

New Fiction Faculty

Interview with Mat Johnson

by Mark Hennion, MFA Fiction '20



In Fall 2018, the Creative Writing Program welcomed Professor Mat Johnson. In a shared appointment with the Department of English, Mat expands offerings in fiction and comic studies. Welcome aboard, Mat!

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MH: You are a really busy writer—you've published four novels, a nonfiction book, comics, and work in screenwriting. What are some of the challenges of working in different genres?

MJ: I don't feel like I've done a lot (laughs). It sounds like a lot, but then you divide it by 20 years. When you look at it that way, I think I've been a steady writer. I'm not a fast writer. I think that leads into how I've been able to do the other stuff because there's been massive breaks in time when I'm working on a novel or

when I'm working on a graphic project...when I'm trying to do something: TV writing, whatever. Usually it's like two years here, two years there, and the times will vary, but a lot of times when I finish a project, I need to clear my palate. It's helpful for me to work in a completely different genre basically. And medium. So the result is that I've had a far more eclectic career than I intended. It was probably the worst thing to do in a world where artists often become brands and they are associated with very specific things. I'm associated with being all over the place.

Johnson —
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Literary Reference

Poetry Faculty

Garrett Hongo
Daniel Anderson
Geri Doran

Instructor
Tia North

Fiction Faculty

Mat Johnson
Jason Brown
Marjorie Celona
Karen Thompson Walker

Instructors

Brian Trapp (Career)
Ulrick Casimir
Michael Copperman

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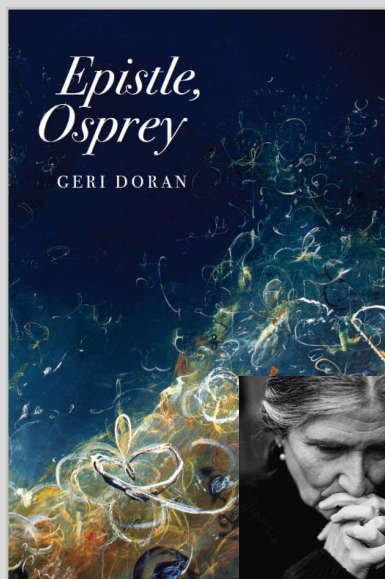
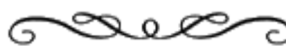
New Faculty Books



Jason Brown

Associate Professor
— Fiction

Jason's *A Faithful But Melancholy Account of Several Barbarities Lately Committed*, a novel in stories, is due out in October of 2019 as part of a short story collection series published by Missouri Review Books. Stories from the collection have been published or are forthcoming in the *Sewanee Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Southern Review*, *Electric Literature* and elsewhere. In 2018-2019, Jason published 14 stories and articles in literary magazines and anthologies and won a Pushcart Prize for his story, *The Last Voyage of the Alice B. Toklas*.



Geri Doran

Associate Professor
— Poetry

Geri's third collection of poems, *Epistle, Osprey*, will be published by Tupelo Press in summer 2019. In this new work, she continues to seek a quieter poem in a more natural form. Against the immediacy of troubled times, these poems retain a belief that long thought, solitude, restraint, and immersion in the world given to us (not made by us) are a means of passionate, even radical, devotion.



Contemplative and disquieted, the poems of *Epistle, Osprey* trace the mysteries of encounter, wanderlust, rootedness, the human relationship with nature, and our uncertain place in a startling world—here where “an eagle ascends with its broken feast.” ■

Faculty News



Daniel Anderson

Professor of Poetry

In the past year, **Danny's** work appeared in *The Missouri Review* and *Southwest Review*.

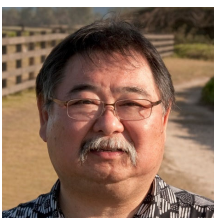


Marjorie Celona

Assistant Professor of Fiction

Marjorie's second novel, *How a Woman Becomes a Lake*, is forthcoming in March 2020 from Penguin Random House, Little Brown UK, and

Malpaso Ediciones (Spain). Marjorie was awarded a residency at the Millay Colony for the Arts and received a CAS Creative Arts Fellowship, both in support of her current writing project, a third novel. In the fall of 2018, her short story "Counterblast" was published in *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, chosen as a juror favorite by author Ottessa Moshfegh.



Garrett Hongo

Professor of Poetry

Garrett will be a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in August and, in September, Writer-

in-Residence at The Lemon Tree House Residency in Camporsevoli, Italy. His poem "The Bathers: Cassis" was selected to be included in *Best American Poetry 2019*. Other poems are forthcoming in *Terrain*, *Sewanee Review*, *Yale Review*, *Asian American Literary Review*, and *Literary Imagination*.



Karen Thompson Walker

Assistant Professor of Fiction

Karen's second novel, *The Dreamers*, was a *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice pick, a Goodreads Choice Pick, and an Indie Next Pick. *Jezebel* called it

"2019's first must-read novel." *The Dreamers* has been sold in nine foreign territories and optioned for television by Warren Littlefield (executive producer of *The Handmaid's Tale*) at Fox 21.

Student News

Starlin

Charles Neaves (Poetry '20) was awarded the **2019 Miriam McFall Starlin Poetry Prize**. "I know that poetry is not something static, fixed, or resolved," Charles observed in his application for the annual award, "but an art that survives through a constant conversation with itself." He intends to focus his time over the summer on "the careful study and interaction with the poetic tradition."



Logsdon

Marci Alexander (Fiction '19) received **The Richard and Juliette Logsdon Award for Creative Fiction Writing** for her story, "The Quiet Ones."



Sewanee

Poets Anna Ball (MFA Poetry '19), Amanda Cox (MFA Poetry '19), Haley Laningham (MFA Poetry '19), and Natalie Staples (MFA Poetry '20) were admitted to the **2019 Sewanee Writers' Conference**. ■



Brian Trapp

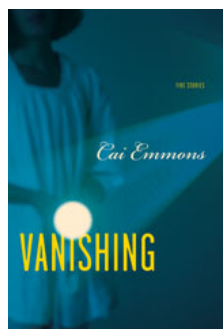
Career Instructor of Fiction

Brian's memoir essay "Twelve Words" is forthcoming in the September/October 2019 issue of the *Kenyon Review*. In addition, two of his essays will be anthologized: "Shower Songs" in *Best of Brevity* (Rose Metal Press 2020) and "My Neighborhood in Two Dog Parks" in *Welcome to the Neighborhood* (OU Press/Swallow Press 2019). This spring, he taught UO's first Introduction to Disability Studies class. ■

Alumni News



Cai Emmons
MFA Fiction '98



Cai is the author of five books: the novels *His Mother's Son*; *The Stylist*; *Weather Woman*; the story collection *Vanishing*, winner of the 2018 Leapfrog Press Fiction Contest, which will be published in March 2020; and a sequel to *Weather Woman*, called *Sinking Islands*, also forthcoming. Formerly a playwright and screenwriter, her short work has appeared in such publications as *TriQuarterly*, *Narrative*, and *Arts and Culture*, among others. She is a graduate of Yale University, New York University, and the University of Oregon where she taught in the Creative Writing Program from 2002-2018.

Tina Mozelle Brazier
MFA Poetry '13

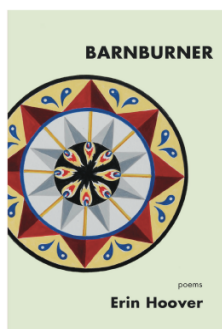
Tina received the 2019 Alabama State Council on the Arts literary fellowship for artistic excellence as well as professional commitment and maturity.

Call for Alumni News

Submit through our online portal:
<http://cwr.uoregon.edu/>
or email: cwrweb@uoregon.edu
Subject: CRWR Alumni News
Include: Name, MFA [genre], 'XX



Erin Hoover
MFA Poetry '05



Erin's debut poetry collection, *Barnburner* (Elixir Press, 2018), was named winner of the 2018 Florida Book Awards Bronze Medal in Poetry; was named a "favorite poetry book of 2018" by *Largehearted Boy* and by *The Adroit Journal*; and received the 2017 Antivenom Poetry Award. Her poems have appeared in the 2016 edition of *The Best American Poetry*, and recently in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Tampa Review*.

In Winter 2019, during her promotional book tour, Erin took time out to visit campus where she engaged undergraduate Kidd Workshop students in a craft talk.



Keetje Kuipers
MFA Poetry '06



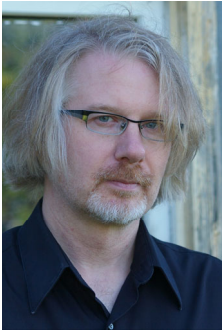
Keetje is the author of three books of poems, including *Beautiful in the Mouth* (2010), winner of the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize and a Poetry Foundation bestseller. Her second collection, *The Keys to the Jail* (2014), was a book club pick for *The Rumpus*, and her third book, *All Its Charms* (2019), includes poems honored by publication in both *The Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Poetry* anthologies. Her work has appeared in over a hundred journals, including *Narrative*, *Tin House*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Orion*, and *The Believer*. She now teaches at Seattle's Hugo House and serves as Senior Editor at *Poetry Northwest*.

Literary Reference Going Paperless

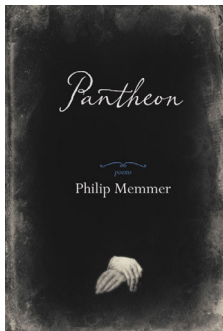
The UO's Creative Writing Program is always looking for new and innovative ways to better reach our faculty, students, alum, and writing community, which is why we are pleased to announce the program's annual newsletter, *Literary Reference*, is going paperless. This will be the last hardcopy publication. Moving forward, we will build and display our annual newsletter online in addition to releasing electronic copies via email.

We are reviewing available layout options to ensure our readers have easily readable online access and printable options. This new process will help us improve our ability to get important and exciting news to you. To review past issues, visit our website under Publications. ■

More Alumni News



Philip Memmer
MFA Poetry '95



Philip's newest book of poems, *Pantheon*, is brand new from Lost Horse Press (March 2019). He is the director of the Arts Branch of the YMCA of Greater Syracuse.

Joan (Thaler) Dobbie

MFA Poetry '88

Joan's work has appeared in chapbooks, anthologies and literary magazines online and in print. Her poem, *Woodstock Baby*, *A Novel in Poetry*, was published in 2013 and her new collection, tentatively titled *Love Song in the Language of Stone*, is due out in October 2019. She co-hosts the River Road Reading Series (RRRS) in Eugene, Oregon.



Alycia Pirmohamed
MFA Poetry '14

Alycia's forthcoming chapbook, *Faces that Fled the Wind*, was selected by Camille Rankine for the 2018 BOAAT Press Chapbook Prize. She was a 2019 winner of the 92Y/Discovery Poetry Contest, and in 2018, she won the Ploughshares' Emerging Writer's Contest in poetry. Alycia's work has recently appeared, or is forthcoming, in *The Paris Review Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Best Canadian Poetry*,

Claire Luchette

MFA Fiction '17

Claire's first novel, *Sister Agatha*, is forthcoming from FSG in spring of 2020. In 2018, she received fellowships and residencies from the MacDowell Colony, the Corporation of Yaddo, the Millay Colony, Lighthouse Works, and Blue Mountain Center. She will be the 2019-2020 Hopkins Post-Graduate Fellow in Fiction at John Carroll University.



Michelle Peñaloza
MFA Poetry '11

Michelle's full-length collection, *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*, recently won the 2018 Hillary Gravendyk National Poetry Prize and will be published in August 2019 by Inlandia Institute. Her work can be found in places like *Prairie Schooner*, *upstreet*, *Pleiades*, *The Normal School* and *Third Coast*. She is the recipient of fellowships from Kundiman and Hugo House as well as the 2019 Scotti Merrill Emerging Writer Award for Poetry from The Key West Literary Seminar. Michelle has also received scholarships from Lemon Tree House, Caldera, VONA/ Voices and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, among others.

Ndinda Kioko

MFA Fiction '18

Ndinda was selected as the *Black Warrior Review's* 2018 fiction winner for her story, "Little Jamaica." ■

Annual Giving Reminder



Consider giving to the **Creative Writing Program**. Your generous support helps us educate students, strengthen our program, and prepare tomorrow's writers—our future literary voices. There are a variety of ways to support the program and gifts of all sizes are a powerful investment in our mission and community. Whether you are making a one-time gift, making a pledge of recurring contributions, considering a planned gift, or establishing an endowed fund, donations to the program and program-related funds allow us to provide a competitive education for our growing body of undergraduates and graduate students.

The faculty and staff in the Creative Writing Program are committed to advancing the educational and scholarly mission of the university and we thank you for your generosity. For more information, visit our webpage: <http://cwr.uoregon.edu/give-now/>. ■

MH: Last year you gave a lecture to the Kidd Workshops, the University of Oregon's one-year undergraduate studio creative writing experience. In your lecture, you mentioned that in your experience many writing teachers neglect to or avoid teaching story structure and plot. Could you say a little more about that?

MJ: I think instructors definitely did when I was in school. I think it might have changed since then, but it's still rare. There's a lot of incredible work to be done in all these other parts of writing. Learning how to create characters? Incredibly important. Learning how to pull out the poetry of a line, how to find your voice? All of those things are incredibly important. So, I think learning about structure is part of that, but often, when it's talked about, it's done in loose ways that are difficult to decipher if you are trying to look from a craft perspective.

So, a lot of my attention as a teacher has been focusing on plot and structure because other teachers don't as much. Looking at the basic question of what defines a story as opposed to a collection of scenes—what is a story? What is something that builds to be more than the sum of its parts, so that it has some extra kind of magical element that goes bigger and resonates with us? Story is an incredibly basic thing. Most commercial fiction has some basic elements of story usually, but it's also, for me, an essential thing to truly enjoy a work completely. There are works I respect, but the works I connect with the most are the ones that have a story that moves me as well as beautiful prose, interesting insights. I'm trying to give the students an opportunity to learn how to do just a basic story. They can unpack that, reject that, or build on it. But all of those things still take an understanding of what it is.

MH: Are there any specific writers or teachers that taught in a way that contributed to your perspective?

MJ: Yeah, I mean a ton; we always look back on those people who influenced us. Everyone from my high school librarian who pointed me toward books, into graduate school. I was taught by Michael Cunningham at Columbia. He held my work to a standard that I wasn't holding it to at that time. Another teacher, Maureen Howard, was one of the first teachers who seemed to believe I could actually do it. The biggest compliment she ever gave to me was when she stopped me in the hall one day and was happy that I'd turned pages in for my thesis. She said, "I was just telling my husband: some writers

write, some writers don't...and you can write." Just hearing someone who can do it tell me I can write, the simplest comment in the world, had a big impact. You need those moments because there's so many dark moments. There's so much failure involved in writing. You need to remind yourself—there's a reason I'm doing this, particularly in those early years. As a teacher, that's one of my jobs. It's not just to critique, but to point out to people what is special about their work. I look back and I look at the teachers who criticized me, my work, and I'm thankful to them and the people who saw the value.

MH: Speaking of Columbia, your educational background is really diverse. You started off at Swansea, Wales, made your way to Earlham College in Indiana, and then ultimately ended up doing your MFA at Columbia. But it didn't stop there: as a teacher, you've taught at Rutgers, Bard, Columbia, and then ultimately at the University of Houston before coming here. Do you think that living in such a variety of environments has contributed to strengthening your work?

MJ: I think some of us are inherently wanderers. I started at another college even before Wales. So, I transferred twice. When I look back, though, I think it's a question of a long career. I spent the first four years of teaching writing full-time at Bard and, at that point, I realized I didn't just want to teach undergraduate writing. I also wanted to teach graduate level writing. I enjoy them both, but I didn't want to just teach undergrads. And then I was at Houston for 10 years, which felt like a long time, yet seemed like when I left it was kind of early. And I think that's the longest I've been anywhere.

The same thing that has made me flit around with different types of mediums has made me not want to stay in a place unless I was getting all of what I was trying to get out of it. What attracted me about Oregon was, after 10 years of teaching in a PhD program, teaching in an MFA program. I wanted to just focus on MFA and undergraduate writing, and I also had the opportunity here to be part of a new comic book program, the first undergraduate major in comic book studies. And it's just beautiful out here. I missed trees after being in Texas for a while. Those things combined and I felt I had one more move left in me as a teacher. I've got probably 20 years ahead of me in my career, and so Oregon is the best place to spend those decades.

MH: We're all told at some stage of the game "write what you know." To what extent do you think an author's work should originate from life experience, and if someone wants to write about something that's unfamiliar to them, what steps do they need to take to ensure they get it right?

MJ: For the most part, the adage is true but it's often misunderstood. "Write what you know" to me does not mean your literal story. It doesn't even mean the world that you know and only you know. It's incredibly helpful to write what you know emotionally. If you know what you're writing about emotionally that becomes a type of truth within fiction. It can be easier in some ways, if you already know the world within which it's set, the setting, but I think that matters less than your connection to the emotions of the characters who experience it. That's your empathetic entryway into the work. I was just teaching "Berlin," by Jason Lutes, and it's a 600-page graphic novel, and he wrote the first 200-pages having never been to Berlin. The entire thing is set there, and it still has a truth and honesty to it. He did a lot of research, but it really comes down to the characters and the emotions behind them. That said, I think it's incredibly challenging, an empathetic, artistic challenge to write about emotional truths you don't feel directly connected to. There's a higher chance of failure, but I don't think that even emotionally you have to line them up because when you go down to our most basic emotions there is a kind of crossover. We all suffer loss, we all have trauma, we all experience joy, hopefully. I'm looking for people to write what they know there.

And to build on that—the other part that's bigger is voice. It's usually very helpful to give all of yourself to that voice so that you're not holding anything back. The closer you can get to your own voice, the closer you're going to get to your own truth. In that sense: not everyone has to do it. But I think it can be powerful for the work.

MH: You divide your time between teaching in the English Department's Comic Book Studies program and teaching graduate and undergraduate creative writing. In my experience, when it comes to fiction writers, many of them have never read a graphic novel. What's something you think fiction writers could benefit from in studying graphic novels?

MJ: Good question. One, I think it is important for writers to do something outside their primary genre. We

have a whole generation of poets who are nonfiction writers now. Within prose, usually the deviation is only good for writing long form and short form fiction. I think it's incredibly helpful for any writer to do something else, whether that's poetry, nonfiction, or graphic writing. They all require different skills, they all open up different ways of thinking about story. Graphic novels force you to have an economy on the page that you don't have to have when you are writing prose. When you're writing a short story, you're not forcing it to a set page count.

When you're doing a graphic piece, because of the technology of printing, you go in saying "this is going to have to be an 8-page piece," and also, "how am I going to make it so when you turn the page, because you're instantly getting the story with the image, that you have reveals happen immediately with the page turn?" You're thinking in a way that doesn't allow you to have any fat in there. One of the difficult things for prose writers is keeping the fat out of our work, keeping it efficient, lean, and focused. With prose, if you are a stylist or your work has really insightful tangents it's easy to hide the fact that you don't really know how to tell a story because you can razzle dazzle them with other stuff, and then when they finish the piece and it doesn't feel like a story, [readers] say to themselves, "Well, I must not have risen to the challenge of understanding this, because there must be a story...this person is really talented." But, oftentimes, there's no story there. You can't get away with hiding like that in a graphic novel.

MH: If there's one thing that you could have every student you teach walk away knowing, what would it be?

MJ: That's a good one. It's so simple, but, it's that I think they can do it. Writing prose is very difficult and incredibly time-consuming. If you write long fiction it takes a really long time before anybody around you sees what you can do. When I first started working on a novel I hadn't published in any magazines. I wasn't doing any readings. Nobody knew I existed as a writer and my friends and family didn't believe that it was a real thing I was doing. So, I think when you go to the workshop it's important to be reminded that you can do it, you're capable of it, and it's also possible. The best workshops build people up and writers walk out feeling like they can climb a mountain. ■



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Emma Stockman

POETRY

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