NOTE FROM THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Scott W. Klein
Professor and Chair

Welcome again from the Department of English, where we’ve just completed another very busy year, which culminated in a commencement weekend that featured the loveliest weather we’ve had for graduation in ages. This issue of the newsletter focuses on a selected few of the many visiting scholars and writers we’ve hosted over the last year and a report from a colleague who is retiring.

You’ll read about lectures by literary scholar Jonathan Freedman and linguist Jon Swales, both of the University of Michigan, who spoke respectively about Henry James and his contemporary visual culture, and on the social-linguistic concept of discourse communities. You’ll also see reports about readings by Irish novelist Kevin Barry and Native American writer LeAnne Howe—and on a talk by medievalist Anne Rasmussen, who spoke of the impact of the digital age in medieval studies. There’s also a memoir by “graduating” retiring faculty member Mary DeShazer, who reflects on her three decades at Wake Forest.

As we noted in the last newsletter, as part of the Wake Forest capital campaign the College is asking alumni to consider making donations to their home department. If you’d like to support the English department, you can now go to our homepage (<college.wfu.edu/english/>) and click on the “Support our Programs” button. This will take you to a web page that will allow you to make a gift to the program of your choice. We appreciate any gifts, which will help us enhance our students’ many and varied academic experiences.

Best wishes,

Scott W. Klein
Professor and Chair
Seeing Is Believing

Jay Pearson | Class of 2014.

Last fall, guest speaker Dr. Jonathan Freedman came to Wake Forest University to present a paper on Henry James’s use of visual culture, which was further discussed in “Strether Through the Looking Glass: Henry James and the Culture of Optical Illusion.” He focused most closely on James’s novel, *The Ambassadors*, but also made it clear that the use of visual culture is widespread throughout James’s work. When Dr. Freedman alluded to “visual culture,” he was referencing a growing form of media in which the visual was employed, and in some cases exploited, to manipulate consumers. Many of these visual media forms were emergent technologies at the time, and thus would have been held in fascination by those who knew about them.

Dr. Freedman’s research tells us that “James shares with the visual artists of his moment a strong interest with new modes of visual expression and the ways in which optical illusion can lead the head and heart to be deceived.” In other words, James considers the ways in which the new developments in visual culture influence the way we interpret art and media, and in particular the way in which optical illusion influences perception of reality and interpersonal interaction. The subjective is especially prone to illusion, according to Dr. Freedman, because in many cases it desires the deception, unconsciously aiding the process through emotional sympathy. Of course, the technological advancements that enabled these illusions included photographic tampering that allowed for the creation of “seemingly genuine images which are actually factitious.”

Examples of such matter given by Dr. Freedman include the photographic “ghost effect” in which an original image was taken and then double-exposed to include a transparent “ghostly” image. The apparent authenticity of the images is important to their function, as is the literary illusion to which James’s characters are susceptible. People have to be willing to believe that what they are seeing is real. The mind is more invested in appearances than in the reality of things.

Other technologies that Dr. Freedman mentioned are motion pictures (illustrates the illusion of motion since they are actually composed of thousands and thousands of static images) and the stereoscope (uses two images of the same scene from slightly different perspectives to create a perceived image of the scene in three dimensions). These last two technologies differ from the double-exposed “ghost photograph” in one major principle: They operate with the goal of accurately representing the real, and strive to push the boundaries of their perception toward that which is real whereas the ghost photograph strives to expand the perception of what is real.

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The problem with each is that it cannot represent all of the truths of reality at the same time. The motion picture is only effective when the element of time is included in its function, and the stereoscope cannot accurately depict all of the aspects of the image it captures in focus at the same time, Dr. Freedman said. Only one component may be in focus at any given moment.

James’s interest in optics also gave him a keen sense of play of light. Light possesses great metaphorical importance within his oeuvre. Dr. Freedman referenced several passages in Henry James’s novella *Daisy Miller* in connection with this use of light. Many of the key moments in Winterbourne and Daisy Miller’s developing relationship may be characterized by who is physically illuminated and who is in darkness; however, the metaphorical impact of the illumination is often at least partially the opposite. While one individual may be illuminated, it is really the person in darkness who acts as an observer who is illuminated, but in the sense of receiving knowledge, understanding, or insight from what is observed. At this same moment, the reader, too, is an observer, and can see more clearly than before. The effect of Henry James’s staging is a great optical trick which transcends the physical to occupy the intellectual and artistic niches as well, and it brings with it psychological or emotional revelation.

James’s use of the visual in his literature is not limited to abstract artistic sensibilities. It applies directly to aspects of the social, including both the gaze and interpersonal observation. James’s work frequently depicts interaction between an observer and the observed and the problem of appearance versus reality (or external and internal) within a social sphere. The natural dynamics of the social sphere are often partially broken down by the interference of a cultural outsider who reveals that the ideals of “good manners” and “etiquette” or the social norms of good behavior create a deceptive image of the self. James’s use of cross-cultural and cross-continental social interactions enables him to manifest his ideals of social illusion in both a people and a place. Dr. Freedman claims that Paris is the embodiment of optical illusion in James’s work. Not only is it home to the famed Versailles Hall of Mirrors, but it is also a place of optical experimentation in the arts.

Ultimately, the ambiguity of the veracity of perception embodied in Henry James’s use of visual elements in his writing brings about few answers, but generates many questions. It teaches one to question the visual since what is seen may not necessarily bear truth and what appears may not actually be. Suspension of disbelief is made easier when the abstract is made manifest in a “concrete” piece of evidence. The gimmick is the foundation of the illusion, but the action of the illusion occurs within the mind. Just as Jung argued that all thought is symbolic, Dr. Freedman argued that “the creative powers of the mind construct the world we live in,” and it is from this that the problem of what is real and what is not arises. To James this capacity in the human psyche is related to the ability to make art, but to the reader, the student, and the lecturer it is the matter of the choice between “blind” acceptance of what seems, or critical analysis to discover what is.
Reflections on
Three Decades at Wake Forest

Mary DeShazer | English Department Faculty

When I was asked to reflect on my career of nearly thirty years as a member of the Wake Forest English Department, I pondered how best to express my appreciation to the countless colleagues and students who have enriched my life—and how to select a few meaningful moments from the many I recall. What follows is a modest tribute to several of those individuals and experiences.

I must first pay homage to my faculty mentors, who helped me find both an intellectual home and abiding friendships at this University. The late English Professor Emerita Elizabeth Phillips and her friend Eva Rodtwitt, who taught for years in the French Department, opened their doors and hearts to me when I first arrived here from Oregon in 1982 and was not sure where I had landed. Over many meals and endless conversations, they helped me comprehend the University’s history and politics and made me feel that I belonged here. My late sister-friend, Dolly McPherson—the first African-American woman hired at Wake Forest—enhanced my knowledge of Black women’s writing, brought laughter to the halls of Tribble, and treated me to salmon dinners made with her secret ingredient (butter!).

Robert Shorter, the English department chair who hired me, encouraged me to consider this University a place where I could flourish. Nancy Cotton, who became chair during the middle of my career, supported my work with the growing Women’s Studies Program and helped to foster my research in feminist literature. Bob and Nancy remain close friends to this day, and I am profoundly grateful to them both.

A highlight of my years as an English professor was the two semesters I spent directing the study-abroad program in 1997 and 2005 at the Worrell House in London. Getting to know students well through sharing household duties as well as intellectual exchange was delightful, and I vividly recall the pleasures of sitting in a darkening theatre waiting for the collective thrill of seeing Judi Dench onstage in David Hare’s Amy’s View or Vanessa Redgrave in the title role in Euripides’ Greek tragedy Hecuba.

Two other teaching experiences come immediately to mind as especially enriching. The first is having the privilege of team-teaching with Gary Ljungquist in 1993 the University’s first-ever LGBTQ course, “Gay and Lesbian Literature and Culture” to thirty-three politically engaged students eager to investigate a then-new field of interdisciplinary inquiry. The second experience that stands out to me is work-
-ing with students in “Mothers and Daughters: Literature and Theory” as they compose oral history projects based on interviews conducted with their mothers or grandmothers. In that course I have borne witness to the testimony of a Holocaust survivor who did not speak of her experiences until the time of the interview with her granddaughter, to the recollections of single immigrant mothers struggling to make a better life for their children, to the voices of mothers who gave birth to babies or lost them, who acknowledged having planned their pregnancies or having found them a surprise. Reading the student papers that resulted from these intimate exchanges has been a joy and an honor.

Wake Forest has supported my research agenda as well as my teaching initiatives, most notably by helping to fund three summer visits (in 1992, 1996, and 2003) to South Africa, where I met with women political poets and enjoyed many forms of cultural exchange. On two of these trips I was accompanied by a colleague and former WFU student, Hannah Britton, now a professor of political science and gender studies at the University of Kansas, whose knowledge of South African history and politics I found illuminating. The result of my early research there was a book published in 1994, *A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States.*

In recent years, my research has focused on women’s writing about breast and ovarian cancer, and again the English Department and the University have provided invaluable support by granting me several R. J. Reynolds faculty leaves that allowed my scholarship to thrive. The spring semester of 2014, my last before retiring in June, has given me a welcome chance to connect my academic and pedagogical interests through a course entitled “Reading Illness Narratives: Clinical and Literary Perspectives,” team-taught with Professor of Medicine Richard McQuellon. The discussions we have shared with twenty-two wonderful students have deepened my understanding of why empathy matters and what the study of illness literature can bring to the lives of the young as well as the aged. I will carry these and other treasured memories with me as I move into the next phase of my life.
Kevin Barry, the Irish writer who came to Wake Forest University on February 20, seemed to be fairly pleased with the nature of his reception. Or, at the very least, he was happy with the rations provided in his opening remarks, Barry announced that he was happily in a “banana pie-induced coma” due to the hospitality provided by his hosts below the Mason-Dixon Line.

This humorous opening statement set the tone for the rest of the Dillon Johnson Writers Reading Series. Hosted by Dr. Jefferson Holdridge, Professor of English and Director of Wake Forest University Press, the event was a laid-back mix of readings from Barry and a Q&A session. Barry read three pieces—two short stories and selection from his full-length sci-fi novel, *The City of Bohane*.

Barry started off with “The Winter Songs,” a light-hearted short story about the all-too-common, inescapable human experience of someone talking at you (rather than to you) on a train. This particular instance was from the point of view of a young lady who has the misfortune to sit across from “a bony and long and turkey-necked” old woman on a long train ride in the countryside of Ireland. This old turkey-necked woman is not the least bit shy, and embarks on a lengthy discourse to her younger seatmate on the oscillating topics of the Olympics, losing a kidney, and the particular kind of hardship that comes with having size 14 feet.

Barry’s story was inspired by a bus ride he took in 2005. He said that he basically transcribed a conversation he overheard word for word, saying that, “if you eavesdrop as a writer, sometimes you’re rewarded with gold.” Clearly, there was gold in “The Winter Songs.” It is a hilarious story— not an “LOL” kind of funny but rather, as Barry said, a “chuckle and blow air out of your nose” kind of funny. Indeed, DeTamble Auditorium was filled with chuckles from the rapt listeners.

Next, Barry read two chapters from his sci-fi novel, *The City of Bohane*. The novel is a dystopian imagining of a future city (say, 2050 or so) on the west coast of Ireland. It is western in more than one way—Barry was largely influenced by the television series Deadwood while writing this novel, so Bohane has many of the same gun-toting cowboy characteristics as the series. The dialogue in it is a somewhat elusive vernacular that comes directly from language of Cork and Limerick. Barry said it is “what homicidal teenage hipsters might sound like in Ireland.” But despite the novel being somewhat out of context and going into the ears of American students unfamiliar with Irish slang, Barry clearly loves his words, treating each one with clear affection. The reading also had a theatrical aspect. Barry made pointed *eye contact with audience*.

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aspect. Barry made pointed eye contact with audience members at significant moments, punctuated humorous and notable words, and affected voices for different characters.

The last piece Barry read was a short story, “Across the Rooftops,” from his anthology *The Island*. The story takes place in Cork in the early 1990s and focuses on two young adults sitting on a rooftop, waiting for the other to make the first move. This was a wonderfully simple story that, like “The Winter Songs” focused on a small element of the human experience that nearly everyone can relate to.

A Q&A session followed the readings. Students were interested in the challenges that come along with reading and writing in the vernacular. What Barry said he likes about the vernacular is that you “have to earn it.” He likes having a book that does not come too easily and requires the reader to integrate themselves, in a sense, into this imaginary world. He said, “If I can get Kansas, Kansas can get me”.

Barry also touched on the aspect of developing notable characters, which he called the “most unteachable aspect of writing.”

Some advice he did want to pass along to aspiring writers is what elementary school teachers across the globe have been saying for years- to pick up a book every now and then. He said that his most important influence came to him in his late teens and early twenties, and that it is “so important to read when you’re young if you want to write. No time spent reading is ever wasted time.”

Overall, the Kevin Barry event was a superb one for all who attended. Hopefully, Kevin Barry might be enticed to come back again one day, and, hopefully, we will again have satisfactory, coma-inducing amounts of banana pie.
Walking up to the podium in all black, with jet black hair accented by red lipstick and glasses, LeAnne Howe already had a dynamic presence about her. One could almost sense some of the temper she hinted at later and would become aware, as she read, that this anger stemmed from her deep convictions and passion for her family’s history. Injustice has stung her. As a result, she has become an educator, teaching people one at a time about the history of Native Americans so that their struggle is no longer invisible in America and the larger world.

Howe is a Choctaw Native American who grew up with two mothers, having been adopted at birth. She remained in contact with her birth mother, going between the two families. Her birth mother is “belly mother,” her adoptive mother is “basket mother.” Howe uses this part of her past as a bridge to bring listeners into her world. These descriptions read from the prologue of her book Choctalking on Other Realities, provide a way to understand how embodiment permeates her work. She described this book as a work about embodiment. In her book, she centers the reader in the dual realities she lived through, going between two families from the very beginning of her life and how her heritage has shaped her. The rest of Choctalking documents her world travel experiences and is a memoir.

After this brief introduction to herself and to her work, Howe launched into a reading of another chapter from Choctalking on Other Realities. This chapter is colorfully entitled “I Fu** Up in Japan” and elicits laughter from the crowd, which is giving off some low energy vibes - after all, it is Monday night. She launches into a reading of a few of her experiences in Japan, where she was invited to speak at a United Nations convention. When in Japan, Howe stayed with a host family with whom she couldn’t communicate using anything other than gestures because her translator had not yet arrived in the country. She details a funny encounter with a furry heated toilet seat in the middle of the night when staying with this family and also describes a time at a Buddhist shrine where she lost her temper at her guide because he didn’t seem able to understand the plight of Native Americans. Discussing this with the audience after the reading, her embarrassment shines through. The memory is fresh.

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When asked about her process during the Q&A post-reading, Howe said that she edits her books as she goes, paragraph by paragraph, then reorders the sections as she goes, but that this process is only for fiction and nonfiction, poetry and other mediums evolve differently for her.

When asked about how and why she works in many different mediums (film, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, essay), she said that all Native American writers do different things; she lets “the piece tell [her] what it wants to be.” She doesn’t try to constrain herself and allows the words to flow. Always interesting, Howe concluded with the strangest question she’s ever been asked about Choctaws, “Do they keep cats?” and demurely answered, simply stating “Yes.”

LeAnn Howe attends the University of Illinois graduation ceremony and poses with Choctaw Citizen graduates.
On March 4, 2014, students, faculty, and staff gathered in Tribble to hear linguist John Swales give a lecture titled “The Concept of Discourse Community: Star, Problem Child, Cash-cow or Dog?” Swales is a Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at the University of Michigan whose research focuses on written discourse and genre theory. He is also the Co-Director of the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) project, which is similar to Wake Forest’s Directed-Self Placement and WakeCo projects that are under the direction of Dr. Laura Aull and Dr. Zak Lancaster, who both worked with Swales at the University of Michigan.

Swales’s lecture focused on the definition of discourse communities including their qualifications, differences from speech communities, and potential for their future role in society. His wit was evident from the very beginning when he explained his seemingly confusing and jam-packed title, showing the rhetorical importance of picking an interesting and catchy title that still pertains to the project. In this case, his title, “The Concept of Discourse Community: Star, Problem Child, Cash-Cow or Dog,” focused on the current situation of discourse communities as well as their potential to be a star in terms of analyzing language in a particular community.

Swales continued by arguing that discourse communities are a “heterogeneous socio-rhetorical assemblage of people who broadly share occupational or recreational goals and interests” and used the examples of particle physicists, an animal clinic, and a local tennis club. All of these groups have a particular language they use to communicate that are specific to their own group, such as words used to describe how certain functions are run or certain slang words used for particular objects. He also explained that there are three types of discourse communities: local, which depends on the geographical location of the group, focal, focusing on associations within the group, and flocal, which is a mixture of both.
He concluded by stating that discourse communities are currently still “problem children,” yet to be nailed down in terms of their roles in society, but their potential to be a “star” heuristically and pedagogically is definitely there due to their potential to describe certain pockets of society and differences in language across different groups.

After Swales’s conclusion and questions, students and faculty from different departments, as well as educators from various universities outside of Wake Forest gathered in Ammons Lounge for refreshments and a chance to speak to the famous linguist. Having Swales speak at Wake Forest was truly an exciting event that allowed various departments and schools to gather in order to listen to a man whose name and works are so influential in the linguistics sphere.
When attending the recent talk by Anne Rasmussen, entitled “Interdisciplinary Pedagogy and Medieval,” one expected a standard—albeit interesting—lecture delivered in the standard fashion. However, to my surprise, Dr. Rasmussen was the one asking questions; she made it clear from the beginning she wanted the session to be an interactive one, and she encouraged the audience to discuss topics amongst themselves. She then proceeded to give a series of “mini lectures” with two minutes breaks in between, during which she gave the audience questions to prompt discussion. Her main focus was the impact of the digital age in the classroom, especially concerning classes on medieval literature.

A professor of Germanic languages and literature, Dr. Rasmussen conducts research in Medieval German literature, poetics and Gender Studies, and she is always looking for ways to make the medieval world accessible to students. She pointed out that the biggest change the digital age has brought is the availability of knowledge, which, in turn, has changed the way undergraduates think about knowledge in the humanities. She warned against the seduction of fast learning, which only leads to a superficial understanding of the topic. However, rather than resist the use of laptops in her class, Dr. Rasmussen encouraged her audience to embrace new technology and use it as a tool for teaching. “Start where you are, meet where they are,” is her philosophy when it comes to approaching students with a subject that may not always seem relevant to the modern world.

She said that students need tools to master and manage the new digital world to unlock the mysteries of the ancient world. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and various medieval-themed video games and movies have certainly piqued current interest in the medieval world, but Dr. Rasmussen pointed out that the entertainment world and the educational world seldom meet. With this fact in mind, she proposed bringing media into the classroom as a way of bringing the subject of study to life. Her students use Wordpress and Google doc to design tours of medieval sites and create virtual timelines, and they attend seminars in Germany online through video conferences.

Dr. Rasmussen raised some interesting points, and her perspective was refreshing. If her unorthodox method of presentation was any indication of her teaching style, she no doubt has little trouble engaging her students and bringing the medieval era into the 21st century—or vice versa, depending on your point of view.
JT Peifer, a 2011 graduate, owns and operates Feisty Goat Coffee Roasters, an entrepreneurial venture he created while attending Wake Forest. He graduated with an English major and now shares his story with other students, alums and faculty to clearly communicate the goals he has for his company. His mobile coffee roastery was successfully funded on March 24, 2014, with over 200 backers through a Kickstarter campaign.