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CHAIR’S NOTE

It is certainly an interesting time to be an English professor in a public university. Funding cuts and ideological attacks make up the lion’s share of the public discourse about higher education in the humanities. As a discipline at the core of the humanities, and without an obvious vocational application, English has perhaps taken more than its fair share of late hits and cheap shots. And we in the discipline have perhaps not done as good a job as we could have of describing what we do in terms available to those outside the discipline. Reading the various attacks as well as the defenses they provoke can lead one to despair, since both are largely staged in an echo chamber of their own presuppositions.

Before we surrender to despair, though, it is important to remember that we have been having versions of this debate about the social utility of humanistic knowledge for a very long time. Plato, that most poetic of philosophers, famously banished the poets from his Republic because their fertile imaginations seemed inherently threatening to the political order he valued. In the Renaissance, my own area of scholarly engagement, humanist courtiers repeatedly wondered whether their various aesthetic talents were simply vain amusements for bloody despots, or subtle ways of leading those despots toward virtuous action. In a certain sense, the humanities have always been on the defensive, if only because the rewards they offer are inevitably less palpable than those in other pursuits.

Part of the problem of knowing how to value a degree in English is one of metrics. What are we measuring when we talk about the success or failure of a particular field of study—is it mere earning power? And if so, is it earning power just after graduation, or 20 years out?

It is important to remember that the word education comes from the Latin for “educere,” to lead forth. Education is never passive; ideally, it should provide the tools for lifelong learning rather than just immediate earning power.

In fact, I want to argue that the discipline of English matters now more than ever. We live in a world increasingly mediated by language, and our access to its vital information is increasingly in the form of texts, and those texts need interpretation. The ability to use language well, and to critique other’s uses and abuses of language, will only increase in importance in the foreseeable future.

I could not think of a better way to contemplate afresh the value of a degree in English than by giving a forum to the voices of both our current faculty and former English majors from our department. Our faculty offer their perspectives on how English impacts the lives of our students both in and out of the classroom, and our alumni share what the degree has meant to them in their disparate pursuits. I want to thank all the alumni who participated—in this newsletter and on our website—for taking time out from their busy lives and fascinating careers to share with us a sense of how their experience as an English major enriched their lives and careers. I hope in reading these perspectives it causes you to contemplate afresh the value of a degree in English than by giving a forum to the voices of both our current faculty and former English majors from our department.
Even though it sometimes seems that higher education is under attack, the business of the department continues apace. Indeed, it has been a good year in the Department of English, despite the budgetary pressures we all feel. I am thrilled to welcome three new colleagues to the department: Scott Lyons, Ruby Tapia, and Melanie Yergeau. All three are highly innovative scholars and remarkable teachers.

We had three successful promotion cases this year: Theresa Tinkle, Adela Pinch, and Laura Kasischke were all promoted to the rank of full professor, with tenure.

The department has recently assumed a position of great visibility in the college’s public face. If you happen to get on the LSA Wire, the college’s online magazine, you will get to see mini-lectures by our own Anne Curzan on language, and by Ralph Williams on Shakespeare. Both are a real treat! We have also been able to coax Ralph out of retirement to do some teaching for us. And we are continuing to collect money for the Ralph Williams Excellence in Teaching Fund.

It is with gratitude and pleasure that I note yet another amazing gift from Helen Zell to the MFA program. This gift allows us to offer a third year of support to our successful MFAs, and vaults us to the pinnacle of creative writing programs.

It is with sadness that I note the retirement of Professor Martha Vicinus. A former department chair, and a pioneer in the study of Victorian women’s lives and loves, Martha exemplifies the kind of spectacular scholar, teacher, and citizen that is the hallmark of this university.

I am also deeply saddened to report the death of Professor Richard W. Bailey, an internationally renowned scholar of the English language. Professor Bailey taught in the Department for 42 years, and in 2002 he became the Fred Newton Scott Collegiate Professor of English. He was a great teacher, and assiduously mentored graduate students about how to make their work matter inside and outside the academy. He served for 34 years as a trustee of Washtenaw Community College; the WCC library was named in his honor in 2005. He will be greatly missed by the department and the community.

I want to conclude by thanking you for your continuing engagement with the department. At this critical moment in the state and the nation, your support is more important than ever. Without your help, we would not be able to sustain our efforts to continue to recruit and retain the best scholars and teachers. In so many ways large and small, you help us maintain and enhance our research and teaching excellence in an era of diminished resources.

As the stories that follow make clear, there is no career template for the successful English major. It is perhaps a choice that requires some courage; one must be willing to sacrifice the security of a predetermined career path for the opportunity to blaze a new one. As you continue to find ways to make your degree meaningful, to discover the myriad ways that “English matters,” please keep in touch, and let us know what your degree has meant to you. It will help us articulate and fulfill our mission, which is also our great privilege, of educating some of the best and brightest students anywhere.

SCOTT RICHARD LYONS, Associate Professor, is a Native American literature specialist with a joint appointment in the Department of English Language and Literature and the Program in American Culture. He comes to us from Syracuse University where, among other things, he served as Director of the Native American Studies program. A member of the Ojibwe Nation, Scott grew up at Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota and for a time worked at Leech Lake Tribal College. Scott’s interests include 19th and 20th century Native American literature, global indigenous studies, the history of colonial discourse, rhetoric, and critical theory. Lately he has also been interested in understanding (and improving) relationships between human beings and other animals. The author of numerous scholarly articles and personal essays, and a former columnist for Indian Country Today, the leading Native American newspaper, Scott was recently awarded the Beatrice Medicine Award for Scholarship in Native American Studies for his book X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent (University of Minnesota Press, 2010). He is married and the father of three daughters, the youngest of whom, Josephine, age 2, is pictured here.
RUBY TAPIA

I’m thrilled to begin my permanent appointment at the University of Michigan this fall. My time here as a Visiting Associate Professor in English and Women’s Studies last winter was immensely productive and exciting and gave me a clear picture of the brilliant, generous students and colleagues with whom I will be building my new intellectual home. I remain especially impressed that my Buckeye affiliation of the last nine years inspires, at worst, only morbidly tinged curiosity when I mention my previous appointment. In all seriousness, I’m leaving a very supportive and energetic interdisciplinary community at Ohio State (where I taught in Comparative Studies, Women’s Studies, and Latina/o Studies), and it would have been impossible to do so without the certainty that my life and work at the University of Michigan will be better and fuller.

My research and teaching falls between the interdisciplines of visual culture, comparative ethnic studies, and gender and sexuality studies. My first book, American Pietàs: Visions of Inedible Tree Parts (University of Minnesota, 2011), puts critical treatments of death and the maternal in conversation with more recent scholarship on affective nationalism and race in a variety of visual and literary media in order to understand how, and toward what end, maternal images work in contexts of national crises and racialized recuperation. I believe that focused, explicit, material stakes with regard to explicating the violent institutional intersections of race and gender merit and demand the interdisciplinary, transhistorical approach afforded by a theoretically and methodologically deliberate visual culture studies. Articulating these stakes as the purpose and promise of visual culture scholarship is my long-term intellectual project, one that I’ve thus far pursued in a range of feminist visual and literary studies and in a large variety of courses that I’ve taught at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

I’ve also pursued these interests in curatorial projects and editorial collaborations centered on gender and the prison industrial complex. My most recent publication is a co-edited volume, Persistent Time of the Other: Race, Death and the Maternal (University of California, 2010), was the product of many years of work on this topic with an interdisciplinary team of incarcerated women, activists, academics, and artists. My most recent publication is an essay that treats the collision of racialized masculinity and female revenge narratives in Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill. I am currently finishing an article on Alissa Torres’s 9/11-themed graphic novel American Widow, as well as conducting research for my next book project, Post-Human Remains: Mexico, Mummies, and Migration in the Persistent Time of the Other. I’m working to understand the role of apparently disembodied—but determinedly visual—data of race and gender that has long shaped the technologies of forensic science but that has yet to be considered in critical theoretical work on either visual cultures of transnationalism, death, or the post-human. I’ve already had the benefit of many conversations about each of these projects with a number of students and colleagues at Michigan, and I really can’t wait to continue them.

MELANIE YERGEAU

I come to Michigan from The Ohio State University, where I earned my PhD and amassed a collection of buckeye necklaces. I’m a fast learner, so I’ve already figured out that, in Michigan, I’m only allowed to say buckeye if it’s preceded by the word poisonous.

My teaching and research do not revolve around incredulous tree parts; rather, they focus on rhetoric and composition, disability studies, and new media pedagogies. My dissertation was the first born-digital project at Ohio State, and, in the past few years, I’ve published articles in journals such as College English, Disability Studies Quarterly, Computers and Composition Online, and Kairos. Currently, I’m working on a book project that explores autism and its construction as an arhetorical condition. Autistic individuals supposedly lack what has been termed theory of mind (ToM), or the ability to imagine the mental states of others. Teacher-scholars across disciplines have interpreted ToM as pathological lack of audience awareness, assuming that autistic rhetors are egocentric because they cannot...
connect with a neurologically typical audience. From a disability studies standpoint, however, I believe we need to (re)consider how audience as a construct has been normalized in rhetorical studies, genre studies, and narrative theory—that is, how audience has come to exclude those with disabilities, or, in this case, those with autism.

In addition to academic work, I live a double life as a disability rights activist. I serve on the Board of Directors of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, as well as the National Advisory Committee of the Autism NOW Center, an initiative of the Administration on Developmental Disabilities and The Arc of the US. This past April, I was invited to the White House and discussed autism, employment, and post-secondary education issues with senior White House and administration officials.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I’m obsessed with the Electric Light Orchestra. I’ve made it my life goal to include an oblique ELO reference in anything I write for public consumption. Please, don’t bring me down.

RECENT FACULTY PUBLICATIONS

Left to right, top to bottom

George Bornstein: The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish from 1845 to 1945, and W.B. Yeats: The Winding Stair and Other Poems (introduction and notes)


Laura Kasischke: The Raising, and Space, in Chains; Petra Kuppers: Disability, Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape, Somatic Engagement (editor); The Olimpias Disability Culture Projects: Embodied Poetics. A DVD, with three performance videos: Journey to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Cripple Poetics: A Love Story, and water burns sun (producer); David Porter: The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England; Eric Rabkin with Howard V. Hendrix and George Slusser: Visions of Mars: Essays on the Red Planet in Fiction and Science (editors); Keith Taylor and Laura Kasischke: Ghost Writers, Us Haunting Them (editors); Keith Taylor: Marginalia for a Natural History
Some years ago, the English Department invited alumni to contribute to our website by articulating how English has mattered in their lives and careers. The stories are inspiring to me as I plan my courses for the year and think about how I might most helpfully focus on what my students this year may need and want. On our website, former students tell of how they learned in their English classes to read thoughtfully, to write carefully, to think critically. They write eloquently about how these skills have made a difference in their lives. These are the messages I want to take with me into my courses: English matters in a multitude of predictable and surprising ways.

This idea—that English matters—forms the core of this Newsletter, and in the following pages we hear from both faculty and alumni on why this is true. Our faculty write of how the study of English matters for reasons both philosophical and pragmatic; how such studies impact the lives of students in and out of the classroom; and how the discipline creates better writers, better thinkers, better contributors to our society, and stronger members of our communities (both real and those digitally constructed). Our alumni offer a different perspective, one several years removed from the classroom, and in the following pages they share stories of how their study of English at Michigan has helped (and continues to help) shape their lives: academically, professionally, and personally. One former student writes that studying English has helped him become a better lawyer; another writes that it has made him a better lover. Our alumni exemplify the virtues of excellent writing; they attribute their skills to their study of English.

Clearly, both faculty and alumni perspectives demonstrate how communication skills enrich our lives in myriad ways, and allow us to contribute powerfully and positively to our world. The ability to read a text—our own included—with attention to its nuances and subtle implications, its potential layers of meaning, can indeed make us better lawyers, lovers, doctors, journalists, teachers, and writers. Space limits, however, what we can include here. Many more stories are currently up on our website. I invite you to visit our website to read these stories, and I encourage more alumni to contribute (we explain how at the end of this piece), for these stories do matter.

Prospective English majors examine the website to see if the degree will potentially help them with their careers after college, and many have told me the website genuinely helped them make an informed decision about their major, or about the next steps they will take after their graduation. One recent graduate, for example, found in the doctor who writes about medical history an inspiring role model, enabling her to recognize that her love of literature and science has a potential career path she had not imagined for herself. English matters in part because our alumni matter!

Faculty, myself included, read the website to discover what our former students are doing, how their studies have helped them do whatever that is. Our students do us proud as they go off into the world and develop fascinating and at times highly individual careers in a very broad spectrum of fields, from business to science, education to art. Our students properly teach us what matters in our discipline, and help us stay focused on the always relevant importance of brilliant writing, clear communication, and slow reading. This Newsletter is a tribute to our students, past, present, and future.

—Theresa Tinkle
Students gain knowledge about life writing as a constellation of genres, and appreciation for the media of life narration, textual, visual and digital, and the ways in which those media reconfigure the “self” being narrated. But they may also come to understand something about their own projects of life storytelling: about the kinds of stories they tell about themselves and how they might change those stories; about how their personal narratives relate to larger narratives of nation or modernity or global citizenship; and about how their autobiographical stories might be commodified, circulated, and received by others, especially the scraps of life stories they mount on social networking sites such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter.

Let me wax personal about the importance of my field to our students. I take my fascination with life writing into the classroom to explore with students how acts of writing, performing and visualizing the self ceaselessly register the organization and reorganization of identity, desire, affect, affiliation, struggle, and reason. Together, we explore the ways in which life narrators conceptualize, negotiate, contest, fracture, and reconstitute selves and families, communities and nations. We explore how technologies impact the way we think of the human as a category, ponder the implications of the human-animal continuum, and theorize the human—as an assemblage, a networked subject, a prosthetic composite, a materially malleable self. In this way, we confront what it is to be human and what it might mean to be post-human. We also explore the contemporary boom in life writing coming not only from the United States but from diverse global locations, contemplating different traditions and understandings of what constitutes a life and a life narrative around the globe, the idioms of telling a life, the social work that life storytelling does, the different stakes involved in telling, publicizing, and letting go of one’s life story, and the politics of publication, circulation, and reception.

Throughout the term, students gain knowledge about life writing as a constellation of genres, and appreciation for the ways in which the media of life narration, textual, visual and digital, reconfigure the “self” being narrated. But they may also come to understand something about their own projects of life storytelling: about the kinds of stories they tell of themselves and how they might change those stories; about how their personal narratives relate to larger narratives of nation or modernity or global citizenship; and about how their autobiographical stories might be commodified, circulated, and received by others, especially the scraps of life stories they mount on social networking sites such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter. I consider this engagement with life writing a preparation for lives lived in professions—in business, in education, in government, in non-profit organizations, and in the arts. It is also preparation for a lifetime of self-reflective storytelling, tutoring in alternative ways of imagining relationships with intimate and distant others.

For the final project this winter term, I asked students to write an analytical paper or a second
In state politics, we observe legislators whose term which higher education has become corporatized. university those measures can be seen in the ways in efficiency, privatization, and outsourcing; inside the market and whose idioms of excellence are pundits, and business leaders whose measure of value globally networked neocons, those economists, the liberal arts. Outside the university, we confront this democracy and for the humanities as the core of arts as the cornerstone of an educated citizenry in partnerships in advocating the centrality of the liberal degree in English Language and Literature are teach in this department and you who pursued of the assault on public higher education, we who defending this humanities education. In the face citizenship; for the renewable resource of pleasure. However we think of the English major, it is an classroom becomes a kind of social network” (199). Its performative dimension involves the enactment of disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) habits of attention, analysis, interpretation, and intensity of affect that our courses, individually and accumulatively, encourage students to observe, internalize, reproduce, hone, and revise. Approaching the major as performative social action is to facilitate the classroom as an intergenerational learning community, where everyone collaborates in setting questions, seeking answers, making claims, and producing work. In such an environment, the classroom becomes a kind of social network” (199). However we think of the English major, it is an education for life itself, for professional careers; affective attachments; local, national, and global citizenship; for the renewable resource of pleasure. We cannot underestimate the importance of defending this humanities education. In the face of the assault on public higher education, we who teach in this department and you who pursued a degree in English Language and Literature are partners in advocating the centrality of the liberal arts as the cornerstone of an educated citizenry in this democracy and for the humanities as the core of the liberal arts. Outside the university, we confront globally networked neocons, those economists, pundits, and business leaders whose measure of value is the market and whose idioms of excellence are efficiency, privatization, and outsourcing; inside the university those measures can be seen in the ways in which higher education has become corporatized. In state politics, we observe legislators whose term limits often limit the terms of their approach to dealing with budgetary crises and whose frustration at the conditions of public schools leads them to make teachers the problem rather than partners in the solution. Equally concerning, according to a recent report by The Chronicle for Higher Education, some twenty-five percent of state legislators across the country do not have a four-year degree and by implication have little sustained experience with the value of humanities education.1

Ours is an education in sustainable life and informed citizenship. How, then, could the study of languages and literatures not matter?

Works Cited


I About one in four of the nearly 7,400 elected representatives across the country do not possess a four-year college degree, according to a report released Sunday evening by The Chronicle of Higher Education in Washington.

—John Whittier-Ferguson

In an important respect, I am not the best person to answer the question prompting this series of short essays from our faculty: “Why does English matter?” For a little more than forty years—since my adolescence—I have been living with my readings so tightly woven into the fabric of my thoughts that lines, and phrases, and poems, and sentences from novels run through my mind almost constantly, called up simply by their beauty and power, or by the mind’s logical and illogical habits of association, or by situations in my life and in the world. Why does English matter to me? Because texts have become, over the course of my life, inseparable from consciousness. Clearly, this is not an entirely normal state, nor is it one that I can or should require of my students. It is a condition that I share with many of my colleagues but not necessarily, I think, with most of the readers of this newsletter or, in my experience, with those of my friends who are not English teachers. And yet I am convinced that my job can be accurately described as trying to answer versions of this question for anyone who asks, generally and specifically, in writing and in conversation, in discussions and lectures, at the University of Michigan and elsewhere.

I frame my response to this open-ended query in terms pertaining largely to my work in the classroom, since that is the forum in which most of you came
to know our department, and it is also the place where I have the obligation to address this crucial, foundational question—“Why does this matter?”—with the greatest number of people who are not already convinced of an answer. The question comes up in every class period of every course I teach—posed in a variety of forms both by my students and by the texts we’re reading together. It belongs to a larger debate in the United States about the purposes, the effectiveness, and the utility of college education. Louis Menand, a professor of English who writes often for The New Yorker, has a wonderfully lucid, concise review essay that summarizes the terms and the stakes of this debate in the issue for June 6, 2011, appearing as I write this note for our newsletter.

Opinions about the importance of English study range from the general to the particular, the philosophical to the instrumentalist, the theoretical to the pragmatic—from “it makes us better people” to “reading and writing are essential for success in today’s information-based economy”—and I believe that all of these assertions have validity. I want briefly to offer here two samples from this range and then conclude with an extremely abbreviated selection of answers that come from my students here at this university—answers that are more applied than theoretical.

Six years before his New Yorker summary of our current debates about higher education, Menand offered his own defense of the humanities in an essay titled “Dangers Within and Without.” We read, talk, and write about books in order to achieve an appropriately nuanced and complicated understanding of culture. And culture is not a mere luxury, something we surround ourselves with once we’ve found food, clothing, and shelter. Culture is “constitutive of species identity”; students of literature can therefore rightly claim the centrality as well as the idiosyncrasies of their enterprise:

Culture is the medium in which we act, and it is, from a purely rational point of view, always a distorting medium. Culture is why paradigms of social and scientific theory don’t work, why people tend never to do what social theory predicts they will do. Kant once said that humanity is a crooked timber from which nothing straight can be cut. That’s what humanists study. We study the warp. (15)

“Art and literature,” Menand continues, “are not epiphenomenal to the rest of human behavior; they

have cognitive value. They are themselves accounts of human life” (15). This description of the wide, fruitful, epistemologically unsettling terrain in which we practice English studies applies to academic scholarship as well as to much that occurs in our classrooms.

Or, moving toward the somewhat less exalted, somewhat more down-to-earth, everyday end of the spectrum, we find Virginia Heffernan, on the op-ed page of the New York Times for June 5, 2011, reminding us that much of our lives in a networked, data-saturated world depends on acts of thoughtful reading:

Making good decisions about new data that surfaces in a rhetorical hurricane — like the data about cellphones and other technology — requires sharp critical skills. Like reading a hard poem or novel, “reading” data and commentary requires a free mind, a measure of originality and decent aesthetic judgment. (11)

I am satisfied with these answers to the “why does English matter?” question—from Menand’s, to Heffernan’s, to even more strictly pragmatic claims about what can be accomplished by those with the ability to read and write and speak effectively.

But there is another kind of answer, too: local, often contingent answers provided by students responding to their readings, and my position as a teacher gives me an especially good vantage for observing how students weigh what T. S. Eliot calls the use of poetry and the use of criticism.”


My student brought Joyce’s words to other writers, who had their own ideas about solitude and the company we meet in introspection, and who might also have something to say about this brief and primarily figurative reference to crime. She turned this self-involved passage into an occasion for getting outside herself, and she helped her workshop students do the same. Her note to me afterwards continued this expansive trajectory, changing forever the light in which I read these sentences.

students’ responses to “why does English matter” in many cases come to me unbidden and informally: not necessarily in essays but in emails, not only in prepared remarks but in comments during office hours or before, during, or after class. These are some fairly recent examples from students whose ages range from 18 to over 50. They include notes:

▶ from a recent graduate on his way to a Peace Corps assignment in Cameroon, assuring me that he’ll find a place for *Ulysses* in his luggage…

▶ from a woman who’d had a dear friend die during the semester we were reading Woolf’s novels, and who said that reading Woolf and being with her friend in her last illness felt like complementary acts (Woolf once mused in her diary that perhaps “elegies” was a better word to describe what she wrote than “novels”)…

▶ from a student reading Wallace Stevens’ “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” with another student from the same class, wondering, in a late-night email, how “a perfection of thought” (Stevens’ phrase) might be achieved and how it would be set apart from other thoughts…

▶ from a student enrolled concurrently in my class on Joyce and in Buzz Alexander’s course that has Michigan undergraduates leading creative writing workshops in area prisons: “Last night I brought the ‘We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers’ quotation to a creative writing workshop I facilitate at Huron Valley Women’s Correctional Facility. We used it as a writing prompt for ourselves, and it was really powerful! Joyce in prison made me think about literature, art, accessibility…” The passage she used with her workshop comes from the “Scylla and Charybdis” chapter of *Ulysses*, where Stephen Dedalus says, “We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.” In Stephen’s lyrical description, this is a passage (and a chapter) about his isolation from others, and his reference to “robbers” is less literal than figurative—conveying his uneasy sense that he has stolen his ideas and even the language to express those ideas from the ghosts and giants who wrote before him (he is, ironically, feeling both completely alone and absolutely indebted and entangled).

My student brought Joyce’s words to other writers, who had their own ideas about solitude and the company we meet in introspection, and who might also have something to say about this brief and primarily figurative reference to crime. She turned this self-involved passage into an occasion for getting outside herself, and she helped her workshop students do the same. Her note to me afterwards continued this expansive trajectory, changing forever the light in which I read these sentences. And, like the other instances of contact and response with which I conclude this essay, though her note is not an explicit answer to the question “Why does English matter?” it is compelling evidence of deep engagement with her reading, an instance of that reading *used* in the world: reading becomes an occasion for writing and for further conversations. I said as I began this essay that in some ways I feel too close to this subject to answer the question by myself; I am, however, privileged to be in conversations almost every day with a host of readers and writers who help me see how they answer it by showing me the uses to which they are putting their reading and writing, by telling me what their readings help them address, by conveying the delights and consolations and riddles that come from the books we read together.

—Susan Scott Parrish

This past summer, I had the good fortune to teach at the University of Michigan’s study abroad program in Sesto Fiorentino, Italy. One book my students and I read together was Carlo Petrini’s *Slow Food: A Case for Taste* (2003), a manifesto for
and history of the thirty-some-year-old Italian-born gustatory movement. Petrini argues that because we live today in a world characterized by speed and standardization, we risk the extinction of: distinct indigenous food sources, local artisanal production of food, the slow conviviality of the table, and the human capacity to use one’s senses carefully. As I read Petrini’s book, it occurred to me that what the Slow Food movement is trying to do for the production and consumption of food, we in English departments are striving to do for the writing and reading of words.

Let’s take the issue of speed. Our students today surely produce and consume more words per day than any other generation in history. On large and small screens, truncated words or words turned into a single letter, cascade past eyes habituated to the quick ingestion of text. Who has time, or who thinks she has time, to write out “Los Angeles” any more, much less retain the memory of its fuller, older name, “El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río de Porciúncula”? LA will do. After all, we’re not trying to savor the words; we’re merely transmitting info (or shall I call it ‘fr’ or ‘nf’?).

Historians of reading in Europe and North America distinguish between older practices of “intensive reading” and the more modern habit of “extensive reading.” Reading was intensive when readers knew only a few books over the course of their lives; they read and re-read them, committing many parts to memory. With modernization in the printing industry and the growth of leisure time, reading became for most citizens, gradually, extensive: readers consumed (and disposed of) magazines, newspapers, and multiple genres of books. Now it seems that we have moved from an era of “extensive reading” to one we might call “over-extended reading.” What is lost in this process is not only the internalization of language regarded as sacred or beautiful or apt in the form of rereading, copying out by long hand, and memorization, but also—and I think this is very important—the reader’s capacity for sustained attention. With deep attention, the object focused on grows more rich and complex as one dwells upon it; conversely, without a capacity for sustained attention, the world inside and outside our minds becomes impervious and shallow.

This is where I think English Departments have a place. In my classroom, my goal is to slow the consumption of language way down. The first three words of Moby Dick, or The Whale, for example, can take an hour or more of class time to mull over. Consider just the first word: Why “Call”? “Call” used in a conversational way as in ‘feel free not to call me Mr. So-and-So now that we are about to go on a long voyage together?’ “Call” as in ‘why not use this name? for me because I don’t really want you to know my real name, or because I have quirkily decided to take on the name of a famous biblical outcast? “Call” as in what the Judeo-Christian deity does when he designates a mortal as His prophet? Or maybe “Call” is a sound-mate of the word “caul,” as in the amniotic sac a very few infants are born still wearing, and which folk belief takes to be a sign that the child has been marked for an exceptional fate.

Every word is full of historical and cultural sedimentation, layers and layers of past uses banked within. Because of this, and because words sound like other words with different meanings (call/caul), and because words change their sense depending on context and user’s intent, every word has an overlapping repertoire of roles. Words suggest and wink and approximate. When combined in sentences, stanzas, paragraphs, and whole books, just think of the possibilities. Students in my classes practice attending to and arguing for and over the range of meaning words can have. By slowing down their reading practices, even for just three hours a week, they come to know that words are not merely functional, standard, messengers of meaning, but rather, unruly players that require attention, discernment, and imaginative engagement. Through this analytical process, students learn, in a way highly applicable to other fields, how to attend to a problem carefully and from multiple angles. Finally, as students come to understand how experienced writers deploy words, they, like the “intensive” readers of old, internalize those writer’s practices. In short, they become much more versatile and skillful as writers.

So, why does English matter? We keep the Slow Word alive.
In continuing our discussion of “Why English Matters” we solicited our alumni to offer their perspective. For those who chose to contribute, we asked them to frame their responses around how they came to major in English and how that choice has impacted their professional and personal lives in the years following their graduation. The following is a selection of the responses we received.

—Howard Markel, MD, PhD, Class of 1982

I can honestly declare that everything about my development as a writer—has been a direct result of the four wonderful years I spent reading and discussing novels, poems, and plays with the distinguished faculty of English and my fellow classmates at the University of Michigan. In terms of disclosure, I should note that I am neither a literary scholar nor a producer of literature. I write medical history, journalism, and non-fiction. As an undergraduate, I latched onto the idea of making a contribution to both medicine and, for want of a better term, the medical humanities. In the years since, I have spent the bulk of my time reading, re-reading, and thinking about literary and historical works as well as extracting complex—and sometimes confusing—stories of illness from ailing patients and myriad other sources. As a physician, I have always found such an approach to be helpful in figuring out a great many medical problems. As a writer, historian, and journalist, this worldview has enabled my understanding and explanation of the human condition, which is, after all, the purview of both physicians and authors. Sometime between college and medical school I discovered the allure of narrative history. The demand to tell history well appealed to the left side of my brain, and its rigor in terms of documenting every statement made with a text or piece of evidence appealed to the right side. It was a Eureka-like moment that I have yet to recover from. Angels were singing, harps strummed, and a warm, fuzzy feeling energized my body. I had found my literary quarry. I now knew what I wanted to write about. And with due respect to all who love literature and fiction, real life events are typically far better than anything any human could ever make up.

From the distance of nearly three decades, my career looks like a rather direct path but in reality it was somewhat circuitous and represented a significant gambling of resources. I wanted to succeed as a doctor who studied the humanities and actually make a living at it. There were no guarantees I would be able to create such a position in a medical school back in the 1980s and there were relatively few role models with which to compare or model my career goals. I was, as they used to say in the days of early aviation, flying by the seat of my pants. Recently my wife asked me if when I was writing my first book about quarantines and epidemics (Quarantine!, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) did I ever think it would be quoted in the White House let alone become the basis for federal and international policies of pandemic preparedness planning. I told her that I may have briefly held such hopes—all authors hope that their work makes a difference—but I soon gave those notions up as a long shot at best. But in reality, I think I always had a goal of playing a role in the public conversation about serious and important matters. I just didn’t broadcast them, in case they failed to come true. I might add that there were many days when these goals seemed quite distant.

If I can give any advice to undergraduates and alumni in these troubled times, it would be simply this: pursue whatever dream stimulates your psyche. Find your passion—no matter how silly it may seem to others. Grab it, and hang onto it for dear life. But also, be humble enough to realize that passion and talent will only get you so far. Hard work will always get you even farther.

But, of course, you already knew that. That is one of the reasons students decide to major in English in the first place. If you make that decision, you take away a skill set that few of your peers who studied other topics have yet to master. We live in an age that no longer has the patience or even the ability to appreciate the nuances of language and the perspectives of other voices. You, on the other hand, have learned how to read complex texts with a nuanced eye and deep understanding. Take heart, therefore, in knowing that no matter what you ultimately do, no matter what your profession, occupation or task, you will constantly be called upon to read and understand texts, people, and situations in the years to come.
I always knew I wanted to be a writer. When I was seven I wrote my first “Chapter Book” about my family. And though I gave them the fictitious name “The Darlington,” nothing happened to any one of them that was not happening in my own family. No one was spared from the dog to my grandmother!

My truthfulness should have been an indication that I was not meant to write fiction, but rather chronicle the events around me. And so it happened I became interested in journalism during high school, working on the school magazine, as well as the yearbook. That, in turn, led me to study English Literature at the University of Michigan, where I could not imagine anything better than spending four years with words.

I knew that reading the best writers was the key to writing better, whether I ended up writing fiction or non-fiction. And, in fact, because I was most interested in writing features, I knew I needed to develop a strong narrative voice like that of Tom Wolfe or Hunter Thompson or Truman Capote, to succeed in my chosen area. Their non-fiction read like fiction—and, of course, they wrote in both forms.

Through my classes at Michigan, I learned how to analyze writing, research the period and social climate behind a piece of literature, and that there are many different ways to interpret an author’s words.

When I then started working in journalism in New York, first as a researcher for very senior writers, I was more than capable of helping them find the facts they needed to support their arguments and I was able to assist them with structure and clarity. These skills were learned in classes I took at Michigan, reading everything from Dickens to Dostoevsky, writing papers on the themes of expatriate writers in Paris in the 1920’s, and even studying poetry. My esteemed undergraduate degree then made it possible for me to be accepted into Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, where I earned a master’s degree.

My own career, which has led me to write travel articles from all over the world (I lived abroad for two decades until this past year), as well as features on business, education, arts, and culture (I am currently fascinated with Detroit), without a doubt holds a direct correlation to what I learned studying the rhythm of William Faulkner’s dialogue, the emotion behind Sylvia Plath’s verse, and the plot development behind classic works whether it was the Canterbury Tales or Wuthering Heights.

I don’t believe I ever would have succeeded at what I love to do without the background of my English degree from Michigan. I do not only hear the voices of so many authors in my head while I write, but also those of many of my professors, who were always encouraging, and truly understood that writing well is one of the most difficult things to do professionally or otherwise. And that the only way to improve one’s writing is to work hard at it.

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After going on a business trip to Detroit recently, I was fortunate enough to have a few extra hours that I was able to detour back to Ann Arbor. When I arrived, I immediately got that “high” feeling of excitement that most returning alumni get and reminds us how proud we are to be Wolverines. This trip brought me right back to my first days on campus, where I was overwhelmed by the opportunity to meet new, interesting people and intimidated by the number of course choices and different majors that the University of Michigan has to offer.

As a person who always liked to challenge myself throughout my life, I knew English was an area where I was weak (I guess, that is if you believe verbal SAT scores are a good measure of this—that is debatable!), and I wanted to focus on the weakness. Knowing a limited amount about literature and never having been one who read books for “fun” in my free time, I started taking English Literature classes and found they were unlocking a part of my mind. These courses were the beginning of my becoming a great analytical thinker and helped me better understand life and the complicated world we live in.

One of the best kept secrets (and there are many) for English majors at the
University of Michigan is that the study of the well-designed curriculum will make you a better businessperson, a better lover and companion, a better parent, and a person who is better able to cope with all the highs and lows you will all face as you go through life.

As I started to think about some of the reasons I have been a successful businessman, parent, and husband, they all came back to themes that I picked up while taking classes in the English Department. What other major allows you to study war, politics, love, death, and character strengths and flaws? As young eager students, you do not realize how lucky you are at this point in life, to have the time and freedom to study English and the classics, and learn from the lessons of some of the greatest minds of all time.

Whether it is John Milton in *Paradise Lost* teaching his theory of the fortunate fall or Melville in *Moby Dick* showing us the character flaws of Ahab in his pursuit of revenge—these lessons and the many others I took away had a prodigious impact on my success. Today, I only wish I could take two years off and study them all over again.

—Kelly O’Connor McNees, Class of 2002

To be honest, I can’t even remember making a decision to major in English. I had loved books and book people for so long that when I registered for my first semester at U-M, I didn’t even consider taking another path. I trusted my gut in that way you do when you’re eighteen, an ability that seems to seep away as you get older. I loved my four years as an English major, loved writing papers and reading poetry and listening to dynamic and passionate professors lecture on their work. I could have stayed forever!

I wanted to be a writer, of course, but that avocation seemed to float off to the side somewhere, unreachable. So, in an attempt to stay close to books, I spent a summer as an intern for a small press in Minneapolis, then moved to New York after graduation and found a job as an editorial assistant for a large publisher. I learned a great deal about the business of books, but after a year I realized the corporate world was not for me. I bounced back to Ann Arbor as an editorial assistant at the university press, then enrolled in graduate school at DePaul University in Chicago. Two years later, armed with my master’s degree in education, I moved to Rhode Island with my soon-to-be husband and taught seventh grade. After a couple years we moved again, this time to Ontario so he could take a position at a research institute. My certificate was not recognized in the Canadian school system, so I worked as a nanny and took on freelance editorial work from my former employers. I was trying to make space in my life for writing, because I had an idea for a novel about Louisa May Alcott.

Remember that thing I said about trusting your gut? It gets harder. Life gets noisier. All I’d ever wanted to do was be a writer, but I let myself get discouraged, sidetracked, and afraid of failure. I don’t regret my detours. I think I had to take them to get to the place where I could understand that I would regret not writing more than I would regret failing at it.

Majoring in English prepared me to do editorial work, go to graduate school, teach middle school English, and write novels. And it has probably prepared me for a host of other things that I may do in the future. Most importantly, the study of language and literature taught me (and continues to teach me) how to think about myself and about the world, and how to make sense of all the stops on the long road.
The Department hosted two major events this past year. The first was the 5th Annual Sarah Marwil Lamstein Children’s Literature Lecture which brought Lois Lowry to campus. Lowry is known for writing about difficult subject matters within her works for children. Her first children’s book, *A Summer to Die*, was published in 1977 (when Lowry was 40 years old). She has since written more than 30 books for children and published an autobiography. Two of her works have been awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal: *Number the Stars* in 1990, and *The Giver* in 1994.

The second event, “The Business of Writing,” was a symposium which explored the rapidly changing job opportunities available to skilled writers. The event featured a number of notable authors, educators, and professionals working in fields related to writing and publishing including Richard Nash, an independent publishing consultant and entrepreneur, who delivered the keynote address.

Additionally, our Zell Visiting Writers Series once again brought to campus an exciting lineup of authors including Charles Baxter, Richard Ford, and Mary Gaitskill and continues to be a wildly popular and widely attended series. In addition to the readings, the series also features each semester a multi-day residency for renowned authors. This past year the Zell Distinguished Writers in Residence were poet Yusef Komunyakaa (fall) and fiction author Jonathan Letham (winter).

The 5th annual Ben Prize was awarded to Gina Brandolino and Cody Walker. The Ben Prize was established in 2007 in honor of Laurence Kirshbaum and was made possible through the generosity of Bradley Meltzer and a group of donors to promote the teaching of good writing. The award was named after Mr. Kirshbaum’s grandson. Two exceptional lecturers are chosen each year for their work with students to improve writing skills. The award committee had to make some extraordinarily difficult decisions this year, given the pool of highly qualified and talented instructors in the English Department Writing Program who were nominated. The three instructors who were selected this year are remarkable for the highly effective, thoughtful, and innovative activities and assignments that all of these instructors employ in their classes. Please join us in congratulating these accomplished instructors and celebrating their achievements.

Also awarded this past year was the 2nd annual English Department Writing Program Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing. Winners were Jake Atkinson (Instructor, Genevieve Creedon), Katie Long (Instructor, Shane Slattery-Quintanilla), and Emily VanDusen (Instructor, Jennifer McFarlane-Harris). We also awarded one honorable mention to Jessica Levy (Instructor, Michael Gorwitz). The four essays from English 125 were all thoughtful, well-written works that demonstrated the range of genres in which our students write. All winning essays will be made available from our website.

Why not join us?
Visit our website to view a list of all upcoming events in our Department, subscribe to RSS feeds, and download video or audio files for any events like those above which you may not have been able to attend.

www.lsa.umich.edu/english/news_events/

Below L-R: Gina Brandolino, Laurence Kirshbaum, and Cody Walker; Katie Long, Jake Atkinson, Emily VanDusen, Genevieve Creedon, and Jennifer McFarlane-Harris; Stephen Spiess and Timothy Hedges.

Award-winning authors: Lois Lowry (children’s literature), Jonathan Letham (fiction), and Yusef Komunyakaa (poetry).
Thank You!

Once again, you, our alumni and friends, have been incredibly generous this year.

You gave over $26,000 to our Strategic and Gift Funds. We use these gifts to enhance the classroom experience for our undergraduates, to support our graduate students, and to retain and recruit the exceptional faculty that make us one of the top English programs in the country.

You donated more than $4,000 to the New England Literature Program (NELP) to provide scholarships for students.

You donated $9,000 to the Walter H. Clark Scholarship Endowment.

You gave $33,000 to the Bear River Writer’s Conference.

You continued to support the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) with more than $32,000 in donations.

The Ralph Williams Excellence in Teaching Award

Although Professor Williams has now retired, his impact will be felt for many years to come through the encouragement and cultivation of the unique talents that great teachers bring with them to the classroom. The Department of English Language and Literature has established an annual award to foster and spur spectacular teaching in undergraduate education in the spirit of Professor Williams. Gifts of all sizes can contribute to the success of this fund and to the ongoing excellence in undergraduate teaching at U-M. Since this opportunity was announced, YOU have given over $23,000 towards helping us achieve our funding goal for this award.

No gift to the Department is too small, and we value and appreciate each one.

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