Notes from the Chair
John Fyler

One of my first tasks after becoming the new English department chair has been to read exit interview comments from last spring’s graduating seniors. Their assessments of the English major and what it has meant to them were uniformly gratifying—especially at a time when we are constantly told that the humanities are in decline at American universities. Here’s what Spencer Dimmick had to say:

"I didn’t come to Tufts with the intention of being an English major. I’m not certain how many people actually do. At one point, I wanted to major in neuroscience. I think it’s a good thing for myself and for the field of scientific advancement that I didn’t end up pursuing that path very far. Ultimately, what drew me to the English major was the same thing that brings me to the library every week, and writing books in my free time every day: a love of stories. I came into university with that love already here, but what I’ve taken away from my experience as an English major is a better understanding of the different ways to love a story.

"I was leery of textual analysis before coming to Tufts - the way it had been described to me and demonstrated in high school was in a dry, almost surgical manner. It didn’t enhance my love of stories to see them dissected and observed through an objective lens; frequently it ruined those stories for me completely. But when I came here, what I learned in my English classes is that textual analysis isn’t meant to be objective, not always, and..."

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Recent Faculty Publications

We asked Department of English faculty to discuss their current research and to share their recent accomplishments, publications, and recommendations.

Nate Wolff: In the past year I finished my first book, Not Quite Hope and Other Political Emotions in the Gilded Age (forthcoming this winter from Oxford University Press), and got started on a second book. An article entitled "The Weather in Dawson’s Landing: Twain, Chesnutt, and the Climates of Racism," related to that new project, was published in American Literary History in April. Lately I’ve also been teaching and writing about Herman Melville quite a bit. I gave talks at Melville Society panels at the MLA conference in NY and the ALA conference in San Francisco, and I took the students in my Spring 2018 "Poe, Hawthorne, Melville" class to the New Bedford Whaling museum. There, we sat in Melville's pew at the Seamen’s Bethel, looked at a lot of rope, and smelled rancid whale oil. Good times!

John Fyler published an essay “Hateful Contraries in the Merchant’s Tale” in the British journal Critical Survey this summer. He also taught at the Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont.

John Lurz spent the summer working on two articles. The first was a heady and theoretical piece that extends the work of his first book and addresses the difference an awareness of literature’s material medium makes for conceiving of literary form, and the second focuses on the role played by the figure of the witch in the work of the French writer Roland Barthes as a way of considering the work of criticism as a kind of magic. He also continued his habit of reading an epic work outside his main research area each summer and revisited Cervantes' Don Quixote, whose playful and picaresque plot very much contributed to his thinking of literature and magic.

John Lurz
Associate Professor
Rebecca Kaiser Gibson has an upcoming poetry series called The Loom in honor of the history of Harrisville as a woolen mill and as a contemporary loom factory. The series is meant to weave new strands of poetry into the lives of the audience members. The Loom, Poetry in Harrisville is a poetry reading series celebrating the best in contemporary poetry. It is located in historic Harrisville, New Hampshire.

Grace Talusan would like to share this story that she told: [https://www.facebook.com/StoriesFromTheStage/videos/265934377264733/](https://www.facebook.com/StoriesFromTheStage/videos/265934377264733/)

Dale Peterson’s book *The Ghosts of Gombe* was released by University of California Press in early April this year. A description of this non-fiction book is as follows: In 1960, a young Englishwoman named Jane Goodall set up her tent within the deep forests of the Gombe Chimpanzee Reserve, East Africa, hoping to start a scientific study of wild chimpanzees. She had help—volunteers and students—three of whom began a new regimen of following the chimps into their forest homes. Then, on July 12, 1969, one of the volunteers, an American named Ruth Davis, walked out of camp to follow a chimpanzee into the forest and never returned. Six days later, her body was found floating in a pool at the base of a high waterfall. Was Ruth’s death an accident? Did she jump? Was she pushed? *The Ghosts of Gombe* is an account of life in a remote research station, of hopeful young scientists working alongside a great pioneer in primate studies and one of the best-known woman scientists in history.

Another book, *The Elephant Reader*, is an anthology of the world’s best writing about elephants. It will be released by Trinity University Press late in the year.

Make a Gift

When making a financial gift to Tufts University, please keep in mind that you can designate the department as a recipient. We are grateful for gifts to support current activities and new initiatives.
Notes from the Chair
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that sometimes digging as deep as you can into a story can function as another expression of love for what the story contains, not a particularly brutal method of killing it. I was taught how to love a story for what lay beneath the words, laid there in careful foundations for the reader to excavate - and how this wasn’t surgery, it was archaeology. There’s always more to find, and I think I might be most grateful for being taught the mindset that lets me love that analysis rather than dread it.

"It would be an understatement to say my reading tastes broadened from being an English major. I used to, and still do most frequently, read for an escape, or for representation of what feels like me that the world doesn’t offer. That’s a great reason to love a story, and that’s a hill I’m prepared to die on - but it isn’t the only valid reason out there. My tastes skewed heavily toward fantasy, and still do, but I’ve picked up a love for stories meant more to educate, to take me to new recognitions of different difficulties people encounter and process, rather than to a world where such complexities can be killed with a sword or spell. Classes like Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare have taught me a greater appreciation for the classics, insight into older times and a window into cultures since passed, and what spark it is that keeps their stories in present memory so firmly regardless. Classes like Contemporary Fiction and survey courses like British Literature bring me toward stories that address or try to process inequalities as time passed - I’ll never forget the visceral acknowledgment that Underground Railroad imparted on me of American history placed through an unforgiving lens. Here were stories that entertained and educated, and kept traditions alive. I may still like my dragons and knights best, but I have stories about World War II, present social inequalities and people overcoming them, and memories that outlasted centuries in my library back often now too.

"Overall, my experience as an English major was exactly what I would have hoped it would be, if I’d had the words to make it a request back when I started. I’m coming out of my time here with broadened horizons and a deeper understanding of stories and how to appreciate them. I know a little bit more about the English language and how to construct a compelling argument, even if that’s always been a secondary benefit to me - often to the chagrin of some of my poor graders over the years. In terms of the job market, we’ll see how my experience helps me, but I’m one of the lucky few who knew what he wanted before he went to college, and that’s writing books. I have landmarks made in hundreds of pages - a book written and edited over the course of my freshman year, a book written in sophomore year and published senior year, and a last book that’s finishing up just as I am too. I can see the progress I’ve made in the placement of every word. Others can, too - it’s gratifying to get reviews and letters from readers telling me that I’ve gotten better, and seeing the correlation in their comments to what I’ve learned over the past four years. In that regard, my degree is already being put to use, and always will be. For me, that’s already enough, but I’m excited to see where it will take me next."

What are YOU doing now?
Have you written a book? Did you pursue another degree?
Did you major in English and then become a doctor? Airplane pilot?
Scuba instructor? Professional musician?

We want to hear about it!
Send us an email at English@tufts.edu and tell us what you’re doing now!
Congratulations!
Natalie Shapero

Congratulations to Natalie Shapero, Professor of the Practice, whose new book, *Hard Child*, was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize. The Judges’ Citation reads, “The poems in Natalie Shapero’s *Hard Child* come as close as lyric poems can to perfection. We feel the effect of them before noticing their machinery. Yet every poetic instinct Shapero possesses, every decision of line, image, stanza, diction, and tone, results in poems that are limber, athletic, powerful, and balanced. And behind her technical choices lie an emerging ethics: ‘I don’t want any more of what I have. I don’t want another spider plant. I don’t // want another lover.’ Her poems take us to the purest evolutionary point of the lyric form through their single-speaker stance, the movement of a mind over subjects, the emotional weight carried on the backs of images, the unpredictable associations, the satisfying call-backs. She teaches us how to retain the self without disappearing into the object we behold. She holds herself at various distances from the thing considered. She drives us toward a view and back again. This is how to write a lyric poem.”

Best Wishes!
Carl Beckman

On May 2nd, the English Department celebrated Carl Beckman’s retirement after his 31 years of dedication to the First-Year Writing Program. Current and former faculty, staff, and graduate students gathered to express our sincere gratitude to Carl and to wish him well on his next adventures. A former mentee, Kristina Wright, wrote the following to commemorate the occasion: “Dear Carl, Sorry I could not be there in person to congratulate you on your wonderful career at Tufts. I am now running an undergraduate writing program and I have a small group of graduate student TAs whom I mentor in the teaching of writing. I often draw on techniques that you and Carol so patiently taught us when we were green TAs at Tufts! I realize the creative energy and dedication it takes to teach writing to undergraduates, and also to mentor graduate student writing instructors. You did both exceedingly well. I hope you have many ‘road trips’ planned for your retirement. And no matter where the road leads, may you carry with you the happy thought that you have touched so many lives by being a wonderful teacher.”
The past 18 months have been full of extraordinary achievements for our graduate students. With dissertations spanning six centuries, touching upon various topics ranging from early modern literature to American historical fiction to dystopian literature, Tufts students have contributed to a rich and diverse academic community. The job market for English students is fiercely competitive, but at Tufts we are pleased that our graduate students are finding success.

The following graduate students have recently secured job placements:

**Kristen Abbott Bennett** (G 2013): Visiting Assistant Professor, Framingham State University

**Kyle Kamaiopili** (G 2018): Assistant Professor, Utah Valley University Department of English and Literature

**Margaret Love** (G 2018): Visiting Assistant Professor, Oklahoma State University (Stillwater) English Department

**Luke Mueller** (G 2018): Lecturer, Bentley University English and Media Studies Department

The following graduate students have recently defended their dissertations:

**Christine Payson** (March 2018): “Providential Defiance: Women Contesting Theocracy in American Historical Fiction 1827-2008”

**Leif Eckstrom** (April 2018): “Untimely Verse: Distressed Publishing and Exemplary Circulation in Antebellum America”

**Kyle Kamaiopili** (April 2018): “The Ancestral Nexus: Indigenous and Black Literatures of Survival”

**Margaret Love** (April 2018): “Radical Canons: Epigraphs, Identity, and Caribbean Writers”

**Fiona Maurissette** (April 2018): “Narrating the (Im) Possible: Dystopian Literature and the Promise of a Liberated Future”

**Luke Mueller** (April 2018): “Knowing How to Go On: Modernism and the Ordinary Uses of Language”


**Jessica Pfeffer** (April 2018): “Spectral Materiality: Theoretical Approaches to Materialism in Early Modern England”

**Matthew Scully** (April 2018): “Against Form: Figural Excess and the Negative Democratic Impulse in American Literature”

The elephant drawings are from rosietea.blogspot.co.uk.