

# WORD!

Towson University | PRWR | Fall Newsletter

## In this issue:

- A Word from Geoff Becker
- Leslie Harrison: Finalist for the National Book Award
- Dr. Lawrence and EULAs
- An Interview with Jeannie Vanasco

## Leslie Harrison and the National Book Award

Huge congratulations to PRWR's own **Leslie Harrison** whose book of poems, *Displacement*, published earlier this year, was a finalist for the **National Book Award in Poetry**.

In November, Professor Harrison traveled to New York City to attend the 68th annual NBA ceremony where author Annie Proulx and Scholastic CEO Richard Robinson were honored for their work.

Check back to Word's! Spring issue for an interview with Professor Harrison on her work and how her life has changed since her award.

## A Word from Geoff Becker

Who is your audience? In the fall of 1998, I spent an afternoon at a medium-security prison in upstate New York as a visiting writer. My cousin, a professor at a nearby college, was teaching there; he'd put my first novel on the syllabus, and I'd donated books. The class was called *Reading Novels*, or something equally generic. Mine was by far the most obscure title. *Invisible Man* was on there, and *The Bluest Eye*—serious company that made me feel more than a little self-conscious. “You’ll love these guys,” my cousin told me. “They’re great people, at least when they’re locked up.”

We met in a small room with cinder block walls and plastic chairs. There was a guard outside, visible through the large, smeary windows. Eight of the men wore prison-issue green sweatpants and sweatshirts; the ninth had put on a white dress-shirt.

Although the class was noncredit and non-graded, three of them had even written papers (“The Importance of *Bluestown* in American Literature”)! We had a lively conversation that went over an hour. How did I get my ideas? Why weren’t there more African-American characters in the story? How long did it take to write? How much had I gotten paid? Would there be a movie?

Eventually, the conversation turned to a love scene between my narrator and the girl he’s carried a torch for since high school. What about that?, they wanted to know. Why did it stop where it did? I explained that I had in fact written more, but that when I was editing, I’d decided that it was pointless and cut it. The fact that the characters went to bed together was enough. I told them I hated gratuitous sex scenes that didn’t move the plot forward or deepen our sense of character in some way. It was a pretty

standard answer—the kind of thing I’d have said at a Barnes and Noble or a college reading.

I looked out at the group. They looked back at me.

“You don’t get it,” said Ray-Ray, the guy who had asked the question. “We’re in prison. That’s the part we *want* to read!”

There was nothing to do but apologize. I’d let them down. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I have to admit, wasn’t thinking about you.” They laughed and told me next time to leave the good parts in.

The question of audience is a tough one. Sure, you have to be true to your own vision. But when we write, we aren’t writing just for ourselves. We have readers we can’t even imagine.

Good writing to you!

## Dr. Halcyon Lawrence on “Redesigning the ‘Fine Print’: Leveraging User-Centered Design EULAs”

By: Chase Childress

On Wednesday, December 6, a small group gathered to hear from the newest PRWR faculty member, Dr. Halcyon Lawrence, speak on End User License Agreements (or EULAs) and a vision of her classroom.

EULAs are those novels you scroll and click through to get to the product or website you really want. Dr. Lawrence tells us: PayPal’s EULA is 36,275 words long. That’s 6,000 words longer than *Hamlet*. Though it would take about twenty-five full days for the average consumer to read all of the EULAs for the products and services they use, we generally spend about eight seconds reviewing a EULA before we click agree. We just aren’t reading them.

Dr. Lawrence says we ought to do more than just read them; we should actively research and theorize carefully about the language of EULAs, because at their base they define the legal relationship between company and consumer--a relationship decidedly not between equals.

Reviewing her own work over the past year directing the Responsible End-User Licensing (REUL) Lab, Dr. Lawrence allowed us a glimpse inside her classroom at Georgia Tech, where students worked collaboratively to research high profile legal cases like the expulsion of David Dao from a United Airlines flight, and to analyze EULAs currently in use. Grounding such work in theoretical readings on user-centered design, Dr. Lawrence’s students developed a set of “heuristics” for ethically written EULAs, now available on REUL’s website. Her advanced classes then built on those heuristics by designing and commissioning three software tools to evaluate EULAs.

Those interested in the Teaching College Composition track would also do well to attend her presentations and classes. Her interdisciplinary and collaborative approach makes for a vibrant and rich classroom environment, where students work on real-world problems and make real-word contributions.



# On Writing *The Glass Eye*: An Interview with Jeannie Vanasco on her smashing debut

By: Chase Childress

## 1. How did this book begin? You also mentioned that this was not the book you intended to write. So, how did it end?

When I submitted the book proposal originally to a number of publishers, I made it more sellable on the advice of my agent: I took out a lot of white space and made *The Glass Eye* less formally inventive. But Masie Cochran at *Tin House* was one of the first editors I heard back from and I could tell she really got the book. She loved the writing and was taken by the voice but said, "You know, there could be more white space" and that the plot of the book should include the actual writing of the book. Masie was interested in the evolution of my relationship to my dad. We both wanted the plot to reflect a way of thinking and to make space for thoughts developing on the page. The fact that Masie was interested in that and not the more marketable aspects of the book was what really made me realize she was the one. I didn't write the book to make money; I wrote it for the artistry. At *Tin House*, the artistry would take precedence over the marketability.

## 2. What's your writing process like?

(When I asked this, Jeannie reached under her desk for a thick teal binder, full of a mixture of neat handwritten and typed notes and separated by dividers. Some of the notes, she mentioned, are from 2012 or older.)

For this book, the first few years was combing the material, saving sentences I liked, analyzing recurring images like mirrors and eyes. It was more like a process of collaging. And I wanted to show some of that messiness in the book, which is in a large part about my writing process.

Because my initial training was as a poet, I spent a lot of time thinking about prosody and lyricism and how musicality can demonstrate meaning or can be a way of finding meaning. And it was slow-going because I would get caught up in the sonic quality of the line.

But I realized that if I let the lyricism take precedence over my writing of the events, that could skew my memory. I didn't want to be dishonest. I had to give myself permission write badly for a while--and that was hard because I'm a bit of a perfectionist, especially about writing.

## 3. You spoke on the panel Writing About and Through Grief at the Baltimore Writers' Conference. Could you give us a snippet of the conversation?

I spoke about my grief for my dad being modeled after his grief for his daughter, Jeannie, and how grief was in some ways a learned experience,

Writing about grief, more generally, is hard because when we're writing about someone we've loved and lost, we sometimes forget to describe the individual. In some ways, it's easier to describe the grieving process than it is to think about the person you're grieving for and that's something I struggled with a lot on the page. In grad school, my classmates would ask, "But why is he so special?" And I thought, "Well, he's my dad!" But that's what I think can be really difficult in writing about grief--we don't write about the experience of living with that person because it's hard. But it's also hard for readers to understand and to feel the book without seeing who the writer lost.

**4. It strikes me that writing about grief, while it can perform a therapeutic function, is also incredibly difficult and taxing. What advice do you have for others writing about grief?**

To take it slowly. Sometimes in writing workshops, because we're in an academic environment, there's a resistance to thinking about writing as therapeutic, as if writing about grief is somehow a less academic or even a gender-specific endeavor.

But it may be easier not to write purely about experience or purely about feelings. Writing about both concurrently can make it easier and more therapeutic than trying to divorce emotion and experience. For a while, I had a snobbish moment where I thought I wouldn't write about my feelings. And there's a gender component to that-- because publications tend to give the impression that women's books focus on feelings whereas men's books focus on ideas. It's an example of how structural sexism plays a role in the publication industry. But I was putting so much pressure on language and scene and not about my emotions and that made it difficult to write.

Writers should also sometimes step away from the work. And that's what I tell my creative nonfiction students, who sometimes write about extremely traumatic events like rape or physical abuse. It's hard for me as an instructor to read these stories and think about how difficult the lives of my students are. But I try to tell my students that it's ok to step away and write about something else for a while.

**5. What can students look forward to when they take your creative nonfiction class?**

I try to assign contemporary authors from different backgrounds who write--if we think about style on a continuum with narrative on one side and lyric on the other--along that continuum at different points. I assign all contemporary authors partly because I know many students are getting old white guys in

all their other classes and I want them to see publishing as something they can do. I also think sometimes when we read older authors (not that reading older authors isn't important!) it sometimes gives students the idea that writing and literature is the canonical stuff from the past. I want them to see that there's amazing writing happening right now.

Every semester, I try to invite an author they're reading to Skype with the class--Louise Krug (author of *Louise: Amended*) Skyped with my students this semester. Next semester, we'll hopefully speak with Thomas Mira Ylopez who wrote a phenomenal collection of essays called *The Book of Resting Places*.

**6. I did intend to ask if there were any authors in particular that you drew on or thought about while writing *The Glass Eye*, but it seems like you may have been pulling from a lot of different art forms and genres. Can you give us a few of them?**

The documentary format *Stories We Tell* by Sarah Polley and the way in which she interviewed different family members and showed herself making the film was very helpful to me. I saw that documentary very early on in the process of writing *The Glass Eye* as a memoir and that influenced my decision to include present tense conversations with my mom and to show myself getting things wrong in an effort to show to my reader that I was trying to get things right. When I let go a little and tried to show myself as...to say authentic takes away authenticity and takes away from writing as artifice, but to show some of that messiness did add authenticity for my readers, I think.

