A Message from the Chair

This has been a semester full of good news for the Department of English and Comparative Literature at SDSU. One of our newest faculty members, Prof. Adam Hammond, published his first book (Literature in the Digital Age, Cambridge UP), we hosted a successful faculty colloquium featuring Profs. Phillip Serrato and Quentin Bailey, and Prof. Joanna Brooks offered an inspiring talk at this year’s Phi Beta Kappa-sponsored Faculty Lecture.

In addition, we welcomed to campus visiting faculty member (and novelist) Assaf Gavron, cutting-edge digital maker-scholar Caitlin Fisher, and noted scholar (and Professor Emeritus) Larry McCaffery.

We also celebrated the momentous achievement of alumnus Matt de la Peña (MFA 2000), who was awarded the Newbery Medal, the most prestigious award for children’s literature. More information about each of these events and achievements appears below.

We would very much like to hear from each of you—especially our emeritus faculty—and to feature your own accomplishments in future newsletters. Please don’t hesitate to write to us, or to stop by the department office at any time to say hello. We’d be delighted to see you.

Michael Borgstrom
Chair

MFA Alum Wins Newbery Award

A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION! Our MFA-Fiction alumnus Matt de la Peña (class of 2000) has won the Newbery, the most prestigious American award for Children’s Fiction!

If you haven’t seen the National City native’s name in lights on SDSU’s I-8 billboard or heard him being interviewed on NPR, here are a few of Matt’s achievements since his graduation: over a dozen books published, primarily in Young Adult Fiction, such as his first novel, Ball Don’t Lie (made into a feature-length film; Matt is in it!); Mexican White-Boy (2008), temporarily and very publicly banned in parts of Arizona in anti-“ethnic” literature legislation; We Were Here (2009); I Will Save You (2010); The Living (2013); the series Infinity Ring; The Hunted (2015)—and the Newbery winner, Last Stop on Market Street (2015), one of Matt’s several picture books. Its illustrator, Christian Robinson, received a Caldecott Honor Award, a clear indication that this book wowed the American Library Association’s Newbery and Caldecott judges. It is now, of course, on the best-seller lists everywhere. The book also received a Coretta Scott King Honor Award and more; to see the complete list, please see Matt’s website: mattdelapena.com.

You can find our reviews of Matt’s book on the book review link at childlit.sdsu.edu.

Two professors Matt studied with are Hal Jaffe and Alida Allison, both of whom are still teaching in our department. Alida remembers Matt taking her “Adolescence in Literature” class. A few weeks into the semester, Matt asked her if she’d read a few pages of the novel he was working on, Ball Don’t Lie. Alida took the four or five pages home, read them, and returned them to Matt with the comment: “Keep writing, Matt—I want to know what happens next!”

What happened next: not only did Matt finish his MFA degree and his first of many novels, he also became an in-demand national speaker and a writing teacher in Brooklyn, all the while maintaining the prodigious basketball skills that informed Ball Don’t Lie!

CONGRATULATIONS, MATT!
Emeritus Spotlight: Carey Wall

Professor Emerita Carey Wall came to SDSU in the fall of 1971 and retired officially in 2002. She was Chair of the department for 12 years. Here, Carey reports on her latest activities:

CONNECTION WITH TEACHING:
Four times a year I go to Phyllis Minick’s Book Club to facilitate their discussion of a novel I have recommended, so I’m always reading fiction and looking for novels to recommend. Phyllis, in her mid-80s, is still at her work in technical writing. The discussions are something like trying to herd cats. The participants don’t want even small lectures; they want to talk. I slip in this or that I want them to see. We discuss mostly contemporary novels, some translated, but last year I got them to reread Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* and *The Portrait of a Lady*.

CONNECTION WITH SDSU:
More than half of the Executive Committee members of Nu Chapter of California, Phi Beta Kappa, like me, are retired. Ever since I retired from chairing the Department, I’ve been the chapter’s Corresponding Secretary. Once we send out invitations to membership in early April, I have a busy month of communications, email and in person, with invitees before and during the annual initiation. I remain on the Department’s Scholarship Committee, which reads applications and meets once each semester. I am a member of The Sounding Board, which pays attention to and promotes SDSU’s Musical Theatre program.

CONNECTION WITH SDSU PEOPLE:
About town in La Jolla, I now and then run into Dan McLeod, who spent part of his retirement getting a Master’s degree in Gerontology. He recently told me he is becoming known in Japan as a gerontologist. Less frequently, I run into Tom Cox of the former French Department. He and Dan meet regularly for coffee. Recently, at the Spreckles Theatre, my usher turned out to be Ed Deaton, who retired from the SDSU Math Department in 1992, spent 15 years in Germany teaching computer science, and then returned to San Diego. These days he lives downtown and walks five days a week to ushering jobs in all the downtown theatres.

As an aficionado of Cygnet Theatre, I go to other events there besides the shows, and I run into other SDSU people there.

ADDENDUM:
Exercise. I go to two tap classes and I work out at Curves twice a week.

Undergrad Speaks About Disabilities

Majoring in English can be a daunting undertaking. It entails substantial reading, plenty of writing, and engagement with complex issues and ideas. Of course, the payoff is an exhilarating and illuminating experience that in addition to preparing students for diverse career paths, prepares them to engage critically with the world around them.

Maddie Padilla is a junior transfer student from Grossmont College who has risen to the demands of the English major. She points out that while she loves being an English major—"I love to write and read other people’s writing"—her academic achievements and ambitions are even more meaningful in light of the challenges that she has overcome.

In the second grade, she began to fall behind her peers in math and other subjects. She says that at that young age, "I realized already that my brain was wired differently." That same year, she was diagnosed with a learning disability and, fortunately, began to receive the support that she needed.

Recently, Maddie was a guest speaker in General Studies 420, "Disability in Society," to share with 350 students her experience as a college student with a learning disability. While she acknowledged that “frustration and failure” have been part of her experience, she stressed, “I am motivated not to let my disability control my life or my self-perception.” She explained that her journey “hasn’t been easy,” but by “preparing more efficiently and studying harder,” she has managed to reach this point in her pursuit of a college degree.

In her first year at SDSU, she has taken courses in Shakespeare, American literature, and adolescence in literature. She has even picked up a minor in professional writing with an eye on a career in technical writing. Ultimately, she hopes she can motivate others with learning disabilities to set high goals for themselves. She notes, “Every day I am faced with a new challenge.” But with diligence and determination, along with the support of her parents and her professors, she continues to make progress toward her academic and personal goals.
Working in an emerging field like the Digital Humanities means that you have an extra job to do. You still do the usual things: produce meaningful research, share it with your colleagues and the public, and present the most vibrant aspects to your students. But you also need to advocate for your field.

Today, the Digital Humanist’s job isn’t just doing Digital Humanities; it’s also convincing everyone else that Digital Humanities are worth doing.

Like most people in DH, I divide my time fairly equally between the two. My “in-field” research is about dialogism or “multi-voicedness” in modernist fiction.

Working with computational linguists, I develop algorithms to detect which fictional works contain the greatest variety of speaking voices and perspectives. This is technical work, but it promises nuanced characters and innovatively layered plotlines, he is able to subvert polarizing politics and, instead, promote empathy and a deeper understanding of human nature. When asked in an interview about what he expects from his readers, Gavron asserted: “To think, I hope. To realize things are not simple. To realize that people, and situations, are multifaceted and that some of these facets can be conflicting to the point of absurdity.”

We concluded the evening with an informative Q&A session in which Gavron revealed details of his novel-in-progress. Though the specifics are classified, we can expect another great Israeli novel that inspires readers to think and, most importantly, to laugh.

Adam Hammond Examines the Digital Age

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My “out-field” work argues that the digital and the literary aren’t separate spheres but intimately interconnected. My book "Literature in the Digital Age" (Cambridge UP, 2016) explores the new literary questions that we can ask of digitized literary texts and investigates the ways that born-digital literary forms like electronic literature and videogames spur us to re-examine our assumptions about narrative. My most recent work reads the DH movement through the lens of the punk era’s DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethic, positioning skills like coding and programming as tools for artistic self-expression and social change.
**Electronic Literature Reading: Caitlin Fisher**

Nearly 95 people came out to hear Professor Caitlin Fisher (York University) read/perform her electronic literature on February 17, 2016. 95 people for experimental literature! Faculty from UCSD, USD, and all across SDSU were in the audience as well as graduate and undergraduate students from diverse disciplines and departments on campus—it was truly an interdisciplinary event.

Fisher shared her cutting-edge work in augmented-reality digital literature, holding up her iPad to scan QR codes and digital markers contained in a book or attached to little domestic objects. When scanned, the markers elicited the projection of a digital image or audio file; eerie voices and shaky photographs appeared to hover over the analog book. The performance demonstrated how augmented-reality technologies can turn books into haunted objects and even, as our own Professor Serrato commented, update the Gothic genre.

Fisher talked about digital humanities from a maker-scholar perspective. Her presentation showed how the incorporation of digital technologies into literature can produce not only new methods of storytelling but also embodied modes of reading, both of which inspire different ways of understanding and studying the literary. Caitlin Fisher holds a Canada Research Chair in Digital Culture in the Department of Film at York University, Toronto. A co-founder of York’s Future Cinema Lab, her research investigates the future of narrative through explorations of interactive storytelling and interactive cinema in Augmented Reality environments. Her visit was sponsored by SDSU’s Common Experience: Energy, and her presentation was generously hosted in and by the Library.

**Department Colloquium**

As part of our ongoing Humanities in Action series, the department inaugurated a new departmental colloquium this semester to showcase faculty research. The Humanities in Action series itself represents the department’s attempt to share the important cultural work of the humanities with wider public audiences, and this first colloquium featured Professor Phillip Serrato and Professor Quentin Bailey presenting their work on a shared topic: “The Immigrant Other.”

The event offered a crucial opportunity to hear two faculty members with diverse research interests lecture on a common theme. Professor Bailey, a specialist in British literature, spoke on “Unwelcome Visitors: The Limits of Hospitality.” Professor Serrato, a specialist in children’s and adolescent literature, offered his thoughts on “Can I see an Other’s woe?: Engaging the Immigrant Other through Chicano/a Children’s Literature.”

To a standing-room-only crowd, these talks spanned a number of texts, authors, and concerns, including the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, William Wordsworth, border security, Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, Gloria Anzaldúa, the French Revolution, and Chicano/a children’s literature.

Professors Serrato and Bailey then took questions from the group, moderating an expansive intellectual conversation that touched on topics such as political policy, cultural knowledge, social responsibility, and, yes, close reading. Joining stunning insight with theoretical grace, Professors Serrato and Bailey together offered a timely reminder of the significance of education within the body politic – and of the particular vitality (and necessity) of humanities-based scholarship and inquiry.

The enthusiasm and interest generated by this first colloquium assured its place as an ongoing event for future semesters.
AVP Joanna Brooks Talks About Humanities

Associate Vice President for Faculty Advancement and Professor of English Joanna Brooks recently gave this year’s Phi Beta Kappa-sponsored Faculty Lecture, offering a rousing argument for the ongoing value of the humanities. Excerpted below are portions of Professor Brooks’s talk:

ON THE NECESSITY OF THE HUMANITIES:
“…I sense an urgent need for the humanities and social sciences to once again pause and reorient ourselves to the purposes of our work. There are many discouraging forces for humanists that are familiar enough to us all that shape our work. But it is really up to us to bring human perspective to the solutionism of our technology-driven era, to see what others cannot or will not see, and name it, and frame it in ways that impact the priorities of human communities and institutions. We can do it only if we are willing to use our academic freedom to attend to the critical human conditions of our time and challenge the orthodoxies that bind us.”

ON HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE:
“With the benefit of a humanist perspective, we can see that of our defining maladaptive human ‘habits of mind’ has been our inability to anticipate, articulate, design for, and comprehend the exclusions, impacts, and costs of technological advances and efficiencies. These costs to human well being, to the environment, and social science research. Because I believe in what we do, because I believe that life is imbued with meaning and resources are precious, I feel always an urgency to use the time, freedom, and modest security we enjoy to hit it hard.”

ON HUMANITIES AS OPPORTUNITY:
“I am so grateful for the opportunities the academic humanities have afforded me to advocate for human rights in my faith community. At the same time, just as impatient I am with the killing orthodoxies of my faith. I am impatient with the killing orthodoxies of professional humanities and social science research. Because I believe in what we do, because I believe that life is imbued with meaning and resources are precious, I feel always an urgency to use the time, freedom, and modest security we enjoy to hit it hard.”

ON THE WORK OF THE HUMANITIES TODAY:
“My job is to see this history within the archive of human history and to relentlessly name its costs and to reframe how lives should be valued.

Choosing to work this way required that I changed the way I saw my job as a humanities and social sciences scholar, the way I choose to use the precious resource that is academic freedom. I’d like to leave you with lessons I’ve learned, and urge you to consider them in relationship to the work we share: 1) We must make it our job to see human precarity and vulnerability, to see the critical conditions of our time; 2) We must make it our job to name critical conditions in accessible language; 3) We must make it our job not just to critique but to build – to frame new priorities for human communities and institutions.”

Professor Brooks’s latest book is Saving Alex (HarperOne).

A Visit from Cambridge University Press

Tenure depends on publication, but how do we publish a scholarly book? What goes into the decision? Ray Ryan, senior commissioning editor for literature at Cambridge University Press (the oldest press in the world) and author of four books himself, visited SDSU as part of the English Department’s “Humanities Alive” series to tell us.

For Cambridge, the key is quality, not trendiness. He told us about a meeting he had at the start of his career. “The topic is ten years old,” said one editor. “Time for us to jump in,” said another.

While the Press is a business, massive sales are not really a consideration when deciding whether to accept or reject a project. Instead, the Press looks to tradition. Authors and topics that are new or haven’t yet developed “a critical crust” hold no interest for the Press. The reason is not stodginess but marketing. Cambridge distributes its books worldwide, and so the topic must have global interest.

The Press, Ryan told us, has moved into the digital age. Instead of older books being pulped, the files are moved onto a computer, and the book will remain available as an “on-demand” paperback in perpetuity.

SDSU’s English department has two proud Cambridge University Press authors: Peter C. Herman and Adam Hammond.
Larry McCaffrey Tackles Literary Aesthetics

One of the most engaging of the Humanities in Action talks this past spring featured Professor Emeritus Larry McCaffrey, who on February 9 gave an inspired and inspiring presentation, “The Aesthetics of the Literary Interview,” about the literary genre he helped both to create and define. A much beloved professor of contemporary American literature at SDSU, Professor McCaffery used the occasion to highlight his evolving understanding of the genre now permanently associated with his name: the literary interview.

Professor McCaffery noted that when he began college in the late 1960s, courses in contemporary fiction were almost non-existent, and English departments in general judged “living writers” as unworthy of serious study because their books had yet to pass the test of time. During his thirty-year career at SDSU Professor McCaffery made it his life’s purpose to challenge that point of view. He did this through his prodigious publications and through his many courses on modernism and postmodernism, contemporary fiction, the “much despised” genre of science fiction, and, not least, rock poetry. Collectively, his books, essays, and most especially his literary interviews champion the work of “risk-taking” authors whose highly experimental, innovative fiction represented a decisive break from the past. Professor McCaffery explained that though these writers are now commonly classified as postmodernists, it was only in the late 1970s that “postmodernism became the settled term.” Among those risk-takers he studied were the three writers who became the subject of Professor McCaffrey’s first scholarly book: The Metafictional Muse: The Work of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass (1982).

Professor McCaffery’s most important contribution to American letters is the dozens of literary interviews he conducted with a veritable who’s who of American writers—from Raymond Carver and Ursula K. Le Guin to E. L. Doctorow and Toni Morrison. During his talk, Professor McCaffery focused on the making of his first (of four) collection of interviews, co-edited with Tom LeClair: Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Writers (1983).

When he began conducting interviews for this book, Professor McCaffery confessed, he had a naïve understanding about what a literary interview was. He quickly learned that the creation of a successful interview involved far more than simply transcribing what an author had said. For a recorded face-to-face interview to “work” on the page, it had to be shaped—to be treated as an improvisational musical composition, much like the ever-shifting duet of two guitarists riffing on stage. As his own “riffs” became widely known, Professor McCaffery’s reputation in this genre grew, and he won the trust even of writers famously leery of granting interviews, primary among them, David Foster Wallace.

Perhaps the most important step in building trust was letting the writer know upfront that the final word would always be theirs: nothing would appear in print without the writer’s prior approval. The writer was always given multiple chances to revise his or her answers to Professor McCaffery’s meticulously prepared set of questions, typically twenty-five pages long.

Such a collaborative process demanded considerable labor and time on both his part and that of the author. For instance, writers did not always understand his questions, Professor McCaffery confided, so he learned to “reinvent the question that the writer answered.” It was the reinvented question that appeared in the published version of the interview, not the question Professor McCaffery had originally asked. Draft followed draft, and letter followed letter, until both “performers” were satisfied with the form and substance of the interview. Happily for San Diego State University, Professor McCaffery has donated his extensive interview archives to Love Library’s Special Collections, where future biographers and scholars will reap the benefit of his author-interview folders and his collection of sometimes whimsical book objects, including a book with a hook and a simulacrum cake.

To aspiring interviewers in the room, Professor McCaffery offered copious advice about the interview and revising process: learn to “shuffle things around,” to “edit the hell out of the initial transcription.” Some questions, he specified, should never be asked: “Never ask a writer what something means. Any writer worth a damn will answer, ‘It means just what I say.’” Avoid queries about symbols, and find tactful ways to ask questions about personal matters. David Foster Wallace, for instance, was understandably uncomfortable if an interviewer sought to know the state of his mental health and especially his well-known challenges with addiction, yet “a good interviewer will find a tactful way to bring such painful issues up.”

Professor McCaffery shared with the audience that in his youth he had dreamed of being a rock star, much like the musicians he worshiped to this day: Bruce Springsteen, David Bowie, and Lou Reed. Instead, he became “a self-professed groupie” of innovative contemporary writers whose stage was the page. Many in the audience would argue that Professor McCaffery long ago realized his childhood dream: he has achieved rock-star status for his much acclaimed literary interviews.
Aztec Literary Review

The Aztec Literary Review was launched in Fall 2012 by a group of Sigma Tau Delta students in the Department who wished to provide a showcase for undergraduate literary work. The editorial and production staff is drawn entirely from the SDSU undergraduate student body, with an editor-in-chief supported by a number of associate editors.

The first issue was published in February 2013 and its launch was celebrated with a lunchtime reading at Scripps Cottage organized by the first editor-in-chief, Kayla Rodriguez. That first issue contained 19 pieces by 15 different writers, ranging from poetry to short fiction to literary criticism and selected from nearly 100 submissions. Since then, the ALR has published four further volumes, under the editorships of Cody Mauro and Richard Freeland, with a new one scheduled for later this semester. In addition, the ALR has held a number of creative writing competitions, from holiday-themed “Nauseating Love Poems” and “Terrifyingly Short Stories” to a serious engagement with issues of sexual harassment on campus, “Voices against Violence.” Further information about the Aztec Literary Review, archived editions of previous issues, and blog posts about various aspects of the writing process are available at the ALR website: http://aztecliteraryreview.com. Questions about the review can be sent to Hannah Roberts, the current editor-in-chief, at aztecliteraryreview@gmail.com. The deadline for submissions for the Spring 2016 issue is 15 May.

Faculty Accomplishments

Sandra Alcosser traveled to India for two weeks with the University of Iowa International Writers Program and US Consul to participate in panel discussions, workshops and readings at many universities. Recently published or forthcoming prose and poetry appears in When the Rewards Can by So Great edited by Kwame Dawes, Plume Anthology and Verde Que Te Quiero Verde: Poems after Federico Garcia Lorca, as well as an interview with inaugural poet Richard Blanco for SDSU's 360.

Alida Allison is one of the English language editors for the 2016 Hans Christian Andersen Award winner, Cao Wenxuan, the first Chinese artist to win the award, often called the Nobel Prize of children's literature.

Clare Colquitt has been recognized as the Most Influential Professor for the fourth year in a row, by this year's Outstanding Graduating Senior in English, Alexandra Gardella.

Assaf Gavron was interviewed by The Los Angeles Review of Books for his novel The Hilltop (published by Simon & Schuster).

Adam Hammond had his book, Literature in the Digital Age, published by Cambridge University Press in Spring 2016. He also had his article, entitled Using Models of Lexical Style to Quantify Free Indirect Discourse in Modernist Fiction, appear in the flagship DH publication, Digital Scholarship in Humanities.

Yetta Howard and Bill Nericcio presented their work “Sexuality in Comics” at the San Diego Comic Fest.

Harold Jaffe had his novel Death Cafe: Fictions & Découfictions published in January 2016 and he has completed his non-fiction volume: Sacred Geography: Dispatches from India. Jaffe’s collection 15 Serial Killers will be published in Spanish in Spring of 2017.

Ilya Kaminsky read from his work and delivered keynote addresses at Cornell, Yale, University of Iowa, as well as at literary festivals in Norway, Germany and China.

Stephen-Paul Martin has had his new book of stories entitled The Ace of Lightning accepted for publication by FC2.

Jenny Minniti-Shippey will participate in an international artist's residency at MART Studios in Dublin, Ireland, where she'll lead Poetic Youth programming with Irish students. Poetic Youth, which provides free arts workshops to underserved youth, worked with over 250 San Diego area students in the spring.

Bill Nericcio received an SDSU Arts Alive teaching award—in return for a break from teaching, Nericcio worked with Dr. Eric Smigel, School of Music and Dance, to develop a new blended curriculum class for Fall 2016 entitled Psychedelic Mirrors: Sex Drugs and Rock 'n Roll in Music, Literature, Film, Cinema, and Art. Nericcio went on to present a speaking tour for his book Tex[t]-Mex (2007) and his new book, Eyegiene, (forthcoming)—the tour included feature lectures at major universities including the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Arizona, EHESS(Paris), Cornell University, and the University of Kansas.

Jessica Pressman was a featured speaker at the international conference “Charisma of the Book” at NYU Abu Dhabi in March and, in February, at UCLA's Digital Humanities Infrastructure Symposium.
Upcoming Events at SDSU

Please visit our website in the fall for upcoming events.