

# WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 7 NO. 2

Celebrating writing in all its forms at Northwestern University

Winter 2007

## CWA 2007 WINTER QUARTER CALENDAR

### SAVE THESE DATES

#### NU FACULTY EVENTS



**Professor Alexander Weheliye**

Wednesday,  
February 7, 2007

A Reading from  
"Phonographies:  
Grooves in Sonic  
Afro-Modernity"

Noon  
University Hall,  
Hagstrum Room 201



**Professor Michele Weldon**

Thursday,  
February 8, 2007

"So You Want to  
Write...A Memoir"

4:00 p.m.  
Mary and Leigh  
Block Museum of  
Art, Pick-Laudati  
Auditorium

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#### SPECIAL GUESTS COMING TO CAMPUS



**Alex Kotlowitz**

Monday,  
January 22, 2007

"A Reading from  
Nonfiction and  
Various Projects"  
5:30 p.m.  
Harris Hall 108



**Brooke Kroeger**

Monday,  
February 19, 2007

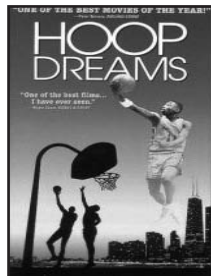
"The Biographical  
Imperative"  
Noon  
Fisk Hall, Room 211



**Michael Specter**

Monday,  
February 26, 2007

"Writing About  
Science and Society"  
Noon  
Fisk Hall, Room 211



**Alex Kotlowitz and Steve James**

Tuesday,  
February 13, 2007

"A Storytelling Battle:  
Film vs. Print"  
4:00 p.m.  
Harris Hall 108

#### February 16, 2007

A Conversation with Journalist  
and Photographer:

**Michael McColly  
and James Tuong Nguyen**

Author of the recently published  
*The After-Death Room: Journey into  
Spiritual Activism*, McColly  
describes his urgent quest for a  
more global understanding of the  
psycho-spiritual challenges faced  
by those who wake up each morn-  
ing inside the AIDS epidemic and  
have to act, to learn, and to hope.

12:30 PM - 2:00 PM  
University Hall, Room 201  
Hagstrum Room  
1897 Sheridan Road

Please join NU's Center for the Writing Arts as we celebrate writing in all its forms by welcoming distinguished guests from both on and off campus. For complete calendar and recent additions visit: [www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/)

**PLANNING WRITING  
EVENTS THIS QUARTER?  
LET US KNOW!**

Just a reminder that the Center's biweekly electronic digest, *NU Writing Event Digest*, highlights NU writing events and reaches students, faculty, and staff via the Center's growing email list. If you know of an upcoming event related to writing, whether it be an author's visit, departmental program, or even an off-campus event involving NU students or faculty, please let us know! We will do our best to publicize all writing-related programming. If you would like to receive the electronic *NU Writing Event Digest*, please send an email to: [words@northwestern.edu](mailto:words@northwestern.edu) or call us at 847-467-4099.

To view our complete writing events calendar, please visit our web site: [www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/)

**WRITING MATTERS**

Editor: Stacy L. Oliver  
Contributing Writers: Peter Scherf, Sarah Tompkins, Justin Sondak

**MASTERS DEGREE PROGRAM FOR SCREEN AND STAGE WELCOMES FIRST STUDENTS**

In Fall 2006 the Masters of Fine Art in Writing for the Screen and Stage at Northwestern enrolled its inaugural cohort. A two-year interdisciplinary program offered through the School of Communication and situated in the Department of Radio, Television and Film this new program provides a rare opportunity for a community of writers to work in screen, stage, television and experimental media.

The curriculum is organized around six core courses that introduce students to a set of "transportable" media writing concepts, as well as specific media and genres. Dedicated writing electives are offered on topics such as writing the character-oriented screenplay, developing the television pilot and writing interactive narrative. Furthermore, students are encouraged to enroll in advanced classes in other departments such as Theatre and Performance Studies in order to develop a better sense of the relationship between writing and the world of the performing arts.

While studying at Northwestern, students will build significant portfolios including at least a short screenplay, a play, a TV episode, and a full-length second-year project of their choosing. Amazing production opportunities from Radio-TV-Film media making courses to a \$5000 grant help students bring their play, screenplay, or teleplay to life. Artists and executives from TV, stage, film, and new media are brought in for discussions and students experience the "real world" of writing and production by taking internships with film, stage, or TV companies in LA, NY, or Chicago.

The application deadline for Fall 2008 is 12/31/07.  
Further program details are available at <http://www.write.northwestern.edu>

**NU CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS  
ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS**

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WRITING MATTERS  
Winter 2007 Vol. 7 No.2  
Editor: STACY L. OLIVER  
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Published three times during the school year at Northwestern University, 1880 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208.

## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

*By Reginald Gibbons  
Director, The Center for the Writing Arts,  
Professor of English and Classics*

The number of events in the arts and humanities at Northwestern seems to increase each year, filling all our schedules with an extraordinary array of lectures, readings, symposia, and performances. The Center for the Writing Arts relays to recipients of our frequently distributed listserv bulletin all the news we receive and hunt out of events relating to writing. Whether it is practical for there to be a more coordinated presentation of events in the arts and humanities has been the subject of conversations and meetings for a number of years, but the sheer richness of the Northwestern environment, and the intense research activity of the faculty, make any regularly coordinated overview seem very nearly impossible. There are intellectual and social pleasures specific to attending a disciplinary presentation, and other pleasures specific to attending an event that brings together otherwise distant constituencies, such as many of the Othello events and the reading by Adrienne Rich and the lecture by Wole Soyinka, this past fall. With the coming expansion of the Humanities Institute and its future relocation to Kresge Hall, it's my hope that the Center for the Writing Arts can help integrate events related to writing with the schedule of events in the humanities.

It is not hard to imagine some of the directions in which the study of writing might go, especially at Northwestern, where for graduate students the relatively small size of the humanities departments allows both disciplinary focus and training, on the one hand, and inter-disciplinary acquaintance-ship among faculty and students, on the other, which can lead to new directions in study and scholarship; and where, for undergraduates, the course offerings are many, in several schools.

The study of writing, too, is inclining toward the interdisciplinary, in several ways. (1) The mixing or blurring of literary genres that began in the early twentieth century still continues with the evolution of film, video, graphic arts, hypertext, and other media; and meanwhile writers of poetry and prose tend to benefit greatly from studying each other's writerly practices (as the undergraduate English Major in Writing has been proving for many years). (2) Literary translation should evolve into an area of study and practice in the university context, even if it has done so in very few places as yet. Since political, military and cultural events leap across borders as quickly and as far as they do nowadays, there has certainly

never been a greater need for the American translation of contemporary literature from abroad and the dissemination of those translations within our own borders. Thus one implication of the need for translation is the need for more translators--which means that universities must somehow produce more graduates who are proficient in other languages. (3) Meanwhile the publishing business, which has evolved into two complementary, but sometimes nearly opposing, camps--the commercial and the not-for-profit--leaves the dissemination of literary works from abroad mostly to the not-for-profit camp, which issues books in small print runs. So another implication of the need for translation is the perennial need for a solution to the ever-present problem of the distribution of books across our vast American spaces. Perhaps the web will generate a solution that not only makes translations available but also focuses searches for them. (Such as [wordswithoutborders.org](http://wordswithoutborders.org) for which Susan Harris, who teaches for the Master of Arts in Creative Writing Program (SCS) is an editor.) Another obstacle to the dissemination of knowledge of other cultures is the sharp decline, over the last few decades, in the venues for book reviews written for the general public. Newspapers

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## WHAT ARE YOU READING?

We asked these questions: 1) What scholarly/professional book or article are you currently reading? 2) What book are you reading at the moment largely for pleasure? 3) What is the next book (work or pleasure) you hope to read? Here's what they had to say:



### Leigh Bienen

Senior Lecturer,  
School of Law

1) The Report of the Massachusetts Governor's Council on Capital Punishment and the Indiana Law Journal Symposium on the Report.

2) Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Upon Mountains*; a beautifully written book about many important subjects. In fact, I am so admiring of this book that I have assigned it to my law students in my course titled "Lives of Lawyers."

3) The next book I hope to read- *The Depression of the Nineties: An Economic History* by Charles Hoffman (that is the 1890's) and also Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.



### Carl Smith

Professor of English &  
American Studies

1) Gerard Koeppel, *Water for Gotham*.

2) John McPhee, *Uncommon Carriers*.

3) Steven Johnson, *Ghost Map*.



### Sharon Holland

Associate Professor of African  
American Studies, American  
Studies, & Gender Studies

1) Claudio Saunt's *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* -- for the second time -- it's that good!

2) Robert Ludlum, *The Ambler Warning* -- airport bookshops are deadly, aren't they?

3) Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, given to me by a friend who's as obsessed with experimental writing as I am. Also, *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*, by one of my students, Camille Dungy.



### John Keene

Associate Professor of  
English and African  
American Studies,  
Director of the English Major  
in Writing

1) I currently am reading several books that address performance theory, and in particular various kinds of racially and ethnically marked sociopolitical and cultural performances in the world. They include my Northwestern colleague E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, and Princeton University scholar Daphne Brooks's *Bodies in Dissent: Performing Race, Gender, and Nation in the Trans-Atlantic Imaginary*.

2) Ekow Eshun's *Black Gold of the Sun*, a diasporic travelogue-meditation centered on the young British author's "return" to his family's native Ghana and his reckoning with his expectations of it, and Edward P. Jones's newest collection, *All Aunt Hagar's Children*, are books I'm slowly making my way through. Whenever I can, I get a bit of lyric nourishment from award-winning poet Nathaniel Mackey's *Splay Anthem* and Bhanu Kapil's *Incubation: A Space for Monsters*, too.

3) There are too many to name!



## REBECCA GILMAN, RENOWNED PLAYWRIGHT AND NEW NORTHWESTERN FACULTY MEMBER

### REBECCA GILMAN: ART OF WRITING A PLAY

*Justin Sondak is a freelance writer living in Chicago.*

*This article originally appeared on Chicagoist, a website covering news and events in and around Chicago, online at: [www.chicagoist.com](http://www.chicagoist.com).*

For every playwright enjoying a production on a Chicago stage during this busy theater season, many more are waiting their turn. Rebecca Gilman knows both sensations well. Ms. Gilman is one of Chicago's most acclaimed playwrights; her work has been produced at the Goodman Theatre, London's Royal Court Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club and regional theaters across the country. She was named a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *The Glory of Living*, which locally won a Jeff Citation and an After Dark Award. She mines the complex issues behind sensational media stories in shows that include *Spinning Into Butter*, *Boy Gets Girl*, and *Blue Surge*.

Gilman recently joined the Northwestern University faculty in the School of Communication's new MFA program focusing on Writing for the Screen and Stage. We attended a talk she gave last week at the Block Museum of Art about the playwriting craft. Here's what we found out:

### How to get started

Gilman believes that you really ought to have the passion and desire to put something down on the page. You're more likely to succeed if you really love theater and expose yourself to other dramatists and playwrights. She recommends taking a playwriting class so you can learn the rules and figure out how to break them. Take an acting class so you will know their challenges and have consideration for them when you write. Actors typically make the transition to playwriting either because they are terrible actors (which she claims was her case) or because they can turn their insight as talented actors into great plays (she cites Tracy Letts of *Steppenwolf* as an example).

Fear of writing is totally natural. Playwrights fear that they may fail, that their families may hate them or they will seem like freaks. To maintain a positive attitude, she recommends the book *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, helping writers work through their ideas. To keep a healthy outlook, she stopped reading reviews of her own work, then stopped reading reviews of everything, relying solely on friends' and colleagues' recommendations.

### Where to get ideas

She recommends looking at what's right in front of you: your family, your friends, your co-workers, etc.



REBECCA GILMAN

She also recommends reading newspapers to find problematic, engaging situations. Read a lot. Growing up, she corresponded with Walker Percy, who gave her the following advice: "you have to read and read with passion."

In Gilman's estimation, great writers are always eavesdropping on conversations. In the age of cell phones, people are so revealing but sometimes seem to speak as if they are being watched and omit the rough edges of conversation. In the age of reality TV shows, people in real life seem to be playing for an imaginary camera.

### Putting pen to paper

She starts by hearing voices of potential characters talking in her head. Next she sees scenes and starts writing when two to three scenes have been formed. Many other writers approach plays with an outline of the story. She generally does not do this but has made an exception when adapting other writers' work.

She warns that you can never be certain where you'll find that first point of inspiration, and cited

**Cont. on page 6**

GILMAN  
STORY  
CON'T

Harold Pinter, who started writing *The Homecoming* upon hearing someone walk into a room and ask "What have you done with the scissors?"

**The process**

When things are going well, she devotes four to five hours a day to writing. Otherwise, she's not writing. Typically she'll think about an idea for two to three years. A first draft can take two to three months. After the next few rewrites, the script will be shown to a couple of people. Then she will make revisions for a draft for the larger public consisting of local directors and trusted theater professionals. Then it will be rehearsed with actors. Typically you have a four-week rehearsal process, then a couple of weeks of previews followed by a first production. Changes are made prior to a second production. Then, they take it away from you. In the end, remember that playwriting is a very collaborative process and that actors may contribute valu-

able feedback.

**Finding inspiration**

She believes *The Music Man* is the best musical ever because it is funny, touching, and has great songs. For better or worse, she says, George Bernard Shaw is an inspiration to her, reminding her that drama requires opposing points of view and that intelligent inquiry can be exciting. She also recommends Anton Chekhov and Bertolt Brecht and regards Wendy Wasserstein, Beth Henley, and Marsha Norman as role models. She reads many contemporary playwrights and has a tremendous respect for Arthur Miller, who is remarkable, she says, for simultaneously addressing "Why am I so unhappy?", a typically American question, and "How can I change the world?", a typically European question.

**Breaking into the market**

It's not easy, she says. First of all, you are competing directly with dead people. Your typical regional theater only has one or two slots per season for live writers because people are weary of seeing new plays. Second, there is a scarcity of

venues. In Chicago, she recommends checking out The Chicago Dramatists, who run a robust network for young playwrights. You should also enter your work in new play contests, so it will be read by a review panel.

You should also befriend directors, who tend to have lots of clout. Consider self-producing, a noble and terrific endeavor where you may find theater people to work on your show for free. Victory Gardens will consider anything from a Chicago playwright. The Royal Court in London will review all submissions, but an agent will help you get noticed. The playwright/agent relationship is a Catch-22: you need an agent to get produced or published, but agents generally consider only those writers who have been produced or published. Find new plays to read--it's easier than ever before to find published plays, thanks to Amazon. This site not only has a large stock of titles; it also recommends similar works. Anything recently produced in New York has been published. Stores that sell scripts are rarer but the Soliloquy bookstore is a good local resource.

**"Celebrities in the Attic" with Landon Jones**

by Sarah Tompkins '09



Landon Y. Jones

Landon Y. Jones, the fall Writer in Residence for the Center for the Writing Arts and former editor of PEOPLE magazine, shared his experience of celebrity culture during his lecture, "Celebrities in the Attic," on November 15. During the lecture Jones presented a slideshow of PEOPLE magazine's covers from the first issue to the present. If a picture is worth a thousand words, magazine covers prove to be a cultural photo album. "You can go to a community and have never been in it before, but everyone will know celebrities," Jones said. "If you want to stop and establish common ground, talk about celebrities." This cultural bond reveals things about society and the values of each decade, Jones said, and the public's interest has evolved from the characters in films to the personal lives of the performers. Many students enjoyed hearing a behind-the-scenes perspective of PEOPLE as well. "It was great to see a former insider looking back on how the industry is now," said Sara Pazar, a Communications senior, "from more of an academic perspective."

## STUDENT VOICES: I Learned About Writing From That!

*This column is dedicated to hearing firsthand from students their experiences of what's making them better writers: the agony or ecstasy of that one reporting or writing assignment that made the lightbulb go on over their heads so that they could say, "Ah, I learned how to write because of that!"*

**Our contributor for this issue is Peter Scherf a senior majoring in English.**

Until I was thirteen years old, I was completely convinced that "my-zuld" was a word in the English language. It wasn't spelled that way, of course—it was spelled "misled," but I pronounced it "my-zuld."

In my formative years, my elementary school classes always featured quiet reading time™, a fixed half-hour where each child would pick out a book to read quietly while the teacher enjoyed the relative calm. Since movement, speech, or entropy of any kind was strictly forbidden during these periods, quiet reading time™ quickly became a speed-reading competition. We were never encouraged by our teachers to race each other through our books, but we were never rebuked for it, either. It was certainly more appealing to a second-grader than quiet appreciation of the elegant, measured paragraphs of Beverly Cleary's *Beezus and Ramona*.

When you hit a word you didn't know during the Reading Race, you skipped over it. This was the

quickest solution, and generally didn't interfere with understanding the basic plot of any book. Soon, however, this practice became the favorite way to discredit opponents—by proving their competitors didn't know what a certain word in their book meant, a reader could prove himself the best scholar. Thus, Racers were forced to hone their ability to grasp the meaning of a word solely from its context. We scoffed at the dictionary—what Reading Racer had time for such a formality, when we could just as easily figure it out on our own and keep going?

So it was that, at thirteen, I somehow still held the spoken word "miss-led" completely distinct from "misled," which I read to myself as "my-zuld." Misled ("my-zuld") was probably, I reasoned, related to the word "miser," a word that sounded very much like it. It was an adjective, and took no other form. It meant, I had guessed, that one had been stolen from or wronged—perhaps even by a miser or, at least, someone very much like a miser. This made perfect sense, and it did so only because I had never once heard the word read aloud or read it aloud myself.

On that fated day in 1997 I was reading John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. I came upon the word "misleading," used in a context I don't recall. For some reason, I hung on it for a moment, feeling a wry tug from my subconscious. In a flash, it all came clear. An incalculably small adjustment—a few neural connections in my brain reorienting themselves—and in less than a



**Peter Scherf**

moment the present-tense "mislead" translated itself perfectly and logically into the past: misled. I remember, in that moment, my sincere prayer of thanks for this revelation: "Dear God in heaven, how could I possibly be so stupid?" We should remember, of course, that I was in seventh grade—a time when it seems the only critic more negative than one's self is absolutely everyone around us, stalking our every mistake with the ominous attention of cruel and feral predators. Thank goodness I had never been forced to read that word aloud in class. The moment continued to nag at me, however, and I soon realized the humor in it—for years now, I had been deceived by the word "misled," which meant "to give a wrong impression."

For the first time in my young life, I considered the multiplicity of a word: as a vehicle for meaning ("misled" as being deceived or poorly directed); as a product of its roots (the prefix "mis-" as in "mistake," and the root "led" straight from the verb "to lead"); and, most importantly, as an organism inscrutable and cunning enough to deceive me for almost fourteen years. This was the beginning of my long descent into a love of language.

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scarcely publish such things any longer.

In the study of writing, a lot more might be included. From the point of view of the writer, comparison with other traditions could be accomplished in part in creative writing courses; from the point of view of the translator, courses teaching language, culture and history could include the practical project of a brief literary translation; and

from the point of view of the business of publishing, in all its forms, there's a sociology of publishing of which far too few readers, even within universities, are aware.

I'll be convening some faculty discussion of such matters in the coming quarters, in order to ask what might be done at Northwestern to bring more of such study to both undergraduate and graduate students. But I promise not to add even more events to the already crowded

schedule that I mentioned at the head of this column--these will be meetings for the sake of thinking toward programmatic outcomes; I think that the best outcomes, in view of new possibilities at the Humanities Institute and ongoing presentations by initiatives like those in Classical Traditions and Critical Theory, will be collaborative in substance and institutionally co-sponsored.

*Reginald Gibbons*

**In Our Next Issue:**

An interview with **Ed Roberson**, our visiting Writer in Residence for Fall 2007. Roberson will be teaching Writing 302-The Art of Poetry.

**WRITING MATTERS**  
NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER  
FOR THE WRITING ARTS  
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