

THE ENGLISH FACULTY

Both talk about words and stories inside them that have to emerge. They also speak about discipline and imagination. They are both published authors.

Margaret McMullan, professor at the University for the past 13 years and chair of the department since Fall 2002, has two novels that will be in bookstores during the 2003-04 school year. *In My Mother's House* is a mother-daughter novel about family secrets during WWII in Vienna. It will be published in November 2003 by Thomas Dunne Books. *How I Found the Strong* is a novel for young adults which will be published in Spring 2004 by Houghton Mifflin. *Strong* is about a scrawny boy named Shanks who, in 1861, is not old enough to be a soldier for the Confederate army. Shanks' older brother and father go off to war, leaving Shanks home with his mother, grandparents and the family slave, Buck.

McMullan is also the author of a 1994 novel titled *When Warhol Was Still Alive*. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Glamour*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Southern Accents*, *Southern California Anthology*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Boulevard*, *Greensboro Review* and in several anthologies. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2001 and she received two Individual Artist Fellowships from the Indiana Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

William Baer, professor at the University for 14 years, has a second book of poetry. *"Borges" and other Sonnets* is an eclectic volume that includes not only an unusual mix of sonnets written by Baer, but also translations of famous works. "They've pretty much allowed me to include what I wanted," Baer explained. His publishers even let him submit ideas for the cover of the book. This forthcoming collection, as was his first, will be published by New Odyssey Press, which sponsors the annual prestigious T.S. Elliot Prize in Poetry, of which Baer was the

The title of this article sounds like a spell-binding novel or a spicy film with subtitles, but actually, it is about two members of the University of Evansville's Department of English faculty, **Margaret McMullan** and **Bill Baer**. Not that they have anything in common with spicy films with subtitles, but they do have much in common with each other. In addition to being members of the faculty, both are parents, both have supportive, creative spouses who not only understand their writing, but indulge in writing as well.

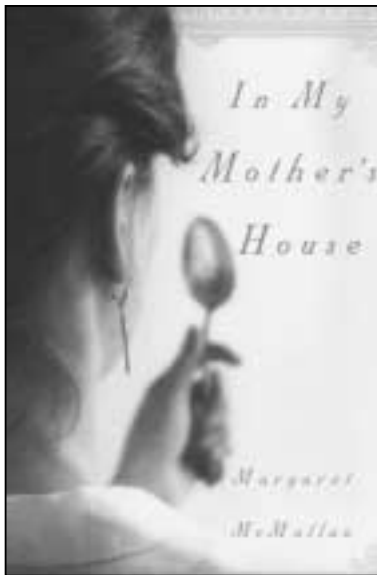
first recipient in 1997 for his book *The Unfortunates*.

Baer and McMullan agree that it takes discipline to write, especially when there are competing forces for your time such as work and family. That is something they can impart to their students who have not only experienced the desire to write, but have struggled to complete their projects. "The reason they [our students] are writing is that they want to be published," Baer said. "So, they need to be around those who are actively involved in that process – and everyone in the Department of English is doing just that."

"You have to be incredibly disciplined," Baer continued. "Students need to think like a writer and be able to handle the whole notion of publication." Baer pointed out that along with publishing comes rejection, and writers must get used to it. F. Scott Fitzgerald, the American author whose novels and short stories chronicled changing social attitudes during the 1920s with such classics as *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night* and *This Side of Paradise*, once wrote 30 stories one summer and none were ever published. How many times has Baer been rejected? "A billion times," he laughed. "It's par for the course."

McMullan's book, *In My Mother's House*, was written before she was chair of the Department of English and even before she was a mother. "The material was keeping me up – I'd try to talk it out with friends and I would start shaking because I wanted to write it so much." She said the research and the writing took about five years – a lot longer than she wanted it to. She wrote *Strong* in the summer of 2002, while she was acting chair of the Department of English. "Again, I couldn't stop thinking about this kid. I started thinking and sometimes talking in his sentences," she said. "I figured I had to sort of exorcise Shanks out of my system or else I wasn't going to get my own life back." She said she wrote the book for her father and for her son. "They were both my audience. I thought of them while I wrote."

McMullan, too, is no stranger to rejection. Although both books are being



published this academic year, when she originally pitched *In My Mothers House* a few years ago, editors commented that they liked the story and the voice, but WWII and Europe were "out." "It's all been said, nobody cares anymore." Both of her books were actually accepted for publication after 9-11 and both include wars. McMullan surmises that timing has a lot to do with the acceptance of books.

Both McMullan and Baer do much of their research during the school year and write during the summers. McMullan said she received funding from Arts, Research and Teaching Stipends (ARTS) and the Alumni Research and Scholarly Activity Fellowship (ARSAF.) During her recent sabbatical, McMullan wrote another book, *Crook*, which is currently under consideration for publication. She also wrote another young adult book called *Cache* during her leave of absence. It too is under consideration.

Baer has also received various grants, including a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He does much of his preparation for writing during the school year, then reserves the summer for the actual task of writing.

Not only does Baer write and publish his own poetry, but he has published three other books: *Elia Kazan: Interviews, Conversations with Derek Walcott*; and his play

The Amistad Case. He is also the founding editor of *The Formalist*, a journal of metrical poetry, which he started in 1990.

Several years ago it was difficult to get metrical poetry published because free verse was the "in" type of poetry. Baer said he created *The Formalist* as an outlet for metrical poets. "I didn't think it would last long, maybe one or two issues, and I thought it would be fun." After the backing of Pulitzer Prize winning poet Howard Nemerov, who gave Baer two poems for inclusion in the journal, *The Formalist* took off. Baer said current subscriptions total about 1,000, which may not sound like many until you contrast that number with the 2,000 circulation of the *Hudson Review*, one of the foremost poetry journals in the nation. Baer and his wife, Mona, handle all the submissions, editing and publishing the journal themselves.

While at UE, Baer has been honored in many ways, including winning the James H. Wilson Playwriting Award; taking second place in the Jewel Box Theatre Original Play Competition; and selected for the ATHE's New Play Development Workshop. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Rutgers University, and Master of Arts degrees in English from New York University, in screen writing from the University of Southern California and in creative writing from the Johns Hopkins University. He received a doctorate from the University of South Carolina in English.

McMullan's book *When Warhol Was Alive*, won an award for best adult fiction from the Society of Midland Authors. She also co-wrote the feature film *Sacred Hearts*, with her husband, Pat, which won Best First Feature at the Ft. Lauderdale International Film Festival. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in religious studies from Grinnell College and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of Arkansas. ■

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