The Coast Line

Newsletter of the UNCW Department of Creative Writing
It has been a busy year for the staff of Chautauqua. In June, our 12th issue, Privacy & Secrets, was released at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York. This issue was one of our favorites, not only for the gorgeous poetry, fiction and nonfiction within its pages, but also for the cover art. Leonard Koscianski’s painting, Night Lights, is featured on the cover, and we cannot get enough of this haunting scene.

Like all issues of Chautauqua, Privacy & Secrets is divided into five sections, which represent the way and philosophy of the Chautauqua Institution: life in art, life of the spirit, life at leisure, life lessons, and young voices (a section devoted entirely to young writers, ages 12 to 18). Featured work includes poetry from Tony Hoagland, Philip Raisor, George Drew, and Joseph Bathanti, as well as Erin Rodoni, whose poem, “The Ninety-Two-Year-Old Woman on My Table” was the second runner-up for our Editors Prize. Cara Bayles’s short story, “Ostracita,” won our Editors Prize. Bayles’s fiction has appeared in Meridian and Trop. She is also an award-winning reporter with work appearing in the Boston Globe, the Houma Courier, the Thibodaux Daily Comet, and Beer Advocate magazine. Other fiction in the issue comes from Taylor Brown, Ryan Reed and Aimee Pogson.

The first runner-up for the Editors Prize was Mary Kudenov’s essay, “The Real Women of Hiland Mountain.” Kudenov’s work appears in Alaska Quarterly Review, Fourth Genre, the Southampton Review, Permafrost, the Citron Review, and bioStories. Other notable nonfiction includes the work of Eli Hastings, Laurie Easter, Deborah Thompson, and Georgia Tiffany.

In September, we celebrated our Wilmington launch of Privacy & Secrets with a party in the reception hall at the Cameron Art Museum. Complete with live music from our editor, Philip Gerard, and the self-proclaimed “Whiskey Boys,” this well-attended event included readings of our Editors Prize-winning pieces, as well as a special reading by Taylor Brown from his Pushcart-nominated story, “Riverkeepers.” In addition, one of our local young writers, Lola Byers-Ogle, read her poem, “Paper Doll,” with exquisite poise. It was one of the highlights of the evening.

With Privacy & Secrets completed, we are in the process of working on our 13th issue, Americana. Although we don’t want to reveal too much about this stellar issue, know that readers are in for a treat, with pieces ranging from a poem about glaciers, Putin, and Herzog, to a story about a Midwestern dad who sells bomb shelters to an essay about redemption through a pickoff play.

Our submission period for Americana closed in November, but we will begin reading for issue 14, Invention & Discovery, in February.
Ecotone

What does place sound like? Ecotone’s fall 2015 issue will consider the ways sound roots us to where we are and reminds us of where we’ve been. We’re interested in how sound shapes the lives of humans and other creatures, from the ways we communicate to the spaces and landscapes we inhabit. We’re thinking about musicology, musicians, linguistics, thriving and endangered languages, sound waves, silence, symphonies, solos, band names, duets, aural technology. We’d like to hear about sound’s role in spirituality and in social change; its future, its transference, its sensuousness, its past.

In the Publishing Lab, student designers have finished the 2015 spread designs for the forthcoming sound issue, and third-year graduate candidate, Megan Ellis, is working with Professor Emily Smith to “thread” the text. The sound issue will be Ecotone’s 20th. The 19th issue was Ecotone’s 10th anniversary issue.

ecotonemagazine.org/shop/issue-19

Lookout Books

On Labor Day 2015, the Publishing Lab released Honey from the Lion, its historical novel from author Matthew Neill Null, a Writer’s Week guest. An interview with Null can be read exclusively in this issue of The Coast Line. He recently toured to promote the book.

www.lookout.org/honeyfromthelion.html
Writers' Week 2015

Writers’ Week is UNCW’s annual celebration of the art and craft of writing. The weeklong event, Nov. 16-20, brought acclaimed authors, poets, and editors from across the nation to campus. The 14th Writers' Week featured workshops, panels, readings, and (sarcastic gasp) a ping-pong table. As is typical, all three major genres - fiction, nonfiction, and poetry - were discussed, and with them aspects of craft: plot, characterization, form, etc. Although heavily attended by M.F.A. and B.F.A. students, all events, free and open to the public, continued the Creative Writing Department’s commitment to enhance student learning while benefiting both the UNCW and New Hanover County communities.
1. **Illya Kaminsky** is the author of *Dancing in Odessa* and co-editor of *Ecco Anthology of International Poetry*. His work has been honored with the American Academy of Arts and Letters Metcalf Award, the Whiting Writers Award, the Lannan Fellowship, and other distinctions.

2. **James Campbell** has written stories for *Outside*, *National Geographic*, *Backpacker* and *Audubon*. His first book, *The Final Frontiersman*, was chosen by the Midwest Booksellers Association, Outdoor Writers of America, Amazon’s editors, and the Book of the Month Club as one of the top titles of 2004.

3. **Jennifer Sahn** is executive editor of *Pacific Standard*. She previously served as editor of *Orion*, during which time the magazine was twice a winner of the Utne Independent Press Award for General Excellence and twice a finalist for a National Magazine Award.

4. **Jill McCorkle** is the author of six novels and four story collections. Her work appears in numerous periodicals and four of her short stories have been selected for the *Best American Short Stories* series. Five of McCorkle’s books have been named *New York Times* notable books. She has received the New England Booksellers Award, the John Dos Passos Prize for Excellence in Literature, and the North Carolina Award for Literature.

5. **Matthew Neil Null** is a recipient of the Mary McCarthy Prize and the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award. His fiction appears in *American Short Fiction*, *Ecotone*, the *Oxford American*, the *PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, and *The Best American Mystery Stories*. *Honey from the Lion* is his first novel.

6. **Peter Steinberg** has represented numerous *New York Times* bestsellers and his clients have been nominated for and awarded Edgars, the Pulitzer Prize, the Story Prize, the Paris Review Discovery Prize, *PEN/Faulkner Awards*, and *National Book Awards*. He currently works with Foundry.

7. **Rory Sparks** is a printmaker and book artist living and working in Portland. She is the founding director of Em Space Book Arts Center, where artists have access to space and rare equipment for their book art practice.
8. Sarah Messer is the author of *Red House* and the book of poetry *Bandit Letters*. Her work has appeared in the *Paris Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and *Gulf Coast*, among others. After receiving her B.A. at Middlebury College and her M.F.A. at the University of Michigan, Messer was an associate professor at UNCW in the creative writing department.

9. Tayari Jones is the author of three novels, including *Silver Sparrow*. She serves on the M.F.A. faculty at Rutgers University.

10. Jason Frye is a travel, culinary, and culture writer with an M.F.A. in creative writing from UNCW. His stories and photography appear in publications including *Our State*, *Southern Living*, *Salt*, *AAA Go!*, *Thrillist*, *Virgin Atlantic Airlines*, and *Forbes*. He is the author of *Moon North Carolina*, *Moon North Carolina Coast Including the Outer Banks*, and *Moon Blue Ridge Parkway Roadtrip*.

11. Lauren Frye has worked as a publicist for Bald Head Island, managing editor for their lifestyle magazine, *Haven*, and is currently part of the team at Gillies and Zaiser, a travel PR firm. She graduated from UNCW in 2004 with an M.F.A. in creative writing.


13. Meg Reid is an editor and nonfiction writer. Her essays have appeared in *Chautauqua*, *Matter Journal*, *DIAGRAM*, *Oxford American*, *Fringe*, and *The Rumpus*. She is the editor of *Carolina Writers at Home*, a photo and essay collection focused on writers’ houses. She is the deputy director of Hub City Press in Spartanburg, SC.

14. Carson Vaughan is a freelance writer whose work appears in publications including *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, *Travel+Leisure*, and *Salon*. He is the founding editor of *The DailyER Nebraskan*, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s first and only satirical news source, and is the former nonfiction editor of *Ecotone*. 🚶
The University of North Carolina Wilmington Creative Writing outreach program, Writers in Action, pairs UNCW graduate students with elementary, middle and high school classrooms around Wilmington. These graduates are passionate about sharing their interest in creative writing. As soon as I learned about WIA, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I had just moved to North Carolina from California, and I was eager to engage with my new community. WIA seemed like the perfect opportunity to do just that.

The program started in 2000 with just one school, Blair Elementary School, and teacher Layne Clark. Since then, WIA has grown, mostly through word-of-mouth, to the point that we now have more schools interested in WIA than there are graduate student volunteers. Graduate students go into participating schools with their own lesson plans, and teach fiction and poetry writing. I had the honor of assisting student WIA coordinators Justin Klose and Renee LaBonte match graduate student mentors to schools. I also began teaching at Blair Elementary this semester.

My first day, I was flooded with memories as I entered the library. I hadn’t been in an elementary school library since sixth grade. Back then, as much as now, I loved reading. I even joined the Library Club, in which we helped the librarian reshelve books and put on a book-based play each month. As I waited for the students to join me in the library, I scanned the shelves. Seeing books I had long forgotten was like running into childhood friends who hadn’t changed a bit.

That first class, I shared a short summary of my favorite book from fourth grade, Maniac Mage by Jerry Spinelli, with the 10 fourth graders who had chosen to participate in WIA. Then they took turns talking about their favorite books, and they all had a book they were excited to talk about. One student loved The Lord of the Rings series, which were written well above a fourth grade reading level, and I was happy to learn the “Goosebumps” series is still quite popular. The way these students talked about the authors of their favorite books, I could tell those authors had a major influence on these aspiring student writers. It was inspiring to see children moved so much by literature. Programs like WIA are vital for continuing to foster this love of the written word.

After class that day, I walked outside and saw large groups of students moving toward the yellow school buses parked out front. I saw parent volunteers wearing bright yellow stickers on their shirts, directing the children where to go. And I recalled seeing several volunteers assisting kids in the library. These days, it truly takes a village to run a school, and Writers in Action is happy to do its part in fostering a love of the arts throughout the community.
Matthew Neill Null, the author of the debut novel, *Honey from the Lion*, visited the University of North Carolina Wilmington as a keynote speaker and reader for Writers’ Week. His novel was published by Lookout Books, the press founded by UNCW’s Creative Writing Department. His fiction has appeared in *Tin House, American Short Fiction, Ecotone, Ploughshares, The Oxford American, The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, and *The Best American Mystery Stories 2014*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Null has received the Mary McCarthy prize and the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award. He recently sat down with first-year fiction student Caitlin Taylor and spoke, not only about this first novel of his, but about growing up in West Virginia, being an M.F.A. student, and his unique narrative voice.
CT: You have such a wonderfully varied and richly developed cast of characters for your latest novel. How did the characters of *Honey from the Lion* reveal themselves to you and to whom do you connect the most?

MNN: I find, now that I’ve talked to more fiction writers, that my approach is a bit unorthodox. Character is absolutely the last thing that comes to me. I don’t even really think about it. For me, writing is a process where I have these disparate images and visions and scraps of phrase and scraps of scene that are in my mind, but they aren’t coupled to a particular character. Or if they are, it’s sort of a vision of that character. I don’t know who the character is. Creating the narrative, for me, means knitting those disparate images and phrases and scenes together, and character comes later. For example, I see a peddler walking down the railroad track killing a rattlesnake. I think, “Well, who would have done that?” That’s where character begins for me. So they’re almost vehicles, in a way, for these visions that float up out of the subconscious. Like dreams, they must have some cryptic import. I think it’s similar to how some poets work. So character doesn’t come to me until very late. I can’t really pick one that becomes a favorite. I don’t really relate to them in that way. For the most part, all the characters are on the same level, even though Cur comes into a lot more oxygen, just because he was a good character to carry much of the narrative arc.

CT: In regard to the inspiration for the novel, I know that you often write your stories as a response to other stories you have written. What inspired *Honey from the Lion*, and is it a response to another story you had read?

MNN: Well, you know, I have lived in West Virginia for so long. So I’ve seen all the changes with timbering and agriculture and coal mining and now fracking for natural gas and all these different things. I’ve lived in close proximity to the landscape that’s changed, and so that’s really what inspired the book. In terms of research, no one could really tell you about these people — where they lived, what they thought, what they cared about — you could see the remains of a few timber camps and their tools, but it was mostly gone. I did read a few books on it when I was younger to flesh out my understanding of the place, mostly academic books. The ideas lived in my brain for years. I didn’t decide to write about it until later. But at about age 19, I really started thinking about this world and what happened there, who would’ve lived there... especially the place and the setting and the way the people lived. And of course — I’m sure — those books I read in the past found a way in. But it wasn’t the direct form of research most people do.

Now, in response to other books: yeah, all my work is in response to other work, and when I think about this book and its narrative stance with the omniscience, it’s a book that wants to contain an entire world. I think about books like *Shirley Hazzard’s The Transit of Venus*, *Voss* by Patrick White, Faulkner, Eudora Welty, *100 Years of Solitude* — books that want to perceive an entire world. That was the main inspiration for this, books like that. Then again, maybe I’m just drawn to books like that because that’s my natural impulse for my own writing. Inspiration is to tease out. It doesn’t necessarily go from A to B, so it can be difficult. Just as important are the people, the oral history of the place and its people who can tell that history.

CT: In regard to some of your other work that really challenges traditional form, I enjoyed one of your short stories “Natural Resources,” and it was so different from anything I’ve read, because there’s no protagonist, dialogue, or traditional structured scene. What was that like, writing something so against-the-grain for a fiction writer?

MNN: Oh, yes “Natural Resources” is an interesting story, and it was so different from anything I’ve read, because there’s no protagonist, dialogue, or traditional structured scene. What was that like, writing something so against-the-grain for a fiction writer?

MNN: Well, you know, I have lived in West Virginia for so long. So I’ve seen all the changes with timbering and agriculture and coal mining and now fracking for natural gas and all these different things. I’ve lived in close proximity to the landscape that’s changed, and so that’s really what inspired the book. In terms of research, no one could really tell you about these people — where they lived, what they thought, what they cared about — you could
and senses. There’s nothing about character. It’s just a narration describing this world. And also, animals are interesting. I wanted it to be yoked to the experience of animal life instead of human life because animals are inherently mysterious, and they move to their own rhythms. Especially with my background where I lived in West Virginia, the close relationships we had were often with animals instead of people through hunting and fishing and merely being in close proximity to the animals. Because you might live a mile or two miles away from your neighbor, and you might not see another human being. But the deer are there, the turkeys are there, the bears are there. So you’re conscious of how they inhabit your world. But I also wrote that story because I’m a contrarian. I wanted to put it up in my writing program and force people to reckon with this story that just did away with all our traditional ways of writing a story, especially now in contemporary fiction. I wanted to force people to deal with it.

CT: And how did that go over in your workshop?

MNN: Some people thought I was just playing a trick; that I was trying to be provocative, which I was, in a way. But it’s still a good story. I stand by it. There were some people who didn’t see it as a real story. But then other people saw that I was doing something, that there was a real narrative structure, but it’s narrative structure that’s given to perceptions and images, and it does have an arc that follows these animals. It also works, I think, because it’s extremely short. There’s a reason why all the stories of Voorhees are short, because I don’t think he could get away with those conceits and turn them into a novel. When I write pieces like “Natural Resources,” I try to keep them very brief because there is something about not having yoked characters and interactions between human beings, it can be harder to sustain long-term, whereas a short piece like that can almost be a prose poem.

CT: And this way of writing, is it something you’ve always gravitated toward as a writer or something you cultivated while you were at Iowa in response to the traditional model?

MNN: In terms of style? Well, I always liked novels that tried to contain an entire world but also cared about the prose as language – the music of the prose. That language, I think I came to it naturally because I’m not from a literary background. My parents were not readers in that way. They were educated, but they didn’t read books, and I was pretty isolated. But I went to the public library and somehow I just found in a small library 100 Years of Solitude, and Lolita, and Faulkner, and Joyce, and early Updike, and Roth, and I just gravitate to those books. There was an affinity there. I was always writing in that mode. In grad school, most of the people in my cohort were writing in a very different way. And so I would run up against some opposition, but it was very helpful for me because it forced me to articulate why I write in this way. I think that opposition isn’t prized enough in the M.F.A. world. Contrarianism and opposition to your work is important in making you question if your writing is valid so that you can ask yourself, “Should I be writing this way?” For me, I think I came out stronger with a technical understanding of why I wanted to do this. I don’t think there’s any pleasure in being patted on the head or being the darling of a program, and everyone saying that you’re fine, and you’re doing great. You don’t get much out of that. We should prize a little opposition. I like bringing together writers with radically different visions and discussing them.

CT: You touched on this earlier when you spoke at the fiction craft talk, but I wanted to ask about how the environmental state of the world has influenced your work, particularly Honey from the Lion.

MNN: What’s interesting about Honey from the Lion’s characters is that they’re experiencing the logging industry for the first time without the benefit of our hindsight or experience. But we’re experiencing the same thing that they did in coal and fracking, and I’m very much influenced by that. The same thing keeps happening, and the book is, in a way, a shout and a warning to people. To beware of how they use the landscape. That debate about how to use the landscape in West Virginia is at the heart of the matter. Every generation has to debate it anew. All of our problems radiate out of that. Where I live, most people are forced to live off the land in some way. I can’t say that I read contemporary environmental writing or writers. That’s not important to me. My interest in environmentalism is very much boots on the ground, experiencing it firsthand. If I have any influences in environmental literature, they’re much older, such as the Transcendentalists. Thoreau and Emerson and Melville and Dickinson. There’s an interesting current in early American writers that goes all the way back to Jonathan Edwards and asking, what is the landscape, how do we use this landscape? As someone who descended from that early, white, European immigration, you’re really faced with this totally new world and how to use wilderness. It’s fascinating. They were grappling with it as soon as they arrived, and we still are.
CT: How did growing up in West Virginia inform your writing?

MNN: It’s a very fraught place in a difficult situation now. I don’t see myself writing much that does not take place in West Virginia. I find that most people there live close to the bone, closer to the land. They hunt and fish and garden and care about the landscape. There’s a lot of space there, and most people took part in it firsthand. We had a lot of property that had once been a farm, and we were always there hunting and fishing and hiking. The landscape was important from an early age. Even now, it’s the place I feel most comfortable. And when I go to a new place, like Wilmington, that’s what I’m most drawn to, the landscape itself — the tidal marshes, the estuaries, the beach. I think very small-town life when you’re looking at a town of say 2,000-5,000 people, which most of the county seats in West Virginia are, I mean they’re pretty much within a rural experience. We have very few real urban areas, and our cities don’t really amount to anything. In the northeast, you’re always looking to New York and the Midwest to Chicago, but we didn’t really have a big city to look to. It was a pretty isolated place even into the ‘90s. I think the Internet has broken it open a good bit. But even where our farm is now, there’s no cell service. It’s off the beaten path and separate from the mainstream of culture.

CT: I wanted to ask you about your experience with Lookout Books here at UNCW. What guided you to Lookout Books as a publisher, and what was it like working with everyone here?

MNN: It’s been 100 percent positive. I’ve loved working with Lookout. Everyone has been so thoughtful and generous, and they’ve all taken my work seriously, reading every line, just a great and rigorous editorial process. Frankly, I’ve had a better editorial and publishing process than so many people I know who’ve worked with big story presses. What led me to Lookout… I spent a lot of time looking for a press that was on board with my particular vision. It was hard to find, because I think a lot of presses wanted to see it as a commodity first and then make it a novel, whereas Lookout saw it as an important book that was doing something different. They wanted to make the book and then figure out how to take it to a marketplace. And those are two very different things. We had a long talk before I signed on where I spelled out — this is the book I’m trying to write, and this is what I’m trying to accomplish, and if you’re not on board with that, I can’t change the book. To my great luck, they agreed. All of the students have been wonderful. I’ve been lucky to meet a lot of people in the Publishing Lab. There’s really no other place like it. I hope it becomes a model for other, similar programs and presses, because a lot of university-based presses are really missing this opportunity to take part in the literary conversation and put great work out there with the students involved in it. I think Lookout could be a great model across the country. It’s important that it’s here in Wilmington and based in this place. I don’t think it’s healthy to have the main few publishing houses in Manhattan, since we’re such a huge country.

CT: Is there any one piece of advice you would give to M.F.A. students here at UNCW?

MNN: If I could only give one piece of advice… I said today in my talk that I think you need to understand the vision and personality underlying your work. I think about the greatest writers, Shirley Hazzard, Henry Green, Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor. You can open up any page, and it’s unmistakable. They have this vision. Wherever they drive the spear of the sentence, that great underground river, that consciousness comes bubbling up. I don’t think you luck into that. You need to start thinking about that vision now, and it will provide a powerful foundation for your work. That can’t be found by trying to get published in a magazine or through commercial aspects. You can go for the artistic vision and still have worldly success. But if you have the worldly success at the forefront, you probably won’t find your vision. It’s not something that can be taught — it’s so personal. But you have to think about how you consider the world, what’s important, what’s unjust, the language you use, your relationship to history. You find this in the greatest writers, this deliberateness, and I think it’s unmistakable. You have to start thinking about it now. You might have to throw 10 years of writing out the window to find it, but it’s part of the game.
Michael White is a professor of creative writing at UNCW and author of four books of poetry and one memoir. I sat down to talk with him about his two most recent books, *Vermeer in Hell*, a collection of ekphrastic poems based on the Dutch painter’s work, and *Travels in Vermeer*, a memoir about his time seeking out those same paintings. The latter was a finalist for the nonfiction National Book Award Prize.

**GI:** Congratulations, it must be a huge honor that your memoir, *Travels in Vermeer*, was nominated for the National Book Award. How have you been handling that attention and the activity that comes along with that?

**MW:** It has been exciting. To some extent, it didn’t feel real until I actually went to the Miami Book Fair and read with the other nominees and winners. I realized there that it was actually real.

**GI:** When did you begin working on these books, *Vermeer in Hell* and *Travels in Vermeer*?

**MW:** I must have taken my first trip in 2005. I had no plan on writing any books at the time. I’d never been to Amsterdam, and I had some frequent flyer miles and was going through a rocky divorce. I got on a plane and walked into the Rijksmuseum on my second day there and looked into the room and had an experience that was pretty heart-stopping. I knew the intensity of the experience meant I had something to write about.
GI: What was it about Vermeer that struck you so greatly?

MW: I had no idea what it was then. All I knew was the skin on my scalp was being pulled around. I just had this tingling feeling. It took me years of traveling and thinking and looking at Vermeer to start to understand the way in which the paintings understood me as a person, the way in which they constructed a space that was almost custom-made for me to experience an intimate encounter with these, usually, solitary women.

I learned that was Vermeer’s aim: not to be seen but to construct an art that can see into the viewer.

A lot of the subjects look very similar. They’re wearing the same things. They’re in the same room, in one corner, under one window. It felt like the writing process: Write the same thing over and over trying to get it right.

Vermeer was a man of pretty modest means. He basically set all of his painting in his own studio. He might change certain details, if he wanted to paint an upper-middle class scene he would have his model wear a nicer dress, he would paint the wall in a smoother way, as opposed to a prosaic work-a-day kitchen. The furnishing in the room would change according to the vision, but it was always the same room and it was always the materials he had at hand. He was devastatingly unique but he wasn’t that original, he basically just took what he had.

GI: The memoir seems to take place inside of Vermeer’s work. And Vermeer in Hell, the poetry book, gets at that too. The world inside of Vermeer seems so much more beautiful than the real world.

MW: It’s so much more fun too. Even when I was back here teaching my classes I was constantly thinking about and planning my next trip, exactly what paintings I was going to see, what order, what I needed to read before I could have that encounter. I was also trying to set up some of those experiences with people, like the art critic in Amsterdam. I knew from the beginning that these obsessions run their course, so I just wanted to make the most of it while I was still feeling it.

GI: I think that obsession is part of Vermeer, having only one room, only one subject. Did that tie in with your own obsessive habits as a writer?

MW: I was trying to write a story, which was a kind of recovery story; it was a story about an obsession with art that helped me recover from a dark time, so that naturally tied into a lot of things. My editor was constantly trying to get me to write about stuff with my family, or dating, because she had an instinct that that was related… The first draft had none of that. It was just looking at paintings.

But, I have come to really value obsession. Vermeer was more obsessed than just about any artist who ever lived. He was so meticulous about every detail of his process, and he only painted 35 paintings, as opposed to the hundreds that his peers were painting. Rembrandt painted about 350 paintings. So for someone to only paint 35 paintings in their whole life, and there be no other record, just those few canvases, is a level of obsession that is staggering. I have a lot of respect for that. I’ve been trying to, just in the poems I’ve written this year, let that obsession run its course and have a lot of respect for when I become obsessed in a poem. To keep coming back to the desk again, and again, and again, until I’m completely done, which is not really even up to me, it’s something else, it’s something deeper which is causing me to look at these subjects.

GI: When you were writing what did you find you could express in prose that couldn’t be expressed in poetry, or vice versa?

MW: In the early stages of these two books there were not two books in my mind; it was one project. I didn’t think of the writing as either prose or poetry, it was just writing. I would scribble in a notebook while standing in front of the painting and come back and try to make things out of the notes. Sometimes I would make poems out of the notes, other times I would use the same notes and try to make an essay or little story. But even the prose pieces I was writing often had an attention to line that you associate with poetry. That was taken out. I had playful stuff that I
was doing with lines that poets do, but the editor wanted conventional paragraphs. I kept my mind open...and kept writing.

GI: How do you want your ideal reader to interact with these books and Vermeer in general?

MW: One advantage to falling in love with a painter who has become really iconic is that people have images in their mind, usually, even if it’s just “Girl with the Pearl Earring.” I’m writing about something that is already lodged in someone’s imagination and memory.

I don’t know that I necessarily want it to be an intellectual process as much as an emotional process. I think that there is something about Vermeer’s gaze that was intensely child-like. He could actually look at something, even as an adult, with the kind of rapt attention that a child might look at a clover or an insect, and it would be endlessly amazing... I think trying to recover that openness to the world would be one of the aims of the book, or both books, to think about how art can help us with that. To help access these maybe locked-away memories that people have.

GI: How do you think all of this influences you as a teacher?

MW: I’ve taught ekphrastic classes a couple of times and really had a great time doing it. I have taken classes to Europe and walked with them through museums. I’m just aware of the kind of experiences that you can have outside of the classroom when you take your talent and throw it into some completely different context and just see what happens, particularly from one art to another. Almost like a translation exercise. There are some amazing things that can come out of that; it never fails to bring real good poems out of people. Beyond that though, I guess I am more open to what it is to write. I think, when in school, we shape this aesthetic and want to teach and are very serious and passionate about wanting to apply what we’ve learned. That’s great. I certainly did that, but I’ve become much more broadminded [about] what kind of experiences might have an impact.

You can take someone and say, “Okay, here’s something you’ve never seen before. Let’s talk about it. Let’s write about that.”
NINA DE GRAMONT

New Book: The Last September

by Will Dean

Nina de Gramont is a novelist and short story writer. Her first book, the short story collection, Of Cats and Men, won a Discovery Award from the New England Booksellers Association and was a Booksense selection. Her novel Gossip of the Starlings was also a Booksense pick. Her second novel for adults, The Last September, was released in September 2015. She has also written three novels for teens – The Boy I Love, Meet Me at the River, and Every Little Thing in the World, which was an ALA Best Fiction for Young Adults. Another novel for teens is forthcoming in October from Penguin, under the pseudonym Marina Gessner. The Distance from Me to You is a Junior Library Guild selection. Her essays and short stories have appeared in a variety of magazines including Seventeen, Redbook, and the Harvard Review. Nina lives in coastal North Carolina with her husband and daughter, and teaches creative writing at UNCW.

WD: In the acknowledgements section of The Last September, you mentioned that your ideas were reshaped for this story. Can you talk a little bit about the development of the plot and your inspirations to write The Last September?

NG: The book begins with a murder, and that’s where I started writing it more than 10 years ago. At first I wasn’t sure what form the story would take – whether it would be a traditional whodunit or more of a domestic novel about a widow and her response to loss. When I sold the book to Algonquin, it was on the basis of that one murder scene so none of us really know where it would ultimately go. Kathy Pories and Chuck Adams both gave close early reads. I think my original conception was closer to the form of a domestic novel, and Chuck and Kathy had great ideas about how it could be both that and a mystery. In early drafts, the mean time of the narrative took place over a much longer span – nearly two years, as opposed to less than a month in the final version.
WD: Eli was my favorite character in the novel. What kind of research did you conduct to craft such a complex character?

NG: Thank you, he’s my favorite character too, and he was also the hardest to write. In a way I had to write three characters – pre-illness Eli, medicated Eli, and unmedicated Eli. I have a family member who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and so I have had a front row seat to what that illness can do and also the ways our healthcare system lets down people who suffer from mental illness. Because of that, I’ve done a lot of research over the years — reading books like Surviving Schizophrenia by E. Fuller Torrey and Mad in America by Robert Whitaker. The reading I’ve done for personal reasons was very helpful in writing the novel.

WD: During my undergrad, I remember a classmate asking you if you felt like your stories were like your children, but then you answered that they are more like past relationships. What is your relationship like with this current novel?

NG: Will, that is a great and funny question, and a complicated one to answer! Because the book came out so recently it doesn’t feel past yet. I would say it is my current significant other, and with that comes all the expected complexity, love, and general fraught-ness. I am protective of it and hopeful for it. The most significant way it has affected me as a writer is as a reminder to keep returning to stories that interest me, even if they seem impossible to construct. As I said, I started this book about 12 years ago, and kept putting it aside and then returning to it. It’s heartening to me that something that had so many fits and starts finally made its way into the world. As a person, for the moment, I’ll say it’s just kind of exhausted me because I’ve had to travel a lot. But check back in a year, after we’ve broken up, and I’ll go into more detail.

WD: What is it like balancing work and family when your partner is also a writer? Do you sometimes incorporate those experiences in your writing? Has David Gessner ever become a character in some capacity in your stories?

NG: It’s a good thing to have a partner who can understand what you’re going through both in terms of what it takes to write a book and the sometimes-perilous terrain of career. I haven’t often incorporated those experiences into my writing mostly because editors and agents don’t want stories about writers. As far as basing characters on David, there are elements of him here and there – particularly in my short stories. But with him as anyone else, I find that first draft characters most closely resemble the people they’re based on. Then as the drafts progress, the characters get further away from their influence, so by the final version they’re almost entirely their own.

WD: You have been a published writer for some time. What was it like submitting your first manuscript for publication? How did you find the courage to submit?

NG: It was terrifying mostly because I wanted it so badly, to be published. But that’s also exactly how I found the courage.
The position of department chair is a three-year-long term and is voted on by faculty. The chair represents the needs and goals of the department to the broader university and New Hanover communities.

David Gessner arrived at UNCW in 2005 with his wife Nina de Gramont, who, along with her husband, is a prolific author, editor, and professor in the creative writing department. Gessner attended Harvard College as an undergraduate. After obtaining his M.A. from the University of Colorado, he taught at Harvard as the Briggs-Copeland Lecturer in Environmental Writing. In essays, he has described his move to Wilmington as a challenge to make home out of a place not naturally home. Ten years later, Gessner appears to have settled, and to have thrived, in the home he has made in Wilmington.

Gessner is an essayist and the author of nine books. His most recent, *All the Wild that Remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner and the American West*, was published to wide acclaim in April 2015. He is currently writing his 10th novel. The book will blend memoir with the history of the early days of Ultimate Frisbee, during which Gessner played on the second top nationally ranked team. The book expands his essay “Ultimate Glory.”

Another collection of essays will expand upon “Learning to Surf,” the much-anthologized essay, for which he won the John Burroughs Award. That book, he notes, will be much quieter and will include many of his introductions to *Ecotone*. He is also working on a project as host and correspondent for *NatGeo Explorer*.

DAVID GESSNER
Department Chair – Elect

As a writing community, we welcome David Gessner as the new chair of the UNCW Department of Creative Writing, remembering also to give a big thank you to Michael White for his previous service.
In fall 2015, Gessner, who drew political cartoons for the *Harvard Crimson*, taught a course in the Graphic Novel and is working on a cartoon essay on environmentalist and author of Silver Spring, Rachel Carson. (Head to the blog Gessner writes with spring 2016 visiting writer Bill Rohrbach for a taste: Bill & Dave’s Cocktail Hour found at http://billanddavescocktailhour.com).

When asked to what he attributes the variety and number of projects he is producing, he reveals it is an illusion that the work is all coming into the world at once. “It’s a luxury of failure,” he says. The forthcoming Ultimate Frisbee novel began 20 years ago; his collection of essays and interviews was written gradually, over the past 12 years. “It looks like a manic outburst, but it really isn’t,” he said. “Just keep plugging away.”

When asked what he is currently reading, he lists three books that will gear him up for writing, beginning with Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*. He notes, “The energy is amazing, the way he integrates interviews.” He is also reading William Finnegan’s *Barbarian Days* and David Halberstam’s *The Amateurs: The Story of Four Young Men and Their Quest for an Olympic Gold Medal*. Gessner said he likes to do reading related to his own subject matter before a project. “Sometimes that’s dangerous as a young writer,” he cautions, “but for me it’s always worth the risk.”

When Gessner shares highlights from his time at UNCW, Ecotone comes first. In 2005, he founded *Ecotone*, a literary journal dedicated to the idea of exploring ecotones in writing, which are “…transition zone[s] between two adjacent ecological communities, containing the characteristic species of each.” Gessner is proud to see how the magazine has itself transitioned over the past decade, “It’s exciting to see where Anna Lena Phillips Bell has taken it, to see where it has gone beyond me.”

UNCW’s Writers’ Week has been another highlight, which he led in both 2014 and 2015. For fall 2015, he crafted a panel on balancing time in nature with the technology of our digital age, which seems a bit of a preview for his agenda as chair.

Gessner enjoys spending time in the wilderness and advocates for action on behalf of place. He hopes to give students the opportunity to get outside, “…to see what the world looks like beyond the walls of UNCW,” and cautions the community against forgetting their North Carolina surroundings. “It’s pretty extraordinary, the place itself.” In November, he led the Writers’ Week class on a trip to Masonboro Island and would like to offer this expedition at the beginning of semesters.

Gessner hopes to continue exploring and supporting students and faculty in what he terms “the writing life.” Students who have taken classes with Gessner know he begins the semester by asking them to share their own writing rituals. “I’d like to offer some casual chats on Friday about the writing life. It’s a class I taught about writing habits, the psychological difficulties of being a writer.” Anticipating he won’t have time to teach the class with his responsibilities as chair, he hopes, instead, to bring the community together around this type of conversation.
Beth Roddy was the recipient of a Virginia Center for the Creative Arts fellowship in July and will attend again in December and January. She won a scholarship to attend the Slice Literary Writers’ Conference in September (joining fellow M.F.A. student Katie O’Reilly). Beth had the honor of sharing the stage for a literary reading with Alan Cumming — acclaimed actor, memoirist, and living Broadway legend — in June during her residency at the Vermont Studio Center. She was also awarded a full scholarship to attend the BinderCon conference in November in New York City. The podcast of Beth’s second scholarship to attend the BinderCon conference in Vermont Studio Center. She was also awarded a full scholarship to attend the BinderCon conference in November in New York City. The podcast of Beth’s second place winning story on Mash Stories is now live, performed

November in New York City. The podcast of Beth’s second

scholarship to attend the BinderCon conference in

Vermont Studio Center. She was also awarded a full

scholarship to attend the BinderCon conference in

November in New York City. The podcast of Beth’s second

place winning story on Mash Stories is now live, performed

by British voiceover artist Marie Louise Cookson. Beth’s

work also appears in Poets & Writers September/October

2015 issue in the Recent Winners section for the prize

she won last December: the 2014 Gabriele Rico Challenge

for Creative Nonfiction for her essay “Single Worst Book.”

She received $1,333 and publication of her essay in

Reed Magazine.

Cathe Shubert graduated summa cum laude from

Middlebury College’s Oxford University campus with a

master’s degree in English literature. She was the recipient

of the Laurence B. Holland Memorial Scholarship while in

the program. Cathe was also awarded a 2015-16 Dr. Ralph W. Brauer Fellowship. She continues to

round down literary news at the Ploughshares’ blog.

Emily Paige Wilson was been awarded a 2015-16

Dr. Ralph W. Brauer Fellowship and will travel to the

National Czech & Slovak Museum in Iowa for thesis

research. Her poem, “Learning to Speak in Czech,”

was a semi-finalist in Tinderbox Poetry Journal’s

first-ever poetry contest. The poem will be published in the December issue.

Jacob Mohr adds to his list of publications a short

story, “Conspicuous Consumption,” in the online

journal Liquid Imagination.

Jamie Lynn Miller was awarded a 2015-16

Dr. Ralph W. Brauer Fellowship, which she will use

to gather recorded and written interviews in the Callejon
de la Loma, a Dominican-Haitian barrio in Cabarete,
Dominican Republic.

Jonathan Russell Clark had a piece in The Atlantic

about Truman Capote’s Music for Chameleons. He

became a staff writer at Literary Hub, had a big multi-

book review on Oscar Wilde in the summer issue of The

Georgia Review, and had an essay about H.D.’s Bid Me
to Live in the summer issue of Tin House. Jonathan

published his first piece in LA Review of Books, on Andrew DeGraff’s “Plotted: A Literary Atlas” and cartography in

literature. He has an article up on LitHub about Roxane

Gay and her PEN Center USA’s Freedom to Write Award.

His article was quoted by The Guardian.

Katie O’Reilly had her essay, “Moral Combat: Voting Rights and North Carolina’s Moral Mondays,”

published in Solidarity on Aug. 6, the 50th anniversary

of the Voting Rights Act. It is also scheduled to appear in

Against the Current magazine. Her essay “Superdonor,”

about attending an insider egg donation conference,

was published in Vela Magazine.

Majsaan Bostrom had her second nonfiction book,

Som ett profis (Like a Pro), published last November in

Sweden. It details life after professional sports through

personal interviews with Sweden’s best athletes. Majsaan

also had two pieces published in Swedish magazines.

“The Library Detectives” is about the rare books that were stolen from the National Swedish Library in the

1990s and early 2000s and the attempts to retrieve them. “The Swedish Weapons Trafficker” is about

Majsaan’s visits with Paul Mardriossian, a Swedish natu-

ralized citizen who found himself imprisoned with some

of the world’s most notorious criminals in Manhattan.

Melissa Parthemore was the 2015 recipient of the

N.C. Sorosis Scholarship in Creative Writing which was

presented in honor of Anne Russell, a 1999 graduate of

UNCW’s M.F.A. Program. Her first publication, the poem,

“People Left Behind,” can be read in the summer 2015

issue of Vitor magazine.

Pernille Larsen has a poem, “St. Kaylee Sits Through

Abstinence-Only Education,” forthcoming in The Asheville

Poetry Review and another poem, “Playing Dead,” for-

coming in The Lost Country. Her poem, “Rubble,” was

second prize for Streetlight Magazine’s poetry contest and

was published in the fall issue. Finally, Pernille’s

“Poem in Which I Attempt to Write L’histoire centrale by

Rene Magritte,” was nominated for the Independent Best

American Poetry Anthology by Crab Creek Review.

Stephanie Trott interviewed author and M.F.A.

alum Jeremy Hawkins ’11 and Lauren Groff. Goff’s

novel Fates and Furies is a National Book Award finalist.

Both interviews are at The Rumpus. She has a review on

Black River and another on You Don’t Say at Cleaver

Magazine and has a research acknowledgement for “She

Became a Ship Passing in the Night: Charting Virginia

Woolf’s The Voyage Out” in The Nautilus: A Maritime

Journal of Literature, History, and Culture.
Alice (Fisher) Davis has published her book, *The Beast*. She works at Duke University in the Office of University Development.

Anna Sutton was selected as a finalist for the *Crab Orchard Review* Poetry Series First Book Award and was also a finalist for the Southern Writers Symposium Emerging Writer Award. In addition, Anna’s poem “Egg” appeared in *Fjords Review* Women’s Edition, and her poem “Gemini” appeared in *Copper Nickel* Issue 21.

Ben Hoffman had his story, *Substitutes*, published in *Granta* and received a rave review at *The Rumpus*.

Kate Cumisky has a new book coming out, *The University of Central Florida Through Time*, and read at the Flannery O’Connor and Other Southern Women Writers Conference in Milledgeville, GA in September.

Benjamin Rachlin sold his thesis manuscript to Little, Brown and Company under the current title *Ghost of the Innocent Man*. He is represented by the Wylie Agency.

Carson Vaughn had his essay on the joys and pains of renovating his new home (in a 1947 travel trailer) published online in *Travel+Leisure* magazine. Read more about the project at localcolorxc.com. He also has a short story in the *American South*.

Catey Miller received an honorable mention in the Katherine Paterson Prize for Young Adult and Children’s Writing through Hunger Mountain and Vermont College of Fine Arts for her short story, “In the Middle of the Night.”

Dana Sachs had her book, *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace*, as the topic for discussion with Downtown Readers at the New Hanover County Public Library in December.

Darren Dean will have his story “A Darker Shade of Twilight” forthcoming in the men’s fiction publication *BULL*. Also, an author interview and novel excerpt from his Far Beyond the Pale appeared online in *The Nervous Breakdown* recently. Bill and Dave’s Cocktail Hour blog hosted a tongue-in-cheek piece of Darren’s on writing. There’s also an interview with him on *Ploughshares* about writing, *Far Beyond the Pale*.

Derek Nikita will have his first Young Adult novel, *Extra Life*, published this month by *Polis Books*.

Dina Greenburg will have her prose poem “Wintering” published in the *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine* (SBLAAM.com); it was online September 1. Dina also has a flash fiction piece called “Radio Silence” in *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*’s October issue. She was awarded a residency at the Weymouth Center for the Arts and Humanities.

Emma Bolden has an essay called “My Only Carriage” up on *The Toast*.

Hannah Della Cruz Abram received a Best of the Net nomination from *storySouth* for her poem, “Choreography for Brief Flight.”

Jason Newport had his short story, “On Letting Go,” published in the current issue of *Potomac Review*. Jason’s satirical short fiction “Protect and Serve” appears in issue #16 of *Vine Leaves*; “Protect and Serve” was nominated for a 2017 Pushcart Prize.

Jeremy Hawkins had his novel, *The Last Days Of Video*, named to the longlist for the Crook’s Corner Book Prize, which honors the best debut novel set in the American South.

Jessica Smith published an article in *Wilmington Magazine* about recent improvements in cancer diagnoses.

Johannes Lichtman has an essay on Milan Kundera up in *The LA Review of Books*.

Kerry Headly has a piece up at *The Rumpus*. It’s a revised essay from her thesis called “No Way Out at the Welfare Office.” This essay was also featured in *The Billfold*.

Leah Poole Osowski won the 2015 Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize for her manuscript *Hover Over Her*. The prize awards the winner with $2,500 and publication of the first full-length book of poetry by the Kent State University Press. Leah’s book will be published in fall 2016, at which time she will visit Kent State University to teach a week-long poetry workshop and give a reading with contest judge Adrian Matejka.

Miriam Parker will be joining *Ecco Books* as an associate publisher after 15 years at *Little, Brown* and Company.

Paul Pastorini was among nine finalists for the North Carolina Literary Review’s first Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize competition for his essay, “The Underwater Ride of After.”

Peter Kusnik is the assistant to the vice president and director of foreign rights at literary agency Trident Media Group in New York City. He joins Nicola Derobertis-Theye in the same department.

Rebecca Pettruck sold her second novel to *ABRAMS-Amulet*. In *Will Nolan Eats Bugs*, a class clown tries not to worry about how his parents fight all the time by being funnier than ever. But a “hilarious” presentation with insects as snacks leads to heckles, retaliation, and possible expulsion. Publication is set for fall 2016. She was a Housatonic Book Award Finalist for her debut novel *Steering Toward Normal* (*ABRAMS/Amulet*, 2014). The award is sponsored by Western Connecticut State University.

Regina DiPerna has four poems in the September issue of *The Missouri Review*. One of those poems, “Teeth,” is featured online as *The Missouri Review*’s Poem of the Week.

Rochelle Hurt was a finalist in *Black Warrior Review*’s Nonfiction contest, and her essay will be published in the spring issue, 41.2. Her second full-length poetry manuscript, *In Which I Play the Runaway*, was chosen by Richard Blanco as the winner of the 2015 Barrow Street Book Prize. The collection will be published in fall 2016 and includes many of the poems she’s written over the last few years: dioramas, odd town names, Dorothy Gale, storms, etc.

Shawna Kenney will have one of her Tiny Truth Twitter stories featured in *Creative Nonfiction* magazine’s newsletter and another will be printed in issue #57.

Veronica Lupinacci was named a finalist in the *Gigantic Sequins Poetry Contest* for her poem, “Sanity’s Song: How to Un-love.”
Anna Lena Phillips Bell received a 2015-16 North Carolina Arts Council Artist Fellowship for poetry. More than 260 artists from across the state submitted applications for the 18 fellowship awards. She has two poems, "Sprout Wings and Fly" and "Girl at the State Line," published on District Lit, an online journal of writing and art.

Clyde Edgerton is the recipient of the 2015 Thomas Wolfe Prize and Lecture and was officially honored during a two-day celebration in Chapel Hill in October. In addition to receiving prize money and a medal, Clyde delivered a lecture Oct. 6 in the Genome Sciences Building Auditorium on the UNC campus.

David Gessner sold his newest book to Riverhead Books. It blends a memoir of his experience as an Ultimate Frisbee player along with the history of the sport and is tentatively titled Ultimate Glory. His review of "Satellites in the High Country: Searching for Wild in the Age of Man" by Jason Mark appears in The Wall Street Journal.

Michael White had his memoir, Travels in Vermeer, selected as one of 10 long-list finalists for the 2015 National Book Award in Nonfiction. He will be the Diana M. Raab Distinguished Visiting Writer this spring for the Spalding M.F.A. in Writing Program in Louisville, KY. Travels in Vermeer was selected as the book in common for the Spalding M.F.A. program, and he will read and discuss the book on campus during the spring 2016 residency.

Phil Furia hosts the daily segment "The Great American Songbook" on WHQR from 1:30 to 2 p.m. and during Morning Edition Fridays at 6 a.m.

Phillip Gerard is a regular commentator on WHQR. His broadcast segments air every other Thursday at 7:35 a.m., 8:50 a.m. or 5:45 p.m. or online in the WHQR Thursday Commentaries at whqr.org/people/philip-gerard.

Robert Anthony Siegel visited all of the Vermeer paintings in Manhattan with Michael White and talked about Michael’s memoir, Travels in Vermeer, out now on the Paris Review Daily, where Robert has another piece on crossing the boundary between writing and painting. His Vermeer article, "Vermeer in Manhattan" has been translated to Dutch and picked up by 360 Magazine. Robert also sold a memoir in essays to Counterpoint Press. Pieces have appeared in this month’s Paris Review as well as The New York Times, LA Times, Tin House, The Harvard Review, and the 2012 Pushcart Anthology.

Wendy Brenner had her essay about Spanish moss in Wilmington published in the November issue of Our State magazine (the restaurant issue). It features colorful, poetic, and weird contributions from M.F.A. students and alumni Elizabeth Davis, Laura Steele, Beau Bishop, and Laura Resnik. Her short-short nonfiction “A Place to Land,” about why she wants to live in the Charlotte airport, appears in the December issue of Our State magazine.