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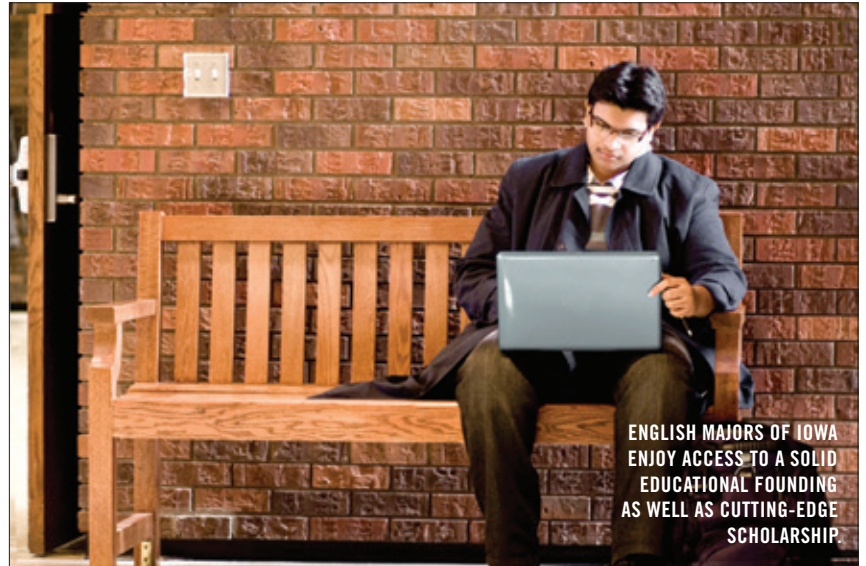


JON WILCOX HAS TAKEN OVER FROM CLAIRE SPONSLER AS CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT

One of the things I wasn't asked during the years I was chair is what an English degree is good for. That's surprising, since many people in and around academia have been debating just that question, as national news and professional publications mull over the value of a humanities education or, sometimes even more broadly, the value of any college degree at all. From those who urge that students skip university entirely to others who advise that students study only "practical" subjects, conversations about whether college matters and in what ways are hard to escape these days.

As the articles and comments from students, faculty, and alumni on the following pages show, there are many ways to respond to questions about the value of an English degree. Some answers are pragmatic, pointing out that the study of English improves the writing and thinking skills that are essential for twenty-first century success and that English offers the kind

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The Value of an English Degree

For anyone surveying the state of higher education today, the question of the rationale for college has become more and more insistent. The notion that a higher degree should be pursued solely for the purpose of personal enlightenment has lost currency as increasing numbers of students, faculty, and educational theorists are pondering what, in practical terms, the purpose of college should be. In his article "How to Assess the Real Payoff of a College Degree" in the April 2013 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Scott Carlson succinctly poses the quandary as this series of questions: "What is higher education for: Personal growth? A golden ticket? Or some of both?"

Complicating the issue is the debate over which college majors have the most "value" for students and what "value" means in the longer term. With both college tuition and student loan debt on the rise, should incoming freshmen seek majors that will give them the most "yield" in terms of salary? According to *The Princeton Review*, "Business Administration and Management/Commerce" is the number one college major as of this year, with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields taking top positions as well. In an uncertain economy, is it that students are flocking to the majors they see as a safe bet, ones that will yield higher-paying jobs after graduation? Has college become nothing more than a factory, arming students with a narrow set of skills aimed at landing a specific job after graduation?

Thankfully, for an overwhelming majority, the answer to this question would be a resounding "no". The arts and humanities—rightfully seen as integral to producing well-rounded students with advanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills—have not been entirely lost in the recent anxiety over debt, jobs, and the pursuit of individual happiness. In the same *Princeton Review*

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of flexible knowledge that is useful for the many different jobs a recent graduate is likely to hold over the course of a career. Other answers point to the deep impact that the study of literature can have for personal growth as well as for social and cultural interaction. To study literature is to be cultured, many would say, and thus helps us understand ourselves and the world better than we could without contact with the thoughts and feelings of an array of writers across global history that literature offers.

When I talk with students past and present, I am often struck by the lasting impact that having studied English has had on them. Notes of thanks that majors send to their teachers, comments on evaluations, messages from alumni—these and other expressions of appreciation that I have received amply demonstrate the deep value of English at Iowa for many who have passed through EPB.

Chairing this large, lively, and diverse department has been an exhilarating, often eye-opening, experience. I am grateful to have had that opportunity and appreciate the generous support so many have offered. As I turn the office over to Jon Wilcox, I am delighted to see how much the department has accomplished, with the support and encouragement of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Provost's Office, our eager students, distinguished faculty, resourceful staff, and generous friends. English at Iowa will continue to thrive, I am confident, and to offer yet more evidence of why college matters.

—Claire Sponsler, Former Chair of English



SKILLS LEARNED IN AN ENGLISH COURSE AT IOWA HAVE WIDE-REACHING BENEFITS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM.

[Steve] Strauss sees English majors as superior thinkers and team players whose abilities are far from limited to the deciphering of academic tomes.

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list of majors, “English Language and Literature” ranks sixth, with “Education” and “Communication Studies/Speech Communication and Rhetoric” also holding their own in the top ten. And myriad voices—from university presidents to instructors to small business owners—have contributed to a growing song of praise for the benefits of an education in English literature. Far from the stereotype of becoming isolated scholars inattentive to the “real world” in favor of “dead” texts, students of English language and literature are developing exactly the kinds of skills that are most necessary for economic and personal success; as the department’s own Director of Undergraduate Studies, Doris Witt, continues, these skills include “habits of careful reading and attention to textual detail, the ability to think analytically and communicate clearly both orally and in writing, training in the necessity of showing up well prepared, and sensitivity to the experiences and perspectives of others, be they classmates in a small discussion group or writers from halfway around the world.” As Professor Witt sees it, the study of English “enriches our lives as human beings in ways that can’t be easily quantified in terms of economic value added.” This perspective is reflected time and again in the assessments of those both inside and outside academia; rather than dismissing English as an outdated discipline, those who understand its invaluable benefits are defending it against detractors who would argue that it has little real usefulness for current and future generations of college students.

In a piece entitled “Why I Hire English Majors” that appeared in *The Huffington Post* on June 23, 2013, author and small business owner Steve Strauss outlines the reasons he prefers English majors to more traditionally business-minded students; in everything from writing skills to the ability to empathize, Strauss sees English majors as superior thinkers and team players whose abilities are far from limited to the deciphering of academic tomes. Strauss writes that English majors “know how to think, to think for themselves, and how to analyze a problem. Business majors are fine, but they are preoccupied with theory, proving themselves, and doing it ‘right.’ But the English majors are used to getting a tough assignment, figuring it out, and getting it done.” English majors are unafraid of a challenge and of dealing with uncertainty, and these are skills that are not only important and attractive to future employers—they are absolutely essential for success in life. As Blaine Greteman, who teaches Shakespeare and early modern literature here at Iowa, eloquently argues, “When Dr. Faustus sells his soul in Marlowe’s play, he asks the devil, in exchange, to ‘resolve me of all ambiguities.’ Of course that doesn’t work out so well for Faustus, and that’s why it’s too bad he wasn’t an English major, because I think the most useful skills we cultivate are the ability to discover ambiguities, to understand multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and to think critically about the obscure and shadowy shapes of truth.”

Far from producing graduates who are ill prepared for both the workplace and the ups and downs of the global economy, then, an English course of study produces vibrant, socially engaged students who can apply their critical thinking skills to problems far removed from traditional literary texts. As our own Cheryl Herr, a scholar of modernist literature and popular teacher of classes on James Joyce, puts it, “Quite simply, studying the Humanities educates us in thoughtful decision-making.” Such a skill is obviously invaluable, as the many savvy students who continue to make English one of the largest and most popular majors at the University of Iowa recognize. While no single major holds all the cards for future success, it is clear that lasting value comes with the study of English.

Exploring, Connecting and Creating: Inventive English Courses at Iowa

In any English department, students know they can find course offerings on Shakespeare, the rise of the novel, or Romantic poets, but at the University of Iowa, professors in the English Department constantly explore new avenues, offering courses that are innovative, cross-departmental, and engaged with some of the most significant social, ethical, and cultural issues that we face.

One such course is Barbara Eckstein's seminar "The Story of Water: Rivers and the Humans Who Sing Their Praises, Control Their Flow," offered in the spring of 2013. This groundbreaking course brought a multidisciplinary and multinational approach to bear on the complex relationship between humans and their water sources; in Professor Eckstein's words, students in this course used their skills "as textual and cultural analysts and as nonfiction writers, fiction writers, poets, and intermedia artists to address one of the most challenging circumstances of the twenty-first century: the quantity and quality of fresh water needed for human life and all other life." Integral to the course experience was a visit to the Lucille A. Carver Mississippi Riverside Environmental Research Station (LACMRERS), an arm of the University's Iowa Institute for Hydrological Research (IIHR), which, in conjunction with course texts, inspired student-created art. Reaching across disciplines, borders, and artistic genres, Professor Eckstein's course helped students turn their skills to what is already one of the most pressing concerns of our modern world: how to responsibly use and care for our water.

In the fall of 2012, Linda Bolton offered a course with a similar focus on the connections between art and ethical responsibility; inspired by the work of poet Muriel Rukeyser, who argues in her work that "art is action," this graduate seminar in cultural studies focused on the important intersections of art and ethical justice, taking up a range of literary and visual artists to ask "what is art?" and "what can it do?" For Professor Bolton, these considerations "challenge us to think about those questions through the lens of an ethical philosophy that prioritizes 'the Other,' and places upon Art the obligation to, at the least, recognize that Other's presence in the world, beside 'you.'" In tackling these quandaries, Professor Bolton helped her students—many from disciplines other than English—create a dialogue between seemingly disparate voices with a goal no less lofty than a consideration of the function and importance of art in societies.

Though concerned with a very different topic, Brooks Landon's "Dead is the New Alive! The Insistence of the Zombie Metaphor in Contemporary Fiction, Film and Television," offered in the fall of 2012, is no less engaged with the exploration of ethical and artistic dilemmas. More than just a survey of zombies in popular culture, this course put pressure on the zombie trope to ask what its insistent popularity means for those who employ it. In a piece published in the January/February 2013 issue of *American Book Review*—an issue devoted entirely to exploring Post-Apocalyptic literature—Professor Landon writes that, while zombies are often used as release valves for real-world problems, they are "emblems of the shambling, always growling problems that our politics and economics and ecological policies seem unable to solve." Like the availability of fresh water or the function of art in the world, the dilemmas embodied by zombies are thus no less integral to the question of how our students will engage in the world beyond our classrooms.

With these innovative and timely topics, each of these three professors offered their students a unique lens through which to examine literature and the larger environments—whether natural, aesthetic, or cultural—within which truth and the meaning of art. These classes provided not only creative approaches to literature and theory, but also opportunities for students to have a real-world impact through their engagement with art in all its forms.

What do you think is the most valuable thing that you gained (or will gain) by being an English major?

Being an English major allows me to question the status quo and to learn to have confidence in my own ideas. I am becoming trained to analyze literature and everyday life with greater depth and understanding.

—**Ashley Lee, sophomore**

Being an English major cultivated my intellect as well as my creativity. My studies taught me to critically analyze and evaluate not only words, but the world. Being an English major helped me become an engaged world citizen.

—**Lily Allen-Duenas, BA 2013**

I have found that enhanced written skills are incredibly valuable in business environments, and I'm thankful to have received such focused training in writing while a UI English major.

—**Cole Rush, senior**

Being an English major has inspired me to gain knowledge actively, rather than remain within the confines of the familiar. I am humbled by my predecessors and spurred by those who will succeed me.

—**Michael Bednarsky, senior**

The experiences I've had in the English major and the Creative Writing Track have shaped my writing practice and given me the knowledge and confidence to pursue my craft. Great teachers help a lot, of course.

—**Michael O'Hara, senior**

My major focuses on the indescribably small details of life (atoms, proteins, cells). English gives me an opportunity to look up from the microscope and prevents me from drowning in a world of science with no context in humanity. The beauty that can be created by words is a constant reminder that life is greater than the sum of its chemical reactions.

—**Alexander Crider, BS 2013 Biochemistry, English minor**

I've come to realize that one of the most important ways a person can help himself is to learn how to present himself in writing. Scholarships, job applications, love letters. Suddenly, your agency rises when you can write well.

—**Ryan Dennis, BA 2007**

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Innovative Faculty Scholarship and the Intersections of Art, Subjectivity, and Text

Faculty members in the University of Iowa’s English Department have recently published books on such topics as material culture, international narratives, popular genres, literary history, and the history of books. Their monographs and edited collections break new ground in literary studies, while engaging fruitfully with other contemporary thinkers in exciting conversations about literature, reading, and culture.

One such work is David Wittenberg’s *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, published with Fordham University Press. Wittenberg’s study encompasses a wide scope of texts, from late-nineteenth century time travel fictions and the work of important theoretical physicists through modern science fiction films and television shows, ultimately crafting a provocative argument about time travel narratives as a place where issues of subjectivity, narrative structure, and history can be uniquely explored. As former University of Iowa Professor Rob Latham says in his review of the book, *Time Travel* is a “fruitful cross-pollination of theory and popular fiction, this is at once a careful genre study and a wide-ranging disquisition on narratology.”

Claire Fox’s *Making Art Panamerican: Culture Policy and the Cold War*, published by the University of Minnesota Press, similarly uses art—in this case, visual art that emerged through the Pan American Union (PAU) after World War II—as a lens through which to examine subjectivity and history, specifically cold war politics and the complicated relationships between the nations of north and south America. As Fox contends, the PAU became an important exchange point in the modernist art movement and brought greater academic interest to Latin American art, an argument which, as the publisher explains, challenges “the U.S. bias of conventional narratives about Panamericanism and the postwar shift in critical values from realism to abstraction” and “illuminates the institutional dynamics that helped shape aesthetic movements in the critical decades following World War II.”

Michael Hill’s *The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977-1993*, published by The Ohio State University Press, is also concerned with the movement of the marginalized into the mainstream, specifically in the years after the American Civil Rights Movement. Examining African-Americans who won major literary

prizes between 1977 and 1993, Hill’s insightful work explains how these exemplary men and women navigated the difficulties of writing in a culture dominated by white literary expectations in order to forge a confident and unique literary aesthetic that maintained a sense of cultural history while also gaining critical acceptance. As one reviewer notes, “Hill’s unique and timely book enriches scholarly understanding of the diverse aesthetics within contemporary African American literary production.”

Jon Wilcox’s recent edited collection, *Scraped, Stroked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, published by Brepols Press, is concerned with material culture and the production of books in the medieval period. An interdisciplinary study that brings together literary scholars, historians, and artisan bookbinders, this collection of essays explores the aesthetics and artistry of medieval scribal culture and manuscript production and has repercussions not only for the study of medieval literature, but also for our own, modern culture, one that is seemingly more and more in danger of eschewing printed books altogether. As the publisher notes, “While the digital revolution has provided unparalleled access to medieval manuscripts, these essays are attentive to what has got left behind – not just the aura of the original, but also the engagement of the senses, such as the feel of the binding, the heft of the volume, the smell of the parchment, or the sound of the pages.”

Loren Glass’s *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde*, published by Stanford University Press, is similarly interested in publishing history; it explores the revolutionary Grove Press, which brought countercultural and avant-garde works such as *Naked Lunch* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to a mainstream readership in its heyday in the 1950’s and 60’s. As one reviewer glowingly notes, “Brimming with as many colorful and brilliant personalities as it is with good ideas and cogent analyses, this book fills in a major gap in our knowledge of postwar American culture, and will appeal to anyone who has ever felt the lure of dangerously sexy ideas.”

These publications represent the kind of forward-thinking and engaged scholarship that has been the hallmark of the English department’s impressive publication record over the past year.

Employing the Tools of an English Major in Multidisciplinary Internships

Internships let students “test-drive” a variety of jobs, while putting to use the knowledge they have learned in their classes. Throughout the academic year, the Department’s English@Work series of events for majors features visits by alumni and presentations on jobs and internships available to English majors. While the sampling below focuses on internships related to creative writing, our majors have held a wide range of internships that have enhanced their skills and have provided contacts and experience. We always welcome information from our alumni about internship opportunities that may be available at their companies.

For my internship at the radio station US 99.5, I have done quite a bit of writing. Whether I am updating the website or promoting various artists, my English classes have helped me become a better writer, which in turn, sets me apart from other interns. I aspire to write in any capacity in a future career, and the classes that I have taken at Iowa have prepared me for writing in the work force.

—**Mary Rechteris, junior**

During the summer before my second year at Iowa, I interned for the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust. I am a tour guide at one of Wright’s homes so I was able to ask the Preservation Trust if there was an internship available specific to my field of study. Luckily, they formed a “writing” internship for me. I compiled and organized information about Frank Lloyd Wright’s ancestry, his architecture, and the annual Wright Plus architectural house-walk event onto a prototype “wiki” page for the organization.

—**Sophie Amado, senior**

It’s no surprise that my time in the UI’s English Department and undergraduate creative writing track left me with the desire to pursue writing as a profession. But all that time spent editing, critiquing, and analyzing the works of fellow students also prepared me for the world of publishing. I recently completed an editorial internship at the incredible independent publishing house, Graywolf Press. The bulk of my work involved evaluating book-length manuscripts, a task that felt comfortingly familiar after my time in EPB.

—**Adam Segal (BA 2011)**

An incoming student recently asked me if a degree in creative writing will be useful in the “real world.” I told her the University provides lots of ways for its creative students to learn how to take full advantage of their skills. As an intern at *The Iowa Review*, for example, I’ve seen how the critical, grammatical, and artistic skills I’ve acquired as an English major with a creative writing focus are used in the making of a great literary magazine. It’s helped me see a bunch of new post-grad opportunities.

—**Derek Heckman, senior**

As an intern at *The Iowa Review*, I read submissions for future issues and proofread for the upcoming issue. My experience as an English major allows me to recognize good writing when I see it and helps me to spot errors and make the next issue the best it can be.

—**Katherine Kraabel, senior**



IOWA ENGLISH MAJORS FIND THAT THEIR SKILLS ARE INVALUABLE IN THE WORKPLACE.

Department News

IN MEMORIAM

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

RAY HEFFNER died November 28, 2012, at the age of 87. A man of uncompromising moral vision who much preferred interacting with students to occupying an administrative office, Ray taught in the English department for nearly thirty years. His love of the classroom was such that, even after his retirement, he continued teaching literature on a volunteer basis.

KIM MERKER, unparalleled craftsman of artisanal books, died April 28, 2013, at the age of 81. Kim's dedication to the art of bookmaking will live on in the University's Center for the Book, which he founded in 1986, and in the books he oversaw in his time as a printer, including many early publications by now-prestigious poets.

Both Ray and Kim were uniquely talented in their fields, and their enthusiasm for the written word touched the lives of innumerable students. The dedication they each showed for their craft lives on in those students and in the University at large. They will be greatly missed.

English Majors continued from page 3

The debate and discussion in my English courses taught me how to explain and defend a point of view in a way that was articulate and respectful of my classmates, and now my coworkers. In class and in meetings you will have disagreements and differences of opinion, but learning how to handle them professionally and coherently is a huge advantage.

—Alyssa Thomas, BA 2010

Chief among the many benefits of my English major is that it taught me to interpret both texts and the world through a variety of perspectives. While the communication skills gained in the major are certainly useful, in contemporary times the ability to successfully understand and interact with others who hold views different from our own is of paramount importance.

—Ryan Holley, BA 2013

RETIREMENT

Professor **MIRIAM GILBERT**, who taught in the English Department at the University of Iowa since 1969, retired this past spring. Over her impressive career, Miriam taught and wrote about a wide variety of literature and drama, with special attention to Shakespeare and the combination of literary analysis with performance studies. In her time at the University she also served as Director of Undergraduate Studies and Director of the General Education in Literature Program. Miriam's warmth and enthusiasm will be much missed by her students, including Judith Coleman, one of the final two PhD students Miriam saw to graduation, who will remember Miriam's "humor, kindness, and infectious zeal for Shakespearean performance, both past and present." Coleman continues, "As a professor, Miriam offers unconditional support and firm guidance—she is one of those unique teachers who is somehow both a trusted authority and a friend. I can only hope to emulate her in my own career." In honor of Miriam's career, the English Department has established "The Miriam Gilbert Award" to help fund a student who demonstrates high achievement in Shakespeare studies and/or Renaissance literature, drama, or performance; a link for donations can be found on the last page of this newsletter.

Professor **DEE MORRIS**, a member of the English Department since 1974, also retired this past spring. Over the years, Dee shared her fascination with the interplay between the experimental and the traditional with countless students, writing and teaching on contemporary poetry and poetics, new media, and sound art. Dee also served the department in a number of administrative capacities, including as Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of the Department. She will be remembered for the depths of both her knowledge and her kindness. As one of her graduate students, Jacob Horn, recalls, "I have never met a scholar with better knowledge of contemporary poetry and avant-garde poetics, and her excitement and interest in these topics encouraged my own curiosity—something I am confident is true for all her students." Horn continues, "I cannot help but feel that the English Department will be diminished without her." To honor Dee's career, the English Department has established "The Dee Morris Award" to help fund a graduate student or faculty member who excels in new media, sound studies, the avant-garde, and poetics; a link for donations can be found on the last page of this newsletter.

Professor **ROBIN HEMLEY**, Director of the Nonfiction Writing Program since 2004, also retired from the English Department this past spring to take up another position. Robin's impressive tenure in academia spans many venerable institutions, and he leaves a major imprint on the MFA program in nonfiction writing.

GAYLE SAND, Administrative Services Administrator and fixture in the English Department for more than sixteen years, retired this May. Warm, thoughtful, and resourceful, Gayle was in many ways the heart of the department. From beautifying offices to patiently helping faculty decipher grant applications, Gayle was an invaluable resource for everyone in the department, and her departure will be keenly felt.

Alumni News

PATRICIA ANDERSEN (BA '98) has signed a contract with Sweet Cravings Publishing to release four novels in 2013.

JOHN BRESLAND (MFA '06) produced his first collection, *Zero Station*, a dvd featuring several of his award-winning video and audio essays. He teaches creative writing at Northwestern University and is currently the film editor for *TriQuarterly*.

CAROLINE CASEY (MFA '07) accepted a position as the new Marketing Director for Coffee House Press in Minneapolis, MN.

LAURA CROSSETT (MFA '03) published her first book, *Night Sweats: An Unexpected Pregnancy*. She is currently a librarian at the Coralville Public Library in Iowa.

RYAN DENNIS (BA '07) is the recipient of a 2013–2014 Fulbright award to Iceland, to work on a collection of creative essays about the struggles of Icelandic dairy farmers. Currently, he teaches creative writing at a small university in Germany.

ANDY DOUGLAS (MFA '05) published his third book, *The Curve of the World*.

HALI FELT (MFA '08) recently published her first book, *Soundings: The Story of the Remarkable Woman Who Mapped the Ocean Floor*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania.

AVIYA KUSHNER (MFA '05) received a grant from the Illinois Arts Council and will publish her first book with Random House next year, *The Grammar of God*. She is a co-founder and contributing editor of *A Public Space*, and currently teaches creative writing at Columbia College in Chicago.

AMY LEACH (MFA '05) published her first book, *Things That Are*, for which she also received a Whiting Writers' Award. The recipient of a Rona Jaffee Writers' Award, she currently teaches at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois.

CHARLES MCLEOD (BA '00) is the series editor for a new annual anthology of stories and essays, *California Prose Directory: New Writing from the Golden State* (Outpost19, 2013).

JEN PERCY (MFA '10) received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. She will publish her first book, *Demon Camp*, with Simon & Schuster next year.

JOHN PRICE (MFA '95) published his third book, *Daddy Long Legs: The Natural Education of a Father*. He is currently the Director of the Creative Nonfiction Program at the University of Nebraska in Omaha.

REBECCA SHEIR (MFA '06) has been named the new host and producer of "Metro Connection" on NPR in Washington, DC. She is also a guest host for NPR's "Weekend All Things Considered," and a frequent contributor to "The Splendid Table."

PATRICK E. WHITE (MA, PHD '80) has stepped down after seven years as President of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, IN and is the interim President at Millikin University in Decatur, IL.

The NEA Foundation presented the 2013 award to First Book, accepted by **KYLE ZIMMER (BA, '82)**, President of First Book. First Book has distributed 100 million books to children in need in thousands of schools throughout the US and Canada.



Thank You for Supporting the Department of English

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.

If you wish to make a donation to the English Department, you can use the form on the back of this newsletter, or you can donate online via the University of Iowa Foundation's secure site: www.uifoundation.org.

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