

Writer - Author - Poet - Playwright - Editor - Graduate Student - Essayist

PASSIONATE PERSISTENCE

ENGLISH MAJORS AT WORK



Lisel Mueller Mat Smart Jennifer Frisvold Anna Kulaski Jenny Wohlfarth Jane Friedman

Change. That word might best describe the career arc of an English major. We start out low, aim high and hope for the best. With a bit of luck (but mostly effort and persistence), the lives we lead might actually reflect our field of study. The following UE Department of English graduates have successfully navigated the field to find that magical marriage between profitable career and creative, fulfilling livelihood.



Lifetime of Achievement

Lisel Mueller, a 1944 graduate of Evansville College, is the author of seven collections of poetry and several books of translation. In May, she received the 2002 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, one of the most prestigious and largest literary awards in the United States.

Mueller first dabbled in poetry while at Evansville, and was inspired by a course in modern American poetry. "It influenced me a great deal in terms of my choice to become a poet, although I was not aware of it at the time," Mueller says. In that course, she studied Carl Sandburg, whom she credits as emboldening her. "His poetry was very accessible, free verse and ordinary language. I thought, 'Well, I would like to try that.' And I did. Some of those poems were print-

ed in the Evansville College *Crescent*."

But Mueller did not start writing poetry steadily and seriously until 10 years later, after the death of her mother. Because there were no creative writing programs at the time, everything Mueller learned was self-taught.

"I would get books from the library about prosody and set myself exercises to do various kinds of forms," Mueller says. "Later on I decided that my poetry was too imitative, and that I couldn't hear my own voice. So at that point I abandoned formal verse."

Her first book of poetry, *Dependencies*, was published in 1965. Later books of poetry, Mueller says, have become more spare, more pared down. "I found that age has done that and I don't know why. There

doesn't seem to be anything that I can do about it."

In spite of her success without the aid of a formal writing program, Mueller thinks that they can be helpful, particularly in providing an automatic community of writers. However, for any poet, Mueller believes the most important thing is to read, as that is how you really learn what poetry is all about. Other than that, there is little or no secret. Mueller herself has no writing ritual or process.

"I do it when the spirit hits me, when a couple of images or ideas come together in my head, and I see something differently than I have before."



Talented Playwright

Mat Smart ('01) had barely graduated from UE with degrees in writing and theatre when his work was recognized. Selected from more than 1,600 entries, Smart's play, *The Bebop Heard in Okinawa*, was one of 12 chosen from 700 applicants to be performed at the 2002 O'Neill Playwrights Conference, a world-renowned event dedicated to the development of talented playwrights.

Smart started the play two years ago as an independent study with Arthur Brown, UE professor of English, who played a crucial part in the play's early development. Inspired by an experience while studying in Japan during UE's summer program with political science professor David Gugin,

Smart set the play in Okinawa during a general election. It is the story of two children of an American father and Okinawan mother and how they deal with the violence erupting in their lives. The play was first read in May 2002 at the New Harmony Project, a playwriting conference started by UE alumni.

Smart still shows his writing to UE professors and credits the Departments of English and Theatre for an enriching college experience. "I can't imagine a better group of people to teach writing," Smart says. "Also, UE's international study opportunities are perfect for a young writer."

Smart is just now starting on his second year in the Master of Fine Arts playwriting program at the University of California at San Diego. Recently UCSD produced *Pure*, his play about a 16-year-old American girl who revolts against materialism and the music industry by fasting. It was also performed in the New York Fringe Festival in August 2002 – a celebration of more than 180 of the best emerging theatre companies and performing artists in the world. Smart plans to continue writing plays and move to New York City after graduation.



From New York to Nashville

If you want to know the hard truth about New York publishing life, ask **Jennifer (Giffin) Frisvold**, who graduated from UE in 1998 with a Bachelor of Fine

Arts in creative writing. Her experience as assistant to editors of *Mirabella* and *Elle* would fill an exhilarating tell-all memoir about lowly assistant editor life. But she has found better things to do. After leaving the Big Apple in 2001, Frisvold discovered editorial bliss in a place she least expected: Tennessee.

Since January 2002 Frisvold has been working at *Performing Songwriter* in Nashville, a near-monthly music magazine that targets the casual or serious musician as well as music fans. She discovered the job through classifieds and was hired as an assistant editor; she was quickly promoted to managing editor. Such a promotion would be impossible at a New York magazine, Frisvold says. "There's such a bureaucracy surrounding people's titles and positions, and a sense of making everyone pay their dues. There's a real bitterness to it."

Frisvold's responsibilities include conceptualizing the cover package, assigning articles and keeping the publication on time and on budget. To create the best editorial mix – something that sparks reader interest – Frisvold must stay current on the music industry by reading *Billboard* magazine as well as every other publication covering the music world. All in all, Frisvold's powers dwarf anything she ever wielded at *Elle*.

"The best part is that everything that I do directly affects the magazine," Frisvold says. "Since it is an independent operation, and we have a tighter staff, everything is a communal effort. I could have called in sick at *Elle* for two months straight and the magazine wouldn't look even slightly different."

That is not to say, however, that Frisvold's experience in New York was not meaningful or important. She says even if she was using her college education to open mail and answer telephones, she treasures the experiences: working in Manhattan, conferencing with smart and powerful women, taking telephone calls from the likes of John Cusack.

"I would say I achieved my dream in New York," Frisvold says. "But my dream of working in magazines has been truly realized at *Performing Songwriter*. The magazine is going places, the potential for it is amazing. So I'm sticking with it, and growing it as much as I can."



Back to School

The most valuable lesson **Anna (Ausborn) Kulaski** ('96) says she learned at UE while obtaining her Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing was not about writing, but listening. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I had no idea how to listen to people and discuss different points of view."

The lesson has paid off for Kulaski, many times over. Having just completed her first year on her master's in speech language pathology at Tennessee State University, she knows just how intricate the communication process is, and looks forward to helping others increase their own skills in speaking and listening.

But Kulaski already has a wealth of experience in the field. In January 2000 she started work as a program assistant and was later promoted to director of families for learning at NashvilleREAD, a nonprofit literacy foundation primarily focused on serving the underprivileged. Her job was to break the cycle of illiteracy among families falling below the poverty line, working with both parents and children. But the job description falls far short of the real-life responsibility Kulaski faced.

"This was a difficult job for me because it became more of a social worker role. Instead of promoting literacy," Kulaski says, "I found myself trying to navigate the state's welfare program so that my families would receive basic necessities such as food, housing and medical care. There was very little time to promote actual literacy. The families I worked with were up against tremendous odds."

Now that she has returned to school and has a graduate assistant position, Kulaski

works part-time at Bowie Reading and Learning Center, a privately-owned tutoring center in Nashville. She helps children who have difficulties with reading comprehension, writing skills and general organization. After she graduates, she hopes to work with children, particularly those with autism or autism-like symptoms, to help increase their language skills.



Back in the Writing Saddle

After nearly 10 years in the magazine publishing business, **Jenny Wohlfarth** ('93) made a gutsy move, but one she had been dreaming of since the day she left UE. In May 2002 she resigned her executive editor position at *I.D.* magazine – a national publication that covers the design world – and struck out on her own as a freelance writer.

This latest decision is not so different from how Wohlfarth first tackled her career. Just a few months after earning a double major in writing and advertising, Wohlfarth says she "followed a wild-hair notion" and moved to Texas. She was soon hired by the *Quarter Horse Journal*, partly due to her father's connections.

"I only knew enough about horses to distinguish the front end from the back end," says Wohlfarth. "I started out writing the horse obituaries, but was writing feature articles within six months. It was a position that kept me writing and editing all day long."

It was not long before thoughts of graduate school prompted Wohlfarth to move on. She received a full scholarship to study poetry at the University of Cincinnati, but quickly learned her true expertise lay in nonfiction, so she switched to the editing and publishing track. Before even completing her master's degree in 1999, she was offered a position as managing editor of *HOW*, a design magazine, based on her superior work as an intern for *Story*, a literary journal, and part-time work for *Writer's Digest*. It did not take long for Wohlfarth to outgrow that position as well.

"After a few good years with *HOW*, I was offered a management position with *I.D.* (International Design) magazine," Wohlfarth says. "It was a big step up for me and came with immense challenges of hiring from scratch, managing an editorial and design team and guiding a high-profile publication that had just been moved from its tightly knit New York circle."

Although Wohlfarth enjoyed the challenge of shaping the editorial voice and vision of such an interesting publication, she felt something lacking.

"I had strayed from the real passion that had always fueled my career's acceleration: writing. The higher up the corporate ladder I went, the less writing I did, and, strangely, the more belabored the act of writing became when I actually did get to write. So I decided to pursue freelance writing and adjunct teaching," says Wohlfarth.

Having reached the nadir of creative freedom, Wohlfarth says it is as rocky and rewarding as she expected. But freedom makes all the difference for her.

"I'm convinced there are plenty of poems and short stories and essays and articles brewing inside me that I've only begun to dream about. I can't wait to free them all."

And the Author



Soon after graduating in 1998 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing, **Jane Friedman** started work as an editor at North Light Books in Cincinnati. For three years she acquired, developed and edited heavily illustrated craft instruction books. During this time she also completed her Master of Arts in English at Xavier University and served as graduate director of the XU Writing Center.

In November 2001 Friedman was hired as managing editor of *Writer's Digest* magazine (owned by the same publishing company as North Light). She edits all magazine content, handles the magazine's many writing contests and conducts monthly interviews with celebrity writers. She also is executive editor of the magazine's special newsstand-only fiction writing issues.

While at UE, Friedman was editor-in-chief of *The Evansville Review* as well as the *Crescent*. She credits much of her success to the skills she learned on these publications. "My formal book editorial experience didn't totally win over the people at *Writer's Digest*. Rather, they loved that I had a college newspaper background," Friedman says. "But it didn't hurt that I could claim editorship of a publication like *The Evansville Review*, which features world-class writers."



The Evansville Review

Authors and poets around the world are familiar with UE's literary journal, *The Evansville Review*. National and international writers and editors of note are published in it and look to it to find new talent.

This year marks its 13th year of publication. Student editors solicit poetry and prose to include in the journal, select the best submissions, edit, design and publish the journal.

Last spring, UE students learned that a poem, "Self and Attributes" by Susan Wheeler, which first appeared in *The Evansville Review* was selected and published in *Pushcart Prize XXVI: Best of the Small Presses*. The annual Pushcart Prize sets the standard of excellence for literary anthologies. The prize is selected from thousands of stories, essays and poetry first published by small presses and magazines nationwide; each year it is hailed as a "touchstone of literary discovery." In the book, *The Evansville Review* is given credit for the first publication of Wheeler's poem.

Another poem which also appeared in *The Evansville Review*, "Our Kitty" by Carol Muske Dukes, was selected and published in *The Best American Poetry*

2001. This anthology, which selects poems for inclusion from nearly 50 publications around the world, is noted as the best in the field of poetry. The editor, Poet Laureate Robert Hass, has served on the editorial board of *The Evansville Review*. Former *The Evansville Review* editor Dan Walker is mentioned in the publication, as well.

Margaret McMullan, professor of English and chair of the department, said the fact that poems from *The Evansville Review* were selected for publication in two of the most prestigious writers' anthologies shows the knowledge of the students working for the publication. "We teach students how to read well and write well. Every semester, we expose students to great literature, and inevitably they are able to decipher good writing from bad writing. Sometimes, in the process, a very talented editor is born."

McMullan also stated that in these anthologies the journal that originally published the poem gets mentioned as well. Other poets and editors think, "Whoa, that journal must be really hot!" which lends prestige to *The Evansville Review*.

"We teach students how to read well and write well. Every semester, we expose students to great literature, and inevitably they are able to decipher good writing from bad writing. Sometimes, in the process, a very talented editor is born."

Margaret McMullan, Professor of English