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The Changing Face of Reading

Tonight, when you curl up with your bedtime story of choice, will the glow of a Kindle illuminate your sleepy face? In the morning, when you rise to apprise yourself of the world’s happenings, will you do so via an iPad, laptop, or smartphone? Will your day be punctuated by emailed communiqués from friends, family, and colleagues? One thing is certain: Reading isn’t what it used to be. Over the last thousand years, the texts themselves, and the ways in which we read them, have undergone a succession of thrilling transformations.

Of course, long before books, there were stories that spilled not from pens but from human throats. The first form of “reading” was a synthesis of listening and talking, an oral tradition perfected by indigenous cultures around the world, and still practiced by people everywhere.

Even with the advent of alphabets and the practice of writing, an emphasis on the human voice remained; this concern with the sound of words was a notable characteristic of some medieval literature. “During the Middle Ages in England,” explains Professor Kathy Lavezzo, “a lot of vernacular literature was written in alliterative form and therefore intended to be read aloud before an audience. In some of this literature, such as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (c. 1400), the author seems so excited about alliteration that at times he/she makes

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A Note from the Chair

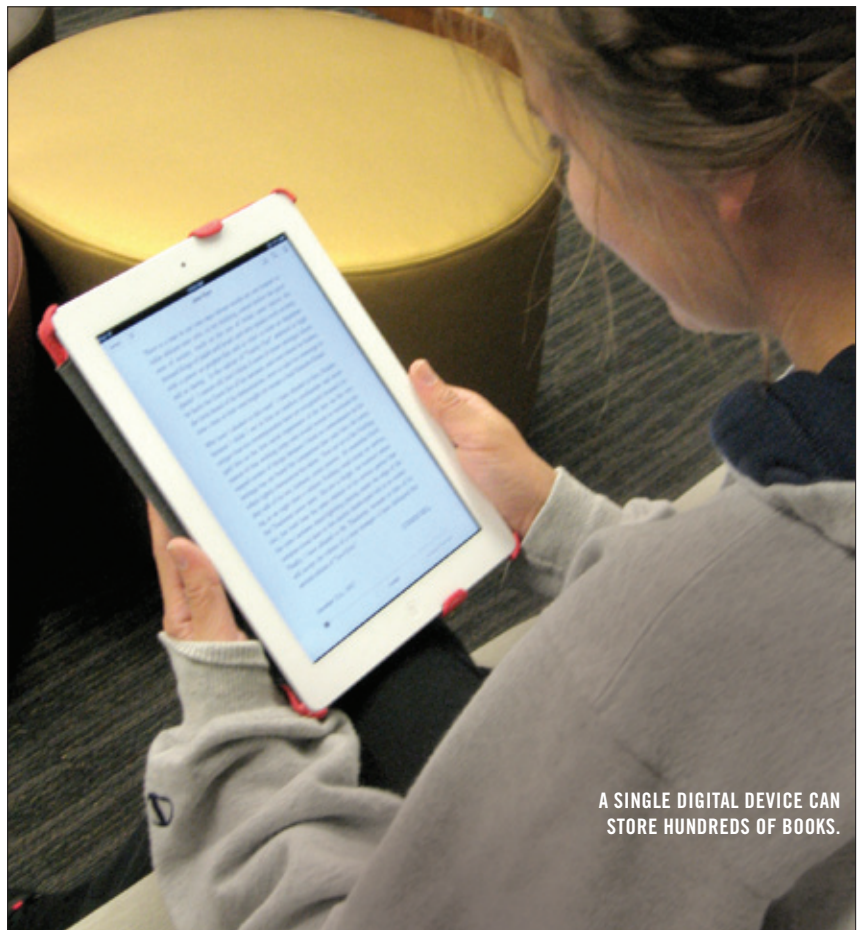
Claire Sponser

I have a pile of paperback and hardcover books on my bedside table; I own an iPad loaded with essays and novels; I go to readings and talks; I spend my research time in libraries, poring over manuscripts from the pre-print period; and, trapped in an airport, I even occasionally resort to reading fiction on the tiny screen of my cellphone. As the stories featured in this newsletter show, that range makes me a thoroughly modern reader (except perhaps for the poring-over manuscripts part) who takes her reading material where she finds it.

This is an exhilarating and also daunting moment in which to be a user and maker of literary texts, which now come in a dizzying array of forms. While I confess to an enduring fondness for the book as an object whose heft and feel and smell are fundamental to the pleasures of the text, other technologies for the delivery of the written word have insinuated their way into my readerly life.

I’m not alone. Apple recently boasted that the number of downloads for iBooks had reached

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A SINGLE DIGITAL DEVICE CAN STORE HUNDREDS OF BOOKS.

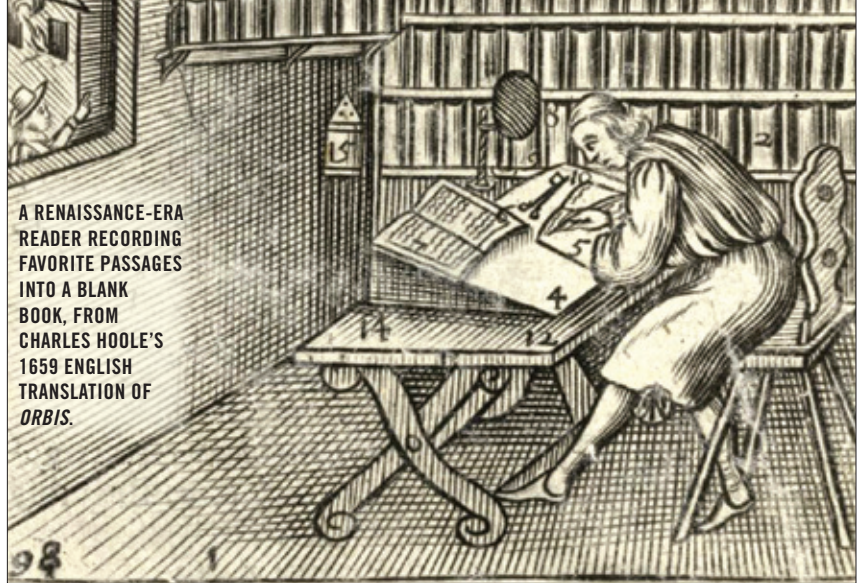
A Note from the Chair continued from page 1

two million, which, while a milestone for the company, is but a fraction of Amazon's 100 million for the Kindle. Kindle Singles—essays, short stories, and so forth—have alone hit 3.5-million sales. In a recent survey by Pew Research, 45 percent of those surveyed said they preferred e-books to print. It's hard not to think that our rapport with books, which has long been a vital part of culture, is undergoing a vast reshaping.

And yet. The dog-eared paperback in a student's backpack probably now jostles against a sleek Kindle or Nook, but that may not be cause for worry. History suggests that changes in media technology are often less a matter of replacement than of supplement. When the printing press arrived in Europe in the fifteenth century, it didn't obliterate the hand-written book, but instead gave it a new and different status. Even today, practitioners of the book arts continue to make books by hand—and to find an appreciative readership for their product. Of course no one expects manuscript books to re-surge to dominance over print anytime soon, but it would be a mistake to assume that print technology completely erased an earlier method of transmitting the written text.

The following pages show that one constant in the face of technological change is the deep engagement of our students and faculty with reading, whether the words appear in ink or digital bits. Students still read for pleasure as well as for their classes, still go to live readings by authors famous and just-rising. Faculty do, too, while also training their scholarly eyes on such topics as the materiality of medieval manuscripts, the marketplace of books in early-modern England, radio as a medium for cutting-edge literature, the influence of book prizes on African-American writers, the impact of publishing houses, Japanese fans of a classic British novel, and the book as an art-object, to name just a few of the recent reading-centered projects on which the department's faculty are at work.

It seems likely that books won't soon cease to be "the bees which carry the quickening pollen from one to another mind," as James Russell Lowell put it, even if the "book" now comes in forms vastly different from the cloth-bound codex of nineteenth-century America. Reading stays at the heart of what we do in the discipline of literary studies, no matter what shape our encounter with a text takes.



A RENAISSANCE-ERA READER RECORDING FAVORITE PASSAGES INTO A BLANK BOOK, FROM CHARLES HOOLE'S 1659 ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *ORBIS*.

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up words for the sake of consonance and at the expense of coherence. In this case, reading is about the sheer enjoyment of alliteration."

In the early modern period, readers were less likely to recite, and more likely to write; the act of reading was inextricably tied to that of putting words on a page. "In the Renaissance," says Professor Adam Hooks, "readers were trained to encounter a text with a pen in hand, in order to mark up—and hence actively engage with—the text. Simple reading alone was not sufficient; the proper scholarly reader needed to actively use the text, taking the time to fully comprehend its meanings and implications. Reading was also aimed at some practical or intellectual goal: a used text was inevitably incorporated into one's own writing." Consequently, a blank—or "commonplace"—book, Hooks explains, "was an indispensable tool for the Renaissance reader: here quotations from various sources could be collected, so that they could be retrieved and used at some later point."

This brings to mind the comparatively simple act of "bookmarking" a webpage. Today, texts are portable, downloadable, listenable, copy- and paste-able, and can be discarded and replaced with the quickness of a mouse click. We see them on displays as wee as two square inches and as wide as seventy feet—the width of a movie theater screen, which, today's English majors know, can be "read" as readily as a book.

The act of reading no longer requires the presence of words—be they spoken or printed—at all. Photography, film, television, the Internet, and an assortment of gadgets ensure that we are swimming in images, all of which serve as fodder for a thoroughly modern kind of reading. Today's most avid readers and critical thinkers realize that every picture really does tell a story. "The ability to 'read' an image," says Professor Miriam Thaggert, "as well as a literary text, shapes the face of reading now—to analyze the composition of a photograph with as much attention as we examine the structure of a narrative. Reading now recognizes the visually-inflected world we live in and studies how image and text work together to shape our world." Students in English courses such as *Popular Culture and Everyday Life in the U.S.*, *Topics in Film and Literature*, and *New Media Poetics* learn this. Meanwhile, the rest of us can learn by watching them.

"We learn a great deal about the future of reading by observing young people—what and how they read, with which technologies, and as part of what media cultures," notes Professor Stephen Voyce. "We are told that manic



ENGLISH MAJORS READ IN A MULTITUDE OF WAYS.

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A Course in Listening: Literary Readings Attendance

Iowa City is rife with readings. Whether they happen at the iconic Prairie Lights bookstore or other commercial venue, a lecture hall on campus, a neighborhood café, the historic Englert Theatre, or Public Space One, handfuls of them happen virtually every week. These readings are a natural feature of the lively local literary scene in which readers, writers (and, frequently, rapt listeners) find such inspiration and fulfillment. In her former role as Director of Undergraduate Studies in English, Professor Lori Branch considered this abundance of readings, and saw an opportunity for education and enrichment. She proposed a course called Literary Readings Attendance, which Professor Claire Sponsler has been teaching each semester since then.

“We developed the course to introduce students to the rich literary culture of the department, the university, and Iowa City, and to encourage them to expand their learning beyond the classroom,” says Sponsler. “We’re delighted that since its inauguration in the fall of 2010, the class has been a smashing success, attracting majors and non-majors alike, who’ve had the chance to hear exciting talks and readings by famous as well as emerging writers and scholars.”

Last spring, students in the course met just twice in a traditional classroom setting, once at the beginning of the semester and once at the end. Between those meetings, each student attended ten local readings, selected from the many that were featured on a regularly-updated calendar, which included such literary luminaries as Robert Leleux, Jennifer DuBois, Guy Delisle, Stephen Beachy, Stuart Dybek, Nancy Gertner, Philip Levine, Zach Wahls, Pico Iyer, and Dorothy Wickenden. The readings represented all genres, including fiction, poetry, memoir, history, and comic books, and also took the form of scholarly talks on literary topics.

“For the first readings I attended, I made sure to select ones I thought would truly interest me,” says Megan Henson, an art major who took the course. “As the semester went on, I began to broaden my horizons and started attending any reading. This spontaneity opened me up to new forms of writing I had never realized I was a fan of, like poetry.”

In addition to awakening dormant affections for unexplored genres, the readings inspired students to stretch beyond the insularity of college life. “As students at the University, it’s sometimes hard to connect with the rest of the Iowa City community,” says Marit Berg, an English major. “Many students exist in an entirely different world from the city itself. The aspect of attending readings that I love the most is the feeling of community. Whether it’s chatting with your fellow locals after the Q&A session, or just walking out together saying how glad you are that you came, that sense of community comes out at readings.”

In lieu of written assignments or exams, student composed summaries of the readings they attended. Still, says Ashley Kostos, a business major with two jobs, “the class is more work than it seems. I felt like it was my third job! But it exposes you to the world, and reminds you that there is more going on besides what your hectic life entails, or what is popping up on your facebook news feed. It reminded me that actual books are still out there. I think a lot of today’s society is based on technology, and people forget about real literature.”

Fortunately, that sort of forgetting is unlikely to happen in Iowa City. As English major Skylar Moore puts it, living here means “we truly have some of the best writers in the world in our own backyards.”

The Perils and Pleasures of Reading Aloud

Students in the Nonfiction Writing MFA Program are well acquainted with a very specific kind of reading—that which is done out loud, and in front of an audience. Here’s what some of them say about the experience:

There’s no revising the vibrations in your throat or the tingle in their ears or scrunch of their mugs with incredulity in their eyes: the audience judging the thing crawling in waves from your brain to theirs. Know your range stay loose at the knees pitch with your tongue and gut. Words are blueprints for how to scream.

—Joshua Wheeler, 1st-year MFA student

While I still dread readings, I’ve discovered that when I read my work out loud, often it begins to move in a way I had not realized it could when it rested on the page, and its rhythms can surprise me as emphasis falls on new places. Sometimes I discover that the ballad I thought I had written was actually a tango, or the torch song really just wanted to be a sea-shanty instead.

—Mieke Eerkens, 3rd-year MFA student

What amazes me about reading aloud was that people laugh at moments I never realized were funny. At one recent reading, an entire room started howling when a character referred to me as a “lovely young woman.” It felt like ages until they settled down. “What was so funny?” I asked after. “Oh THAT!” they said. “That was great. What a good joke!”

—Blair Braverman, 2nd-year MFA student

I still long for a crass crowd, intimidating and easy to read. An iron-livered, workworn gang overpaying their way into a thick hot room not from duty but in pure desire to come out ahead, whether by insight, hope, or a good phone number. In a rabble of folks who catcall and laugh loud when all’s well, and who heckle or turn away talking upon slightest stretch of threadbare attentions, I’d be forced to do what we’re all supposed to do when we come to the page: earn every word.

—Quince Mountain, 2nd-year MFA student



NONFICTION WRITING PROGRAM ALUMNA FELICIA CHAVEZ GAVE SEVERAL READINGS OF HER ORIGINAL WORK WHILE EARNING HER MFA.

“Artifacts of Desire”: The Not-So-Lost Art of the Book



LEFT: A HANDCRAFTED BOOK CREATED BY LIZ UNGER, A STUDENT AT THE CENTER FOR THE BOOK.

BELOW: AN IMAGE FROM ONE OF THE DIGITALLY-ARCHIVED MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES' SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

While the iPad and Kindle offer convenience and carry a decidedly sleek appeal, they cannot approximate the physical beauty of books, particularly handmade or antique books. Even when viewed as mere objects, without regard for the words they contain, books can delight—and haunt—the senses in ways no newfangled gadgets can. Like people, books' beauties are numerous and diverse. Each one, it seems, has a singular look, feel, smell, and sound.

If there's one place at the University of Iowa where an appreciation for books thrives, it's certainly the Department of English. But books are also at the heart of another program on campus: the innovative Center for the Book, which offers students the opportunity to study the techniques and artistry of bookmaking while researching the history and culture of books. Hands-on courses in papermaking, calligraphy, typography, bookbinding, and letterpress printing, as well as seminars like *The Book in the Middle Ages* and *Topics in Book History*, all help to both preserve and perpetuate a love and understanding of books.

English Department Professor Matt Brown is also a faculty member at the Center for the Book, representing a natural link between two disciplines, both of which inspire a spirit of attentiveness in students. “I think the art of reading we teach here in English shares with book craft a sensibility based on deep attention,” says Brown. “Cultivating this kind of focus, especially in an age of distraction, is one of the many virtues of a literary education and a book arts education. In a world of ‘more, faster, better,’ this ability to concentrate will actually distinguish arts and humanities students.” Readers of books, and those who craft them, develop a valuable and scarce skill: the ability to focus, to dwell in the present moment—at least some of the time.

“Readers have always been distracted, and historically there's been no shame in skimming and surfing within and across books,” concedes Brown. “The problem with digital devices is that they build in distractions, such as messaging, email, and commercials, that emerge from elsewhere.”

Sometimes, though, a synthesis of technology and tradition can promote an increased appreciation for the beauty of books, as Professor Jon Wilcox, who has a passion for medieval manuscripts, has

observed. “The moment is ripe for new understandings of medieval manuscripts as objects of study and as artifacts of desire. With the digital revolution providing ever greater access to ever higher quality reproductions, manuscripts are becoming available to more than just a handful of scholars with access to research collections.”

So, it is only thanks to the same digital technology that has brought us the iPad and the Kindle that people can now savor—albeit through a two-dimensional display—the exquisite contents of old books. Professor Judith Pascoe, who is fascinated by Japanese adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, is glad “to be able to access a digitized copy of the 1960s-era edition that turned many Japanese women into Brontë lovers. “But ‘accessing,’” she notes, “is not the same thing as turning the book's pages and smelling its binding.

Holding the actual book in my hand makes it easier for me to imagine those long-ago Japanese girls with their abridged rendition of Cathy and Heathcliff.”

It is these prosaic, yet potent, aspects of reading—the fragrance, the tactile pleasures—that prompt so many to panic at the prospect of the disappearance of true books.

“The new technology has brought plenty of anxiety, of course,” says Wilcox, “with polemics regularly lamenting the impending death of books or the end of reading as we know it. While such jeremiads may be unrealistically pessimistic, they have encouraged renewed attention to the specific properties of books, and medieval manuscripts are a vital early chapter of that story, constituting, as they do, a book form independent of print technologies.” Like the books crafted today at the Center for the Book, medieval manuscripts were truly one of a kind. “If the printed book exemplifies the industrialized processes of mass production with which it is so strongly connected, medieval manuscripts represent a model of craft production enacted by artisans, and this artisanal model may take on new resonance in a post-industrial world.”

For contemporary artists like the students at the Center for the Book, the artisanal model to which Wilcox refers resonates strongly. They, and their similarly enamored peers in the Department of English, who value the practice of reading words on paper, are gentle conspirators in the act of keeping books alive.



What We Read and How: English Majors Weigh In



Readers are no longer limited to paper books and periodicals. Recently, English majors shed a little light on what they read and how they read it.

In my opinion, there's nothing better than a tangible paperback book in which the pages can be bent. I enjoy holding a book and annotating my favorite scenes of novels to revisit. Recently, I savored reading *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, and marked some of my favorite sentences to look back upon for inspiration towards my own writing.
—**Sophie Amado, junior**

I get most of my recipes online, especially when I'm looking for something specific, but I like leafing through cookbooks for ideas. I would never have thought to search online for "Sweet Potato-Pear Tzimmes with Pecans and Raisins" (nor, if I'm being honest with myself, am I likely to make it), but hey, I've got the recipe!
—**Katherine Montgomery, PhD candidate**

I'm quite partial to the heavy hardcover Harry Potter epics. The weight of the words in my hands enhances the literary magic and effaces the obvious pragmatism a softcover or Kindle alternative would provide. The fatigue endured by my wrists is well worth it for the tribulation-filled tales of those mystic British teens.
—**Eric David Moore, sophomore**

I read a lot of online fiction on my phone. I buy and read comic books on my computer because I love the crisp colors and easy storage, but when it comes to books I'll always go for the paperback first. Audio books can be fun, though! I love reading the *Odyssey* just as much as a Batgirl comic. I love stories of all kinds.
—**Liz Silich, sophomore**

My hands passionately grip the edges of a book by Daniel Pink—my eyes, just as ardent, rage across the pages, gathering every Wisdom Nugget possible. Wisdom Nuggets are concepts that inspire epiphanies, reactivate the spirit, and can lead to success. When my mind and spirit are hungry, I grab a Wisdom Nugget Book, and read until I'm full.
—**Del-Marie Nelson, sophomore**

I tend to read fantasy/romance novels, and I am irredeemably in love with real, solid, paper books, as well as the bookstores they come from; part of me even hates ordering books online, since I feel robbed of the bookstore experience.
—**Stephanie Glennon, sophomore**

Literature comes from garage sales. When I was a student, physical books provided relief from endless ICON readings [for online courses], and maybe it's too soon for me to find an e-reader appealing. But it's also too soon for me to be employed, so I buy fifty-cent copies of Didion and Vonnegut while I raid the public library's new nonfiction and fantasy.
—**Rose Butchart, BA, '12**

I read on paper. I like to turn pages. I like to see spines on a shelf, to come across notes, receipts, and dedications, to be free of corporate language in lieu of that plain word "book." I have two young daughters now; I try to teach them that the world comes at us in many ways, not just through screens.
—**Mia (Nussbaum) Alvarado, MFA '07**

Dissertation-relevant texts make up the bulk of my reading, but I try to supplement them with recent and interesting material in genre fields like sci-fi, fantasy, and mystery. So instead of just reading Grossvogel's *Mystery and Its Fictions*, I get to dig into Tregilis' *Bitter Seeds* and Hurley's *Infidel*. All of my fun reading occurs on the Kindle.
—**Jacob Horn, PhD candidate**

Department News

IN MEMORIAM

We mourn the recent deaths and honor the memory of three emeritus professors:

ARCHIBALD CARY COOLIDGE, JR., who taught in the English Department from 1956 to 2001, died on November 28, 2011, at the age of 83. Arch taught 18th- and 19th-century British literature, with an emphasis on the novel. He was the author of numerous articles on Dickens and of a number of longer studies, including *Charles Dickens as a Serial Novelist* and *A Theory of Story*.

SVEN ARMENS, who was a member of the English Department from 1950 to 1987, died on December 20, 2011, at the age of 90. Sven was a scholar of wide interests, publishing books on John Gay, on archetypes of the family in literature, and on poetry, and teaching a broad range of courses, including Shakespeare.

ALBERT STONE died on January 13, 2012 at age 88. Al joined the English Department in 1977 and retired in 1991; he also taught and served as Chair in the American Studies Department. His specialization was American literature, with a focus on autobiography. His study of Mark Twain helped cement Iowa's reputation as a center of Mark Twain scholarship.

Professors Coolidge, Armens, and Stone had long and distinguished careers, during which they taught and mentored countless students with warmth and dedication, and published engaging and perceptive scholarship that has had a lasting impact on their fields. They will be sadly missed.

Got news? Let us know at <http://english.uiowa.edu/alumni/> (click on "Submit News") and we'll post it on our website.

View this newsletter online at www.english.uiowa.edu/news/outofiowa

Would you rather receive this newsletter by email? Drop us a line at english@uiowa.edu.

RETIREMENT



**DAVID HAMILTON, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
FROM 1975 TO 2012**

A note from a colleague:

David Hamilton, longtime editor of *The Iowa Review*, and valued member of the English Department and the Nonfiction Writing Program, retired this past spring, and it's rather hard for me to imagine the landscape of the NWP without him.

To me, David has been the most valuable of colleagues, someone whose own ambitions take a backseat to the needs of others, students and colleagues alike. The list of important writers he's mentored, both as an immensely important editor and as a teacher held in the highest regard, might fill a sizeable literary wall of fame. As a colleague, I will miss his open door, his unfailing invitations to sit down, followed by the question, "What's on your mind?" His own literary achievements, both in memoir and in poetry, while coming later in his career, give the rest of the world who might not be fortunate enough to know him in person, a chance to understand what has been on his mind. I will of course miss his legendary parties, but I hope that this great Iowa City literary tradition will continue for some time and that his literary output will continue to grow, as I'm sure it will.

I should add likewise that I first met David when I was 22 and a student visiting the offices of *The Iowa Review*. He intimidated me then by his erudition, and as a colleague, while I lost the sense of intimidation, my respect for him only increased. Never in my dreams did I imagine then that I would be fortunate enough to serve as his colleague, nor that I would be asked to dot the final "i" on his academic career, something I find impossible to do in this short space but something I see nonetheless as a great honor.

—Professor Robin Hemley, Director, Nonfiction Writing Program

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tweeting, text walking, and the chronic facebook updater fill the world with ephemeral, disposable language. Yet, one finds a handy riposte to this version of things in their dedication to Harry Potter novels and video games whose quests take months to complete. So it would seem the so-called Millennials love extremes, reveling in a seven-part epic whose vast symbolic arena echoes Homer's imaginative universe, whilst taking joy in Twitter's cheeky 140-character restriction."

Today's young readers both keep pace with and perpetuate reading's ongoing evolution. "The young have no problems moving between radically different media and border-blurring genres," says Voyce. "I see in my students a generation swinging wildly from that jungle gym of language we used to call the avant-garde."

If yesterday's avant-garde is today's conventional reality, tomorrow's reading practices will only further stretch our collective imagination, as well as our capacity for invention. What will abide, however, in spite of reading's perpetually changing face, is the love of words and the stories they shape—the very human craving for both true and invented tales that will last as long as we do.

Alumni News

BRIDGET DRAXLER (PHD 2011), Assistant Professor, Monmouth College, was awarded a fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities to participate in a 2012 NEH Summer Seminar on Jane Austen.

JENNIFER SHERER (PHD 2008) is Director of the University of Iowa Labor Center, which conducts educational programming for Iowa's organized workforce.

JESSICA DESPAIN (PHD 2008) is the editor of *The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition*, a hypermedia archive comprised of the illustrations, cover designs, and textual variants of Susan Warner's novel, *The Wide, Wide World*.

MATT MILLER (PHD 2007), Assistant Professor, Yeshiva University, is creating an online digital edition of *Lider: fun bukh: bleter groz*, the Yiddish translation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

LUCAS MANN (MFA 2012) has a book of literary nonfiction, *Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere*, forthcoming from Pantheon in 2013.

DYLAN NICE (MFA 2011) has a short story collection, *Other Kinds*, forthcoming in 2012, and teaches fiction and essay writing in the University of Iowa's Certificate in Writing Program.

JENNY LEWIS (MFA 2011) will be a visiting instructor in the English Department at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China for the 2012-2013 year.

ELENA PASSARELLO (MFA 2008) will join the MFA faculty at Oregon State University and publish her first collection of essays, *Let Me Clear My Throat*, in the fall of 2012.

RACHEL STEVENSON (BA 2012) is currently in the MA program in Medieval and Renaissance studies at Columbia, where she plans to continue researching women's reading practices during the early modern period.

BENJAMIN MEINERS (BA 2012) is pursuing his PhD in English and American Literature at Washington University in St. Louis, where he is studying 19th- and 20th-century American poetries, as well as gender and sexuality studies.

REBECCA MCCRAY (BA 2010) works as a paralegal in the Criminal Law Reform Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, regularly writes blogs for the ACLU, and teaches a creative writing workshop for formerly incarcerated women.

WENDY XU (BA 2010) is earning an MFA in poetry at the University of Massachusetts. She co-edits and publishes *iO: A Journal of New American Poetry / iO Books*, and her first collection of poetry, *You Are Not Dead*, will be published in 2013.



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Gifts to the Department of English help us continue to develop and thrive and, most importantly, enable us to serve current and future students by providing them with an education of incomparable depth and diversity. We rely on private contributions to support students, faculty, and the innovative initiatives that make ours among the highest-ranked English programs in the nation.

Graduates of our BA, MA, MFA, and PhD programs have gone on to make meaningful contributions in the fields of education, the arts, business, the nonprofit sector, and government—shaping the world in which they live with the understanding, compassion, and communication skills they gained as English majors.

Your gifts have allowed us to continue a range of important initiatives, including visits by eminent scholars and writers, conference hosting, undergraduate and graduate student scholarships and funding, and faculty travel to professional conferences. We thank you for playing a crucial role in the department, especially in light of the historic budget difficulties the University of Iowa has faced in recent years.

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