



# Out of Iowa

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## Welcome to Iowa

### Four new faculty members join the department

#### Kevin Kopelson

Grace Kelly? Now she's not camp," argues Kevin Kopelson during a discussion of camp sensibilities — the topic of an undergraduate course he'll be teaching next fall. "Grace Kelly is too perfect. She doesn't overestimate herself. There are no faultlines that you can identify with.

"With Maria Callas there's something different going on. What's interesting about her is that, as Wayne Koestenbaum argues in *The Queen's Throat*, gays love the Callas who's past her prime. They love the Callas who's persevering in the face of a kind of vocal physical breakdown. We see that as a glorious, divine coming through despite all the limitations that are placed upon us. It's not that gay men want Callas to fail, but they want that risk and they want to hear her overcome it."

Another icon of the homosexual community, Judy Garland, parallels Maria Callas: "She's always set against more glamorous women, people who are hard to identify with. We identify with the pain that she's constantly performing. As with Maria Callas, we like the fact that she has vocal trouble later in her career; even though it seems in those tapes that she's not going to make it, *she does*, and we get to celebrate our own overcoming of odds and limitations through her.

"Gays get to have *The Wizard of Oz* both ways. We get to see her escaping a terrible limiting domestic scene and living in this glamorous land of make believe. She gets to escape Kansas. There's a t-shirt that has a gingham tablecloth with a note on it that says: 'Aunt Em — Hate you, hate Kansas, taking the dog, Dorothy.' That's one wish fulfillment. The other is that she gets to come home again. So many gays are alienated by their families. What they enact through her is the fantasy

### Retirements

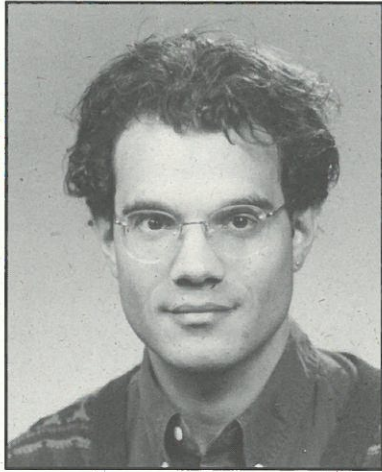
This year saw the retirements of Harry Oster and Ray Heffner, both longtime members and senior professors in our department.

Professor Oster, who joined the department as an associate professor in 1963; is a distinguished American folklorist, known especially for his collection and production of American folksongs.

Professor Heffner, whose career in administration took him to the position of vice president and provost of the Universities of Indiana and Iowa, and to the presidency of Brown University, returned to our English faculty in 1973 as a professor of renaissance literature. He is best known for his study of Ben Jonson's comedies; he has also long hosted "The World of Letters" on KSUI/WSUI.

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that no matter what she really is, or where she goes, she has a place at home where she will be loved unconditionally."



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## Gays get to have The Wizard of Oz both ways.

—Kevin Kopelson

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Kopelson is working toward a theory of camp. "It's tough to get at how subversive camp is," he says. "It's not subversive if the audience doesn't pick up the ironies or the parody." Kopelson's class will attempt to understand the rules that govern the way a camp performance is interpreted by its audience.

One of those rules, he says, involves the theory of performativity. "Foucault would describe camp as a very aggressive reverse discourse. With transvestism or female impersonation what you have is a group of people saying: 'You say I'm inverted, you say I'm effeminate, fine that's what I am, and I'll be in your face about it, and in the course of doing so I'll get you to realize that all gender, including your own, which you think is so stable, is basically performative.' "

In the mid-seventies, Kopelson attended Julliard, where he studied concert piano. His fascination with the piano hasn't dimmed; now he's at work on a book, "The Sexual Virtuoso," which focusses on how audiences understand and react to romantic pianists. He's particularly interested in conflation of piano performance and the performance of sexualities.

After working as a corporate litigator for four years in the early '80s, Kopelson grew weary of that work, and headed to Brown University's English program, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D. (1991). His first book, *Love's Litany: The Writing of Modern Homoerotics* will be published by Stanford University Press next year. □

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## Fred Moten

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Jazz is crucial to my work," says Fred Moten, "It is the lens through which I see everything. I think about ways I can bring to bear the lessons of jazz on a whole range of discourses that may be seen, inaccurately, as above jazz."

Like the study of Shakespeare, for example. In his undergraduate Shakespeare class next fall, the thirty-year-old assistant professor says he may ask students to consider ways in which Shakespeare is an improvisational writer. He points to a few of Viola's lines in *Twelfth Night* to help prove his point:

*Make me a willow cabin at your gate;/And call upon my soul within the house;/Write loyal cantons of contemned love/And sing them loud even in the dead of night;/Halloo your name to the reverberate hills/And make the babbling gossip of the air/Cry out 'Olivia!' O, you should not rest/Between the elements of air and earth;/But you should pity me! (Act 1: Scene 5;ll. 250-58)*

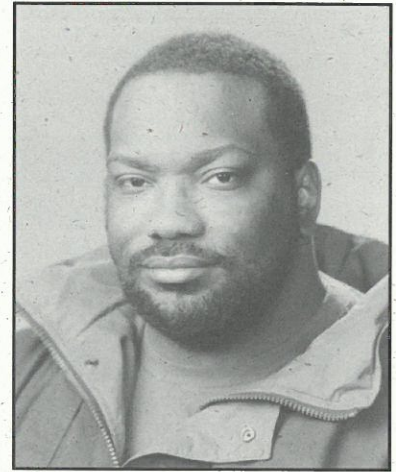
"I'm stealing from my teacher Stephen Booth here, but often in Shakespeare, upon our first hearing, we have this sense of understanding, but upon second and third reading we begin to become distanced from his words, and ask ourselves: How did we understand that? How is it that I like it? It's like listening to Thelonius Monk."

Moten, a Ph.D. candidate at University of California, Berkeley is focussing his doctoral dissertation on Amiri Baraka's "The Burton Green Affair," an essay written in 1966. The essay is about a white pianist, Burton Green.

"Green was into avant garde or free jazz. Baraka saw free jazz as fundamentally a black thing, the apotheosis of African-American expressiveness. It was problematic for him to think about a white musician playing this music. Green was playing with two black saxophonists, Pharaoh Sanders and Marion Brown. The essay is essentially a review of the show. Baraka was trying to abstract Green from the music; maintain the music while eliminating Green from it.

"The rigor of jazz is different from the rigor academics speak of," says Moten. "Its rigor is not determined by the opposition of feeling and reason, but rather it's an improvisational rigor. In jazz you can find a sense of the whole within the ensemble. The ensemble is a resolution of the one with the many which philosophy has been very much in search of, but never quite able to find."

Moten received his A.B. degree from Harvard University in 1985. In the fall, in addition to the Shakespeare class, he'll be teaching Contemporary Afro-American Novels, with works by Toni Morrison, Samuel Delany, and Nathaniel Masters among others. Next spring, Moten and Professor Herman Rapaport will team up for a course called Race and Philosophy. It will make use of holocaust testimony and slave narrative. □



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**—Fred Moten**

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## **Marilynne Robinson**

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**W**hen the question of the influence of t.v. and movies came up in conversation with Marilynne Robinson, she surprised us. Maybe we're *less* visual as a result of the t.v. age, posits the Writers' Workshop teacher: "Western civilization has a huge, effectively pre-literate period when very few people could read and most people had things communicated to them visually, so that there were murals and sculptures and so on, and these kinds of things had an almost exclusive hold on the intellectual imagination.

"It seems to me that what happened with the invention of moving pictures is that images have been made *like* literature, they've been made into fluid narrative, and they've lost a great deal of their power as images.

"In effect the dominance of literacy as a model in the modern world has invaded the image — probably at a much greater loss to the images than to narrative. I don't think that we are very visual — we don't want to look at anything for a very long time."

But good writers often linger over an image, she says. "It seems to me that most of the best writers pause over things in one way or another. If Raymond Carver shows you an image once, he shows it to you five times in the course of a story, moving by analogue from one thing to the next — until you've got a complicated sense of it.

"Most of the writers that I've worked with think that if they tell you something twice, however wonderfully, they've presumed too far on your patience. But there's sort of a presumption of interest on the part of the reader that any good prose writer makes: 'I have your attention — I'm going to tell you something.' It's hard to get people to step into that frame of mind."

Robinson is also receptive to complex sentence structure: "There was a strange period when people thought that modernity and syntactical complexity were incompatible things, which is absolutely arbitrary and bizarre. People have been encouraged to use simple language as if it were somehow more honest.



"I think that if you adopt simplicity of syntax and abandon irony and so on, in a way that so many contemporary writers tend to do, you've locked yourself into a certain kind of thinking and not permitted yourself the possibility of developing other ideas, and that's a pointless captivity."

Robinson says she doesn't create unsympathetic characters in her fiction. "I just don't. It feels horrible to me. It feels like I'm doing something cheap. I figure if you can't sympathize with a character, get rid of him. When I write fiction — when I read fiction, too — I always have a very nervous feeling that any character is too thin. And my way of resolving that in *Housekeeping* was to create characters that I considered to be aspects of one character. I used to say it was a cubist portrait. I consider the characters to be related to each other along a continuum, rather than being opposed or being separate.

"I don't think the conventional representations of characters in fiction normally come anywhere near indicating the actual complexity of a human being, and I think that's had bad effects on our thinking because it fudges issues like motivation, and misrepresents the *felt* quality of life. So much of the content of anyone's experience is based on choices

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contentious family.**  
—Marilynne Robinson

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that they have *not* made, choices that they think they might at some time make, things they wish they could do, things they can't stop regretting. There's a whole burden of other possibilities that people carry with them. We're usually navigating against very profound currents in our own natures that perhaps are visible to no one else — everyone is a sort of multitude, some kind of contentious family."

Robinson is the author of *The Mother Country* (1982, Farrar, Straus & Giroux) a non-fiction book examining the environmental damage and human disease caused by Sellafield, a working nuclear fuel reprocessing plant and waste dump on the west coast of England. The book was nominated for the National Book Award in 1988. Her novel, *Housekeeping* (1981, Bantam), was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1982. □

## Tom Simmons

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If you want to write well, you can't take things like lycra for granted," says Tom Simmons.

"In a course on style, a professor might compare the writing of Tom Wolfe and E.B. White," says Simmons, "one does X and the other does Y, and then you think you're on the road to defining their styles. But understanding style really requires a sensitivity to the visual world, ways of describing the world with and without words — for example, conveying speed through jeans or dresses or car fins. Style is a continuum. There's not a literary style that's divorced from visual style, clothing or cars."

Now what was that about lycra?

"Well it's incredibly sexy but because it's so commonplace, it's now taken for granted. It's shiny, strange to the touch, in colors that are sometimes repugnant — not warm or inviting like skin. It captures the motion of the body by adhering to the muscles, and that is delicious. It's both a revelation and a concealment, a public confession in which the confessor is also shielded. You might not get to that if you write it off as just another consumer product."

Simmons is also teaching a course called "Art of the Essay." The meat of the course, he says, is an attempt to expand the traditional concept of Western narrative. The class is reading, among others, *The Book of Job*, Jung's *Answer to Job*, and the *I-Ching*.

*The Book of Job*, he explains, offers a powerful Western archetype of the narrative: one specific human being versus an unjust universe. The narrative of the *I-Ching* is not about a person, but an intermingling of characters, and it's private, occurring between the book and the reader. The underlying universe is not unjust, but one in which change is constant, expected and welcomed.

Simmons says he's interested in non-traditional forms of the narrative because "there's a false sense of the limited alternatives in non-fiction writing: one is either reporting facts, quote unquote objectively, or one is a memoirist or a new journalist placing herself in the subject she's writing about. It seems to me fiction writers have been more daring in their experimentation with narrative. There's more room for similar experimentation in non-fiction."

Simmons is the author of two memoirs: *The Unseen Shore: Memories of A Christian Science Childhood* (Beacon Press, 1991) and *A Season in the Air*, available this September from Ballantine Books. His essays have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and Op-Ed page, and *The L.A. Times Magazine*, among others. He is a licensed pilot, an avocation he took up in 1990 while teaching writing and literature at MIT. He received his Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley in 1988, and his A.B. from Stanford University in 1978. □



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**Lycra is both a revelation and a concealment.**

**—Tom Simmons**

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## Message From the Chair

I'm happy to report that the Department of English at Iowa is running at peak efficiency. We are the smallest English department in the Big 10, yet we have the most undergraduate majors. Only Michigan teaches as many as our 1000 majors, but with a faculty of 80 or more to our 44; and all other Big Ten schools have ratios considerably more favorable than ours. Add to this that

our faculty works with over 200 graduate students and supervises nearly a hundred teaching assistants in the General Education Literature Program where each year 6,000 undergraduate nonmajors take courses.

So how is it that the English Department keeps attracting more undergraduate majors and continues to get high evaluations from them? How is it that our faculty is more productive

than it has ever been? How is it that our TA training program is considered the model for the University?

And how can it be, given the impossible demands that our enrollment puts on us, that our graduate program is the strongest in the College and one of the very strongest in the country? Last year *U.S. News & World Report* ranked us 26th out of 133 doctoral in  
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## Message from the Chair, cont'd

English programs, and 13th among programs at public institutions.

Several years ago, the University began to offer a small number of Iowa Fellowships, four-year awards designed to make Iowa competitive for the very top graduate applicants in the country. Each year, the University offers twenty of these fellowships. This year, the English Department was given eight of the twenty, an unprecedented testimony to the quality of applicants we are attracting.

All eight have accepted the award, and next year's incoming graduate class will thus have a large number of the most sought-after students in the nation. For the past three or four years, the applicant pool has grown more impressive, and now we accept only about 10% of our graduate applicants. We're able to tailor our incoming graduate class to the strengths of the department, bringing in students who will most benefit from study with this particular faculty.

It all seems to be working. Each year, the University offers a small group of dissertation-year fellowships to those graduate students writing the most promising PhD theses; for the past three years, all of the nominees from English have won fellowships. And over the past three years, Iowa's record of success in placing its PhDs in academic jobs has

been the strongest by far in the Big 10. Despite an extremely tight job market in '91 and '92, nearly all of our PhDs secured teaching jobs at colleges or universities.

The list of employers is an impressive array of institutions. Recent Iowa PhDs are now teaching at Texas Tech, the University of California at Berkeley, Kansas State University, DePaul University, the University of Chicago, Calvin College, Mount Holyoke College, Western Washington University, St. Olaf College, Miami University, Middle Tennessee State University, Radford University, Rhodes College, Loras College, Luther College, Augustana College, Kalamazoo College, Montana State University, and Millsaps College, to name a few.

We're very proud of such accomplishments, but we know — given Iowa's relatively small size and limited resources — that we'll have to keep working more creatively to maintain our success. Surprise, creativity, and innovation have always been the defining characteristics of the humanities at Iowa, and they are qualities that we try to nurture. Our goal always has been to be a unique department, not an imitator. If we tried to imitate those places with bigger numbers and richer resources, we'd be second-rate.

Long before a commit-

ment to undergraduate teaching became the fashion in higher education, the Iowa English Department was involved in creating a working culture of teaching, where faculty and graduate students join together to enact, and nurture outstanding teaching. ver

Over the years, English faculty and graduate students have won more university-wide teaching awards than any other department. And semester after semester, student evaluations testify to the excellence of instruction in this department from introductory courses for nonmajors through doctoral seminars.

Whenever I attend professional meetings, I end up returning to Iowa re-energized and more pleased with this place than ever. Despite the economic hardships and the incredible pressures of enrollment, we continue to have something very special here. Our job now is to deal with our challenges, locally and nationally, in such a way that we preserve those things that have distinguished the Iowa English Department.

Ed Folsom, Chair

**"Surprise, creativity, and innovation have always been the defining characteristics of the humanities at Iowa."**

# Faculty Books in the 90s

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**Marvin Bell**, *The Book of the Dead Man*, forthcoming Copper Canyon Press.

**Clark Blaise**, *Man and His World*, Porcupine's Quill, 1992, and *I Had a Father*, Addison-Wesley, 1993.

**Florence Boos**, *The Design of William Morris's 'The Earthly Paradise'*, The Edwin Mellon Press, 1991, and an edition of *The Earthly Paradise* by William Morris, Vol. I, forthcoming from the University Press of Virginia.

**David Chamberlain**, ed., *New Readings of Late Medieval Love Poems*, University Press of America, 1992.

**Frank Conroy**, *Body & Soul*, Houghton-Mifflin, 1993.

**Stavros Deligiorgis**, translator, *Halo, Romanian Poems by Paul Celan*, The Coffee House Press, 1991.

**Kathleen Diffley**, *Making War Civil: Popular Narratives from Sumter to the Centennial*, University of Georgia Press, 1992.

**Anne DiPardo**, *A Kind of Passport: A Basic Writing Adjunct Program and the Challenge of Student Diversity*, NCTE, 1993.

**Barbara Eckstein**, *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

**Mary Lou Emery**, *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile*, University of Texas Press 1990.

**Ed Folsom**, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*, forth-

coming Cambridge University Press.

**James Galvin**, *The Meadow*, Holt & Company, 1992.

**Miriam Gilbert**, *Shakespeare in Performance: Love's Labours Lost*, forthcoming Manchester University Press.

**Jorie Graham**, *Region of Unlikeness*, Ecco, 1991; *Materialism*, Ecco, 1993.

**Cheryl Herr**, *For the Land They Loved: Irish Political Melodramas, 1890-1925*, Syracuse University Press, 1991.

**Kevin Kopelson**, *Love's Litany: The Writing of Modern Homoerotics*, forthcoming Stanford University Press.

**Ruedi Kuenzli**, co-ed., *Surrealism in Women*, M.I.T. Press, 1991.

**Brooks Landon**, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)Production*, Greenwood Press, 1992.

**Tom Lutz**, *American Nervousness: 1903*, Cornell University Press, 1991.

**James P. Marshall** *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991; *The Language of Interpretation*, forthcoming,

NCTE.

**Herman Rapaport**, *Heidegger and Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language*, 2nd ed., Nebraska University Press, 1991, and in Japanese translation from Tokyo University Press; *Between the Sign and the Gaze*, forthcoming Cornell University Press.

**Robert F. Sayre**, ed. *New Essays on Walden*, Cambridge University Press, 1992; *American Lives: An Historical Anthology of Autobiographical Writing*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.

**Tom Simmons**, *The Unseen Shore: Memories of a Christian Science Childhood*, Beacon Press, 1991; *A Season in the Air*, forthcoming Ballantine Books.

**Alvin Snider**, *Origin and Authority in Seventeenth Century England: Bacon, Milton, Butler*, forthcoming University of Toronto Press.

**Gerald Stern**, *Leaving Another Kingdom*, Harper & Row, 1990; *Bread Without Sugar*, W.W. Norton, 1992.

**Daniel Weissbort**, *Fathers*, Northern House, 1991; *Inscription*, Cross Cultural Communications, 1993; *Lake: New and Selected Poems*, 1993; co-ed. and translator, *Twentieth Century Russian Poetry*, University of Iowa Press, 1992; *Red Knight, Serbian Women's Songs*, King's College, 1992.

**Jon Wilcox**, *Aelfric's Prefaces*, forthcoming Durham Medieval Texts.

