

WORD!

Towson University Professional Writing Newsletter

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Let Us Know!

Do you have accomplishments or news that you want to share with others in the Professional Writing program?

Contact us at:
prwr@towson.edu

A Word! from the Director

By: Geoff Becker

When I was twelve my dad insisted I take a summer touch-typing class at the YMCA. He'd learned at that age, and so I was going to, too. I didn't like it, but it wasn't up to me. I practiced a little each day on a 1950s Royal, the keys of which I covered with masking tape so I couldn't see the letters. I got used to positioning my fingers just so over the home keys, "f" under my left forefinger, "j" under my right. For about a week, it seemed hopeless. How could anyone ever learn this? But then the barriers started to go away, muscle memory kicked in, and I found that, to my great surprise, I could think out a sentence without looking down at my hands.

In those pre-computer days of the 1970s, most people didn't confront keyboards as part of daily life. Business executives had secretaries. College students needed to type papers, of course, but if you couldn't type, you could always find someone to help you, or you could pay for the service. Thanks to my dad, one of the barriers to writing was a little lower for me. I didn't love typing, and I still don't. I don't like tying my shoes, either, but I'm glad I know how. The fact that I could type may even have led me, at least indirectly, to becoming a writer (sorry, Dad!).

That fall, as part of a work-study program through my school, I spent a day at the studios of WHWH radio in Princeton, NJ. The station played a kind of "easy-listening" style, and no one I knew listened to it for anything other than Princeton sports scores, and, in winter, news of school closings. The guy I was assigned to was in his forties and running the whole place himself. He was overweight, kind of sweaty, and chain-smoked. He basically ignored me, so I just watched what he did. In between shoving oversized cassettes with ads on them for local car dealerships and grocery stores into the studio deck, and announcing the next musical selection, he typed up news copy, two-fingered, on an old Royal, not unlike the one we had at home. It was a violent exercise. His thick fingers rapid-shot down like pistons; he must have been producing ninety words a minute. Who knows what he

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Scholarships & Writing Contests

The International Poetry Competition is hosted by the Atlanta Review, which is looking for original and unpublished creative worked creative work

Entrants can send in up to 10 poems, although the reading fee increases after the first two poems.

The Grand Prize winner will receive \$1000 and publication, but the next twenty winners will also be published.

Deadline is March 1th

The Chicago Tribune is holding their 2019 Nelson Algren Short Story Awards for short fiction.

One grand prize winner will receive \$3,500, with five finalists getting \$750.

Stories must be no longer than 8,000 words.

Applicants are welcome to submit two stories as separate entries.

Deadline is January 31st

The Sonora Review is looking for poetry, fiction, and essays.

The winner will receive \$1,000 and have their work published.

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(Continued from "A Word!")

was writing? I can't imagine it was anything very important—probably just news about local school board elections or an upcoming sale at Bamberger's department store. No matter; the keys on that machine were in danger of flying off under the attack of his hands. This guy was, it seemed to me, the Jimi Hendrix of the typewriter, the Muhammed Ali. And he was doing it totally wrong.

Good writing to you!

An Interview with the 2018 Baltimore Writers' Conference Keynote Speaker, Amy Bass

By: Rebecca Ritter

This November saw the 26th annual Baltimore Writers' Conference held at Towson University. This year's keynote speaker was Emmy Award winning writer and historian Dr. Amy Bass. A professor at the College of New Rochelle, Bass' research interests range from identity politics to modern American culture, with a focus on sports.

Her latest book, *One Goal: A Coach, A Team, and the Game that Brought a Divided Town Together*, has been optioned by Netflix for a potential adaptation. Dr. Bass has also served as senior research supervisor for NBC Olympic Sports since 1996, winning at Emmy Award for her work at the London Olympics in 2012. She was kind enough to answer some questions for WORD! about her career and offer advice for students in the PRWR program.

Did you start out knowing that sports writing was the field you wanted to go into?

I don't know that I have ever called myself a sportswriter, actually. I am a historian by training — my Ph.D. is in history. I think sportswriters are journalists, and do the hard work of journalism, while I am very much a writer within the context of history — the study of something of interest within a defined time and space. That said, I know that my latest book, *One Goal*, is very much within trends of creative non-fiction and narrative non-fiction so I supposed I'm continuing to blur the lines. But all of this is a longwinded way of saying: no, because I don't think I am in the field of sports.

I think I'm a historian who has often written about sports because I think it is the best way I can focus on the ideas and topics I want to focus on — race, citizenship, identity, and so on.

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To be considered for the contest, applicants must submit at least **6,000 words of fiction, four to eight pages of poetry, or an essay of up to 5,000 words**. Each entry must fit the theme: **The future**.

Multiple submissions are welcome.

Deadline is March 15th

The Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction is open to all writers.

The winning writer will have their work published and be awarded \$2,000. All stories will be considered for publication with the Colorado Review.

While there are no theme restrictions, applicants must submit stories that are at least **2,500 words** to qualify.

Deadline is March 14th

The Reedsy Scholarship is awarded twice a year for writers and novelists furthering their education.

Winners of the scholarship will receive \$1000 towards educational expenses and be eligible for further sponsorship as they grow as a writer.

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But I never look at sports and think, “What can I write about next?” I get interested in something and, yes, quite often it happens to be about sports. *One Goal* is about soccer, but it really came out of the moment in America when the dialogue about refugees was starting to get heated. It didn’t come out of a “WOW! What a great soccer team!” moment.

You have an expansive background as far as your teaching at CNR and what you’ve written on in the past. Do you think having a diverse area of interests is necessary for writing about sports, or for writing in general?

I think you have to have something to write about, and you have to have something to say. That’s what it means to be a writer: figuring out what interests you, figuring out what you already know about it, figuring out what else you can learn about it, and then figuring out how to tell it. Research is a critical part of writing. I cannot emphasize that enough. Early MFA students look at me like I’m crazy — “But I want to write fiction!” You still need to research.

All day, every day, I’m jotting down observations, news tidbits, pieces of conversation — all of that is research. Then there is archival research, reading, secondaries, primaries. Different projects will have different scopes, for sure. Where to start? Read. Read everything you can get your hands on, stuff you like, stuff you don’t. Because you’re building an arsenal of ideas, and you want your brain to be able to make as many connections as possible, pulling out nuggets where they can just fly. So yes, that’s where the diverse area of interests helps you write, helps you be a writer.

What do you think has changed for writers since you first began writing professionally? Some young writers are finding it daunting to break into writing when the traditional routes into fields like journalism are undergoing so much change. Do you have any advice for them?

I always say two things: read every day, and write every day. Because that’s what it takes. I write every morning, whether I’m working on a project or not — it might be emails, a letter, a list (I love lists; obsessed, really), whatever. But writing opens up my head, and then the day can be absorbed a bit better. So write and read. And then whatever the landscape looks like when you’re ready to tackle it, you’ll have that to build on.

I’m not really a futurist per se, but we know that many first year college students will land jobs that haven’t even been invented yet. How do you prepare for that? Just get educated.

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Applicants must be accepted to or currently enrolled in an accredited college, university, or graduate program.

The application must include the first chapter (1,500 to 7,500 words) of an original novel you are currently writing or have written but not yet published.

Deadline is February 21st

Check out their websites for more information!

Are you halfway through the PRWR program? **It's time to submit your program portfolio.**

Spring portfolio submissions are due **April 1**. You must submit three pieces of writing from different genres. Contact prwr@towson.edu if you have any questions.

All **May 2018** graduates need to apply for graduation by **January 15!**

In your talk at the BWC, you had a lot to say about the ways technology is going to be changing the field, and how writers and visual/digital-based artists are going to have to integrate in order to succeed. Do you have any insights for writers coming up in this technologically dominated time?

Just use what you can — all of it — and don't turn something away or down just because you don't know what it is. It's all about communicating ideas, so whatever you need to do that, figure it out.

A Writer's Stay at Contrivance: An Interview with Shelley DeMarco

By: Alyssa Higham

The Good Contrivance Fellowship is an award, funded by anonymous donors, that allows a graduate student to spend two nights at Good Contrivance Farm. Author Ron Tanner runs this working farm that also serves as a writer's retreat. The fellowship is intended to give a student-writer the solitude of a few days to finish or start a new project. Shelley DeMarco was the first PRWR student to win the award.

What made you apply for the Good Contrivance Fellowship?

I have three kids and my husband works long hours, so finding time and energy to write has always been a challenge. I'd been kicking around an idea for a novel for a while but hadn't gotten past the point of preliminary sketches and outlines. So, when the Fellowship opportunity came up, I jumped on it, hoping I could crank out some decent pages over the span of a weekend and also escape my children.

What did you work on during your time at Good Contrivance Farm?

Besides drafting some scenes for the novel, I worked on an essay I'd been thinking about for a while, and I read Ron Tanner's book *From Animal House to Our House* which was a great read.

I spent a lot of time writing by hand instead of typing on my laptop. I'd been wanting to give this a try because I had a feeling that writing by hand would help me produce better first drafts. I was right. And, as a result, I do most of my first drafts by hand now.

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How effective would you say the Fellowship was in helping with your writing?

Very. Having time to read and write helped launch me into a productive summer. And, honestly, any time spent reading and writing is beneficial to my writing.

What’s one distinct memory you have of the Fellowship?

Well, through a stare-down on the back porch, I became friends with a skeptical tabby, and I also got to enjoy a June thunderstorm pelting rain on the barn’s tin roof.

Can you share one thing you’ve taken away from the experience?

For me, the Fellowship gave me more time to write, but it also reinforced that writing is still just me facing a blank page—it’s work no matter where I am. I just need to do the work.

What would you recommend to other PRWR students who are interested in applying for the Good Contrivance Fellowship?

Go for it. You won’t regret trying.

Catching Up with PRWR Alumni: Steven Lessner

By: Alyssa Higham

Steven was recently promoted to Associate Professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College, a two-year college in Annandale, Virginia. He was also selected as a Stage 2 Reviewer for the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC).

What kind of process did you have to go through to be promoted to Associate Professor?

For the first three years while being faculty here at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), I had to write an extensive self-assessment narrative outlining my accomplishments in the categories of teaching, scholarly and creative engagement, service, and institutional responsibility for that academic year. These evaluations, along with my teaching evaluations were reviewed by the Dean of Languages and Literature. Further, the Dean observed and evaluated my teaching each of my first three years. Each year, I also set goals for myself to accomplish in terms of the same categories listed above and had to report in separate written evaluations on how I met these.

After successfully completing these three years in terms of assessment from the Dean, I was able to apply for promotion to Associate Professor of English. The Dean supported my application for the promotion based on my performance the past three years.

What would you say is one of the most significant changes you’ve discovered in teaching English now that you’re an Associate Professor?

So far, nothing has significantly changed in terms of my teaching since being promoted to Associate Professor. Here at NOVA, all English professors, regardless of rank, have a great deal of freedom in how we teach our courses in terms of writing assignments, required texts, etc. Since teaching at NOVA, I’ve enjoyed teaching English 111: College Composition I, English 112: College Composition II, English 125: Introduction to Literature, and English 254: Survey of African American Literature II. One thing I will say is that when I told my writing students in an English 112 course that I had been promoted, they all clapped and it felt great to have this recognition from them!

I will share something that I feel like has significantly changed in my teaching since I’ve been at NOVA. At a two-year college, I have the pleasure and privilege of working

with students who vary greatly in terms of experience and age, much more so than the previous two institutions where I taught. Many students I teach are a traditional college age (18-19 years old) and may have come straight from high school. I also have dual enrollment students who are currently still in high school in my courses, as well as veterans and folks in the community who may be coming back to college after many years in the workforce. Further, I enjoy teaching many International students who are multilingual learners. So I am always changing and revising my pedagogical strategies to make sure I'm meeting the needs of many diverse learners in my classes which is something I love doing!

The Conference on College Composition and Communication is the world's largest professional organization for researching and teaching composition. You were selected by the 2019 conference Chair to serve as a Stage 2 Reviewer for submitted conference proposals. Could you explain what it means to be a Stage 2 Reviewer?

As a Stage 2 Reviewer for CCCC, you are responsible for evaluating individual proposals submitted for the conference, as well as organizing panels of presentations from the proposals you review. In late June 2018, I flew to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Headquarters in Urbana, Illinois. I, along with eleven other English professors, reviewed proposals for two days under the leadership of Dr. Vershawn Young, the incoming CCCC Chair. Each professor was paired up with another person and asked to review certain clusters or categories of submitted proposals.

Another professor and I were assigned to review the proposals that were submitted for the "Creative Writing" and "First-Year Writing" clusters or categories. After reviewing the proposals, we then created panels of 3-4 speakers for the individual presentations we reviewed and wrote up titles as well as a brief description of the

panel.

What was the application process like to be selected as a reviewer for the Conference on College Composition and Communication?

The incoming CCCC Chair, Dr. Vershawn Young, selected professionals in the field of Composition Studies he felt would be strong Stage 2 Reviewers. I received an email from him inviting me to be a Stage 2 Reviewer, as well as to contribute my ideas with other colleagues, to the CCCC call for conference proposals. Dr. Young cited my work with Hip Hop composition pedagogy as one reason he wanted me to be a Stage 2 Reviewer and how my research spoke to the CCCC theme he chose of "Performance-Rhetoric, Performance-Composition." When teaching writing, I use Hip Hop as a way to explore the writing process, as well as writing strategies that can be useful for first-year writers.

I have also been highly active with CCCC since 2007 by presenting workshops and individual presentations, serving as a Chair for panels, and contributing as a Stage 1 Reviewer. I was very honored to be invited to be a Stage 2 Reviewer and represent community colleges as the sole professor from a two-year college who served.

What was, or is, one of the greatest challenges you've faced, either as a professor or as a Stage 2 Reviewer for the CCCC conference?

The greatest challenge I face as a professor is coming to terms with students who may not do well in a course I teach. I do my best to help each student through individual paper conferences, as well as in office hours if extra help is needed. Yet, sometimes in community colleges, students have a great deal going on in their lives such as having families, working full time jobs, taking care of an elderly parent, etc. These life events going on can take over and affect the amount

of time and energy a student can devote to a course.

I find it really difficult when I know a student is trying his/her best and he/she can't make it across the finish line to successfully complete my course due to life events. My hope is that the student will retake the course and successfully complete it in the future.

How has the Professional Writing program helped you throughout your teaching career?

I still use a great deal of composition pedagogy strategies when teaching writing here at NOVA that I learned in a Composition Pedagogy course and Evaluating and Assessing Writing course I completed in the Teaching College Writing track. I took both these courses with Dr. Cheryl Brown, who served as my mentor and advisor in the PRWR program. Dr. Brown first introduced me to CCCC and offered me valuable feedback when I was writing my first proposal to submit to the conference back in 2007. Also, through working in the Writing Center under the mentorship of Dr. Deborah Shaller, I learned a great variety of verbal and written feedback strategies that I still use when meeting with students for paper conferences.

Do you have any advice for current PRWR students, or for fellow graduates of the program, hoping to teach English at the college level?

I would say to reach out to alumni who graduated from the PRWR program in your track and who have a career you are interested in pursuing. Asking PRWR alumni questions about their career choices and what their current careers are like could prove highly valuable. If anyone in the PRWR program would like to contact me with any questions about my career as a professor or teaching writing and literature at the college level, I would be more than happy to talk with you. You can reach me at slessner@nvcc.edu.