

# DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

# NEWSLETTER

## SPRING 2024



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH • SPRING 2024 • VOLUME 2 • ISSUE 2



Department of English

# AWARDS & ACCOLADES

## **DR. J. ELLIOTT CASAL**

MOCH Charles and Catherine Freeburg Fellow, 2023-2024

## **DR. WILL DUFFY**

MOCH Charles and Catherine Freeburg Fellow, 2023-2024

## **DR. LORINDA COHOON**

Spring 2024 Professional Development Assignment

## **PROF. COURTNEY SANTO**

Spring 2024 Professional Development Assignment

## **PROF. MARCUS WICKER**

Radcliffe Fellowship, Harvard University, 2023-2024

College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Research Award in  
Engaged Scholarship, 2023-2024



# FALL 2023 EVENTS RECAP



*The Pinch Presents Dan Hornsby*



*Designing GenAI Policies Panel*



*Harry Potter Study Abroad Info Session*



*We highlighted our ~eras~ at Discover Your Major Day*

# SPRING 2024 EVENTS

## **BLIND DATE WITH A BOOK**

A month-long student engagement event.

Check the bookshelves on the 2nd floor in early February!

## **WORDSMITH WRITING OLYMPICS**

Saturday, February 25

1:00pm

University Center Ballroom

## **BOOK TALK WITH AUTHOR AND UOFM ALUMNI ALICE FAYE DUNCAN**

“Martin, Coretta, and the Power of Black Love”

Thursday, February 29

Patterson Hall 456

## **DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP WORKSHOP SERIES**

8-week series begins in March

Hosted by WRTC in partnership with Memphis

Public Libraries

# SPRING 2024 EVENTS

## **LITERATURE MOVIE NIGHT**

More info coming soon!

Co-hosted by the Literature and African American Literature concentrations

## **13TH ANNUAL NASEEB SHAHEEN MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES**

*Shakespeare and Bloomsbury*

Margery Garber, Harvard University

April 11th, 2024

in partnership with Rhodes College

Know of any other upcoming events? [Let us know!](#)

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

## **JASMINE SETTLES**

Jasmine Settles is a graduate of the MA in Literature and African American Literature Certificate programs. She is the owner/founder of Cafe Noir, a bookstore and cafe that focuses on books by BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ authors. Most recently, Cafe Noir was featured at Soul & Spirit's Skol-astic Adult Book Fair, co-hosted the Literature is Liberating Fest with Crosstown Concourse, and hosted an exhibit at the Brooks Museum.

## **DR. SHANNA CAMERON**

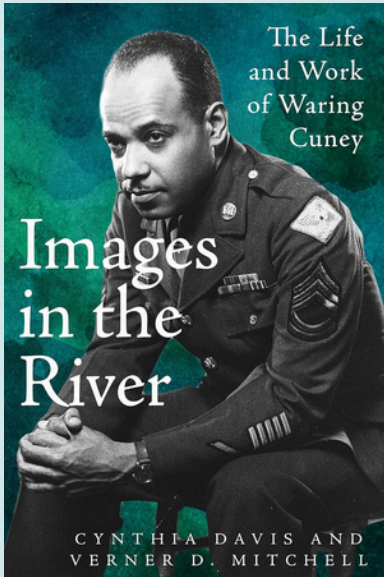
Shanna Cameron is a 2023 graduate of the Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication PhD program. In Fall 2023, she began a tenure-track position as a professor of Rhetorics of Science, Technology, and Culture at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. She has an article forthcoming for *Communication Design Quarterly*, an article published in 2023 in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and has presented three times this year: at the Rhetoric of Health and Medicine Symposium, at the Feminisms and Rhetorics De-Conference, and at the Conference on College Communication and Composition (CCCC).

## **DR. DARYL ANDERSON**

In Spring 2023, Daryl Anderson became the first African American male to receive a PhD in Applied Linguistics at the University of Memphis. Dr. Anderson's dissertation extended family language policy research to consider the language policies of bidialectal speakers of African American English. Dr. Anderson is currently an Academic Advisor in the Academic Advising Center at the University of Memphis.

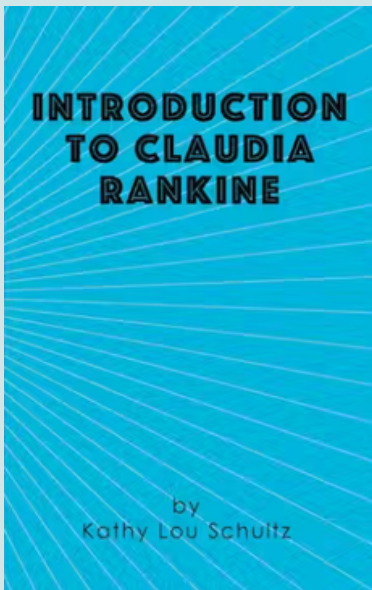


# FACULTY BOOKSHELF



## **IMAGES IN THE RIVER: THE LIFE AND WORK OF WARING CUNEY** **VERNER MITCHELL**

Through 100 of his best poems, many never collected or published, and a detailed biographical monograph, *Images in the River: The Life and Work of Waring Cuney* introduces readers to a newly recovered Harlem Renaissance poet, and to the history of a remarkable American family.



## **INTRODUCTION TO CLAUDIA RANKINE** **KATHY LOU SCHULTZ**

Kathy Lou Schultz's *Introduction to Claudia Rankine* provides the first book-length introduction to this vitally important poet. Rankine's poetry, writes Schultz, gives voice to the "unspeakable wounds" and trauma of race in America. Schultz places Rankine's poetry in the context of the poet's life, her works in other genres, and our challenging political moment.

# FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

## DR. ERIC SCHLICH ON ELI HARPO'S ADVENTURE TO THE AFTERLIFE

Dr. Eric Schlich is an assistant professor in the MFA in Creative Writing program and is currently serving as the interim Creative Writing coordinator. His new novel, *Eli Harpo's Adventure to the Afterlife*, was released on January 16th, 2024.

### **Q:** TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR STORY, ELI'S STORY, AND HOW/IF THEY MIGHT INTERTWINE?

**A:** Eli's story is far more interesting than mine!

When Eli was four, he had an emergency open-heart surgery, flatlined on the operating table, and went to heaven to meet Jesus. Or, at least, that's what his father, Simon—a devout Baptist minister—raised him to believe.

Nine years later, at age thirteen, Eli's no longer so sure. He's outgrowing his visits to hospices and hospitals, where he evangelizes and sells *Heaven or Bust*—his father's book about Eli's trip to heaven. On top of that drama, his mom, Debbie, has been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer and Eli's started having sex dreams about Jesus (yeesh!). Then famous televangelist Charlie Gideon shows up at the Harpos' doorstep with a copy of *Heaven or Bust!* and a proposal to create a new attraction at his theme park, Bible World, based on Eli's trip to the afterlife. Unfortunately, despite creeping doubts, Eli can't say no—his family needs the money and it's the realization of his father's wildest dreams.

“The novel moves through three timelines, between Eli's first trip to Bible World, his years in college, and his eventual return to the park with his husband and young son. The story navigates Eli's isolation, growth, and acceptance as he decides the truth about his supposed trip to heaven.”



In the calamity that ensues, Eli is left to grapple with his faith and sexuality on the Harpo family's rambling road trip from their hometown of Canaan, Kentucky to Bible World in Orlando, Florida. The novel moves through three timelines, between Eli's first trip to Bible World, his years in college, and his eventual return to the park with his husband and young son. **The story navigates Eli's isolation, growth, and acceptance as he decides the truth about his supposed trip to heaven.**

Eli and my own story don't intertwine much. However, Eli and I are very similar in that we're both shy, introverted people who don't like a lot of attention on us. We're also both middle children; but I have two sisters and Eli two brothers. Unlike Eli, who was homeschooled and raised in a family of evangelical Baptists, I went to public school and grew up in a family of lapsed Catholics. Eli and I are both from Kentucky and attended the University of Kentucky for our undergraduate degrees.

I've also written an essay called "Bi Erased" about coming out bi and how writing the story of a queer teen helped me express something I'd buried within myself. I owe Eli a debt of gratitude for that.

## **Q: WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM THIS JOURNEY?**

**A:** There's a scene in the book in which Gil Bright, a famous atheist, tells Eli, "sooner or later you'll have to decide whether to keep telling the lie that comforts or to face the truth that hurts." That felt like the theme of the book to me. **Is it better to keep propagating a lie about heaven because it eases the pain of our grief and mortality, or to recant and be honest even if it's extremely painful? Perhaps *the most painful thing.***

The book is my answer to that conundrum and although I don't mean for it to "evangelize" about my own atheism and personal belief that this is our one and only life, I hope readers come away with a chance to interrogate their belief about what—if anything—comes after and how that belief shapes the life they're living.

On a more political note, **we're living in a time in which religious fervor is influencing real policy in our country:** a post-Roe world that poses life-threatening harm to women by stripping them of their bodily autonomy and their right to an abortion. And there's the fear that we'll take yet another step backwards by denying LGBTQ individuals the same rights with their partners as those that heterosexuals take for granted. This book is about a boy who was raised in a family that would support such prejudices and it highlights his struggles to get out of it.

**Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK ELI IS DOING NOW? ANY CHANCE YOU’LL REVISIT THIS CHARACTER AGAIN SOMEDAY?**

**A:** Eli becomes (**spoiler alert!**) a pharmacist at the end of the novel, so he’s likely at work in the pharmacy or at home with his husband, Will, and son, Oliver. I don’t think I’ll revisit Eli, because I left him in a reasonably — if not perfectly — happy place and I’d like to keep him there. But never say never!

**Q: WHAT/WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE ELEMENT/CHARACTER IN ELI’S STORY?**

**A:** My favorite element of the book is the comedy, especially the Christian satire. **I love writing a comedic voice and had a lot of fun inventing commercialized Christian elements.** There’s a videogame in the book called *Raptured!* that pokes fun at post-Rapture apocalyptic narratives like *Left Behind*. In my first draft, I had so much fun writing the sequence in which Eli and Debbie play this game that it ran to over twenty pages! I had to cut that back a lot in revision.

I also had a lot of fun inventing Bible World rides. I visited real Christian attractions like the Ark Encounter, the Holy Land Experience, and the Creationist Museum for research, but then I got to exaggerate and invent my own attractions like Noah’s Ark Park (a petting zoo), The DropTower of Babel, and the Sodom & Gomorrah roller coasters, complete with a plaster pillar of salt labeled “Lot’s Wife.” I also had fun with the satirical chapter epigraphs, one of which is a Bible World jingle set to the tune of “Jesus Loves Me.”

Character-wise, Eli’s mother, Debbie, is by far my favorite. She’s the skeptic of the family who experiences a crisis of faith and loses her religion after her cancer diagnosis. **So she speaks a lot of truth to power**—she even creates a “Wall of Scandal” in protest to the family’s involvement with the televangelist Charlie Gideon—and is often a real scene-stealer. Love ya, Debs.



## **Q: WHAT WAS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR THIS NOVEL? WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR INSPIRATIONS?**

**A:** This novel took over five years to write and revise. I first drafted it as my creative dissertation for my PhD program at Florida State. Then later revised it and revised it and revised it... I went through three agents and two publishers before arriving at the published version.

**The initial inspiration, of course, came from heaven tourism books like *Heaven is for Real*.** When I first saw these books—many of which have a minister father co-opting a near-death experience of one of their children—I was viscerally offended. Such bald exploitation of their own child! One of my mentors at FSU, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, talked about writing out of anger and I knew my strong reaction to this Christian genre of literature had the seed of a novel within it. I read several of these books to satirize them.

But what interested me in this was crafting a character (Eli's father, Simon) who wasn't a con artist, but a true believer. And how that evangelical belief in the afterlife blinds him, a good person who does a lot of honest charitable work, to the harm he's causing his son.

The queer narrative in the novel is loosely inspired by Garrard Conley's *Boy Erased*, a memoir about surviving gay conversion therapy. It was one of my proudest moments when **Conley blurbed *Eli* and wrote, "I so rarely encounter an authentic rendering of Evangelical thought and its complications. This book feels as though it was written directly to the queer kid I was growing up in Arkansas with a Baptist pastor for a father."**

I'm also a big movie and TV buff. When sending the manuscript to agents, I often pitched it as *Little Miss Sunshine* meets *Saved!*—two movies I love and an accurate description in that the book is very much a family road trip novel with religious satire. In TV terms, if you like *The Righteous Gemstones* and *Heartstopper*, you'll like this book.

## **Q: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A FIRST-TIME AUTHOR?**

**A:** Every novelist is different, but each has to find the right balance between plotting and pantsing. I wrote half drafts of several failed novels before this one. I'd always get stuck in the middle. (More like the "muddle.") Eventually, I read a bunch of screenplay books and studied three-act structure and that helped immensely.

**So my advice would be to study the structure of your favorite novels, movies, and TV shows— especially those in the genre in which you're writing.** Those models are essential to cracking the structure of your own book. We'll be doing this in my Spring 2024 Forms of Fiction class, "Plot Models for Novels."

## **Q: IS THERE ANYTHING I DIDN'T ASK THAT YOU'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT?**

**A:** I'd like to discuss my current and future writing projects. I've written a screenplay adaptation of *Eli Harpo's Adventure to the Afterlife* and I'm now working on an original horror screenplay called *Mother's Milk*, about a couple, Ryan and Bridget Warbler, whose newborn son is swapped with a changeling.

I've also started two new novels. The first project is called *Nostalgix* and follows Jude and Erin, a married couple on the verge of divorce, as they undergo Temporal Recurrent Emotional Attachment Therapy (or "the TREATment"), an experimental time travel therapy that traps them in time loops of the best memories of their relationship. I pitch this as Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* meets *Groundhog Day*.

The other is a YA book called *Pavlov's Camp for Disobedient Weredogs*, about Caleb Hundt, a teen boy who is diagnosed with cynanthropy (weredogism). After becoming embroiled with a neighborhood weredog pack, Caleb is sent to Pavlov's Camp for Disobedient Weredogs, a youth detention camp for kids with his unique medical condition. There he must survive Obedience Training, save his friends from rabid weredog attacks, and learn to repress or embrace his inner dog for good. I pitch this one as Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* meets Louis Sachar's *Holes*.

**I'm having a lot of fun juggling multiple writing projects. We'll see which one takes off next!**

“It was one of my proudest moments when Conley blurbed *Eli* and wrote, “I so rarely encounter an authentic rendering of Evangelical thought and its complications. This book feels as though it was written directly to the queer kid I was growing up in Arkansas with a Baptist pastor for a father.””

**ELI HARPO'S ADVENTURE TO THE AFTERLIFE  
RELEASED ON JANUARY 16TH**

**[CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFO ON THE NOVEL](#)**



# TEACHERS, CREATORS, INNOVATORS



If you are interested in becoming a donor, please contact us at [tttucker@memphis.edu](mailto:tttucker@memphis.edu)

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