Of late I’ve been thumbing through a wonderful little book, To Engineer is Human, by Henry Petroski, a professor of civil engineering at Duke University. Written for the non-engineer lay person, Petroski’s book presents a vivid and enlightening discussion of the role of failure in engineering design. Yet what struck me about much of what he had to say was how familiar it all sounded. As I read his description of the process by which one achieves successful design in things like bridges, skyscrapers, and even pencils, I could not help but see similarities with the writing process itself.

Engineers, like writers, must use their knowledge and general principles of pre-existing models to produce something that uniquely fulfills a specific task or intention; and success is the outcome of a history of more or less unsuccessful attempts from which one learns to do the task better. In other words, a successful bridge, like a successful essay, is the product of a revision process. The difference between the two, of course, is that no engineer plans for his or her bridge to collapse, while the writer begins by knowing there will be many crumpled sheets in the wastebasket before a final product emerges. (There’s a reason Rousseau called his writings “essais,” or “tries.”)

But maybe the most valuable thing I learned from Petroski was the engineering concept of the “ill-structured problems.” In contrast to well-structured problems, which clearly have a single or a best answer and a single or preferred method for solution (think algebraic equation), “ill-structured problems” have neither a preferred methodology nor a clear or complete solution.

As I read Petroski’s account of “ill-structured problems,” I began to think how like my own experience of literary texts the engineer’s wrestling with such a design challenge must be. Literary texts are complex, full of joints and pressure points where numerous variables and possibilities of meaning intersect in thrilling, mysterious, and sometimes dangerous ways. As readers and appreciators of these inexhaustibly complex challenges to our interpretive abilities, we have all learned to become those “connoisseurs of chaos” (204) that Petroski urges his aspiring engineers to be.

I was interested to discover, through a casual Google search, that there is a whole body of research on the “ill-structured problem,” and that teachers in a wide variety of disciplines (not just engineering, but business, political science) work hard to design such problems to develop their students’ cognitive abilities. One website I came across contained the following advice for devising an “ill-structured problem”:

. . . [I]ll-structured problems should allow students to pursue different procedures for solving the problem. These various procedures will come from allowing different perspectives based on students’ perceptions and interpretations of the nature of the problem.

When I read this, I thought immediately: “This is what we do in the English major!” I am guessing that the connection between Jane Austen or Toni Morrison and civil engineering would not be automatic or intuitive for many readers of Writing in the Margins; but it’s clear to me that the work of the English major—specifically the reading and interpretation of complex and challenging texts—cultivates precisely the kind of cognitive powers that are key to effectively negotiating those “ill-structured problems” that occur wherever any discipline (even those that prefer their solutions to be neat and “well-structured”) confronts the challenges of real-life circumstances.

I spend a lot of time talking with prospective students and their parents about the value of an English major, and Petroski’s book has given me a fresh perspective on (and a fresh conviction in) the value of the critical reading and writing skills we try to cultivate in the practice of our discipline. If these skills and habits of mind are as relevant to the practice of engineering as my reading of Petroski suggests, the answer to the vexing question, “What can you do with an English major?” may be “What can’t you do?”

Andrew Scheiber
Professor and Chair
In 2005, J.C. Hallman came across a scientific paper about “Pleistocene Rewilding,” a peculiar idea from conservation biology that suggested repopulating bereft ecosystems with endangered “megafauna.” The plan sounded utterly utopian, but Hallman liked the idea as much as the scientists did – perhaps because he had grown up on a street called Utopia Road in a master-planned community in Southern California. Pleistocene Rewilding rekindled in him a long-standing fascination with utopian ideas, and he went on to spend three weeks at the world’s oldest “intentional community,” sail on the first ship where it’s possible to own “real estate,” train at the world’s largest civilian combat-school, and tour a $30 billion megacity built from scratch on an artificial island off the coast of Korea. *In Utopia* explores the history of utopian literature and thought in the narrative context of the real-life fruits of that history.

The following are excerpts from “A Joke” and “A Ship,” found in *In Utopia*. Originally published as “A House is a Machine to Live In” in *The Believer*, “A Ship” was selected for inclusion in *The Best American Travel Writing 2010*.

Utopia is in a bad way.

Utopian thought can be broadly defined as any exuberant plan or philosophy intended to perfect life lived collectively.

As Ernst Block suggested, the historical drive toward utopia is best understood as a kind of light, or fire. Utopian thought sparked in antiquity with descriptions of fancifully perfect countries in Plato and Aristotle, smoldered like a coal mine fire through the Middle Ages with early monasticism and portraits of Eden and Heaven, burst into eponymous conflagration with Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* in 1516, caught and spread across Europe with religious fervor for 150 years, tacked for a century and turned secular, flared anew with the American Revolution and the French Revolution, burned like wildfire through the nineteenth century, and forged at last the ideologies that squared off in the twentieth century for what Thomas Mann called “a worldwide festival of death, this ugly rutting fever that enflames the rainy evening sky all around.” Utopian thought bears its share of responsibility for that scorching of the face of the earth. As a word, it had already acquired a pejorative connotation, but after World War II “utopia” was no longer just a synonym for naïveté. It was dangerous. Now, decades further on, in a new century and a new millennium, earnest utopian thought and earnest utopians are a glowing ember at best, and utopia’s legion failures seem to suggest that the best course of action would be to crush it – to snuff it for good.

By any rational measure, I should suggest this myself. But I won’t.

The idea of a joke is central to the history of utopia – or at least to my version of it.

More borrowed from a broad range of classical and contemporary sources in the creation of *Utopia*, striking them together as flint stones to ignite the utopian blaze. But just how seriously he meant the exercise to be taken has long been a matter of conjecture. The influence of *Utopia* is undeniable. No quixotic adventure, no bureaucratic catch-22, no charming Casanova, nor even any odyssey home is as universally recognized as the name of the perfect world we forever chase, the bittersweet flavor of hope. Among words that have leaped from fiction to reality, advanced from noun to adjective, it stands alone. But what did More mean by it? Theories characterize the age in which they are professed better than they characterize More or the book. Yet it’s not going out on a limb to suggest that the history of the world since 1516 is a protracted history of not getting the joke of *Utopia*.

An inability to tell whether he was just kidding describes Thomas More’s personal life as readily as it describes his book. Famous for his wit, More’s friends were quick to note that a taciturn air made perceiving his humor no simple task. He apparently enjoyed this. More’s arid nature is
palpable today. Does the poker-faced expression of Hans Holbein’s famous portrait of More disguise a nut flush or a lowly pair? Does More have you beat, or is he bluffing?

Holbein had been recommended to More by the famous humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus described More’s humor as prodigious. As a boy, Erasmus wrote, More was so delighted with puns he seemed “born for them alone.” Erasmus served as More’s confidant during the writing of Utopia; the two were lifetime friends. The inspiration for Erasmus’s In Praise of Folly (1509) – a play on More’s name, morus means “fool” in Latin – arrived while Erasmus was on horseback on his way to visit his friend. The book, a joking treatise on the stoicism of his age, was written in seven days once he was installed in More’s home.

Utopia borrows from In Praise of Folly as surely as it borrows from Plato. Like the entire genre of literature that would follow on its footsteps, Utopia is episodic and didactic, shifting freely between discourse and description. The book’s structure is itself a dichotomy. Part one is treatise in the form of Platonic dialogue. Part two is travelogue in the spirit of the diaries of Amerigo Vespucci, published eight years before More set to work.

At the start of William Alexander Taylor’s 1901 utopian novel Internere a small steamship runs into a fog bank three days north of the equator and drifts into a whirlpool. “I felt myself being dragged down into the immeasurable watery depths,” the hero recounts. He loses consciousness – and promptly wakes in a hammock on the curved deck of an entirely different kind of vessel, one with a “succession of suites and apartments, richly but artistically furnished.” The hero imagines for a moment that he is already in Paradise, but the ship, a “merocar,” turns out to be just one advance in a perfect world hidden inside the earth.

The jump from steam-powered transport to luxury yacht places Internere midway along an evolution in utopian thought: A range of authors, architects, and engineers first identified paradise as a floating island, then as an island accessible by ship, and finally as the ship itself. Transport became destination.

In 2002, when the unique vessel The World of ResidenSea shoved off from an Oslo wharf – christened by a triumvirate of Norwegian priests with a cocktail of holy water and champagne – it marked the first time it was possible to own real estate onboard a ship.

The launch was greeted with telling fanfares.

“A global village at sea,” said The Boston Globe.

“Utopia afloat,” said Maclean’s.

Utopian literature is so full of ships and shipwrecks, no book about utopia would be complete without the story of a voyage.

My voyage began when a delivery man ignored the threshold of my screen door and left a box in my foyer. I discovered the trespass with a little jolt of fear. Inside the box was another box, wrapped like a present with gold twine. Inside that was a leather document wallet stamped with a curious, round symbol—a porthole view of what looked like a setting sun. And inside the wallet was my invitation to The World.

I met the boat in Luleå, Sweden, on the Gulf of Bothnia. The town was not exactly a tourist destination, and the
only word my taxi driver needed by way of address was “ship.” At any given moment *The World* might have a population of 200 souls and 250 crew, giving it a unique passenger-to-staff ratio. Except there were no passengers, really. Apartments on *The World* ranged in price from $1 million to $8 million, and many of the residents used the ship as a second home—or third, or fourth. *The World* circled the globe endlessly, following world events and stopping at ports most cruise ships ignored. Like Luleå. Thus, it sometimes accepted humble moorings, and was now docked just up the coast from town, past some broken-down railroads and in line with a barnacly icebreaker named *Twin Screws* for its propellers.

The taxi passed through the ship’s cyclone-fence checkpoint—manned by members of its Gurkha-recruited security force. I hurried up the gangway because it was raining.

A crowd of residents huddled inside, pressed together in the ship’s onboard security lock, waiting to disembark. I’d been told that privacy was the ship’s highest priority, but the residents looked friendly enough, bright and cheery, though not like tourists, and with a glow to them. The glow of knowing your time belonged to you.

When I stepped onboard one of the bright, cheery women recognized the trope of the moment. “We’re the welcoming committee!” she said.

Which was a joke, because she was obviously not a professional welcomer. I was in her way, and they were all headed for my taxi to explore Luleå for the day.

On my last day onboard I was invited along with forty or so residents to visit a few sites of interest in the Ålands. We assembled in the Village, filed down the gangway, piled onto a chartered bus. The residents were millionaires to a man, but as we pulled away they chattered and laughed like kids riding home from school.

“They’re affluent people, but warm,” I’d been told, the caveat added as though it ran contrary to expectation.

Which made me wonder whether *The World*, beyond allowing you to stay at home while you traveled, offered the possibility of community, of kinship, to those whose success tended to alienate them. It may be wasted compassion to empathize with the wealthy, but it seemed to me that the wealthy remained apart not because they liked being apart but because an economic system that encouraged class division—a system in which not everyone was in the same boat—chopped people into insoluble bits: wealthy and poor, cold and warm. Dichotomies. Did utopia have to eliminate class? Could a class system figure out how to retain dignity for all involved—without inducing vomiting? Was Fourier right? Was that the best possible world? *The World* was born of capitalism, but it seemed to me that it took at least one step toward transcending it. It wasn’t just the community onboard—the resident poker game that sprouted up spontaneously or the karaoke nights that revealed the wealthy had the same plebian tastes as everyone else. It was, too, a conspicuous lack of currency, or transactions, onboard; it was the green values they embraced not because it was profitable but because they thought it right; it was the government they had formed themselves, intentionally, when they bought the ship.

“By the way,” [ResidenSea CEO James] St. John told me, “I don’t think it’s utopia.” I wasn’t so sure.

J. C. Hallman has been a faculty member in the St. Thomas English Department since 2007. He is the author of three nonfiction prose books, including *The Chess Artist* and *The Devil is a Gentleman*, and a short story collection.
This is a passage from Lon Otto’s *The Flower Trade*, a novel in progress set in Costa Rica. Monica has gone to Arturo’s isolated house for the first time. Valerie is her four-year-old daughter, who’s on an outing with a preschool classmate’s family. Stephen is her son, Ted is her husband.
When she woke, the blades of light had shifted overhead. She leaped out of bed and rummaged in the pile of her clothes for her watch and found she’d barely have time to get home before Valerie was dropped off. Arturo was already up and dressed. She shouldn’t worry, he said, he knew a fast way through the mountains.

In the car, she was brushing her hair when he slammed on the brakes, throwing her hard against the restraint of the shoulder belt. There were fallen rocks on the road ahead of them, some big as typewriters. Was she all right? he asked. She touched her collar bone and the side of her breast where the harness had dug in. He put the car in gear and eased it along the narrow dirt shoulder between the rock fall and the sheer edge of the road. She glanced down the precipice falling away to her right before fixing her gaze on his concentrated face.

Once past the obstruction, he apologized. “Some say it’s sopilotes,” he said. “Vultures. It’s said they drop stones onto roads of the mountains and wait for some guy to crash.” He saw her smile and said, “One time they’re doing this, dropping stones on the road, and one of them say, ‘Would it not be simpler to just drop the rock direct on some cow or person?’ And the others turned their long neck in embarrassment, and one finally declare, ‘We are no murderers. We are civil servants.’”

She put a hand on his shoulder. Even while joking he hadn’t released the knot of tension in the corner of his jaw. She caressed the spot. “Mina,” he said to her, pointing through the darkly tinted upper portion of the windshield, a huge bird floating toward the next ridge, its long, blunt wings angled forward, its neck neatly tucked away between its shoulders, only the sharp beak visible.

She looked at her watch. Four-thirty. Valerie was supposed to be back by five. Would they make it? she asked him.

Yes, of course. He started speeding up, pushing the tight, badly banked turns his car seemed too big to negotiate.

She wove her fingers into the thick hair curling over his collar and said, No, the vultures had had their chance.

The road seemed to be still climbing. Now and then they’d have a view of San José spread out far below. Then the road was dropping toward a steep gorge. There was something ahead, a roadblock with two jeeps and members of the rural guard standing around, and beyond them a narrow bridge spanning the gorge.

More civil servants, she said, trying to joke herself out of the despair that was starting to settle onto her. He remained impassive and silent as he pulled to a stop at the barricade. She waited for him to turn to her and make her smile, but he was focused on the jeeps and the uniformed men casually moving toward the car. They were in the familiar khaki of the police force responsible for the countryside, except for three men in camouflage fatigues such as she’d never seen in Costa Rica. The ones in camouflage carried automatic weapons.

Arturo lowered his window, the brightness of the afternoon shining into the car past the tinted glass, casting everything into a yellow haze.

One of the guardsmen leaned over and greeted them politely.

Was something wrong? Arturo asked. The man shook his head and assured them, no, nothing was wrong, it wasn’t serious. He only needed to see their papers. Arturo gave him his driver’s license, and Monica dug a much-folded xerox of her passport out of her purse. The guardsman studied their papers for a minute, then walked over to where the armed men were standing.

“What wasn’t serious?” she asked. “What was going on?”

For the first time since they’d had to stop, Arturo looked over at her. He smiled mechanically, his thin, wolfish face looking not quite like himself, and shook his head. He wasn’t sure, he said. It wasn’t the guardsman he was worried about, they would just want a little bribe. It was the men in camouflage.

She checked her watch. In fifteen minutes, maybe less, Miguel’s mother would be dropping off Valerie at the apartment. Stephen was at a sleepover and Ted wouldn’t be back for hours. There’d be no one. Arturo took her hand in a gesture of comfort, but he was preoccupied and distant and showing none of the easy confidence that ordinarily surrounded him like a cloak broad enough for them both.

Two of the guards approached and asked him to come with them, they needed to ask him a few questions. She started to open her door as he got out, but the man said no, it wasn’t necessary. She got out anyway and stood beside the car and watched him being led to one of the jeeps. It was Costa Rica, she kept reminding herself, they weren’t going to hurt him. It was not El Salvador or Honduras or Guatemala. It was some bureaucratic thing, an opportunity to conduct some minor extortion. If only they would get it over with and let him take her home to her little girl.

She looked around. She’d never been here before, and she recognized no landmarks. Far below, where the gorge twisted out of sight, there was a house or shack beyond the bridge. Otherwise, she could see no sign of civilization except for a distant flash now and then that must have been from an office building down in San José catching the late afternoon sun.

The guardsmen came back and asked her to step away from the car. She moved to the side of the road and tried to explain about her daughter, that she had to get back at once, the child would hurt herself. Of course, they said, it would only be a moment, and they began to search the car. She walked toward Arturo, who seemed to be arguing with the guardsmen and the men in camouflage, but he noticed her and raised his hand, holding her off. A moment, he mouthed to her, raising his index finger.

All the doors were standing open. The big car looked butchered. Her bags of Christmas presents were spread out on the ground, the toys arranged as if for sale by street vendors. One of the guardsmen went to Arturo and made him give them his keys and opened the trunk and removed some blankets and riding tack and a briefcase. She edged over to see what they were doing, until a man in camouflage blocked her way, made her return to the side of the road. They brought the briefcase over to one of the jeeps and handed it inside. She watched Arturo watching the man open his briefcase.

Lon Otto has been a faculty member in the St. Thomas English Department since 1974. His numerous short stories have been published in a variety of literary journals and anthologies.
I was a different person before I participated in the Writing for Social Change HECUA (Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs) program. I had always known the kind of person I wanted to be but it was not until I participated in the program that I was able to see how I could actually be that person. I recommend this program to any English major who wants to take control of their own education and learn how to turn literature into a form of art, a tool for social change, a way to form a true community, and a way to connect to humanity.

I initially heard about HECUA through a class visit my freshman year. Someone from one of the abroad programs came into my Intro to Justice and Peace class and talked about the importance of HECUA for people with social justice-oriented mindsets. I was both curious and interested, but it was not until I learned that there was an unwritten assumption that all Justice and Peace majors eventually participate in a HECUA program that I decided to seriously consider applying. I signed up for the program because I have always thought that Justice and Peace Studies and English go hand-in-hand, and because I am a double major in both fields, this seemed like the perfect option. This was a program that combined my two passions and allowed me to use the discipline of English as a way to promote change in the world. I was nervous about doing a domestic program because I thought that remaining in the Twin Cities would fail to broaden my horizons. I could not have been more wrong. By staying in my community I was able to truly grasp the concept of “think globally, act locally.”

A major application of this concept was through my internship at St. Paul Central High School. I interned with their touring theater program, which involved working with the most advanced performing arts students, who were given the privilege and responsibility of writing the plays themselves. The plays focused on such issues as homophobia, sexual violence, and corruption within the American education system, just to name a few. Some even dealt with issues related to both parents serving time in jail, leaving the student to take care of the family on his or her own. I soon realized that these topics were not fabricated, but instead were created from the realities these kids had to face every day. Each student taught me so much and made me see that help is needed right here, in America, in St. Paul, in my own community. The glorious thing about a HECUA internship is that you actually have responsibilities, control, and a voice. I got to teach entire classes, lead and plan a field trip, help students with college applications, and play a significant role in the planning of an arts literacy teacher training conference.

The internship takes up just half of your time in HECUA; on Tuesdays and Thursdays we attended a reading seminar, where we had open discussions about the books we were assigned for that week. The year I participated in the program, we read everything from a memoir about a boy’s survival of the genocide in Darfur to a graphic novel of a girl’s journey through the struggles of finding her sexuality. A majority of the time, groups of students would be given the task of leading the class by focusing on the theme for that day and developing an innovative writing exercise for everyone to work on.

As far as the writing aspect of the program is concerned, my instructors, Bill Reichard and Molly Van Avery, were constantly pushing us to step outside our comfort zones and explore genres in which we had never written. There were students in the class who were
national champion Slam poets, two were working on completing their first novels, a couple were journalists, and the rest of us were somewhere in between. I had only written serious academic pieces, confining myself beneath the comforting blanket of the five-page analytical essay. Needless to say, I was definitely intimidated at first. However, as the class progressed, I realized that I was thankful to be surrounded by intellectuals who were willing to share their amazing experiences, wisdom, and insights with the rest of us. It was invigorating to be part of a community where everyone was so invested in their education and were brilliant beyond belief. It truly opened my eyes.

As my HECU A journey progressed, I decided to explore the world of the short story. I discovered what it meant to develop and get inside the head of various characters. I fell in love with trying to build them a past, present, and future. I could give each of them faults and accomplishments. I was the sole dictator of what they decided to say out loud and what they kept inside. That kind of power is intoxicating. I realized that imagination is something that we are taught to outgrow; it is perceived as a frivolous and unnecessary accessory in the adult world because so often adults are afraid of creation. Creation requires being in an open state of mind, a mind that welcomes anything and invites conflicting ideas and progressive thinking. HECUA taught me to not only imagine the peaceful world I wanted to live in but also the means to actually create such a world.

My Writing for Social Change HECUA experience exposed me to a whole new realm of social justice practice that I had never thought of before. I wrote short stories that had underlying themes of social justice concepts woven in between the lines. I realized that social justice did not need to jump out and slap the reader across the face in order to be effective. For example, I once wrote a whole story about my experiences taking the bus everyday to get to both class and my internship. Taking the bus was a huge part of my HECUA experience; it was a way for me to connect myself with my environment and with people I would not have normally interacted with. The Metro Transit route 16 bus was a whole new world, filled with problems, stories, new beginnings, culture, and was something I looked forward to every single day.

Writing for Social Change made me a stronger English major. I am more confident in my ability to address analytical topics in class, am a far stronger writer, and am able to look at literature as a tool to invoke and develop my inner passions. So, to HECUA I say “thank you.” And to prospective participants I leave you with this – don’t hesitate, just take the plunge and apply. You won’t regret it.
For Those Cold Winter Nights, We Recommend...

**Big Machine** by Victor LaValle features cults, recovering junkies, and the proceedings of a secret/underground society, couched in a suspenseful, well-structured story. LaValle is an excellent craftsman and combines multiple genres skillfully. It’s a literary postmodern novel with shades of gothic horror, best read in peaceful, stable surroundings. –Alex McEllistrem-Evenson (Adjunct Instructor)

Two delightful novels I’ve recently read – the sorts of books you finish with a sigh and a smile and a “oh, that was charming” – are both told from multiple perspectives. The first, *The School of Essential Ingredients* (Erica Bauermeister), tells the stories of eight very different people who come together each month at the most wonderful cooking class; the other, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (Mary Ann Shaffer), set in England following World War II, reveals its characters’ stories through the letters they write. –Liz Dussol (Adjunct Instructor)

For a dark and stormy night, I recommend Oscar Wilde’s *Complete Fairy Tales*. Wilde explained that they were intended “partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childish faculties of wonder and joy.” –Alexis Easley (Faculty)

A great “read” is Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. It’s about the terrors of Nazi Germany and is narrated by Death who turns out to be a reliable and compassionate storyteller. I was impressed with Zusak’s accurate knowledge about the day-to-day life, the history, and the politics of that time, as well as with his ability to create engaging and complex characters. I would recommend it as a good beginning “read” about that terrible time. –Joan Piorkowski (Faculty)

I would recommend *The Master Butcher’s Singing Club* by Louise Erdrich. The novel features a captivating story of a German immigrant family and their lives in the US. The characters are complex and interesting. Plus, there’s an exciting twist at the end! –Corey Hickner (Graduate English Student)

I would recommend *Sex Wars* by Marge Piercy, a fictional chronicle of the 1870’s and 1880’s in which the proponents of “free love” and political rights for women collided with Victorian mores and entrenched political resistance. Piercy’s approach is contemporary in its explicit treatment of the sexual adventurousness of certain personages, but her research on the period seems authoritative, and the interwoven stories she tells are laced with humor, pathos, and sometimes withering social critique. –Andy Scheiber (Faculty/Department Chair)

I recommend Vendela Vida’s *Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name*. Its snowy Lapland setting will be fitting for the icy storms outside your window and the novel’s short length and speedy pacing make for pleasurable single-sitting reading on a dark winter afternoon. It is the story of a young woman who flees a dying life to venture alone into the northernmost reaches of the planet, in search of the identity of her father and the whereabouts of her mother but discovering much more, including herself. Vida’s transparent prose is deceptively simple but ends up haunting you. –Amy Muse (Faculty)

I recommend *American Supernatural Tales*, edited by S. T. Joshi. This anthology of short stories, ranging from Washington Irving to Joyce Carol Oates, has some great spine-chillers in it. For those that enjoy reading tales of psychological terror, I also recommend the two-volume set *American Fantastic Tales*, edited by Peter Straub, released by the Library of America in 2009. –Andy Leet (Staff)

I recommend David R. Slavitt’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The great Roman poet tells hundreds of stories about transformation, some whimsical, some brutal, some profound. –Gordon Grice (Adjunct Instructor)

I recommend *Winter: Notes from Montana* by Rick Bass. Bass describes winter in beautiful, detailed narratives that made me long for winter, even when I first read it in June a couple years ago. The book is made of a series of essays that can be read in order, or can be read individually to fill a 20-30 minute span while you sip your hot cocoa. –CarolAnn Hook (Graduate English Student)

I recommend *The Country Under My Skin* by Gioconda Belli. Belli writes her memoirs about growing up in upper-class Nicaragua in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and how she became a Sandinista – a revolutionary – while balancing her domestic life as wife and mother. Belli skips around, each chapter focusing on a different period in her life, and the pieces start to come together as you read. It also addresses the delicate balance of career (pretty extreme in this case) and domesticity that many women face. –Mandy Marek (Graduate English Student)

I recommend *Grace Notes* by Bernard MacLaverty (1998). An Irish-born composer returns to Ireland for her father’s funeral; MacLaverty portrays her reckoning with a past that includes her history of abuse and post-partum depression, but also draws a picture of the creative process and the inner life of music itself that astonish-
es readers – even those with no background in music whatsoever.
–Jim Rogers (Staff)

I highly recommend Tom Folsom’s The Mad Ones: Crazy Joe Gallo and the Revolution on the Edge of the Underworld. Although The Mad Ones is nonfiction, it reads like a crime drama. It’s an extremely visual, even cinematic, text (think Goodfellas). Joe Gallo, the subject of the book, is so outrageous and his story is so compelling that it becomes impossible to put down. You’ll want to read sections aloud, affecting an accent, to anyone willing to listen (not that I did this). –Shannon Scott (Adjunct Instructor)

Last summer I indulged in a graphic novel. It’s called Logicomix, and it’s essentially the story of Bertrand Russell’s search for truth and meaning and love and, well, the whole shebang. As dull as that sounds, it’s a gripping tale, beautifully drawn and cleverly told, and in such a way that challenges the reader to consider his own assumptions. Logicomix is written by Apostolos Doxiadis, a mathematician and novelist, along with Christos Papadimitriou, a computer scientist and novelist, so it’s interdisciplinary to boot.
–David Fettig (Graduate English Student)

I recommend Elizabeth Kostova’s vampire story, The Historian. I (who typically retire at the hours enforced in rest homes) was up until 3 a.m. reading this novel on many nights (as were a few of my students to whom I recommended it, and who will probably never forgive me for their sleep loss). Tip: For those contemplating curling up on a cold winter evening, I suggest that you leave the lights on. –Abby Davis (Adjunct Instructor)

I recommend Agaat, written by Marlene Van Niekerk and translated into English from Afrikaans by Michiel Heyns. A very moving and beautifully written novel about an Afrikaner farmer, Milla de Wet, and her black maid and caretaker, Agaat. Focalized through the point of view of 70-year old Milla, who is paralyzed and dying, the book chronicles the last years of Apartheid, shifting back and forth between different time periods and narrative styles. Most harrowing is the relationship between Milla and Agaat, who has been exploited and mistreated by Milla since she was a small child. –Carmela Garritano (Faculty)

I recommend Still Life by Louise Penny. This is the first in a series of detective novels set in the village of Three Pines in Quebec province. The novel feels like a “cozy detective story” but has beautifully developed characters. As you get to know these characters, you get sucked into life in Three Pines. Happily, these characters reappear in the subsequent novels in the series. –Marty Warren (Faculty).

Richard Russo’s Straight Man is a good read for those of us in academia. The back cover puts it somewhere between “hilarity and heartbreak.” Basically, Russo gives us a week in the life of the chair of an English department that is, as the back cover says, “more saggely divided than the Balkans.” It’s funny, and a fast read, and hopefully not terribly true to our little department! –Liz Wilkinson (Faculty)

I recommend Ninni Holquist’s The Unit, which takes the reader on a thought-provoking journey to the world of organ donation in a society that requires its older citizens, who no one “depends on,” to live in “the unit.” The utopian world in this novel clearly cloaks a clearly dystopian premise. It’s brilliant – just wait until you get to the end! –Marla Borer (Adjunct Instructor)

John Leland’s Hip: The History offers an in-depth explanation of the often over-looked trends (both significant and seemingly superficial) that have influenced the direction and identity of American culture. After establishing that hip is a tool for enlightenment and personal reinvention, Leland traces the literary contributions and “hip” philosophies of Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau and Melville (the “Original Gangsters”) to today’s complex marriage between hip and consumerism. –Yvonne Asp-Grahn (Adjunct Instructor)

I’d like to recommend Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. Imagine reading a 200-plus page comic strip that, in addition to being funny, also happens to be incredibly smart, psychologically complex, and deeply touching. Bechdel’s coming-of-age/coming-out memoir is all about family business; both the physical family business and the actual business of family. Best of all, for those who are well-read, Bechdel draws on various works of American literature to help herself and her audience make sense of her relationship with her parents, both of whom are high school English teachers. –James Hammar (Graduate English Student)

Stacey D’Erasmo’s The Sky Below offers the beautiful yet troubling narrative of Gabriel Collins, a man who constructs art boxes in the vein of Joseph Cornell’s work. D’Erasmo’s language churns through Gabriel’s childhood memories and creates a complex portrait of Gabriel that is neither flattering nor condemning but full of yearning. A second book, Rakesh Satyal’s Blue Boy, tells the story of a young Indian American boy who grows up gay in the Midwest and thinks of himself as an incarnation of the blue Hindu god Krishna. He does not feel that he fits in with others in his school or in the Indian American community, but he manages to find humor in a sense of superiority over others. –Paul Lai (Faculty)
This fall, the English Department decided to pilot a new program for first-year writing students called the Common Context Program. This new program, which takes the place of the Common Text Program, focuses on a common issue or theme and is marked by events in both the fall and spring of the academic year. This year’s Common Context is water.

In September, the first event of the new program, a screening of Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s *Trouble the Water*, was held in John Roach Center. Close to two hundred students turned out to see this film that tells the story of Kimberly Rivers-Roberts and her husband Scott, two New Orleans residents who videotaped themselves riding out the storm with their neighbors and attempting to put their lives back together in Katrina’s aftermath.

Three more events were held during the week of October 11. A faculty panel discussion entitled “Blue Planet: Water in a Global Context” included presentations by faculty members Steven Hoffman (Political Science), Elise Amel (Psychology/Environmental Studies), Kevin Theissen (Geology), Kaye Smith (Engineering), and Kanishka Chowdhury (English/American Culture and Difference). The presenters spoke about hydrodevelopment and its impact on native peoples in Canada, mindful conservation, climate change and its implication on global water systems, the design of water delivery systems in developing nations, and the problem of water privatization.

Next was a screening of the classic noir thriller *Chinatown*, a film based in part on the historic 1904 Owens Valley Land Grab, a scandal in Los Angeles involving the theft and diversion of public water for private use.

Finally, a second faculty panel discussion entitled “Water and Literature” was held. Five English Department faculty members participated in this panel, each speaking about one or more texts. Young-ok An discussed Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and illustrations of the poem by Gustave Doré. Paul Lai shared some points from Vandana Shiva’s *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* about the need to reconceive water as a commons for all people rather than as a commodity to be bought and sold. Alex McEllistrem-Evenson pointed out how Ken Kesey’s *Sometimes a Great Nation*, in its stream of consciousness narrative, uses water as a metaphor for the act of writing. Michael Mikolajczak examined a number of texts dealing with water as a destructive or life-giving force, moving from Dave Eggers’s *Zeroland* to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Walker Percy’s *Lancelot*, and Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*. Anne Roth-Reinhardt spoke about Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, focusing on a passage in which the pond freezes in winter yet remains an important presence for the author.

All of these events were well attended and hopefully helped to generate productive writing and discussion. The department looks forward to its upcoming Common Context events in the spring semester, including the screening of Deepa Mehta’s drama *Water*, as well as *Tapped*, Stephanie Soechtig’s documentary about the business of bottled water. Additional events are planned and will be announced soon.

**UST faculty members from the “Blue Planet: Water in a Global Context” panel included Kevin Theissen, Kaye Smith, Kanishka Chowdhury, Elise Amel, and Steven Hoffman.**
In October, three undergraduate English majors presented the research projects that they completed this past summer as part of the UST Young Scholars program. This student panel colloquium event was titled “Literature and Social Change: Flannery O’Connor, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Dime Novels.” PAUL BLASCHKO’S project seeks to uncover the epistemological functions that operate in the stories and novels of Flannery O’Connor and to use this information to more elegantly explain the significance of her work and the effect it has on those who read it. Using an epistemological framework to analyze literature provides critics and readers with a consistent means of interpreting works with terms definable in the language of epistemology. ADAM LOWNIK studies the epistemological crisis that occurred in Victorian culture following the publication of Darwin’s findings on evolution and the way in which detective fiction from the period responded to that crisis. He examines the works of two masters of the genre, Arthur Conan Doyle and G.K. Chesterton, and analyzes the way each author provides a response to the moment of epistemological crisis society was facing through the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Fr. Brown. COREY DAHL’S project observes the intersection of gender and class politics in dime novel detective fiction at the fin de siècle. Over time, female detectives in dime novels developed increasingly strong feminist characteristics, defied gender stereotypes, and communicated the importance of independence, intellect, and strength to a female working class audience.

On November 12, AMY MUSE gave the second lecture of the 2010-2011 department colloquium series: “Visiting the Site of the Dance of Freedom: Notes from My Research in Greece.” One of the most iconic images from the Greek War of Independence is of a mass suicide: women, children in arms, preparing to jump off a cliff to their deaths rather than be taken in slavery by the forces pursuing them. According to the legend, the women clasped hands and defiantly danced and sang as one by one each threw her child off the cliff and then followed immediately afterward. This horrifying act became known as the Dance of Zalongo (after the region in western Greece where it took place) and seized the imagination of the rest of Europe, which responded with protests and commemorations in the form of poems imagining the women’s last thoughts, monumental paintings that now hang in the Louvre, and philhellenic melodramas produced on the stages of London and Paris. In the 1950s a hauntingly beautiful modernist sculpture honoring the women was constructed on the mountaintop site, turning it into a tourist destination. Muse’s presentation describes the visit she made to the Zalongo Monument and her examination of it as an “experience museum” that attempts to place visitors in the presence of history and to awaken the spirit of freedom for which the revolution was fought.

St. Thomas students had an opportunity to attend two creative writing workshops this fall, both sponsored by Sigma Tau Delta/Literary Club. The first workshop was
offered in mid-October by **JACOB PAUL**, author of the novel *Sarah/Sara*, and the second was offered in early November by visiting ACTC writer, **BRUCE MACHART**, whose debut novel *The Wake of Forgiveness* had been recently published to rave reviews. Both authors also gave well-attended readings of their respective works.

The English Department hosted a small luncheon in late October to honor **PAUL HAGUE**, Professor Emeritus of English, and **JENNIFER PERKINS**, the 2009-2010 recipient of the Hague Award for Excellence. Also attending the luncheon were **JIM KURPIUS ’60** and his wife Sue, benefactors of this special English Department award. The 2010-2011 recipient of the Hague Award, **BETHANY ANDERSON**, was unable to attend because she is currently studying abroad at the University of Stirling, Scotland. The English Department sincerely appreciates the Kurpius’s generous endowment of the Hague Award.

**FACULTY**

**MATT BATT’S** lyric essay, “Tabernacle,” was published in the *Huffington Post* in October. In addition, *Sugarhouse*, his memoir about renovating what was likely once a Salt Lake City crack house while everyone aside from him and his wife was either dying or getting divorced, will come out next year with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.


**LON OTTO** gave a craft talk at the University of Iowa’s Summer Writing Festival this past June. Titled “Touchstones, Templates, and the Train Tracks Your Mule’s On: Reading as a Writer,” the presentation attempted to sort out some of the very different, even contradictory things that are involved in this essential part of the writing life. Otto also served as the guest fiction editor for the fall 2010 issue of the literary magazine *Fifth Wednesday Journal*.

**JOAN PIORKOWSKI’S** edition of *Zwischen Bock und Pfahl*, a Holocaust survivor narrative written by Dr. Erich Kohlhagen in 1946, was published in August by Metropol Verlag in Berlin. The edition was published in collaboration with the Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum. Dr. Kohlhagen was a German Jew arrested in 1938 who remained a prisoner in six different concentration camps – Sachsenhausen, Gross Rosen, Auschwitz, Monowitz-Buna, Dora and Nordhausen – from 1938 until 1945. The “bock,” a hanging post, and the “pfahl,” a wooden frame over which prisoners were beaten are two of many torture devices used regularly in the Nazi concentration camps. Their linking in the title – “between” bock and pfahl – emphasizes the daily brutality of Kohlhagen’s experience. On November 9, Piorkowski was the invited speaker at Sachsenhausen’s remembrance ceremony for Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass.”

**TOM REDSHAW** has returned from a full year sabbatical. During that time he traveled to Wake Forest University, North Carolina, and to Dublin, Ireland, and Nice, France, to do archival research and conduct interviews pertinent to his cultural history of the Dolmen Press. Just recently he has published two chapters in *Other Edens: The Life and Work of Brian Coffey* (Dublin, 2009) and two articles: one in the *South Carolina Review* on the Cuala Press in the 1970s and another in the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* on John Montague’s *Tides*. Two more articles are forthcoming: one in the *Irish University Review* on the concept of “Poetry Ireland” and the other on the print-maker S. W. Hayter and George Reavey’s Europa Press in a book to come from Dublin’s Lilliput Press.

**CURRENT STUDENTS**

**UNDERGRADUATE**

**PAUL BLASCHKO** presented a paper entitled “Adopting the Schema of Grace: Interpreting Flannery O’Connor Epistemologically” at the Literature and the Sacred conference at Brigham Young University on October 14-15. He’s also completing an editorial internship at Graywolf Press.

**JENNIFER GRAFFUNDER, ADAM LOWNIK, and LORENE PIOCH** all presented papers at the Streamlines Undergraduate Conference Celebrating Language, Literature, and Writing, held at the University of Dubuque, IA, on November 13.

**AMANDA SAWATZKY** has had a Communications Internship with Wells Fargo Insurance, Inc. since May 2010. She writes: “I have learned so much in my internship! It actually started out as a Marketing Internship, but with a recent reorganization of our department, my title has changed from Marketing Intern to Communications Intern. Wells Fargo has a successful Summer Internship Program, so there is definitely opportunity for other St. Thomas students to consider applying there for an internship next summer.”

**CURRENT STUDENTS**

**GRADUATE**

**SHANDI WAGNER’S** article, “The Transformation of Snow White into the Evil Stepmother in Anne Sexton’s ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,’” has been accepted for publication in the April 2011 issue of *Sigma Tau Delta Review*.

Numerous graduate students presented
papers at the Home, Exile, and the Nation annual graduate English conference held late last April at St. Thomas. These students included CHRIS FLETCHER, DEBORAH FORTEZA, SARAH HAYES ’10, CAROLANN HOOK, EMILY JOHNSON ’10, BRITTANY KERSCHNER ’10, AMY MONSON, KERBY PETTINELLI ’10, SHAWN PICH, SHANNON SCOTT ’10, BETHANY TIMMERMAN, SHANDI WAGNER, and JENNIFER WALDENBERGER.

DAVE FETTIG presented “The Assumption of Clotel: An Interpretive Reading of the Frontispiece from W. W. Brown’s 1853 Novel Clotel” at the Literature and the Sacred conference at Brigham Young University on October 14-15.

Alumni

UNDERGRADUATE

WES BRADLEY ’03 has been teaching high school English in the Bronx, NY, and the South Side of Chicago for the last seven years and has just assumed an assistant principal position this year in Chicago.

The Playwrights’ Center has named LISA BRIMMER ’08 and four other writers as the 2010-11 Jerome Many Voices Fellows. Underwritten by a grant from the Jerome Foundation, the Many Voices Fellowship program enriches the American theater by offering playwriting fellowships to Minnesota artists of color.

English major alumni ELIZABETH CORR ’10 and KELLY KRAEMER ’10 and current major NICHOLAS LANKFORD contributed to “A Student Roundtable on Prison Abolition and Imprisonment Writing,” which was published in Radical Teacher, 88, Summer 2010. Their instructor, PAUL LAI, also contributed to this article.

KELLY KRAEMER ’10 writes: “Grad school is going great! The University of Wisconsin-Madison campus is huge compared to St. Thomas! All of my classes are in the same building, luckily, so I don’t have to do much running around. Everyone I’ve met so far in the [School of Library and Information Science] department is really nice. The school is fairly small (there are about 80-something students in my entering class). It feels like a close-knit group, the same way that the UST English department was. I’m starting to get involved in some of the different student groups, including the Madison chapter of the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) and the Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums group (TLAM).”

ALUMNI

GRADUATE

JOSH BOYD ’10 was accepted into the Ph.D. program at Baylor University (Waco, TX) and also granted an assistantship.

MELISSA (FLICEK) DOFFING’s ’04 delicious new book, Let Them Eat Crepes: stories featuring the French pancake, has just been published. She and her co-editor, Susan Koefod, collected stories from around the world, including a half-dozen from Twin Cities writers. Readings will be scheduled in and around the Twin Cities area and will be listed on their website (www.eatingcrepes.com) and Facebook page. The book was released on November 1 at lulu.com and will be carried by select local book retailers.

BRIAN GREENING ’03 presented “Excavating New Orleans: Viewing the City through the Lens of the Superdome” to undergraduate students in a lecture sponsored by the St. Thomas American Culture and Difference program. An ABD candidate in Saint Louis University’s American Studies program, Greening’s dissertation research focuses on New Orleans, the Louisiana Superdome, and the 40-year span between two of the most disastrous hurricanes – Betsy and Katrina – to hit this area. He looks to locate the shifting, reforming meaning and symbolism of New Orleans primarily through the Superdome – a landmark that signals the city’s slide towards becoming a tourist-centered economy.

SARAH HAYES ’10 has started a doctoral program in English at the University of Florida.

JACKSON PETSCHE ’10 has started the doctoral program in English at the University of Syracuse, New York. Also, his Master’s Essay won the Michael Sprinker Essay Contest sponsored by the Marxist Literary Group and will be published in their online journal, Mediations.

TRACY YOUNGBLOM ’96 had her first chapbook of poems, Driving to Heaven, published in November.
Friday, April 29, 2011
O'Shaughnessy-Frey Library Center, O'Shaughnessy Room
6 p.m. reception followed by 7 p.m. English Department colloquium event:

PRINTING A NEW LITURGY:
LIAM MILLER AND ROMAN CATHOLIC LITURGY AFTER VATICAN II

St. Thomas English alumni are invited to this department reception and lecture offered by Dr. Tom Redshaw, who will be retiring at the end of this 2010-2011 academic year. Invitations to join the department for this alumni event will be mailed in early spring.

Best known today for his Dolmen Press (1951—1987), Liam Miller also involved himself in publishing for Catholic Ireland by taking on typographical and book design commissions offered by Veritas (formerly the Catholic Truth Society) and Sean O’Boyle’s Columba Press. While Miller’s designs for An Biobla Naoa – expressed principally in his design of an Irish-language edition of Isaiah and of beginning capitals for the Gospels – failed to be adopted, his patient expertise, technical skills, and artistry informed the chief publications of Liturgical Books, a short-lived imprint devised by Jefferson Smurfit. Chief among those works was the publication of the ICEL translation of the Roman Missal for use in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and Ireland. The suddenly planned visit of Pope John-Paul II to Ireland in 1979 – Ireland’s last national celebration of its Catholicism – prompted the finest of Miller’s work as a designer and printer of religious texts and resulted in the presentation bindings of the Mass books used by John Paul II and his concelebrants in Dublin, Drogheda, Galway, and Knock.