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THE BROADSHEET

Common Core Scholastic Standards and the Threat to Fiction

By Jessica Bruso

Many of us can remember the moment when we fell in love with literature. For me, it was when I read *Jane Eyre* as a sophomore in high school. My assignment was to read a fictional book independently and to analyze a major theme. I chose *Jane Eyre* because it was the only book from the list my teacher distributed that I owned. My friends believed me to be crazy, picking a book with such small print spread over four hundred pages. I was at first determined, then overwhelmed, and finally, obsessed. Thus began my love for literature, eventually leading me to pursue a career in teaching high school English.

I recently read an article by Michael Holquist in *PMLA* called “The Language of Fiction and the Fiction of Language,” which focuses on the way that the Common Core is treating the way fiction is taught. The Common Core standards consist of a series of specific benchmarks that students must reach at particular points in their academic careers. Standards created for each grade-level prepare a student to move on to the next

level. The purpose of the Core is to ensure that students who graduate from high school will be prepared for the challenges of college. Currently, forty-two states have voluntarily adopted these standards.

The Core standards codify an approach to fiction that differs significantly from the approach used when I was in high school. For one thing, they move away from the imaginative aspects of narrative and privilege instead the transmission of information. They also favor non-fiction prose. Language is valued for its direct representational capacity, rendering the world with the same logical precision as a mathematical equation, thus diminishing the literary use of language, which tends to be highly figurative and often exceeds the conventions of logic. Apparently, the goal is to serve the needs of college students and future employees, so that individuals will be better able to analyze word patterns and succeed in the information age,

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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.

becoming more efficient word processors. While these qualities might be necessary for the future success of current students, there is also value in learning how to respond to fiction and write analytically about figurative language, with all its slipperiness. According to Holquist “The term fiction occurs seven times in ELA [English and Language Arts] standards (as opposed to twenty-five invocations of nonfiction and sixty of informational).”

This observation struck me. My love for English certainly was not inspired by so-called informational texts. It was inspired by the beautiful and creative contours of narrative and by the richness of character and imagery. I developed a love for language because of the fiction I read as a child, not because of newspaper articles. When reading literature now, I do not approach it with the desire to play detective; I approach it with a mind open to several interpretations. I believe that there is no right or wrong way to look at a piece of fiction, because even though we all read the same words, we feel differently and think differently about what we read based on our personal thoughts and experiences.

When we fail to look at literature openly and instead try to find one specific meaning, we eliminate art from language. Holquist writes, “The conception of language that animates the standards is presented as if it were natural language, but in its effects, it is more akin to programming languages used to control machines.” I agree that when language is reduced to a programmable medium, rather than a form of art, it loses its rich, figurative and meaningful range.

That’s why I am calling upon the readership of *The Broadsheet*. We will soon be conducting a survey to gather you perspectives about fiction in the curriculum and what inspired you to love English and your decision to dedicate your undergraduate career to it. I encourage you to read Holquist’s article (*PMLA* 130.3, 2015) and to reflect back on your own experiences in the English to incorporate in a follow-up story for our next issue.



Lauren Marsh



Brian Courtemanche



Jessica Furtado

Alumni Creative Writers

By Rachel MacKelcan

It’s no surprise that when undergraduates take stock of their educational resources, they overlook the value of alumni. The fact is, though professors and peers prove to be an invaluable reservoir of knowledge and assistance during this complicated journey, it is the alumni community that perhaps best understands the challenges we face. Since I began my career at Merrimack, my appreciation for the generosity of English program graduates has grown steadily.

As young students and aspiring authors, our journey is difficult. Each day we are met with a new challenge and a new goal to achieve, and though these things are occasionally one and the same, we can find comfort in knowing that, no matter how hard classes get, no matter how many times a submitted poem or short story gets rejected, we will eventually succeed.

I am a creative writer and I often worry about taking long breaks from writing, that is, by not finishing a story, or by just cranking it out because by leaving it on the back burner I feel that I am not only failing the story, but that I am failing myself. Weekly I grapple with self-doubt, wondering if I'll ever be able to make it to a point at which I can support myself by doing what I love, and sometimes it cripples me. I'm learning, however, that it's not always easy to be a writer; it's not easy to do what you love, but it's the struggle that makes it worth it. (The feature you are reading now is no exception!)

A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to correspond with English alumni who have published some of their own creative work. They are: Jess Furtado, Brian Courtemanche, and Lauren Marsh. They offered me a glimpse into their lives and a view of how exactly they were able to succeed as writers, and they have inspired me to open up a project that I have been meaning to get back to.

On Going Back in Time

Q: If you could go back in time x amount of years, what advice would you give yourself?

Jess Furtado: If I could go back about five years to the time when I was in the middle of my college career, I would tell myself to relax and get more involved on campus. I was a full-time commuter student and full-time small business owner, so when I wasn't attending class or writing papers, I was working around the clock. I didn't spend enough time getting to know my peers and actually enjoy student life, and I wish I had. While working as hard as I did has paid off, if I could do it all again, I would probably live on campus and focus on spending my spare time forging friendships and getting involved in the community.

Brian Courtemanche: I'd tell myself to relax more and have fun. It's important to do our best in every task we undertake, including the many things we don't always want to do, but it is also important to try and find the fun in every day. We only get a limited amount of days on the planet, so each day—even the tough days when we are up to our eyeballs in obligations to others—there should be some pleasure in there too. Specifically regarding writing, I'd say that the first person you have to please is yourself. Yet also, you have to be open to the ideas and suggestions of others. Writing is both personal and collaborative, and it takes awhile to find a balance between those two poles. Ultimately I try not to attach too much ego to any of my writing. It's the final piece that matters, not my ego. There are many writers who are much better than myself. I'm just happy to have the opportunity to share my imagination with others, and hopefully please them. If a reader can make suggestions to tighten up a work, or an editor suggests changes that he or she thinks will make the work more enjoyable for readers, or the demands of a particular project mean that you have to go in a direction other than you originally envisioned, you have to decide if you're going to put your ego on the shelf and try to make the final piece as fine as possible for your readership. So you have to develop your own voice and skill, yet mesh it with others who are similarly devoting their own time and talent to the project. I think of athletes who spend countless hours honing their personal abilities, yet also have to mesh with their teammates' abilities, take direction from coaches and trainers, all in an effort to play well on game day. And not every piece will be a home run, despite highest hopes. I understand that. I'm just happy for a chance to play on the field, so to speak. My approach to writing is rather like that.

Lauren Marsh: Write as much and as often as you can before you have a full-time job and adult responsibilities!

On Books

Q: Do you have a certain book or short story that you read in high school or college that really stuck out or inspired you to want to do what you do?

Brian Courtemaunche: Ever since I was a little kid, I've been enthralled with all things weird and spooky: haunted houses, ghostly tales, stories of strange events, monsters, things that go bump in the night. I read *A House With a Clock In Its Walls* by John Bellairs sometime in my early adolescence, which is a wonderfully spooky novel for younger readers, but can be enjoyed by lovers of the macabre at all levels. In fact, I still have my old beat-up paperback copy (signed by the author) and return to it every few years for a re-read. If any one book set me on the path to trying my own hand writing about such subjects, it would be that book.

Lauren Marsh: There are so many books that influenced me as a young writer, mainly classics — *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Frankenstein*, *Great Expectations*, *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Pride and Prejudice* to name a few.

On Publishing and Writing

Q: Did you always want to publish, and did you ever have doubts that you could?

Jess Furtado: I first had the urge to publish around my junior year in college. Before that I viewed my poetry as something deeply personal to be guarded, and it didn't occur to me that someone might want to read my poems. When I first arrived at Merrimack I heard about the Rev. Ahern Poetry Contest and decided to take a stab at it. I was surprised when my poems took both first and second prize, and that's when I decided that maybe I should stop hoarding my poetry and send some of it out into the world. I didn't know much about literary journals and small presses at the time, but I began to attend events like the Massachusetts Poetry Festival and AWP and I grabbed a copy of *The Poet's Market* from my local library, all of which revealed to me that there was a huge market for poetry by emerging writers that I never knew existed. I did my research to find which journals were most receptive to young writers with little to no publication history, and I submitted some of my work. In the beginning I took rejection letters fairly personally, but after receiving a few dozen I learned not to get so frustrated and kept pushing until the first acceptance letter finally came from *The Common Ground Review*. After that, I stopped doubting that I could find homes for my poems. It was simply a matter of learning where my voice would be most well received, and that is true even for the most seasoned poet. Different magazines publish different styles of writing, so you have to spend some time reading literary journals to get a sense of the unique pulses that drive each of these publications before you send your work out.

I am currently a poetry editor for the literary journal *Paper Nautilus*, and I write and publish under the pseudonym JJ Lynne. I began my work at *Paper Nautilus* as a reader and was offered a co-editorship in 2013. Being put in the position of accepting and declining work has taught me a lot about my own writing. The poems that I find strongest and that I tend to accept for publication contain concrete images that are haunting and that I will find myself thinking of long after I have finished reading the poem. They are poems that use language in a way that I may not have seen before, or that make me wish that I could simply live inside that poem and never leave. The poems that I tend to decline are those that rely heavily on abstractions and

never really manage to ground themselves with something concrete for the reader to hold onto, or those that are littered with clichés. Knowing that, I try to avoid those pitfalls in my own work and be as fresh and innovative as possible when crafting a piece.

Lauren Marsh: Yes, I've always wanted to publish because I think, like anyone who writes, you write because you have a story inside you that you want to share with the world at large. I don't know that I've ever doubted that my work could be published. I think it was more a matter of time and the desire to put work out there before getting an agent that compelled me to establish my own imprint and become an indie author.

Q: What is your favorite piece that you have written?

Brian Courtemaunche: That's a tough question. Really I don't have a particular favorite. If pressed, I suppose I'd vote for 'The Crystal Cavern,' my piece that is included in *More Adventures in Arkham Country* (a collection of macabre make-pretend scenarios by various authors). That piece allowed me to further develop and play in a fictional Massachusetts backwater village that was originally conceived by one of my favorite old-time writers of weird fiction, H.P. Lovecraft. I like how the piece turned out, and hope that others find it fun. But really, I am simply happy if any of my written pieces bring enjoyment to others. I enjoy writing, and if some other folks can find the fun in what tumbles out of my imagination and onto the page, then it's a win for all.

On Merrimack and the English Major

Q: What was your favorite English course at Merrimack college and why?

Jess Furtado: My favorite course at Merrimack was a directed study I took with Dr. McWhorter during my final semester. I was one credit short of graduating because I had transferred from UMass-Lowell and not all of my credits were transferable. I approached Dr. McWhorter about the idea of conducting a directed study to fulfill my final credit, and I elected to focus on postmodern women writers and the concept of madness. We spent a great deal of time working closely with the work of my favorite poet, Sylvia Plath, and we also explored writers such as Susanna Kaysen, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton, among others. This directed study pushed my close reading skills and shaped my understanding of how women's place in the literary world has evolved, and that has been invaluable in my own career as a writer and editor. Plus, Dr. McWhorter is simply an amazing professor, so if you get the opportunity, take one of her classes! I took 3 other classes with her during my time at Merrimack, and each one was more interesting than the last.

Q: Were you always an English major, what drove you to decide to study English?

Jess Furtado: I was not always an English major. Originally, I intended to study photography and was all set to do so. I had a full scholarship to the Art Institute of Boston and was ready to go, then my grandmother's health took a turn for the worse and that changed things. I decided to take some time off from school and while I waited to see how things would progress. During that break, I had plenty of time to think, and that's when I rerouted. I already had a decent background in photography and had done a lot of freelance photo work in high school, so I wanted a backup plan. When I decided to reapply to college, I elected the English major because I had always been passionate about literature, and I figured that if the creative path didn't work out for me, I could always teach, which is another career option that I knew I'd enjoy. I am happy that I made this decision. Studying English made me a more creative and analytical thinker, and has been a positive

influence in every job that I have held, from my time as a children's librarian, to my current work as an artist, writer, and small business owner. I have never met an English major who has regretted his or her choice of studies, because there is so much that can be done with a degree in such a versatile field, so don't let the naysayers frustrate you when you get questioned about your choice to study English! I assure you, you are in good hands.

Advice to Young Writers from Lauren Marsh

As far as being a Merrimack alumna and speaking directly to Merrimack students, I can say this: I'm a writer by both passion and profession, meaning I have a full-time day job as a communications professional and I moonlight as an indie author. There is a tricky balance to this, but working full-time is a reality for most authors. I feel extremely fortunate to have chosen Merrimack for my undergraduate coursework because their English department is beyond stellar. My professors, many of whom I'm still in touch with, are all passionate within their areas and I never left a class feeling anything but inspired. They provided more than a foundation for my future. Instead they gave me the tools to keep building onto that foundation and the belief in my own abilities as sole architect of my writing life. The beauty of attending a small, liberal arts college is the individual attention you receive from faculty. Take advantage of this —learn as much as you can from them, and use this time in your life to start intensely honing your craft. If you're serious about being published, start submitting your short stories to literary magazines and journals now. Get used to this and be tenacious early on. Write a blog, write reviews, write for the college newspaper or literary journal, look for sites like Cultured Vultures, Hello Giggles, and Minerva Mag who are looking for contributors and start getting your name out there in print - even without pay. Contact published authors or go to their signings and ask them questions, join Goodreads to see what others are reading. And read as much as you can because that will make you a better writer. Merrimack is a vibrant, nurturing, creative place that, in addition to its exceptional faculty, offers many resources and networking opportunities, so make the most of it while you're there. Good luck and happy writing!

There are a lot of other questions you could include here that address my advice to young writers, how I deal with writer's block, etc. that you can pull right from my Goodreads author page here: https://www.goodreads.com/author/12114202.L_S_Kilroy/questions

* * *

After I read these comments I felt better about myself as a writer and found myself feeling much more hopeful about my future. Even though many of us may not be able to find time to slow down and take a break from papers or fully vanquish the urge to procrastinate, I think there is something powerful to be said about the fact that three different people offered resonant insights. For me, a very-much-in-my-head writer consistently hunted by guilt and time, having the opportunity to talk to graduates who are accomplished writers proved a real godsend, because it makes my dreams of someday succeeding appear that much more attainable.

Coming to Merrimack I had always thought there were only a few ways to get your work out there: you either send in your work to any publisher who will read it and receive feedback, or you walk along the less conventional path of self-publishing. In reality writers have so many opportunities out there to choose from. Furthermore, it looks like we also will have the chance to work, to make a living and continue to do what we love. I have to confess that when I first decided I wanted to be a writer, my voice would take a dip whenever I tried to express out loud that aspiration; I was scared to actually hear myself announce what I wanted to do, but after talking to some of our graduates and working with the English department at Merrimack, I couldn't be more confident about my future success.

We here at *The Broadsheet*, know that you have a lot to say on this topic, as well, so let's start a conversation. Feel free to join in and submit to me your responses to the questions I asked our graduates at thebroadsheet@merrimack.edu and stay tuned for more in our next issue!

Connecting with British Writers in Rome

By Kileigh Stranahan

When most people decide to go abroad, their decision usually isn't based on the promise of new course opportunities; it's based on a need to see more than just the 300 acres of their college campuses. I also fell prey to this yearning. Distracted by my fervent need for adventure, I chose to go abroad without really thinking twice about the classes I would take, or whether or not they would even help me complete my English major. I knew Rome was such a big city with so much to explore, so I wasn't really considering what would happen within the four walls of a European classroom. However, contrary to popular belief, institutions overseas take their classes pretty seriously. I encountered strict attendance policies, rigorous paper assignments, and challenging exams.

When it was time for me to select my courses, about two months before I left on my journey, I gravitated toward the one British Literature course that The American University of Rome had to offer. I almost arbitrarily picked other courses from the school's website (that surprisingly resembled MyMack) and didn't think about them again until my plane touched down in Rome.

When I arrived at the eternal city, the university gave us about a week to get our bearings and relax until classes started. Some volunteers from AUR picked us up at the airport and brought us to our new apartment, about a 30-minute walking distance from the campus. They told us which direction in which to walk, which buses we could catch, and left us to fend for ourselves. The only responsibilities we had for that entire week involved getting our permit to stay and attending an hour-long orientation on campus. After sleeping for about 14 hours straight, my roommate and I woke up and decided to map our way to the school. We were warned about the dreaded stairs that led to the school ahead of time, so when we located them, we knew we were on the right track. We climbed up all three flights and got to the university, sweaty and breathless. After that day, I never walked to campus again.

AUR sponsored a variety of tours for the incoming students, so that we could get a chance to explore the center of Rome and the neighborhoods we would be calling home. They showed us how the bus system worked (including how to avoid paying the fare!) and how to look as un-American as possible. Despite their efforts, there was no hiding our nationality. The first week went by so fast that most of it remains a blur to me, except one memory. Seeing the Coliseum for the first time and at night was such a poignant moment for me. We rounded one corner and all of a sudden it was right in front of us: lit-up and massive. It was the kind of sight that words don't begin to explain.

Eventually, the first day of classes began and I had to start sacrificing my weekdays again. I walked into a large white classroom, the last of the five class meetings I had that day. Since courses in Europe are only three credits as opposed to Merrimack's four-credit curriculum I felt much more drained than my usual afternoon blah's. There were only seven other students sitting down, which made the room feel that much bigger. The professor sat at the front of the room and waited until we got settled. He began the class by saying, "Who here has read any British Literature before?" in a thick British accent as opposed to the Italian accent that I had been getting so used to. The whole class was so taken aback that none of us had raised our hands. My professor, Alexander Liberto, then said, "Well, it looks like we have a lot to do then" and began the semester.

Everyday that semester my professor began the class by saying, "Let's get to business; shall we?" and it became a running joke in our class. He established the perfect balance between keeping the class moving in the right direction without letting it get too tedious and dull. Professor Liberto told us about his education in Malta, London, and Rome. Even though he had been teaching and living in Italy for about 20 years, he had travelled all over the world. We also learned that he had published several academic works and numerous poems throughout his years—a fact he never let us forget during the semester.

I later found out that most of my fellow classmates were not from America either; one was Italian; one was from Norway; two were from Spain, another from Egypt, and then two other students and I were American. It was interesting to have so many different backgrounds and cultures studying together. I was a bit surprised by the fact that



some of the authors that I had read, such as John Keats and John Donne, were unfamiliar to the other students. We were all learning at different paces but were helping one another out through discussion. Having a small, close-knit class made for a more comfortable and enjoyable learning environment. In a situation like that you could really hear and focus on what everyone had to say about the works we were studying. Taking a British Literature course taught by a British native was a real treat and something I never imagined I would experience. When you go to a place like Italy you don't expect to gain a lot of knowledge on English Literature...or at least I didn't. In this class we covered a wide spectrum of British Literature. We read works from all the way back to the 15th century, including, the morality play *Everyman*, up until the Romantic period. We also studied Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, to name just a few examples.

One of the most stimulating parts of this course was going onsite to where some of the plays we were discussing had been set, or where some of the poets we were reading, such as John Keats and Percy Shelley, were buried. I didn't realize that many British writers had set their narratives in Italy or had even visited Rome. For example, after reading *Julius Caesar*, Professor Liberto took us to the location where Caesar was stabbed. Ironically enough, the ruins that remain at that location now are used as a cat sanctuary! Before Professor Liberto brought us to this site, it had already become a favorite spot of mine. You don't realize how much you'll miss your pet when you study abroad, so my friend and I would go and visit the cats to get our animal-fix. Like many of the Romans, we were unaware of the literary significance of this location.

As the end of the semester approached, we began reading works from Romantic poets John Keats and Percy Shelley. What most people don't know (including myself prior to this semester) is that Keats and Shelley are both buried in a Protestant cemetery located in Rome. Also, right at the foot of the famous Spanish Steps is a memorial house for Keats and Shelley. This quaint, slightly hidden, building houses a collection of treasures and literary works associated with the two poets. When we finished reading poems from these writers, we visited their graves. Passing through an old rickety gate, we could see numerous faded gravestones. The cemetery was covered in greenery but felt cluttered, because all of the headstones were so close together. Once we finally located the two poets, I stood there staring at their graves. Sometimes when you read works composed by authors that lived hundreds of years before you, it can be difficult to connect with their writing and see them as real people. However, standing at the foot of Keats's and Shelley's graves, knowing their bodies were underneath me, I instantly felt closer to them.

Studying abroad in Rome was something I never thought I would do. Getting out of my comfort zone was not easy for me but was one of the most worthwhile things I have ever done. I witnessed the Coliseum first-hand. I walked through the Vatican. I saw the exact spot where Julius Caesar was stabbed. I met and learned from professors and students from all over the world. I stood where the remains of famous poets' bodies lay six feet below me. I didn't think studying abroad would be an intense literary experience, but I was mistaken. I read so many amazing pieces while I was in Rome, but it wasn't simply the material that really evoked interest for me; it was the closeness that I felt to these authors that I'd never experienced before. My love for English followed me to Rome and expanded so much more while I was there. I'm sure most English enthusiasts can relate. While I was in Rome, I found English in places where I wasn't even looking for it.



An Inside View of Merrimack's Creative Writing Community

By Rosemary Morton

A community of creative writers is thriving at Merrimack College and not all of them are English majors. Passion binds them together. I interviewed a number of them and was struck by how committed to the craft each student is, despite carrying a full load of courses, and by the variety of their interests. Let me introduce you to some of them.

Jacques Denault:

Jacques Denault's love for reading inspired him to try his hand at writing. "There are many authors that inspire me but for different reasons," Jacques says. "H.P. Lovecraft and Poe for their imagination, overall tone and the way their works remain relevant and influential even today. I'm also greatly inspired by Tolkien and J.K. Rowling for the way they were able to create entire worlds of their own." Though Jacques's love for writing began in high school, he admits that he "wasn't the best student back then, so I'd usually spend class time writing poems rather than paying attention to the teachers."

Writing creatively excites Jacques because of the possibilities that it can offer. "I know that whatever I'm working on, I can do what I want with it. It's such a pleasant break from the forced essays that everyone gets assigned in college." But the inspiration to write does not always come on demand. Jacques explains, "My least favorite thing about it is the fact that it [writing] can seem so daunting. Staring at a blank page, trying to find the right things to say, is one of the most difficult things to do."

Jacques's interests include poetry and fiction. "My goal, as a writer," he says, "is to write poetry anthologies and novels. Personally, I like to write a lot of poetry and fiction. I particularly like horror and weird fiction. I write my poems because they're almost like their own conversations that feel as though they need to be heard. Quite a few of my poems center around social justice and cultural issues. I write fiction mostly because I write the stories I want to read." And recently he has been successful, publishing a short story called "The Fall of General Took" in *Beorth Weekly* and a poem called "The Lives of Trees," which will be published by *Rat's Ass Review* sometime in April. He is also working on a number of other projects: "Currently I have two novels in the works that have been keeping me busy, as well as numerous short stories and flash fiction pieces that I have planned."

Like many English majors, Jacques participates in creative writing programs offered through the Merrimack College Writers House. "It's the one place on campus where anyone can go and work in peace, and enjoy the atmosphere. There are also other students there who are happy to give advice and edit work, and it's a space for brainstorming ideas. On top of that, Andrea and Danielle, the masterminds behind the Writers House, have helped me personally improve my writing in leaps and bounds.... I do a lot of creative writing because it's a wonderful outlet for expression, and it's something that you can practice for your entire life and still know less than 1% of it all in the grand scheme of things."



Christina DiMartino:

Christina is another English major whose love of the written word started when she was quite young. Christina recalls, “I’ve been writing pretty much since I could hold a pencil. In second grade we had free drawing time, but I used it to write a story instead. The rest is history!” Christina said that the writing of Ellen Hopkins and Alice Sebold has inspired her. “I like these authors because one, Hopkins, plays around a lot with the formatting of her prose. Alice Sebold amazes me because her writing always packs an emotional punch.” Reflecting on her own writing, Christina explains that she lives “vicariously through my characters. My protagonists usually start off as diluted versions of myself; they become different people as the story goes on. I know ‘write what you know’ isn’t the best writing advice, but personally, my protagonists have to have some of my own truth for me to take them anywhere.” As to her choice of genres, she says, “generally, I prefer writing fiction. As a genre, it has a lot of options, like historical or young adult fiction. I always want to write things that I would want to read.”



Photo Credit: Kevin Salemmme

Though sometimes she writes without a plan, when she gets into a zone, she often experiences a “breakthrough,” and often this happens at the Writers House. “At the weekly Writers’ Circle meetings, we share what we’re working on and give feedback. Everyone is really respectful of each other’s work.”

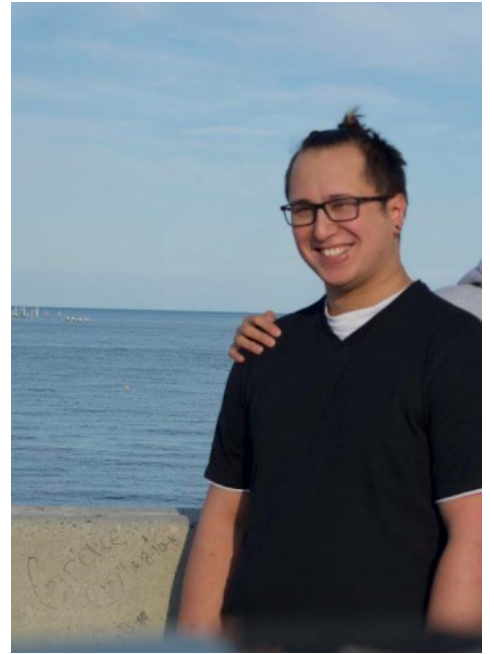
The best thing for Christina about creative writing is “getting in the zone.” She muses, “I love being able to make something great. I love hearing people’s reactions to the things I write, not just whether they liked it or not, but specific things that made them think or feel something.” And, typically, her “least favorite thing about writing is writer’s block. Anyone who says they’ve never had it is a liar.”

And, like all writers, Christina dreams about being successful. “Of course I want to write a bestseller, but more than that, I want to write a novel that says something important, something that I believe in.” “I’m most proud of [my] portfolio,” she confesses. “It was three separate pieces: the first three chapters of a young adult novel, a project for a creative writing class that I have written in the style of Ellen Hopkins, and the first two chapters of a historical fiction novel, set in the 1920s.” She is also currently working on a novel that she has shared at the Writers’ Circle a few times. “This work is what I refer to as my ghost story. It’s about a high school girl who can talk to the dead, and she uses this information they give her to track down a serial killer. I’m very excited about it.”

Jason Asman:

English minor Jason Asman is an avid participant in the Writers’ Circle. “I write creatively because it helps me create a deeper understanding of the world around me and my personal experiences. I also write to preserve my experiences and feelings in something concrete.” Much of Jason’s writing focuses on his personal experience or on the experiences of people he knows. “That is why,” Jason explains, “I do not have a clear inspiration”. His goal is to create something powerful that will connect to his audience at some deep level. “I think my writing style is very unique to me,” he reflects, “and I don’t really aim to replicate any particular writers. But the inspiration for what I write usually comes from conversations I have with others, or ideas that I hear in passing throughout the day.”

Jason Asman's love of writing began in childhood. He recounts, "I've always liked writing down my thoughts and little rhymes that popped into my head since I was very young, but it wasn't until my freshman year of high school when I started taking it more seriously and seeking to improve my skills." Jason prefers to write fiction or poetry and chooses the form that seems best suited to communicate "something that he's already lived through." "I like the idea of creating fantastical stories based around my own experiences," he said, noting that focusing on personal experience does have its drawbacks. "I think the best and worst thing about writing creatively is that it helps me understand things that happen in my everyday life. By writing these experiences down I am able to see and think about them in ways that I would otherwise be unable to do. It can also be a very painful practice, because many times, the things that I write about are extremely emotional and powerful, so dwelling on them long enough to write them down can be challenging." The payoff for such intense self-examination is that "it helps me to grow as a person."



Jason spends quite a bit of time at the Writers House, which he says "is a great place for anyone interested in creative writing because it's typically quiet enough to sit down and push out some ideas but there are also times when there are other writers around to bounce ideas off and get feedback from." Like so many others, Jason values this interaction and the inspiration that comes with it. He mentioned that a piece of writing of which he is most proud is something he wrote last year about a picture-perfect relationship between two teenagers. "I'm fond of this piece in particular because I think that the style of narration that I used, along with the vivid descriptions, helped to create a strong connection between the narrator and the reader."

Regarding his aspirations, he says "my goals in terms of writing are mostly personal, as putting my thoughts down on paper has a cathartic effect on me; it helps me to understand and cope with the personal issues that I face in my daily life." Jason is currently working on a narrative about a boy retelling the story of the first Christmas that his family spent without his grandfather.

Nora Whouley:

Nora Whouley is a Communications major who is just as devoted to writing creatively as her English major counterparts. Currently a junior and my roommate, I was excited to discuss how creative writing has shaped her as a person and an artist.

Nora likes to write poetry, using many different forms. "I like to mix it up because I think there are many ways to release and it's good to try new things." "Whenever I have time, I sit down and write down what I feel," she explains. "I usually start with a notebook then edit on my laptop." Sometimes inspiration can hit her at the oddest times. For instance, she says she even gets "ideas when I'm working out. Because it is so fresh in my mind, I am able to write the poem the way that I want it to be written."



Photo Credit: Kevin Salemme

“I write creatively because this is an outlet which releases any tension or frustration that I have”, Nora tells me. “It feels rewarding to use poetry to rant, vent and express.” She added, “I find that sometimes inspiration can occur in basic places that shape our lives.” Her first encounter with poetry occurred in elementary school. “I learned poetry from Shel Silverstein,” author of *The Giving Tree*. “All of his writings talked about sharing, being a friend, and I feel that they treated children as adults.” I found it interesting that such a basic story could stir so much passion in her. Nora acknowledged further that when she got into college one of her inspirations was Emily Dickinson. “I like her writing because she shows how women play an important role in our society—especially at a time when women did not achieve such roles.”

One of Nora’s favorite hobbies is writing on her blog, “Hello Poetry.” “The best part of writing is for people to see what I have written and to get my word out in the world.” There have been many nights when Nora read to me poems from her blog, which has given me greater insight into her personality. One of the drawbacks from putting your writing out there, however, is that you open yourself up to criticism. According to Nora, “it is hard sometimes to be criticized for something that I care deeply [about] and worked hard on. I try not to take it too personally when I do not get likes on some of my work.” Nora’s observation really struck me, because evaluation by others is something that all creative writers face.

This reality, however, fails to overshadow the many positive consequences that come with writing creatively. One such pleasant occurrence found Nora’s poem “Happiness.” “I decided to write something and I wrote it directly on my blog without a draft and, before I knew it, it was trending.” One thousand readers saw “Happiness” and Nora was overwhelmed by the response. “It felt good. I thought I taught people something. The message of the poem is everyone deserves to be happy and nobody has the power to take that away from you.”

Nora says she writes with the hope that she can “learn from others and learn more about myself. Poetry is a great form to work with because we (people on the blog) are seeing and sharing [and] therefore helping one another.” Nora has currently posted two new poems called “Broken” and “A Part of Your Life.”

The students I interviewed made it clear to me that even though creative writing brings much enjoyment to the writer, it also involves serious work and a big, personal commitment. Conversing with these creative writers excited me and inspired me to try creative writing myself. I have begun visiting The Writers House and attending weekly Writers’ Circle meetings. I can testify first-hand to the inspiration supplied by this wonderful campus resource and the community of writers it nurtures. It serves as a home for those who love the written word and motivates many of us to reach for our pens.

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
 After all, the sky flashes, and the great sea
 yearns,
 We ourselves flash and yearn,
 And moreover my mother told me as a boy
 (repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
 Means you have no
 Inner Resources.’

John Berryman, Dream Song 14

The **Toughest** Questions for a Book Lover to Answer

By Bridget Kennedy

Dakota Durbin



Lizzy Barcomb



Jolene Buczala



Photo Credit: Kevin Salemme

A love of literature is the foundation upon which the English department is built. Its students and staff share a diverse interest in literary periods and genres, and assigned readings help students cover as many of these periods and genres as possible in the span of four years. Students may not enjoy every work of literature on the syllabus, but we give each work a chance and are often surprised to have learned more than we expected going in.

In the end, we always enjoy the time we spend broadening our horizons in class, but what about our free time, when personal reading lists become the unofficial syllabi of the summer? What do we pick up while snuggled up with a mug of cocoa over winter break?

Sophomore Dakota Durbin, Junior Lizzy Barcomb, and Freshman Jolene Buczala from the Merrimack English program have given us a little insight into what they read when they aren't studying or reading for class. They also offer recommendations for some of the best classes in the department (even though all the courses are worth taking), and talk about why they chose the English program.

When you read for pleasure what/whom do you read and why? Or, what is your favorite book?

Dakota Durbin

I read all different types of literature. I read a lot of fantasy when I was younger. As I got older I definitely got into different poets. I do enjoy what I read in class, and have found new interests to what else I want to be reading. Recently I have been into thrillers and read Gillian Flynn’s *Dark Places* and *Sharp Objects*.

My favorite book would have to be *Fahrenheit 451*. I fell in love with it in high school, and have reread it again since. I love the style, the story, and the characters. Ray Bradbury weaves sci-fi language with poetic language and creates these great poetic descriptions. I love the controversies and criticisms brought to the table. Most of the characters can seem like they are devoid of emotion, but the main character Montag is the starting spark that ignites the fire to push forward the cause. I also love Clarisse—she is just a fantastic character. She exudes innocence and eccentricities but [as] a child instead of an adult. She widens the perspective of older generations.

Lizzy Barcomb

My favorite book is *Abarat* by Clive Barker. His books are fantasy, but so dynamic. Barker creates vast worlds in his books and that is what makes them so interesting. He is also an artist and paints all of the pictures in his books. His paintings are all very surreal, and he doesn’t just paint for his books—he keeps over 400 of his paintings in his house! He shows the reader how he wanted the story and characters to look, giving his readers the full author’s perspective. He truly creates every part of the story. His views are very dark and weird but he is smart and it adds to the fantasy in his stories.

Jolene Buczala

I love fantasy, because through it you can enter worlds that are otherwise impossible. You might see drama unfold in real life, but where else can you follow epic quests? It’s a way to embrace imagination and creativity.

One of my favorite series (it’s so hard to just choose one book) is the *Inheritance Cycle* by Christopher Paolini. Fantasy, of course, with dragons, magic, humor, and adventure. Another reason why I like it is because Paolini was so young when he wrote it—that helps inspire me.

Fahrenheit 451

Abarat

Inheritance Cycle

What have been your favorite courses in the English program so far and why? Or what are you most excited to take?

Dakota

Shakespeare and the Body with Professor Plasse. She introduced a really famous author everyone knows about and we got to learn why everyone knows him. I had never worked much with him before the class, and now I love him. The class was really inspiring and opened me up to a field of literature I hadn't considered. A lot of the classes do that, like Milton's *Paradise Lost* class with Professor Scherwatzky. I could say great things about the English department, but the Shakespeare class stood out for me. It brought so much to light, and gave me a full appreciation of texts I wouldn't have otherwise had.

Lizzy

I have only taken three English courses for my minor so far, but Literature of the Harlem Renaissance with Dr. McWhorter is my favorite class so far. I love the 1920's and 30's. I love learning about culture and race at that time—a lot of that information isn't taught enough in school. We learn about more than just the glamour of the roaring 20's. We read about internal perspectives and get different voices from the era. I love how engaging the professor makes the class—there is always an opportunity for great discussion.

Jolene

I'm most excited to take the Mixing & Mashing Monsters: From Beowulf to Tolkien, Crichton, & Back Again, because JRR Tolkien is one of my favorite authors, and having a class including works by him is a rare opportunity. Though I haven't read *Beowulf*, it seems like something I would like. I hope to go on the study abroad to Ireland with the Writing Through War to Peace class--peace and war are interesting subjects to me, and I really want to see Ireland, especially the castles. Also, I'm looking forward to taking creative writing classes to develop my skills.

Why did you choose to become an English major/minor?

Dakota

Majors: Psychology and English

I love literature and enjoying life. English and literature are an outlet for me to learn about new things, express myself, and learn about myself. English classes have ignited a passion in me I have never felt in any other area or subject. Every time I leave an English class, I feel a little more changed and inspired to write. I can only hope to be even partially as good as all the great people we read and write about.

Self Expression

Lizzy

Major: Mass Communications

Minor: English

I am an English minor now, but I was an English major for a while. It was fun, but I wanted to do more than just writing and analyzing poems. I still enjoy that, but I knew that wasn't what I wanted to spend all my time doing, or make a career out of, so I switched to mass communications. In mass communications, I keep the fun part of writing with the minor to develop my skills. Communications writing seems more theory based than the analysis [] English majors [do], and it is a little harder, but the English minor helps me maintain my writing skills and lets me keep studying literature.

Jolene

Majors: English and Computer Science

I chose to be an English major because I want to improve my creative writing skills, to hopefully write a novel (or series) in the future. One of the main reasons I decided to attend Merrimack was the vast variety of English classes available, as well as the Writers House.

Creative Writing

The Broadsheet

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In the Next Issue:

*Common Core Standards: part 2

*Nordic Noir Insider

*Mass Poetry Festival Feature:

Merrimack vs. Salem State Slam

*English Awards: Backstory

*Merrimack Teaching Alumni

*Book Review

*The Adventures of Penny (a comic series)



Coming Events :

***English Award Ceremony and
Sigma Tau Delta Induction, April 27, 4pm
at the Writers House**

***Aherne Poetry Contest: deadline April 1**

