

THE BROADSHEET

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'Boats Against the Current': Reflections on This Year's Senior Seminar

by Alison Leonard

By the time senior year arrives, most students are busy juggling classes, jobs and internships, all while worrying about graduation and planning for their futures. This year's senior English majors have one major advantage not only in preparing them for the future, but also in keeping them grounded and engaged: the Senior Capstone Seminar, taught by Dr. Ellen McWhorter. The special dynamic between Dr. McWhorter and this year's students is one that makes those in the class often express their sadness about the upcoming close of the semester. It's actually pretty extraordinary; how often is it that students are genuinely sad to see a course come to an end?

I'm one of them. Choosing the English major was the best decision I made in college. There is nothing quite like being in a room full of people so fully engaged with the material, all offering up their own interesting interpretations and sparking lively discussion. Senior Seminar is the ultimate embodiment of this ideal, particularly because every student is an English major. Senior Corinne Keddie observes, "I have never been in a class with just English majors before, and I think that makes the class better because we're all comfortable with each other and have had similar experiences."

Of course, Dr. McWhorter makes the experience of Senior Seminar even better. For most of us as juniors last year, the hot topic of conversation was trying to figure out which professor would be teaching our section of the course this year. Keddie said, "I was so excited when I found out Senior Sem was being taught by Professor McWhorter because I had a feeling it would be a fantastic class, and I was right." Another feeling of excitement came when Dr. McWhorter passed out the syllabus. Yes, we had the intimidating option of writing two 12 page papers or a 30 page thesis and presenting our work at a conference, but we also had F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as our primary text, and interesting possible presentation topics like "Popular Culture and the Canon" and "Defining Literature."

The latter presentation, which was the very first of the semester, sparked a discussion that has persisted throughout the course: What is literature? As senior English majors, no one anticipated the question would be so difficult, yet it is ultimately a very important one. As we've discussed, determining what constitutes quality literature has a significant impact on which texts are included in the canon, valued and taught to students. We've also had many insightful discussions about popular culture and its relationship with literature. From raising questions about the effects of books like *Twilight* on the world of literature, to how movie adaptations affect people's desire to read, we've covered a myriad of interesting topics.

Regardless of the specific material, having had Dr. McWhorter in previous classes, the other students and I knew from the beginning that we would be learning a great deal about literature in an engaging and unique way. As a relatable and encouraging professor who's not afraid to laugh with us, Dr. McWhorter provides a comfortable and interesting learning environment. "Professor McWhorter has always been one of Merrimack's most valuable assets," senior Chris Mosher describes. "She guides us along the way while allowing us to explore our own ideas, and she gives us the confidence we need to be literary thinkers. Knowing we have her support is an incredible gift."

In turn, Dr. McWhorter expresses the same type of affection and respect for her students. When asked to describe this semester's body of students, she replied, "Honestly? They're perfect. Many of this semester's students are already very strong

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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.



Dr. McWhorter

Why does Literature Matter?

Here's what members of the Merrimack community had to say:

- "Literature is language artfully organized that expresses the order and chaos of an author's world and prompts an intense engagement with our own." – Professor Steven Scherwatzky
- "Literature teaches us who we are or might be." – Andrea Cohen, Director, Writers House
- "Literature is important because it helps us to understand the world that we live in. Writers share their knowledge so that we can learn about various cultures and human behaviors. It challenges us to think, analyze, and understand things that are happening around us. People develop their minds through literature." Lauren Bowers, '15, Communications major
- "Literature is extremely important. Literature allows the reader to analyze how and why authors write and think the way that they do. By reading, I feel that I open up connections to the real world, and create a personal relationship with the author." - Joe Fisher, '17, Health Science major
- "Literature matters because it is perfectly useless." - Professor Marie Plasse

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writers, readers, and thinkers, and that has made our conversations both fun and enlightening. As professors, we hope for that magical mix in all of our classes."

While Dr. McWhorter describes the class as somewhat more informal than she originally expected, she explains that this dynamic has allowed for "honest and raw conversation about so many things." While students, of course, spend time analyzing literature from different literary approaches, it's not uncommon for the class also to end up discussing large-scale philosophical issues, such as the sheer act of loving literature in a world becoming more enthralled with electronic technology. As a lifelong bookworm myself, it's inspiring to listen to other people my age speak with such passion about literature and its impact on their lives. In addition, the debates and differing perspectives regarding the material or about literature in general are also very thought-provoking. Senior Chris Mason echoed this sentiment: "My favorite part of Senior Seminar is definitely when we have in-class discussions, particularly the ones where people disagree. It often gives me a new perspective, and it's entertaining to see it unfold week after week."

Compared to courses leading up to it, work in the Capstone Seminar involves reflection and close examination—on our program, on the discipline of English studies, and on the stature of the literary arts in our culture. Says Mosher, "We've taken a step back from all of the other work we've done as majors to really take a wide, though complex, view of the English major and what it is we do best." In the course, we've analyzed one major literary work through a variety of interpretations and then studied multiple sources regarding the history of the discipline, the literary canon, and politics, just to name a few. We've also had the opportunity to look in-depth at some of our favorite novels as we pursue our individual papers, which has been a favorite part of the course for many. Mason explains the difference between this and other English classes: "The difference lies in the depth of analysis. Rather than focusing on reading a text one way, by the second half of the semester you can see it through a number of different perspectives."

Dr. McWhorter points out that "Senior Seminar is designed primarily to give students a chance to thoughtfully reflect on what they've learned as English majors and to place the study of literature in broader contexts." Keddie sees Dr. McWhorter's take on the course as fulfilling this mission, especially by providing valuable writing and critical thinking experience for seniors as they begin to prepare for their careers after college. She said, "I think a big part of the mission is to make us as prepared as possible, specifically as writers, to go into the real world. The course is geared toward how to successfully use the skills we've cultivated as English majors in the real world, regardless of the job we end up doing."

As for Dr. McWhorter's specific goals for her Senior Seminar students this year, she primarily hopes that we challenge ourselves in new ways during the course. She said, "If my students leave the class having felt confident enough to grapple with some part of the English major that they have found difficult, I'll be a happy professor." For Mosher, that goal has been realized, and he advises next year's Senior Seminar students to embrace the idea of challenging yourself. "Just be prepared to challenge yourself and be ready to learn and you won't go wrong," he said.

Other current Senior Seminar students have words of advice for juniors concerned about the prospect of taking the course. Keddie said, "Your whole career here at Merrimack has prepared you for this class. Senior Sem is a lot of fun, so there's definitely nothing to be worried about!" Mason advises fellow English majors to relax and prepare: "Bring an open mind, participate in discussions, and you'll excel." As we advise juniors and underclassmen about Senior Seminar, it also unfortunately means that our own experience is coming to an end. Personally, I'll miss our lively class discussions, the entertaining and inspiring dynamic between Dr. McWhorter and the other students, Kevin Welch repeatedly and passionately referencing his thesis topic, *Fabrenheit 451*, and simply learning so much from my talented and intelligent peers and professor. Reflecting on the close of the semester, Dr. McWhorter said, "This course has given me an opportunity to see students, many of whom I met almost four years ago, become powerhouses. I can't wait to see how they take English out into the world beyond the academy."

Elegy for Seamus Heaney

by Jennifer Hanselman

Sunlight slanted through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Writers House as 45 students and faculty members gathered on Wednesday, November 13 to remember Irish poet Seamus Heaney. The setting sun added an elegiac tone to the event, which was especially appropriate; Heaney died just a few months ago, on August 30th. A number of attendees, including myself, brought with them poems and excerpts to read in appreciation of his work.

Andrea Cohen, Director of the Writers House, opened the event by telling the audience about Heaney's many accomplishments during his life, including receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. She recalled that when she had seen him read from his work at Harvard, he "looked like the most humble person in the world." She began the tribute by reading aloud "Blackberry Picking," which seemed to be a favorite among the faculty members in attendance.

Merrimack English majors might be familiar with Heaney because he translated the edition of *Beowulf* that most professors in the department favor. After listening to a recording of him reading the first several lines of the poem, Professor Geraldine Branca introduced anyone who hadn't taken her *Beowulf* class to the translation, emphasizing that Heaney brought "new life to an old poem," something previous scholars, in her estimation, had failed to do. Several of Dr. Branca's students read portions of the poem, including (in order) myself, Tony Rossetti, Christine Neel, Jacques Denault, Kevin Welch, Jacob Wilkins, David Al-Herbawi, Nick McDaniels, Chris Mason, and Daniel Sullivan. The group consisted of students from various majors and future dates of graduation, but *Beowulf* brought all of us together.

Subsequent readings of Heaney's work that followed became more informal after the ten *Beowulf* excerpts. We listened to Heaney's Nobel acceptance speech via recording. Then, Professor Paul Vatalaro read two poems, "The Early Purges" and "The Barn," from *Death of a Naturalist*, one of Heaney's early collections. Professor Steven Scherwatzky read "Midterm Break", a poem about the death of Heaney's four-year-old brother, that seemed to strike a chord with the audience. Professor Kerry Johnson read "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," a poem that she contextualized by saying that the "split nature of Ireland was inescapable" for Heaney.

But professors were not the only ones with non-*Beowulf* poems prepared. Brad Wall read "The Underground;" Chris Mosher read "Fosterling;" and Tony Rossetti read "Scaffolding," which had been read at a recent friend's wedding.

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Danielle Jones-Pruett, Writers House Program Coordinator, concluded the event by saying that Heaney "helped her find her own poet's voice," and then played a recording of him reading one of his most famous poems, "Digging."

The sunlight was nearly gone from the room by the time the event drew to a close. After the memorial, Professor Branca said, "Heaney would have liked this," referring to both the Writers House itself and the gathering that day. One thing is for certain: Heaney's work will be appreciated and remembered for some time to come.



Merrimack community members honor Seamus Heaney



Student Profile: Jackie Bagley



An English major with a minor in Education, Jackie Bagley knew when she passed the college on the way to the orthodontist at age 13 that she was destined to enroll at Merrimack. She recalls telling her grandmother during each trip, “I want to go to that college.” Jackie chose English because she enjoyed reading and writing in high school and believes that her college program is

helping her hone very marketable skills, such as the ability to think analytically, read well, and write clearly. She has especially enjoyed taking Professor McWhorter’s “Harlem Renaissance” and Professor Scherwatzky’s “Sex, Race, and Empire” courses. The English faculty, she believes, exhibit a remarkable ability to make literature come alive for their students. She finds particularly memorable a maxim she heard from Professor Scherwatzky: “we need to read great literature to write great literature.” Her favorite writers include Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane Austen.

Jackie has found the new program initiatives—concentrations in Creative Writing and Literary Studies and co-curricular internships—in English very exciting. However, she is most fond of the new Writers House, which opened in September 2013. “The events” held there, she says, “have really made me appreciate being an English major. I loved hearing authors speak about their work, and read their work.” Jackie believes she has benefitted from the close relationship most majors have with their English professors. She recommends that students follow their literary interests, getting to know faculty “beforehand;” “they’re very nice people,” she says, who “know a lot and can help you make your decision” on whether or not to major in English.



Jackie Bagely and Jennifer Hanselman

English: My Second Home

by Jennifer Hanselman

When I first came to Merrimack in the fall of 2010, I feel like I knew very little. I didn't know that much about living in New England (since I had always lived in California), or what college would be like (I'm sure I wasn't alone in that!), or even smaller things, like what classes to take. There was one thing I did know from the moment I said yes to Merrimack, though: I wanted to be an English major.

That was one of the most important decisions I've made. And now that I am on the verge of graduating, I can look back on my experience with pride and a sense of accomplishment. The truth is, my time in the English department at Merrimack is one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

The first few English classes I took gave me a feel for the discipline, but I can't say that I was in love yet. I had expected to do a lot of creative writing, but the classes I was taking weren't focusing on that. Instead, we were learning different literary theories and reading plenty of books. It may not have been what I expected, but I learned to love it over the course of my time here. On the surface, an English education teaches you to think about and read books in a more in-depth way, and to write better papers. But these skills can be used for almost anything – just attend any English Career Night event and listen to what the alumni have to say.

The best advice I can offer to current majors is not to be afraid of your professors. This is probably true of any department, but I can say with confidence that the English department has some stellar people working in it. My time at Merrimack would not have been the same if it weren't for the paper-related discussions I've had with Professor McWhorter, or talking with Professor Scherwatzky about *Paradise Lost*, for example. If it weren't for me taking so many of Professor Vatalaro's classes (and visiting his office non-stop), I most likely wouldn't have had the opportunity to help launch this publication with my fellow interns. As cheesy as it sounds, those are the kinds of reasons that I almost consider the English department to be a second home on campus.

I might not know my next steps in the world, but I do know that I can use the skills that I have learned at Merrimack to find something that I love. It's scary to think that my three and a half years are ending so soon, and that I will have to move away from my home away from home so soon after I got settled. But I also know that if I ever want to return, the English department will still be here for me. And hopefully, I will have some great stories to tell.

What's New at the Writers House?

"It's the Lasting that Makes the Game"

by Laura Stevens

Lucas Mann, the latest writer to speak at the Merrimack's Writers House, is most recently known for publishing a work of creative nonfiction about minor league baseball. Not knowing much of anything about baseball, I was uncertain about what to expect, and initially a bit reluctant to attend this particular Writers House event. It's my guess that many of the 50 people who attended were in the same position as I was: interested in literature, but not so interested in baseball. Director Andrea Cohen introduced Mann, and quoted him saying he wanted to write "nonfiction that is hard to sum up." Mann approached the podium, and once he began speaking about his book titled *Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere*, my uncertainty turned quickly to intrigued delight.

On the surface, Mann's book is about a minor league baseball team called the Clinton (Iowa) LumberKings, which Mann chose as the subject of his work, because he grew up playing and loving baseball, and was "looking for something that felt familiar and evocative" to write about. The passages Mann read focused on a woman named Joyce, whom he met once he began attending LumberKings games. The two became friends, but perhaps more importantly, Joyce became a kind of minor league baseball and life mentor to Mann. Though many aspects of Joyce's world revolved (and continues to revolve) around the LumberKings players and the baseball schedule, Mann's writing made it clear that she was not a team groupie, but a complex person with a rich perspective. When Mann once asked her if she wanted to leave a particular game early, she wouldn't even consider it. "I never want it to end," she said; "it's the lasting that makes the game."

After listening to Mann read, it becomes clear to the listener that *Class A* is about much more than the long bus rides, small crowds, and culture of minor league baseball in the Midwest. Mann admits that readers "won't learn much about baseball," but rather, "what [the LumberKings] mean to people." He said, "Different people get different things from something as small as a minor league baseball game," and it is also true that individual readers will learn different things from reading Mann's book.

It became clear when Mann began to read a chapter of his book that there was truly something for every reader, whether it is the subject of baseball, the politics and recent economic turmoil of the Midwest, or the desire for a delightful read. For me, it was Mann's stunning descriptions and the concrete, sometimes stark, portrayal of the characters that set it apart. Mann's creative nonfiction is truly unlike any I have read. It is so detailed, so relevant, and so beautifully written, that it feels like fiction, and yet the reader has

the benefit of knowing that truth is never far from the text. Mann told the story of Joyce offering from her bag a scarred game ball to a father and his two young boys, who were sitting a few rows in front of her. (She had been collecting game balls and storing them in cases around her home for years.) The boys didn't seem all that excited until Joyce began to point out the special qualities of the ball's appearance, especially the marks left by chalk lines and swinging bats. The anecdote, as Mann read it, embodied a kind of magic.

Mann's honest portrayal of his main character, Joyce, prompted a member of the audience to ask about the morality of "outing" private individuals in his book. Mann said that if you write for a magazine, they "fact-check the hell out of you. If you write a book, nobody fact-checks you." He was not at all worried about this, because all of his friends in Clinton, including Joyce, knew he was writing about them. Mann actually drove back to Clinton to read Joyce the passages about her. Joyce, especially, was not at all concerned, because she shared Mann's sentiments in tracking and preserving the truth, as evidenced by her preservation of letters she had received from former players.

Mann has a different writing philosophy than most nonfiction authors, saying, "If I already know about a topic, why would I be interested?" For Mann, the question compelled the writing. He created his own maxim, "Write about what you don't know," a revision of the conventional directive that writers embrace what they know. He believes the writer should locate something that draws her in, and convinces her to stay and write. This, Mann says, is what produces great nonfiction.



Over 50 attendees gather to hear Lucas Mann talk about *Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere*

Writers House Coffee House

by Jennifer Hanselman

An intimate group of 16 attendees gathered in the Writers House on the evening of November 21 for the first ever student-run Coffee House, hosted by Alexandra Lynch. After some time spent mingling and a short introduction from Andrea Cohen, Writers House Director, Lynch started off the event. Her natural and charming introductions to the participants kept the event flowing at a comfortable pace.

The first performer was Rob Canella, a Communications major, who read two original poems, "Drilling and Blasting" and "Easter Eggs."

He was followed by Brad Wall, a History and English major, who read "A Dream Within a Dream" by Edgar Allan Poe.

Next was Jacques Denault, an English major, who performed from memory "The World is Too Much With Us" by William Wordsworth, and an original poem, "Oppression."

Jamie Hayes, a Forensic Science major, read an original work inspired by the prompt that week for the Writer's Circle, that also meets in the Writers House on a weekly basis.

Chris Mosher, an English major, read the opening passage from *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe.

Benjamin Burke, a Psychology major, performed an original song, "Sake of Pride," accompanied by his guitar.

The next two poems, by Andrea Cohen, Writers House Director; and Danielle Jones-Pruett, Assistant Director of the Writers House, both read poems with a similar theme: blackberry picking. Cohen's was a recent work dedicated to a friend, and was entitled "Branch Water". Jones-Pruett's piece was called "Black Forest".

Chris Mosher and Bobby DiSorbo, also an English major, played guitar and performed "The Quiet Things No One Ever Knows" by the band Brand New. DiSorbo followed up with two of his original poems, "Out" and "Uncle Earl's War."

The event was the first of its kind at Merrimack, but certainly not the last. The level of talent was certainly there; hopefully it will only grow in the future.



Bobby DiSorbo and Chris Mosher perform at the Coffee House

Upcoming Events Spring Semester 2014

Tuesday, Jan. 28, 3:30pm: Screening of *Louder than a Bomb* with Lou Bernieri (from Phillips Academy's Andover Bread Loaf)

Louder than a Bomb is a riveting and stereotype-blasting documentary about the world's largest youth poetry slam, in which teenagers speak out, make noise, and find their voices. Lou Bernieri, from Phillips Academy, will introduce the film and discuss outreach opportunities with Andover Bread Loaf, which promotes literacy and educational revitalization.

Thursday, Jan. 30, 4pm: Artist Anna Schuleit Haber

MacArthur Award winning artist Anna Schuleit Haber will talk about her latest projects, including *The Beverly Oracle*, a large-scale public art project commissioned by the city of Beverly, Mass.

In the last issue, *The Broadsheet* reported that Father Kevin Dwyer, OSA, wrote and delivered the blessing at the initial dedication of the Catherine Murphy Conference Room. The blessing for that occasion was performed by Father George Morgan, OSA.

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The Writers House Holiday Party