who I was, but slowed my thoughts down to a manageable level so I could recognize what was anxiety and what was reality. My mom used her job as a social worker to get me a volunteer position at a very nice nursery school in Boston. There, I fell in love with early childhood education. Because of Merrimack's proximity to my new house, and the reputation of its Human Development and Education majors, it seemed like the perfect fit for me. I started in the fall of 2016. My original plan was to get in and get out as fast as possible. I was a commuter student, so I didn't need to be on campus any more than necessary.

By the spring 2017 semester, things weren't going

great. My experience at the nursery school was souring and I wasn't enjoying the education classes as much as I thought I would. I was in a relationship at the time that, in hindsight, was full of red flags that I just ignored. I stopped going to therapy, and titrated off of my medication. I thought these were steps forward, but I started to feel like I was spiraling again. To take back some control, I thought about what made me happy. The answer I kept coming back to this time was English. But it wasn't just literary studies. What I like most about English is stories: reading them, sharing them, and telling them, but I had no confidence in myself as a writer. I had written a few (very bad) poems in high school and I had conceived



Calvin attends a Writers House event

of some fantasy-style narratives (mostly for *Dungeon & Dragons*), but I asked no one to read them. At this time, I was taking Professor Plasse's Introduction to Literary Studies course and Professor Duffy-Comparone's Introduction to Creative Writing, and these were the classes in which I felt most at home. Professor

Duffy-Comparone in particular constantly prodded me to become an English major, and towards the end of the semester, I enrolled in the English program.

But my life didn't get better immediately. My relationship was worsening after a particularly stressful summer and I felt like an outsider in the English department. I was taking Professor Vogel's American Contemporary Literature course and I felt like an imposter. The discussions were of much higher caliber than I expected, and my interpretations of course texts seemed superficial by comparison with those of my classmates.

To make matters worse, I felt awkward at the Writers House Open House; I wasn't comfortable talking to strangers. The last time I had tried something like this, I failed horribly, and I couldn't participate in most of the Writers House groups I wanted to be because of my job. The main reason I made it through that semester was Professor Duffy-Comparone. I was taking her Fiction Writing class at the time and not only did she continue to bolster my confidence and encourage my own writing, she was also there to talk to me about what was going on in my life. She's the one who pushed me to spend more time at the Writers House. She sat with me when I scheduled an appointment with Hamel Health when everything was getting to be too much. Most importantly, she taught me that professors are people first. Without her, I never would have had the courage to speak with Professor Vogel to come up with a plan to get me back on track in his class. I ended that semester single, with decent grades, and a foundation of community, all of which are in no small part because of Professor Duffy-Comparone.

The spring 2018 semester was critical for me. It would be the first semester I could devote entirely to school as both my relationship and my job were over. For the first time since high school, I finished a semester with straight-A grades. In Sophomore Seminar, I started to feel like I was a part of my English major cohort. In Professor Plasse's course *Body Parts: Shakespearean Drama* I gained analytical and interpretive confidence in my reading of texts. I spent more and more time at the Writers House and was able to take part in both Writers' Circle and *The Merrimack Review*. I finally felt like I was where I belonged. I've told this story before in *The Broadsheet*, so I'll be brief, but the point I identify as solidifying that feeling of belonging was when Writers House Associate Director Danielle Jones-Pruett invited me to join other students at the Mass Poetry Evening of Inspired Leaders poetry reading.

What I usually leave out of that story is exactly how much that invitation meant to me, even more so than

the evening itself (which was fantastic). I had never expected to make acquaintances, let alone friends, at Merrimack. Even after becoming an English major, a large part of me thought that Merrimack was just going to be small part of my life. I had tried the typical college experience in the past and hated it, so why would I want to subject myself to that again? "It didn't work before, so I shouldn't even bother trying this time," was the phrase that kept running through the back of my mind. So, when Danielle asked me if I wanted to go join the group going on that trip, I almost said no. But then I realized that the sense of community I was looking for lay right in front of me. And not only that, others wanted me to be a part of it. So I grabbed it with both hands and I haven't let go yet.

Now I'm applying to graduate programs in English, because I really like being in these sorts of environments. It would be nice to view my journey as a simple curve, starting up high, swooping low, and eventually turning upwards, but it's not that simple. For over a year now I've been having monthly therapy sessions at Hamel Health clinic, and in its waiting room a sign reads, "Healing is not Linear." The expression reminds everyone reading it that life never travels along parabolas and curves as though it were a map. There are constant ups and downs and one bad day doesn't mean the next one will be worse. Healing also is not solitary. The insidious nature of anxiety made me feel like I was alone, like I couldn't communicate with anybody. And that isolation only served to feed itself, curling in until leaving my house felt like the hardest thing in the world. But I wasn't alone. I had my parents, colleagues, professors, and peers. Even today, I still need to manage my anxiety. Just because I'm no longer on medication and I don't go to therapy as frequently doesn't mean my anxiety has gone away. What has changed, however, is the way I see anxiety and the strategies I've learned to deal with it. I belong here, on this planet, as an English graduate student, and it's taken a long time and the support from those around me to understand that.



## NEWS AND NOTES

\*Professors Emma Duffy-Comparone and Brittanie Aiello received a \$42,000 grant from the Rapoport Foundation for the Jail Education Project. The Project involves teaching creative writing to inmates housed in local jails. Select Merrimack undergraduates (among them English majors) serve as teaching assistant interns.

\*Writers House Associate Director Danielle Jones-Pruett has published two poems in the current issue of the literary magazine *Zone 3*, and one poem in *Welcome to the Neighborhood*, an anthology that was just published by the Ohio University Press; it includes poems by Rita Dove, Robert Pinsky, Joy Harjo and others: <https://www.ohioswallow.com/book/Welcome+to+the+Neighborhood>.

\*The Merrimack College Writers House is sponsoring a literary outreach program, called **LitOutLoud**, introducing local high school students to creative writing through generative writing workshops, readings, and open mics. According to Associate Director Danielle Jones-Pruett, who will be coordinating the program, the Writers House staff will be selecting student interns who are enthusiastic about creative writing and literature to lead these programs in a way that inspires and encourages young writers.

\*Professor Steven Scherwatzky published three reviews of recent articles on Samuel Johnson in *The Scriblerian* (Vol LII, No. 1, Autumn 2019).

\*English Alumnus Josh Roberts has sold his first novel, a work of young adult fiction titled *The Witches of Willow Cove*. The novel will be published by Owl Hollow Press in May of 2020.





