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UNIVERSITY
OF OREGON

Literary Reference

NEWSLETTER OF THE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

A Conversation with Charles Wright

The following is an edited version of a talk between Charles Wright and former student, Professor Garrett Hongo.

CW: Has anybody ever heard of the book *What is the What?* by Dave Eggers? I didn't understand what the title meant—what's the "what"? Here is where it comes from. Since I'm supposed to impart wisdom to you, this is what I came up with. It's kind of simple-minded, but it has a certain *je ne sais quoi*...

(Reading): "When God created the earth, he first made us, the Muonyjang. Yes, first he made the Muonyjang, the first man, and he made him the tallest and strongest of the people under the sky."

"Yes, God made the Muonyjang tall and strong and he made their women beautiful, more beautiful than any of the creatures on the land."

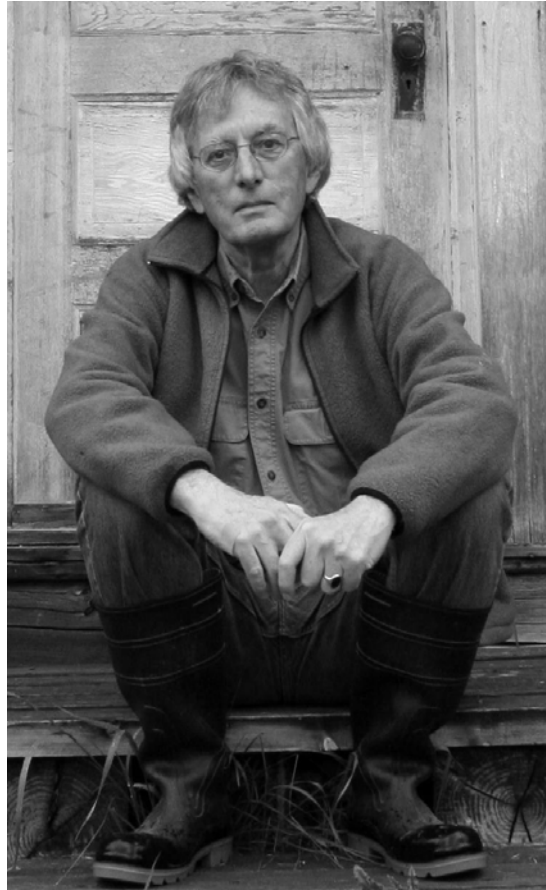
"Yes," my father continued, "and when God was done the Muonyjang were standing on the earth waiting for instruction, God asked the man:

'Now that you are here on the most sacred and fertile land I have, I can give you one more thing. I can give you this creature which is called the cow.'

"Yes," he continued. "God showed man the idea of the cattle. And the cattle were magnificent. They were in every way exactly what the Muonyjang would want. The man and woman thanked God for such a gift because they knew that the cattle would bring them milk, and meat, and prosperity of every kind. But God was not finished."—God's never finished—"God said, 'you can either have these cattle as my gift to you or you can have the "what."'"

My father waited for the necessary response. "But," Sadik said, helping out, "what is the 'what?'"

My father said, with an air of theatrical inquisitiveness, "yes, yes, that was the question. So, the first man lifted his head to God and asked, what this was, this 'what.' 'What is the "what?,"' the first man asked. And God said to the man, 'I cannot tell you. Still you have to choose. You have to choose be-



tween the cattle and the "what." Well, then. The man and woman could see the cattle right there in front of them. And they knew that with cattle they would eat and live with great contentment. They would see that cattle were God's most perfect creation and that the cattle carried something god-like within themselves. They knew that they would live in peace with the cattle and that if they helped the cattle eat and drink the cattle would give man their milk, would multiply every year and keep the Muonyjang happy and healthy. So, the first man and woman knew they would be fools to pass up the cattle for this idea of the 'what.' So, the man chose cattle. And God has proven that this was the correct decision. God was testing the man. He was testing the man to see if he could appreciate what he had been given. If he could take pleasure in the bounty before him rather than trade it for the unknown. And because the first man was able to see this, God allowed us to prosper. The Dinka live and grow as the cattle live and grow."

A grinning man tilted his head. "Yes, but uncle Dong, may I ask something?"

My father, noticing the man's good manners, sat down and nodded.

"You didn't tell us the answer—what is the 'what?'"

My father shrugged. "We don't know. No one knows."

CW: Take the cow. Take the cow. All poets and writers take the "what." And they live on a long and twisty and twiggy road. And they never find out what the "what" is. Take the cow.

GH: Well, I guess the first question is, what is the "what"?

CW: I don't know what the "what" is. I've been searching, I've been looking. The "what" is the indefinable otherness that we are not.

GH: You know, in a time when it was seriously unfashionable to introduce these kinds of spiritual questions, even to admit that one's interests and quests involved the

Wright

negative x, the "what," you took up these issues, these questions, in the midst of high accomplishment with two or three books already, *Grave of the Right Hand*, *Hard Freight*, *Bloodlines*, and you moved closer and closer to asking these questions even as you described the Southern landscape you came from, even as you described southern California where you lived, even as you engaged in imaginative conversations with ancestral poets, Li Po, Emily Dickinson, Leopardi. You never gave up questing for a kind of answer that we all know just doesn't come. What inspired you to be so foolish?

CW: I couldn't milk. I don't know. It's what was given to me to do. Some people have inside them an unanswerable question that they waste their lives on trying to figure out. And I guess I was one of these people. There are thousands of us. Millions, maybe. But, I was one of them. Also, I wasn't interested in anything else but

to try to figure out through the graces of language that which I couldn't see and that which I couldn't hear because it seemed a silly and impossible thing to do, though I did it. And, it's true it was very unpopular back then in the day. Of course, it's been popular for millennia. But, I don't know. I really don't know, and I'm not trying to be evasive. I had an Episcopal Christian upbringing which I darted from at the age of 16 because I thought it was silly. But then I guess I took up something just as silly. But it was in my own fashion. It wasn't a received form, as you might say. So, a lot of what I was taught or was exposed to as a child and as a young adolescent and as a young adult stayed with me. The questions stayed with me. Although I have somehow manipulated them into another way of progressing, or regressing as the case may be. Some people would say it was regressing.

GH: And yet your poems are shot through with the vocabulary of that faith and that training.

CW: One uses the vocabulary one grew up with, I think. And I do use that vocabulary. And probably to excess and maybe not even to effect. But it is what I have and what I use.

GH: And from that vocabulary you've built other tiers of learning and language. Being informed of Chinese poetry, the great tradition of Western literature itself, and a very specific group of figures like Dante, Tasso, Leopardi, and your poems reach out to these literary figures for not so much solace, but company, in a way. It's always a gentle reach and in another line you might invoke Ancient of Days, you might invoke something from the Christian literature. How the hell did you do that, getting so mixed up?

CW: I don't know. I guess it's because I came from the only county in Tennessee that didn't secede during the Civil War. And I never knew which side I was on. I tend to write about things that interest me, that

plague my ears. And those poets you mentioned, the people you talk to—when you write, or at least when I write, you always write for the dead, for those who know what you're trying to figure out. Mostly, 'cause they're dead. They know. Or you think they know, so that's who you write for. You don't write for your mother. You don't write for your classmates. I mean, you may for a while, but deep down you know you have to get away from that. You write for the great dead. Or you write for the angels. You write for all of that business. You write for the "what." And you use the handholds you got. You don't just have to be a writer, obviously, to be concerned with this sort of thing. Also, if you read something and like it, you want to try to please that person. So, you kind of include them. And you take what they were doing and try to make it somehow different, but recognizable to them in certain aspects.

GH: And, in Verona, you found the poems of Ezra Pound for some reason.

CW: I found them before I left the states. I found them in a bookstore in New York. That old New Directions, black and white profile selected poems of Pound. And I'd heard his name, so I bought the book. I didn't read it then. And then when I got to my station, in Verona, there were a couple of guys. I was a lieutenant—this is ROTC. All my friends were privates, 'cause all the officers were stupid and dumb. And all the privates were smart and had gone to Yale and Brown and places like that. And so I started hanging out with them and one of them was a guy named Harold Shimmel who was already writing poems and stuff like that. And I said one day, "oh, I'm going to go out to Lake Gaurda"—Lake Gaurda is one of the beautiful Italian lakes right outside Verona—"to Sirmione." It's where the great Latin poet Catullus

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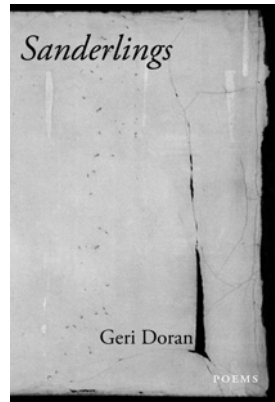
Faculty Focus: Poets Publish New Books



Gerri Doran

Gerri Doran published her second collection of poems, *Sanderlings* in June of 2011 with Tupelo Press. The book was a finalist for the 2012 Oregon Book Award.

“... the voice that within dirt / took root became the many-tendriled sound’ is the Roethke-like ‘germinal’ pulse that characterizes Gerri Doran’s distinctive second collection, *Sanderlings*. The marriage of this elemental voice with an elegant formal intelligence and a quiet, insistent, and probing imagination makes these poems truly remarkable additions to contemporary American poetry.” – Michael Collier



“What I love about *Sanderlings*, besides the ripening imagery, is the variety of expression. The poems don’t fix on a single way to regard our sense of living. There’s a powerful willingness to look into the natural diversity of thought and feeling, and Gerri Doran’s language is willowy and very fine.” – Carol Frost •



Garrett Hongo

Garrett Hongo’s newest book of poetry, *Coral Road*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in September.

"There is rage and beauty alike in Garrett Hongo's long-awaited and sublimely romantic book of poems, *Coral Road*. Hongo dramatically inhabits the Hawaiian past and honors his ancestors, both familial and literary, in a rich, triumphant, and indelible work of imagination." –Edward Hirsch



Hongo, along with poet Janine Oshiro received the 2012 Elliott Cades Award for Literature, the most prestigious literary award in Hawaii. He "...was honored for a lifetime of work that reflects his life in and out of Hawaii." – Hawaii Tribune Herald

In April, Hongo read at the Library of Congress and this spring, was Poet-in-Residence at La Macina San Cresci in Greve, Italy and a guest Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Florence. •

Creative Writing Minor Update

The Creative Writing Minor has proven to be a success! Since its induction in 2010, well over 100 student have declared the Minor, 85 of whom are currently active. As a result, the Program has substantially increased the number of undergraduate course sections it offers and is looking at the possibility of adding even more sections to meet student demand. •



Meet the Incoming Class!

Jordanna Brown (Poetry) is originally from England, but has lived mostly in the US (North Carolina, Washington, and Florida). She received a BA in English from the University of Florida last year. Since graduating, she spent nine months in Seattle leading a local library's poetry workshop, haphazardly reading, and falling a little unoriginally in love with the West Coast—its culture, food, wilderness, and rain. Her writing is most inspired by literature, creatures, travel, and people-watching. Jordanna is now living back at home with her family, fiancé, and two cats in Florida and works as an editorial assistant in an anesthesiology office. She's hungry to get back to school and start a writing life.

Daniel DeVaughn (Poetry) was born and bred in Birmingham, AL where, from a young age, he took to the forests and open spaces that are so profuse there. Always a lover of words and steeped in the traditions of the Word, he received his BA in English and Creative Writing in 2009 from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. That very same year he co-founded the DIY zine *Cumulus* with longtime friend Josh LaFayette. As editor, Daniel mined the underground talent of the Birmingham arts and culture scene while giving everyday folk a voice to speak out about city-wide issues. More recently, he released a book of poetry (illustrated by Mr. LaFayette) entitled *I Feel Capital!* Those oh-so-few moments that pop up between reading and writing are filled with playing the bass guitar and making graffiti t-shirts in the basement. Daniel is more than excited about the MFA program at Oregon, not to mention the (slightly) lower humidity.

Kelly Dwyer (Poetry) spent the first half of her life in northern

California, where she learned her love of nature through camping and hiking with her family. Then, in the midst of her middle school career, she and her family moved to Oklahoma. After countless angst-ridden phone calls and many tears, she began to appreciate the beauty of Oklahoma's vast, mutable skies and summer thunder storms. Kelly is thrilled to become a part of UO's MFA community. She will be moving from West Texas with her fiancé, Grayson, and their dog, Scout. The three of them are looking forward to discovering Oregon's many interesting sights (and smells).



Spencer Krauss (Fiction) is a 2009 graduate of San Diego State University. Born and raised in Southern California, he spent his formative years at Grossmont College, where he published work in *The Acorn Review*. A former dishwasher, copywriter, and plant service technician, he lives in Portland, OR.

Alexa Lachman (Fiction) was born and raised in South Africa and emigrated to Portland at the age of sixteen. After dabbling in community theater, macchiato making, and exotic cheese sales, she completed her BA (English) at the University of Oregon and remained there another year to complete her Master's in Education. She taught in Albany, OR for two

years before finding her dream job: teaching World Literature to juniors and seniors at South Eugene High School. During her five years at South, she founded and was the advisor for *Figure of Speech*, a literary magazine showcasing student writing and artwork. Her work with talented teenagers, especially geeky ones who love to read and write and discuss reading and writing, inspired her to apply to the MFA program to pursue her long-suppressed core passion: writing.

Michael McDermitt (Fiction) was reared in a sleepy town in west-central Pennsylvania and now lives in Pittsburgh. He is the co-founder and a contributing member of the **My Idea of Fun** artist collective that is based out of the flood-famous burg of Johnstown, PA. His writing and music are archived on the collective's website, along with a plethora of great art from better artists. He's spent much of the last seven years playing music all over the country and doggedly writing all the while. For Michael, the pull of both the Pacific Northwest and the Oregon MFA program is strong, and he's anxious to try out his new umbrella.

Charlotte Muzzi (Poetry) grew up in Duluth, Minnesota, and studied English at Carleton College. In the summer, she leads backpacking and canoeing trips in the Boundary Waters and the Rockies. Charlotte is currently working at Roosevelt High School in Portland, where she is helping to start a writing center in partnership with the University of Portland. She likes running, sitting on roofs, and cooking Italian food. She also really wants a dog.

Alycia Pirmohamed (Poetry) is a graduate of the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Originally a student of biology, Alycia's love of

New Students—Cont'd from page 4

poetry blossomed under the tutelage of Derek Walcott, with whom she completed a two-week writing intensive this spring on his home island of St. Lucia. Alycia's poetry combines elements of East Asian artistry and the everyday immediate to explore issues of gender, identity, and multiculturalism. Alycia has authored a number of chapbooks and been a feature poet at readings hosted by the Edmonton poetic community. She is very excited to pursue her MFA at the University of Oregon.

Jane Ridgeway (Fiction) was born and raised in Seattle, WA. She received her BA in English from Wellesley College, then defected to Los Angeles. She has worked as a box-hauler for a moving company, an adult literacy tutor, a botanical garden docent, and an actress's personal assistant. Her interests include: horror, science fiction, documentaries, playwriting, and the outdoors. Due to a government clerical error, she holds the dubious distinction of having spent six months legally dead, ending in the singular experience of making an ap-

pointment to prove that she was alive. She looks forward to her return to the Northwest.

Jayme Ringleb (Poetry) was raised with one foot in upstate South Carolina and the other in rural Northern Italy. He has received a BA from the University of South Carolina with concentrations in English, Film Studies, and Philosophy. After working with nonprofit organizations in Columbia, South Carolina, Jayme moved back to Italy to pursue an MBA through the University of Iowa's study abroad program in Asolo. There, he also had the opportunity to lecture for and direct a personal development and leadership program for undergraduates studying abroad. After graduating, he returned to his roots in the American South to focus on his writing. He now seeks out odd jobs. Jayme's latest has been farm work, which has had him corralling possums out of storerooms and prying hawks off ducks. It's been an admittedly curvy road for Jayme so far, but he's thrilled to find it leading him to Oregon.

Ellen Scheuermann (Fiction) was born in Washington D.C., where she grew up between an illegal boarding house and a Greek Orthodox church. Her fascination with the "Great Books" compelled her to journey a whole 45 minutes to St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland (not the basketball school). She graduated in 2007, and put her degree in philosophy and the history of math and science to work as a wine shop office manager, a restaurant reviewer, and a development assistant at the Smithsonian Institution. After moving to New England she became a full-time copywriter, as well as a fiction reader for *Ploughshares*. Currently she lives and writes in Somerville, Massachusetts, and is excited to move to Eugene with her fiancé Andy and her black lab Lady. And her books.

Lauren Walbridge (Fiction) was born in Chicago and grew up riding horses and exploring the woods of Richland, MI. She received her BA in English with a sub-concentration in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan. In 2006, she won a Hopwood Fiction Award, and her story "Water and Wood" was recently anthologized in the 50th Anniversary "Best Of" Lloyd Hall Scholars Program Literature and Arts Journal. In addition to writing, she's been known to moonlight as a musician, an editorial assistant, a shopgirl, and an equine caretaker. She continues to live in Ann Arbor, where she's worked with 826Michigan and The Collagist. When not writing, Lauren reads non-fiction and feminist theory, and spends her time cooking and hunting for vintage furniture. She has gone west to Colorado and Alaska, south for SXSW and BBQ, and is currently in Paris, contemplating how one might smuggle a boulanger in a suitcase. The BBC is her preferred news outlet, she loves Doctor Who, and she cannot wait to get to Oregon. •

Creative Writing Faculty Read at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, located on the UO campus, invited Creative Writing faculty members Garrett Hongo, Danny Anderson, and Ehud Havazelet to read their work.

Hongo read primarily from his new collection *Coral Road*, and Anderson from his forthcoming work *The Night Guard at the Wilberfore Hotel* as well as some earlier poems. Havazelet read his short story "Gurov in Manhattan," which appeared in the *Best American Short Stories 2011*. •

JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART

LITERARY READING

Creative Writing Program Professor and Distinguished Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences

Garrett Hongo



will be reading from his new book of poems, *Coral Road* (Knopf, 2011)

Wednesday, February 15, 2012 at 5:30 p.m.
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Ford Lecture Hall
1430 Johnson Lane on the UO Campus
Reception and book signing to follow.

JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART

LITERARY READING

Creative Writing Program Associate Professor of Poetry

Daniel Anderson & Ehud Havazelet




will read from his first new book, *Letter*, and share an original or unpublished story from his new collection, *Which appeared in the Best American Short Stories 2011*.

will read his story, "Gurov in Manhattan," which appeared in the *Best American Short Stories 2011*.

Wednesday, April 11, 2012 at 5:30 p.m.
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Ford Lecture Hall
1430 Johnson Lane on the UO Campus
Reception and book signing to follow.



Student News

2012-13 Fellowship at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing



Sarah Hulse ('12) was named the 2012-13 James C. McCreight Fiction Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. The fellowship carries with it a \$27,000 stipend, generous health benefits, and a one-course-per-semester teaching assignment. Hulse plans to revise her novel *Black River*, drafted while in the MFA Program, as well as begin work on new short stories. Her story "Roses" was published in the Spring 2012 issue of *Witness*; her story, "Breakwater" in *Salamander* •

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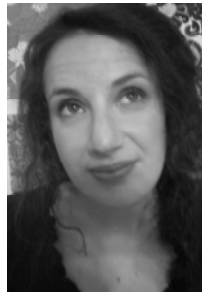
2012 Oregon Literary Arts Fellowship



Zondie Zinke ('13) was awarded a fellowship from Oregon Literary Arts "to help Oregon writers in the early stages of their careers initiate, develop, or complete literary projects." She also received a grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation which provides "emerging playwrights, short story writers, poets, and unpublished novelists with one-time funding that will enable them to live and work for a period of time as a writer" •

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Richard & Juliette Logsdon Prize in Fiction



The Richard and Juliette Logsdon Fiction Scholarship is awarded to a second-year MFA student for work of exceptional merit. Richard Logsdon had himself won a writing award in 1971, the Sarah Harkness Kirby Award from the UO English Department for the best graduate student essay, and that validation boosted his self-esteem and confidence. This is the Logsdon's way of similarly supporting other students.

2012 Recipient : **Sarah Gurman** (fiction '13) •

The Penny Wilkes Scholarship in Writing and the Environment

This prize is awarded annually for "writing that has some connection to the environment and that shows a human relationship to the environment," Penny Wilkes explained when she endowed the award. "Nature provides the perfect venue for writers to get into the mode of employing all of the senses."



2012 Recipients :
Graduate
M. Paul Pickering
Undergraduate
Naomi Parrott Halpern •

Walter and Nancy Kidd Memorial Writing Competition

Poet Andrew Hudgins and fiction writer Randall Kenan judged the 2012 Kidd Memorial Writing Competition. Winners were announced on May 10, 2012, at the Creative Writing Program's Reading Series event featuring Randall Kenan." •



FICTION

1st – Faire Holliday
2nd – Rebecca Freeman
3rd – Matthew Tellam

POETRY

1st – Lauren Greenhill
2nd – Edward Earl
3rd – Noelle Petrowski
Honorable Mention –
Roxanne Mckee

L-R: Faire, Matthew, Edward, Lauren, Noelle, Roxanne; Front: Rebecca



Miriam McFall Starlin Poetry Award

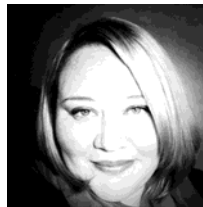
This award was established in 1997 by the late Glenn Starlin, Professor Emeritus in Theater and Telecommunications, as a gift to his wife Miriam on her 80th birthday. It honors a promising graduate student of poetry in the program. Miriam Starlin, a poet herself, has had a life-long dedication to writing poetry and has supported poetry on the campus and in the surrounding community.



2012 Recipient : **M. Paul Pickering** (poetry '13) •

The Karen Jackson Ford Poetry Prize

To honor the legacy of the former Creative Writing Program director, the program, with a donation from MFA alum Lance Patigian, created the Karen Jackson Ford Poetry Prize. This award, which features a cash prize of \$1,000 for "a poem honoring the imagination and human cultural geography in the aftermath of displacement, Diaspora, and immigration," is selected on the academic and creative merits of a poem written by a graduate student in the MFA Poetry Program.



2012 Recipient : **Jessa Heath** (poetry '13) •

Reginald Shepherd Memorial Poetry Prize

The Reginald Shepherd Memorial Prize in Poetry and Poetry Criticism honors poet and critic Reginald Shepherd (1963-2008) and seeks to "support poetry that reflects classical and modern sensibilities in language of precision and beauty."



2012 Recipients : **Lucas Andino** and **Naomi Parrott Halpern** •

Alumni News

Michael Copperman's ('06) work appeared in *The Sun*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Camera Obscura*.

Debra Dean's ('92) third book, a historical novel titled *The Mirrored World*, will be released from Harper Collins Fall 2012.

John Higgins ('96) is the recipient of a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship at MIT for the 2012-13 school year.

Christian Knoeller's ('81) work appears or is forthcoming in *About Place*, *Bluestem*, *Digital Paper*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Platte Valley Review*, and *South Carolina Review*. He also received the 2011 Gwendolyn Brooks Prize for Poetry from the Society for the Study of Mid-western Literature.

Brandy Nalani McDougall's ('01) article "Ma ka Hana ka 'Ike (In the Work Is the Knowledge): Kaona as Rhetorical Action," co-authored with Dr. Gorganne Nordstom, was selected by the Conference on College Composition and Communication as the winner of the 2012 CCCC Braddock Award.

Philip Memmer's ('95) *The Storehouses of the Snow: Psalms, Parables and Dreams*, was published in February by Lost Horse Press.

Michelle Peñaloza's ('11) poems appeared in *Bellingham Review* and *Great River Review*.

Bob Reiss's ('76) 18th book, *The Eskimo and The Oil Man* was published by Grand Central Publishers in May.

Susan Rich's ('96) poems were published or are forthcoming in *The New England Review* and *The Southern Review*. In addition, she is co-editing *The Poet in the World* with alum **Brain Turner** ('96), to be published by the Poetry Foundation and *McSweeney's*.

Natasha Sunderland's ('11) story "Eight, Nineteen, Twenty-Seven" won second place in Indiana Review's Fiction Contest (summer issue). •

Congratulations

to all of our award winners!



2011-2012 Reading Series



Michelle Latiolais

Fiction Writer

Opening our Series, Michelle Latiolais read from her recent collection *Widow: Stories*, a *New York Times* Editor's choice selection. Latiolais is the author of two previous novels, *A Proper Knowledge*, and *Even Now*,

which earned the Gold Medal for Fiction from the Commonwealth Club of California. She is a Professor and co-director of the Programs in Writing at the University of California at Irvine.



Charles Wright

Poet

In November the program hosted poet Charles Wright, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the National Book Award, and the Griffin Poetry Prize, and author of nineteen collections of poems. Wright read from a range of his work, including new poems not yet published. Prior to his retirement in 2010, Wright taught at a number of prestigious universities: U Cal at Irvine, Columbia University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Virginia. He has also been a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Padua, as well as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Università Degli Studi, Florence, Italy.

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Jason Brown

Fiction Writer

During Winter term, the Program welcomed its newest faculty member, Jason Brown, who read his story "Wintering Over" published in the Winter 2012 issue of *The Southern Review*. A former Stegner and Truman Capote Fellow at Stanford, Brown is the author of two collections of short stories, *Driving the Heart and Other Stories* and *Why the Devil Chose New England For His Work*.

Prior to joining the Creative Writing Program at the U of O, he taught in the MFA Program at the University of Arizona.



Geri Doran

Poet

In February the Program's own Geri Doran read her poems to a full house: extra chairs were brought in and late guests were left with standing room only. Doran's *Sanderlings*, released July 2011, was nominated for an Oregon Book Award and her prior collection, *Resin*, was selected by Henri Cole for the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award.

She is the recipient of the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, as well as fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Portland's Literary Arts.



Andrew Hudgins

Poet

April brought Pulitzer and National Book Award finalist Andrew Hudgins who read from his most recent collection, *American Rednering: New and Selected Poems*. Among his awards and honors are the Poet's Prize, the Ohioana Poetry Award for lifetime contribution to poetry in Ohio, and the Witter Bynner Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Hudgins has published seven books of poetry and two collections of literary essays. He is Humanities Distinguished Professor in English at Ohio State University.



Randall Kenan

Fiction Writer

Our final guest, Randall Kenan, read from his novel-in-progress, *There's a Man Going Round Taking Names*. He is the author of four books, including the collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, nominated for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and among *The New York Times* Notable Books of 1992.

Among his honors are: a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, and the Fellowship of Southern Writers. He currently teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in Pine Manor College's low residency MFA Program. •

Wright

supposedly had a villa—who knows if he had a villa there or not, but that’s the story. And Harold said, “oh, well you’d better read this—take this poem.” I’d loaned him the book because he wanted to read it,—I still hadn’t read it yet. That’s how hip I was. And he said “read this poem, it’s about that place.” And I did and I was smitten by it. So I stared trying to imitate it, as we all do.

GH: And this was the poem, “Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula?”

CW: “Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula,” Yeah. Which is a phrase from one of Catullus’ poems. And it’s really not a particularly good poem—it’s very Victorian or Edwardian as Pound was in those days. I don’t know if anybody even reads Ezra Pound anymore, but you should if you haven’t. You know it started out with, “What hast thou, oh my soul, with paradise?” Well, there’s a catchy opening. “Will we not rather, when our freedom’s won, / Get us to some clear place where the sun / Lets drift in on us through the olive leaves / A liquid glory? If at Sirmio,” etc., etc., and I said, God, that’s beautiful. I thought it’s beautiful because it’s in iambic pentameter, but I didn’t know what iambic pentameter was. It just sounded so good to me. I didn’t even know what iambic pentameter was when I got to the University of Iowa workshop by mistake because no one ever read the manuscript that I had sent in. Jesus, it was awful. But I sent it in August, that’s how hip I was, and school started in September. And—just to continue this aside—in the first workshop session, the first comment that was by someone that turned out to be a great friend of mine and still is and a very famous poet, Mark Strand, he said, about my first workshop poem, “I don’t think the iambic pentameter’s working very well in this poem.” He was just trying to be provocative, you know, he was sort of coming in and

marking his territory because it was our first day. And I said, hell, I’m dead-meat, I don’t even know what iambic pentameter is. So, I never opened my mouth for the next two years. But I did figure out what iambic pentameter was and, anyhow, to go back, that was where I got interested in writing poems. And since I was in the Army and in a foreign land, the only books available to me were in the Army post library which had T.S. Eliot (and certainly had no Ezra Pound) and Robert Frost which was a good thing. I don’t think it had any Dylan Thomas, but he was so famous as an iconic figure at that time that I read some of him. And that was it. And I’d applied to the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism because I thought I wanted to be a journalist—I knew I didn’t want to be a business person. And I got accepted. I got accepted because the dean of the graduate school of journalism turned out to have been the college roommate of the faculty adviser to my fraternity of which I was president my senior year. So, that’s how I got in that school. It was through no wonderfulness of my own. And so I decided not to go there. I wanted to write poems. I had to write poems. I was just taken with it, after reading through the poems of Pound and reading Eliot and going around Italy. And so, I sent in a manuscript and it was when nobody was there in August. But I had a B average from Davidson College, so I was admitted into the Graduate School. I thought that meant I was admitted into the writing program, so I showed up. I signed up and started—it was disorganized in those days. We were in a Quonset hut in the old days at the University of Iowa—and I started going to workshops and being totally stricken that I had no business being there. But, I ran fast, you know, I ran real fast. And finally at the end of the first year I asked my teacher Donald Justice, I said, “how in the hell did I ever get in here. I know what I sent.”

And he said, “oh, I don’t know, I didn’t read it. It was in August, I was gone. I was in Florida.” He said, “ask Paul”—Paul Engle who’s the other one. And Paul said, “I don’t know. Ask Don, I didn’t read it.” So, obviously, nobody read it—I just showed up. The only good thing about this is the other two people I know who were never formally admitted into the workshop, but showed up and started taking classes were James Tate and Philip Levine. So, at least it was pretty good company.

GH: Pretty good company.

CW: Anyhow, I felt very fortunate to have gone to an MFA program because it taught me basically everything I had to know and then to unlearn. That’s the purpose of an MFA program—to learn certain basic things and then to unlearn them in the coolest, slickest way that you can. But you have to get them unlearned otherwise you’ll keep on writing that same god-damned poem for the rest of your life. You can’t do that. You can’t do it. Some people do it. Too many people do it. Everybody but me does it—nah, ha ha.

GH: Let me talk about your affection for the Chinese poetry. We’re

Wright — *Cont’d on page 10*

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Alder Building News

This year, the Creative Writing Program gained a significant amount of space on the third floor of the Alder Building, home to the Program since 2009. GTF offices, formerly scattered among the first and second floors, have all been moved upstairs. The Kidd Fellow and Kidd instructors are now gathered in a spacious open office (306 Alder) while Intro instructors share a room down the hall (301 Alder).

Third-year GTFs and visiting adjunct instructors share an office on the second floor (218 Alder).

As part of the space allocation, 104A is the new CRWR main office and Business Manager, Julia Schewanick, is now in 107, near the building's back entrance. •



Wright

talking mainly here, as I understand it, about the poets of the T'ang dynasty, 6th to 8th century China A.D. Li Po, Tu Fu, Wang Wei and D'ang Ming. In their poetry, I read, that spirit is very much in the landscape. It's almost a Daoist imminence. And as you commune with that landscape, as you describe it, as you invoke it in measure and tones and rhyme, in Chinese the theory is that the spirit of the land arises, sort of like Spiritus Mundi. And that seems to be also your method—that you see the spirituality of the landscape.

CW: That's where it is, that's where spirituality is—in the landscape. That's what I liked about it, and that's what I tried to get into my poems.

GH: Then you take it a little bit further. The Chinese would make a pronouncement, they'd take a surmial.

CW: And then they'd stop--

GH: Yeah, but they'd say, "How's good will persist. I watch the long

road of the river of stars"—you know that beautiful line from Li Po. And you ask very pointed spiritual questions. You know, "what is it that lasts from a man's life," "how do we see the angel's wing." They enter your poems like small pieces of harmonic canticle. And they enter in the landscape description and you pursue and wish and off' times, particularly starting when you were my teacher, you would impart a piece of wisdom that could last. A wisdom that I could hold in my memory and in my heart and say, just hold on there boy. It's almost...you're not an aphorist, but yet they come.

CW: That was when I thought I knew something, back before I'd figured out I really didn't know anything. And so I was full of the spirit. But it is true that I do think that, I mean, of course, the natural world is all there is. And you got to make as much a paradise out of it as you can. Everybody does it in his own way. Or makes an inferno of it in his own way. But, landscape is what pleases my eye, therefore, I find in it what I might

think is on the other side of the landscape, which is actually *in* the landscape—and I talk about that. It's very difficult to talk about this stuff as you well know, although you do it pretty well, a lot better than I do. I go on instinct a lot...

GH: Don't put me on the spotlight, you're on the spotlight.

CW: I know. But it's a tiny spot.

GH: I just have a couple more questions and then I'd like to open it up a bit. Like I said, I was going to try to get a little fancy. Here's a question I prepped. In *Della Pittura (On Painting)* by Leon Battista Alberti, he writes about "historia," that the proper subject and ambition for serious painters is an episode from the Gospels. And that's how you build inspiration, that's the proper subject to paint—that these paintings then become illustrations of the movement of the soul. He was talking actually about the Fra Angelico that we mentioned the other night. In your poems, which are situated in the everyday, I also see movement of the soul. How can we say that we can take the everyday and yet approach the everlasting?—because I don't doubt that that is what's going on in your work.

CW: The everyday is the everlasting, you know. It is. And if it's not for you, you better forget about it because there's not going to be any other choice whether you take the "what" or the cow. But the everyday is where we live, and if we don't live we can't write and if we can't write we can't live. Once you set your foot on the dark and twiggy trail, you have to keep following it, wherever it leads you. And you got to hook it up to the everyday, you can't just float out in the clouds. You don't want to be a non-objective person even though the objective is subjective. In other words, the objective thing is not the object, but what's beyond the object. But you gotta talk about the object first before you can get into ideas beyond it. And

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where the soul is, who's to say, you know. It's probably just in the language. But it's a pretty concept. And, I don't know how to answer these kinds of questions, that's the problem. I've spent all my life trying to figure out what the "what" is, and I can't, I don't. But you get there by—and this is what the Dinka didn't know—you get there by taking the cow and doing something with it.

GH: That sounds strange...
 (laughter)

CW: I don't mean that. You know, you take what's offered you in the natural world and you try to make something otherwise of it. Or at least, I do, I have that compulsion to do it. That doesn't mean everybody does. William Carlos Williams didn't do that and he's a great poet. Hart Crane didn't and he was a great poet. I don't know. There are no answers to these questions. You know that.

GH: I said I never ask a question unless I know the answer.

CW: Well, then, you know everything, 'cause I don't know anything.

GH: Well, I wonder if there's a question or two from the audience. My questions were mostly fairly general. I know there a couple of very specific questions that people wanted asked. One of them is about a poem in *Sestets* called "Little Ending." What do you mean, or can you comment on these two phrases: "black scratch," and "the untouchable road?" Can you talk about those?

CW: Well the untouchable is unspeakable about. It's the untouchable road at the end of the end. "Black scratch in our eyes" is the dirt of this world, I guess, and that's what's go-



Photo: Michelle Cuevas via uvmagazine.org

ing to lead us to the untouchable road. We don't know what's at the end of the untouchable road, but somebody's going to be there. We hope. And I like the phrase, "black scratch." That's the other thing. A lot of things come up in poems because you like the phrase. But don't fall in love too much with liking the phrase because then you start to drift off into a dream of glory that will never come. •



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