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NEWSLETTER OF THE GRADUATE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY, BROOKLYN CAMPUS

Spotlight on Visiting Faculty: Interview with Fall 08 Fiction Prof. Han Ong

"There are other beginnings /
 no less startling, but starting
 out / the pavement disap-
 pears / under a thicket, the
 clouds are / the consistency of
 brick, / a mirror image floats
 in a puddle. / The clouds flail
 above linoleum strips. / The
 lemons ripen as we speak."

-from "Third Party
 Billing," INSEPARABLE poems
 1995-2005, by Lewis Warsh,
 Director of the MFA Creative
 Writing Program

"it might also discourage
 other survivors from ap-
 proaching the perimeter /
 but that's a chance we'll have
 to take..."

-from "We Can't
 Afford That particular Human
 Trait At This Particular
 Time," by Wayne Berninger,
 Editor-in-chief of Downtown
 Brooklyn

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How would you say a novel or
 story grows for you?

There are many entry
 points. Character and dialogue
 are usually good starting points
 for me. If I have a grasp of a
 character's "desire," maybe
 even something as simple as "I
 want a new winter coat," then

I can place that character on a



kind of straight line: what is he

going to do next in his path to-
 wards that new winter coat?

And that straight line (with de-
 tours or improvisations that
 might come up on any given
 writing day) becomes the book
 or story.

Do you see writing, for the seri-

(continued on page 2...)

A Veteran Perspective: *School, Back to* by Elspeth Macdonald

My husband, an em-
 ployee of the University, urged
 me to take a course on poetry. I
 had already dismissed it as too
 hard. When I walked into that
 first class, I was as terrified as I
 would have been at 25. I didn't
 have the professor's permission
 to join the class. Unable to reach
 him, I went anyway. Once the
 class settled in, the professor
 asked me to step outside. Very
 thoughtful; it would have been
 awkward to talk privately with
 him in front of all those stu-
 dents. Soon he suggested I stay,
 see how I liked it; we could talk
 afterwards.

Two students were
 about to announce which poetic
 essays they had chosen for the
 class text. I braced myself.
 Would they pick someone I had
 even heard of—let alone liked?
 Probably not, if it was anything
 like music, so much new stuff,
 so much of it ... difficult.

"Tagore," said the
 first. I love every poem I have
 ever read of Tagore. Terrific.

Then I braced for the next offer
 from my southern classmate:
 "Maya Angelou." Wonderful.
 These students are soul mates,
 if this is typical. I had just heard
 Maya Angelou make an extraor-
 dinary speech at the 50th Anni-
 versary Montessori Conference.
 The professor handed out the
 syllabus. After he put one on
 my desk, I whooped discreetly,
 but he wanted to know what I
 thought of the class. I was
 thrilled, and continued to be for
 the whole term.

A few months later,
 when I got into the MFA Pro-
 gram, I was walking on air. The
 professors, there now, didn't
 seem thrown by having a grand-
 mother in the class. They are
 each probably younger than our
 youngest son. But I don't feel as
 if I'm treated any more specially
 than anyone else. In fact, the
 only person who treats me as
 special, and she is working on
 it, is me. I found myself saying
 in class ... "maybe because I'm
 older;" or, "from my vantage
 point." Maybe to remind myself

of reality. It is easy to look
 around at everyone and, like
 the family dog, think you must
 be one of them.

All this has thrown a
 new light on another kind of
 school—preschool—where, as
 teachers, we were very careful
 to put more than one minority
 student in a class. No one
 should be all by him/herself in a
 room. I am a minority—the
 only senior citizen in class.
 Now I see this practice as insu-
 lation against being, in my case,
 the only authority on age.
 There's something about it that
 I find delicious. Like dulce de
 leche, it's probably unhealthy.

The drawbacks are
 chiefly physical: sitting in class,
 to read, and to write papers,
 means having to do better at
 exercise. And I can barely carry
 the books about. Let's say, I am
 building muscle.

I don't remember
 students, in the olden days,

(continued on page 4...)

Spotlight on Visiting Faculty: Han Ong (*from cover*)

ous author (whatever that means), as a process or a habit? What is the difference?

I'm not sure how to answer this question. It took me a while to acclimate to the idea that writing had become my "profession," the thing by which I make my money (along with related endeavors like teaching). This was because for the longest time writing was a guilty secret, or perhaps not a "guilty" secret, but a secret nonetheless. It was what I did in the hours I had off from the straight jobs. Or what I secretly typed into the computer when no one was looking on these jobs. I have bad writing habits. I don't write daily, as some esteemed writers do and recommend. I write when there is enough inspiration or "material" in my head, things which need to be written down or they'll get lost. And when I hit the brick wall of ignorance regarding the plot or the charac-

ters, then I stop, going back only when this ignorance has lifted. This may take the form, as with the case of my first novel "Fixer Chao," of several months' break.

How does place, both geographically and metaphysically, affect your work?

Place is the bonus, but rarely the starting point. Although I have to say that "Fixer Chao," being set in New York, benefited from the energy of the city—I wanted that energy in the book as well.

What, ideally, do you hope to achieve through your experiences at LIU?

To help unblock a few minds. To give young writers a new way to look at their craft, and to give them a skill set they would otherwise not have considered. Even if they only end up using one out of the many skills that I impart, the rest will

always be in reserve, there to be called upon on the occasion they're needed, skills such as taking material from real-world sources such as newspapers—obituaries are a particular favorite—and being able to synthesize them and reconfigure them so that they fit smoothly into your own writing and become, by your own alchemization, yours... also, the idea that reading and writing go hand in hand, like having a conversation, and that one should always read as one is writing, preferably a wide array of material so that no one particular style or voice takes hold to influence your own work... also the ability to think of a story as a sequence of events set forth by a character's desire, or a story as the overlap between one character's desire and another; the ability to think in terms of "desire," which opens you up in both writing and in life.

"Did you think Feng Shui could repair your ugly soul? Did you—"

-from *Fixer Chao*, by Han Ong, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001

In the Spirit of Hemmingway, Six Word Book Reviews

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write an entire novel in only six words, to which the author responded, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." He is rumored to have called it his greatest work.

Whether composed for the sake of art or to settle a bar bet is unknown, either way we wish to invoke Hemingway's sense of both economy and brevity here, in order to describe some of those other great works that have recently crossed our paths.

Sail by James Paterson

"Dangerously engrossing, twisty, turny, amazingly simple."

-Sarah Kolbasowski

The Dubliners by James Joyce

"Mysterious paralysis plagues Dublin afterthought hospitality."

-Marita Downes

Madwomen: The Locas Mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral, Ed. & Trans. by Randall Couch

"A honeycomb of sensuous poetic phrases."

-Liliana Almendarez

The Polish Officer by Alan Furst

"Vivid Graham Greeneish novel of espionage."

-Walter Balcerak

Gather Together in My Name by Maya Angelou

"Enlightening author, tremendously resourceful, brutally honest!"

-Zahra Patterson

Oxford Unabridged English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press

"A little wordy, good plot though."

-Robert Planos

The Book of Ebenezer Le Page by G.B. Edwards

"I love a good Guernsey joke."

-review by Jessica Rogers of an instant favorite

Student & Alumni Announcements

Marita Downes received a partial scholarship this past summer to attend the Dublin James Joyce Summer School. In addition, **Professor Maria McGarrity** spoke at the program on the subject of "James Joyce and Roger Casement: Imagining the Primitive."

Last Meal: Collected Stories, the first book published by LIU alumna **Diane Macaraeg Quin**, is now available on amazon.com.

Sarah Kolbasowski teaches at both Kean University and Montclair University, and just had a poem picked up by The Edison Literary Review.

Stephanie Gray read poetry as part of the 2nd Annual Boog City Music and Poetry Festival.

The eldest son of **Mary Walker** ranked #1 in the nation, for his division, in the martial art, Taegeuk Yuk Jang.

Ti'Nese Boyd now teaches at Intermediate School 35 in Brooklyn.

Jennifer Ambrose moved to Chicago and is teaching five composition classes.

The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses awarded one of two prestigious internships for the Fall 2008 semester to **Gary Parrish**. Also, Farfalla Press, founded and edited by Gary Parrish, recently released three new publications, *Glad Stone Children* by Edmund Berri-gan, *Red Noir* by Anne Waldman, and *Censory Impulse* by Erica Kaufman, all available through Small Press Distribution.

Gary Parrish has been awarded the 2008 Esther Hyneman Graduate Award in Poetry, while **Jessica Rogers** accepted the same award for Fiction.

Helen C. Seo was recipient of the first Liang and Bernard Schweizer Master's Thesis Award, for her work entitled "Evelyn Waugh: 'Change and Decay in All Around I See.'"

Jaime Barker won the Louis and Ann Parascandola Graduate English Award for 2008.

Jaime Barker, Omayra Cruz, Joseph Garnevicus, Sarah Kolbasowski, Jacqueline McCormick, Sophia Mavrogiannis, Cherisse Mayers, Lindsey Miller, Margot Nasti, Helen Seo, Charles Thorne all received 2008 Departmental Awards for Excellence in English.

Jasmine Wanda-Tori Waszak was born on July 24th, 2008, to **Tejan Green -Waszak** and her husband **Kevin Waszak**. She weighed 6 pounds 15 ounces.

Please join us in congratulating **Wayne & Melissa Berninger** on the birth of their son, **George Monte Berninger**.



"I imagine that I could have pushed my same-sex feelings aside for a life of loveless domesticity and social acceptance, as many women have done and continue to do out of fear of social ostracism. God bless them all for trying to please their mothers."

-from Jaime Barker's *Parascandola Award* -winning essay, "The Carolinas"

"This human language/ Take this part of me with you / Who knew you and the names we carry..."

-from "Standing in Lines," by Gary Parrish

Submit to *Downtown Brooklyn*

Downtown Brooklyn: a Journal of Writing is the literary magazine of the English Department at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University. A new issue appears at the beginning of each fall semester, and the editorial staff then accepts new submissions from September 1 until February 1 for the next issue. We read & respond to submissions in batches as they arrive.

We accept submissions from all students, faculty & staff at the Brooklyn Cam-

pus. This includes alumni, as well as persons formerly employed in any capacity at the Brooklyn Campus.

Submissions are also welcome from Visiting Writers who teach in the Creative Writing MFA program and from writers who come to campus as part of the English Department's Voices of the Rainbow Reading Series.

Submit up to ten single-spaced pages or the equivalent of poetry &/or fiction &/or creative non-fiction. On a

separate page, include your phone number, mailing address & e-mail address, as well as a brief biographical statement.

The best way to send your submission is attached to an e-mail sent to his address: wayne.berninger@liu.edu

-Wayne Berninger

Announcing the release of *Downtown Brooklyn, a Journal of Writing* Issue Number Seventeen, 2008, featuring cover art by Charulata L. Dyal!

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School, Back to by Elspeth Macdonald (cont. from cover page)

being so warm. People sit next to me. I am readily included when we have to form groups. I am offered help if I ever need it with computer issues, which I frequently might. I'm from NY—I thought people were tough and out for themselves. I am ready to deal with that. Have not had to: this is a completely kind, hard-working, talented, group, class after class.

As I was thinking about this article I thought back to my last regular English class. In the 70s I took a literature course at the New School. We read *Moby Dick* in two weeks. In the 80's I took education courses which only involved classes in how to teach English. This is very different from a class where we are encouraged to think up our own stories. Then I had a year of psychology courses upstairs—terrific, but no English. Way back, in 1978,

there was one excellent poetry workshop with Phillip Lopate. He turned on the faucet.

For my studio art degree, I only had to write one paper in four years. I worried about it for three.

And then it hit me—I haven't had an English class since senior year in high school in 1957. School was very different, 51 years ago. We read, we analyzed, we sometimes memorized, we wrote term papers and we had exams. We sat in rows, wore uniforms. We had read everyone by then, including Chaucer (memorizing the first part of the Preamble), Spenser, Emerson, Thoreau, and in the 12th grade itself—Thackeray, Eliot, Whitman, and Yeats. We had a lot to chew on. I began writing poetry. There were no poetry readings. There was an Upper School Poetry Contest with one

winner, which was probably as hard on the winner as it was on the rest of us. I had to think back to elementary school, under the famed Mr. Albert Cullum of St. Luke's School (see PBS Independent Lens series, *Touch of Greatness* for a film about him), to remember poetry coming to life. I know we read aloud to each other and other classes. It was one of the first open classrooms.

Later as teachers, we were taught to post our students' work. I had forgotten what that feels like. Now having read my own work in public at the Living Room, The Bowery Poetry Club, and The Cornelia Street Café—it makes so much sense. What memorable thrills!

There are similarities, too—summed up in one word: rigor. I haven't had to work so hard since high school. Plenty of writing, a raft of reading. No

one complains. I love it. So no wonder everyone seems so literate, so able to analyze other students' writing. I am astonished at the way students can read and/or listen to the work of others and at the same time keep track of their thoughts and feelings about that work. I expect to catch on.

Right now I have to go on a walk to keep the sciatica at bay, and track down an essay for my next course.

A Note from the Editor:

To send story ideas, news or announcements, or to find out how you can write for *Word's Worth*, contact Jessica Rogers, editor, at jessica.rogers@my.liu.edu

For information about the programs offered in the English department at Long Island University, contact Marilyn Boutwell, Advisor & Coordinator of Graduate Studies in English, at marilyn.boutwell@liu.edu