A Message from the Chair

These are exciting times for our department! We’ve recently completed an overarching revision to our major, opening up coverage in literary history, increasing our offerings in diverse cultural perspectives, and developing students’ capacities in scholarly writing, editing, publishing, and digital literacy.

In addition to our ongoing strengths in British and American literature, children’s literature, comparative literature, and creative writing, we’ve developed bold new initiatives in Digital Humanities and community engagement (such as our Shakespeare & Co. Drama Lab, our Poetry International Community Outreach program, and our very popular Living Writers series). All of these efforts are possible because of the wonderful support we receive from alumni and friends.

We’d love to hear from each of you—and to feature your own accomplishments in our newsletter. Please feel free to write to us, or to stop by the department office at any time to say hello.

Michael Borgstrom
Chair and Associate Professor

Digital Humanities @ SDSU

Our department is moving into exciting new territory with several initiatives focused on the Digital Humanities. The term “Digital Humanities” describes efforts to study digital technologies and culture, to employ computational practices in traditional humanities research and teaching, and to reflect upon and analyze the impact of digital technologies on culture and knowledge work. Here at SDSU, a group of faculty gathers regularly to explore how traditional humanities matter in and for our digital world.

This work in Digital Humanities began last year through a series of discussions based in the English department and extended throughout the College of Arts and Letters, culminating in a daylong “Re/Boot Camp” for faculty and graduate students. This was a highly interactive, hands-on opportunity to think through the intellectual, institutional, and cultural consequences of the digital shift and to talk through practical, incremental strategies for adapting scholarship and teaching for the 21st century.

As an extension of these initial efforts, The Digital Humanities Initiative at SDSU promotes this work through research and teaching, as well as by providing a hub for Digital Humanities collaboration across campus. Dr. Jessica Pressman leads our department’s efforts in this area through a range of interconnected programs: a Digital Humanities faculty research group; a learning community on “Digital Communication Across the Curriculum”; Digital Humanities tool workshops; and a highly successful conference on “Diving into the Digital Humanities” that was held in October at SDSU and attracted participants from across the country.

Ideally, our grassroots, site-specific initiatives will be used as a foundation for collaboration across institutions in San Diego (and beyond). The department and college envision this effort as a unique opportunity to come together and think conceptually, historically, and collaboratively about the digital humanities and humanities work in the digital age. We invite you to join the conversation!
Celebrate 25 Years of Creativity

The Hugh C. Hyde Living Writers Series, conjointly with the Department of English and Comparative Literature, are delighted to celebrate 25 years of SDSU’s MFA in Creative Writing—25 years of elegance and moxie—with events featuring MFA Faculty, Students, Affiliates, and Alumni.

The capstone of our fall, 2014 celebration featured a reading and Q&A with distinguished poet and influential educator, Marvin Bell. This event was supported by the Department of English and Comparative Literature, The Hugh C. Hyde Writers’ Endowment, and the IRA Fund. Marvin Bell’s career has been substantial—including over 23 books of poetry and essays, a 40-year stint as a faculty member at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and two terms as Iowa’s first Poet Laureate—and his poems, “...beyond their formal mastery, constitute an admirable project whose interrogations run deep” (Poetry). His literary honors include awards from the Academy of American Poets, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the American Poetry Review, fellowships from the Guggenheim and NEA, and Senior Fulbright appointments to Yugoslavia and Australia. He has revolutionized and redefined poetry and influenced countless generations of writers. Bell has said, “I would like to write poetry which finds salvation in the physical world and the here and now and which defines the soul, if you will, in terms of emotional depth, and that emotional depth in terms of the physical world and the world of human relationships.”

Other highlights from the fall, 2014 anniversary celebration included a spirited reading by MFA Professor Emeritus, Marilyn Chin, which commemorated her new collection of poetry, Hard Love Province. Acclaimed YA author and MFA Alum, Matt de la Peña, shared selections from his collected works and discussed the saving powers of literacy and creativity. We are also excited to host PhD candidate and MFA Alum, David Tomas Martinez, on Wednesday December 3rd for a release party featuring his debut poetry collection, Hustle.

The anniversary celebration resumes on Wednesday, February 11, 2015. MFA Students, Alumni, and Faculty will gather for a festival of reading and greeting in Love Library, (Room 430) from 5-8:30 p.m. The evening will begin with a reading and book fair featuring distinguished MFA Alumni from 5-6:30 p.m., followed by a MFA Faculty reading from 7-8:30 p.m. featuring David Matlin, Sherwin Bitsui, Katie Farris, Ilya Kaminsky, and Sandra Alcosser. Festivities will continue on Thursday, February 12th, with refreshments and a reading featuring MFA Students and Alumni. Location and time of MFA Student & Alum reading TBD. Let us once again share our energy and warm our literary lives in celebration of a 25-year legacy of stoking the arts both locally and globally. If you’re an MFA Alum who would like to share news, or if you have questions about the celebration, please email: mfa.sdsu@gmail.com. In the subject line, please specify: “MFA 25th Reunion.”

To Dorthy

You are not beautiful, exactly.
You are beautiful, inexact.
You let a weed grow by the mulberry
And a mulberry grow by the house.
So close, in the personal quiet
Of a windy night, it brushes the wall
And sweeps away the day till we sleep.

A child said it, and it seemed true:
“Things that are lost are all equal.”
But it isn’t true. If I lost you,
The air wouldn’t move, nor the tree grow.
Someone would pull the weed, my flower.
The quiet wouldn’t be yours. If I lost you,
I’d have to ask the grass to let me sleep.

—Marvin Bell

Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See

Paving the Way from the Stage

The Department of English and Comparative Literature is offering a new interdisciplinary, experimental, service-learning course for Spring 2015, which combines scholarly research into dramatic literature and performance, outreach to the local theatre community, pre-professional experience, and the creation of a digital repository of accomplishments and resources.

The class will be taught by Dr. Edith Frampton, serving as an SDSU Center for Teaching and Learning Fellow this year, who, together with faculty members from across the university, is part of a Learning Community focused on digital literacy. Students in the new class will read, analyze, and write about a variety of diverse plays, studying their contexts and going to see those plays performed around San Diego. They will organize and lead post-performance discussions with audience members, actors, directors, and designers. Professionals from local theatres, such as Old Globe Artistic Director Barry Edelstein and Cygnet Theatre dramaturg Taylor Wycoff, will also visit the class. For their final project, students will research and produce program notes and school study guides for upcoming San Diego shows. These will be incorporated into a website that will be available to other students, educators, arts administrators, and members of the general public.

The class, which is a facet of the Department’s new Shakespeare & Co. Drama Lab initiative, will serve as a model for other service-learning and digitally oriented courses, while simultaneously strengthening the connections between SDSU and the San Diego arts community.
I first met Sherry as an undergraduate student at San Diego State University. I was the older (perhaps too vocal) student in what I believe was her first literature course after her trailblazing work with the Rhetoric and Writing Studies department. In a sense, we were both coming back to something.

My classmates were, well, less than stellar; Sherry would wonder aloud about their commitment to the discipline of English. Stern and demanding, she would ask brilliantly thought-provoking questions, but the class would often just stare at her. Sherry was visibly frustrated but equally committed to her silence, not being the sage on the stage, to creating a space where we could struggle with, and be rewarded by, great literature and ideas. There were a few of us who spoke regularly, but the majority of the class grimaced with, and be rewarded by, great literature and ideas. There were a few of us who spoke regularly, but the majority of the class grimaced or flipped through pages, answering her silence with silence.

The day our first paper was to be returned, Sherry came in and set them on the table in front of the class. She peered at us from above her glasses; I was terrified. I was coming back to college a little bit older and not so much wiser, and while I loved literature and writing, I wasn’t sure I had made the best choice in major—I mean, how do English majors make a living? On top of that, I was not sure if I could measure up to Dr. Little’s famously high standards. I had been a waitress for ten years and I was unsatisfied in a bottomless way. I wanted more for myself and from the world around me. And so I found myself in foreign territory, sitting in Dr. Little’s class, waiting for a grade and maybe a comment or two that would confirm my choice to return to college to earn a degree in English.

Sherry picked up a paper from the top of the pile and said, “This is what English majors are able to do.” I gulped and she began to read. From the first sentence, I knew it was mine. I had labored over that first sentence. All these years later, I don’t remember what she said about the paper after reading it, or if she said anything at all, but it doesn’t matter.

There are no words for what she did for me that day. She alone, in the way that great teachers do, set me on a course to make my life fulfilling in ways I never imagined possible.

After earning a B.A. in English, I entered the Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at SDSU, but only after many conversations in Sherry’s office, conversations where we weighed the pros and cons of various options for graduate school. By then I had become a regular in her office hours and she had become my mentor.

As a graduate student, my relationship with Sherry deepened. While I navigated the personalities and politics of a small writing program, she was my port of call. I would knock on her door and she would move a pile of books aside for me to sit down, and then she would listen and ask, as always, the best questions.

Not only did Sherry support me throughout graduate school, eventually becoming a reader for my thesis, but she also continued to be my guide through great literature. I took three graduate courses with her, including a course on pedagogy and her renowned James Joyce seminar.

One day I spilled into her office, practically giddy with having just finished Joyce’s “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”. My reading of it was so tangled in ideas of myself as an earnest but not-so-young artist that Sherry could not help but laugh at me—gently laugh at me. (Honestly, I laughed at me too.) Then, she calmly asked me to read a passage from the end of the book: “Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”

Like the novel’s protagonist Stephen Dedalus, I felt so alive to read that passage to Sherry in her office. This was my religion. I was almost in tears as I rambled on and on about the book and life and art and then stopped myself, realizing that I was once again rambling on and on. There was some silence. Then in her colossal wisdom, Sherry asked, “What does forge mean?” I wasn’t sure. I responded with something like, “Who cares—look at all the other words!” I turned the pages showing her everything I had highlighted. Sherry responded, “Spend some time with the word forge.” She sent me out of her office that day, not aimlessly adrift in the poetry of Joyce, but a detective in a world of words and ideas.

Fifteen years later, I am a poet and a college professor. When I write, I try to channel Sherry’s profound curiosity for language, and as a teacher, like Sherry, I try to listen and ask good questions. I work to not fill the classroom’s silence with my own voice, to create an environment where students struggle with their own words and the words of others, where they take responsibility for their education so that they can become lifelong learners. None of this would be possible without having had the absolute privilege of being Sherry Little’s student.

Sherry’s silence now is what James Joyce might call “thought enchanted.” My thoughts are filled with so many wonderful memories of her and my life as a student—now a life-long learner—and my work as a teacher, my fervor for education. Sherry helped me to interpret “what the heart is and what it feels,” and equally important, how to forge meaning in a world that seems to conspire against it.

For me, Sherry Burgus Little is the embodiment of integrity. My time with her was filled with grace and scholarship. Sherry, in the words of Joyce, you have created in me, for me, something “soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.”

—Sydney Brown
San Diego State University Alumna
Faculty Accomplishments

**Professor Sandra Alcosser** was the plenary speaker at University of Tennessee which included an interview in the UT literary journal, Grist. Her sonnet sequence *Temple in the Sea*, was scored and performed by British composer Adam Walter and Trinidad Symphony. Professor Alcosser has poems published, or forthcoming, in *The Sun Magazine*, *Plume Anthology*, *Ghost Town Literary Review*, *Forest Understory*, *Down to the Dark River: Poems about the Mighty Mississippi*, and *Locked Horn Press*. Recently, Professor June Cummins published introductions to four children’s books, the sequels to Sydney Taylor’s first book, *All-of-Kind Family*. In November, she spoke about Taylor and her books at the Tenement Museum in NYC. Professor Cummins also recently submitted an article about identity-based children’s book awards.

Professor Laurie Edson’s article on *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the second award-winning novel by MacArthur recipient Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is forthcoming in the fall/winter 2014 issue: “Mapping Relationality: Adichie and the Social Spaces of Post-Independence Nigeria,” *ELN English Language Notes* 52.2 (2014): 131-45.

Professor Ilya Kaminsky’s book of poetry, *Dancing in Odessa*, has been translated into various editions and has been published in Turkey, Macedonia, Mexico, as well as selected poems in Russia. The UK edition of the book also came out this year from Arc Publications in Liverpool. Professor Kaminsky’s new poems appear, or are forthcoming, in Poetry magazine and McSweeney’s, and Western Humanities Review.

Professor Jennifer Minniti-Shippey won the inaugural Pitt & Virginia Warner Innovation in Teaching Award for her work developing Poetic Youth. Also, her panel, “Developing Community Creative Writing Programs for Underserved Youth,” was accepted for the annual AWP Conference.

Professor Bill Nericcio gave lectures at the Texas Comicon, at a digital humanities THATCamp at Boise State University, at San Ysidro High School, at the University of Texas, El Paso, and the New Americans Museum in San Diego, as well as speaking at the California Forum for Diversity in Graduate Education at UCSD.

Congratulations to Professor Jessica Pressman for her successful conference, THATCamp, for the Digital Humanities. Over 150 faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students participated in the event which welcomed a wide variety of people from CSUFresno, UCSB, UCSC, and throughout Southern California.

Professor Jeanette Roberts Shumaker coauthored a scholarly book with William Baker on the octogenarian Anglo-Jewish writer Bernard Kops; the monograph was published in 2014 by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Professor Kathleen Shumate is publishing a book of poems titled *From the Land of Oz*. The collection will appear under the pseudonym, Kathleen de la Chaumette and will be published by Finishing Line Press in January 2015.

Congratulations to **Professor Joseph Thomas** on his contribution of a chapter on Modern and Contemporary Children’s Poetry to a volume of *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, edited by Stephen Burt and Alfred Bendixon, which was realised this October.

Upcoming Events at SDSU

**Living Writers**:

David Tomas Martinez
Love Library 430, 7p.m.