

WORD

A newsletter for the Master's in Science in Professional Writing program

Inside this issue:

PRWR student wins Graduate College Thesis Award

By S. Ann Johnson

Just think about how great would it have been to have known Bill Gates before he founded Microsoft software company or Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin while they were merely Stanford University students. Now stop dreaming. And get acquainted with former PRWR student turned TU lecturer Christopher Thacker.

Thacker, a 2007 PRWR graduate, currently teaches undergraduate courses in TU's College of Business and Economics and English department. And, who knows, he may just be the next Gates, Page or Brin—once his innovative social-networking Web site for researchers and corporations is complete. Think of Thacker's Web site as a Facebook for qualitative researchers—an interactive Web site that relies on user-generated content, which Thacker's thesis refers to as a Web 2.0 site.

"He is now at work, slowly but surely building the Web site," wrote PRWR professor Dr. David Dayton in a Graduate College Thesis Award nomination letter. "He hopes that he and his part-time business partner, who is a full-time web developer, will succeed in creating a novel kind of social-networking Web site they can one day license to other

researchers and to corporations seeking a way to capture and share 'lessons learned' as part of a larger knowledge management infrastructure."

Dayton was Thacker's thesis advisor, mentoring him and encouraging his scholarly ideas. Since Dayton nominated Thacker to the College of Graduate Studies and Research to receive the thesis award, Thacker not only won the Graduate College Thesis Award, but has authored two scholarly journal articles as well.

"As a result of the thesis, I was given the opportunity to co-author with Professor Dayton two scholarly articles that have since been published in *Technical Communication* and the International Professional Communication Conference 2008 Proceedings," wrote Thacker in an e-mail. "We also presented elements of the thesis at the IPCC 2008 in Montreal, Quebec. Currently, I am working on developing a qualitative research site based on the conceptual model described in my thesis. With any luck, I will be afforded the opportunity to unveil this site at IPCC 2009 in Hawaii."

But obtaining these accomplishments was no easy feat.

"For starters, Chris had to give himself a crash course in a field



Christopher Thacker, a 2007 PRWR graduate, won the Graduate College Thesis Award for his work in technical communications.

that was new to him (technical communication) and an interdisciplinary area that was also new to him (qualitative research methods)," continued Dayton in his nomination letter. "He accomplished this by reading voraciously—well over 100 scholarly articles. He also carried out a user-centered design process, interacting with me as the client for a prototype Web 2.0 site for which he had to build a conceptual model because no one has ever created this type of site for exactly this purpose before.

"Imagine trying to design a complex interactive Web site for a client who has only a general idea of what he wants and doesn't really know what is technically feasible. If you can do that, you will have a solid general sense of the difficult creative

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A word from PRWR Director Geoffrey Becker



PRWR Director Geoffrey Becker is an award-winning novelist. He will teach "Writing the Novel" during the spring 2009 semester.

My son won't go to bed at night until he sees the rat. The rat is on page eight of a book called *Cock-a-Doodle Whooo*, and he invades the hen-house where our hero, a nice little owl who got lost on a rainy night and stumbled into this warm, friendly place, now lives. Some of the hens make fun of him because he can't cock-a-doodle, so he's a lousy substitute for a rooster (the text makes no effort to address any other ways in which he might be deficient in this respect). But when a rat shows up and starts eating their feed and scaring the chicks, nature takes over and our tiny owl saves the day. He eats the rat.

Personally, I find this a little disgusting. Maybe it's because we live in Baltimore City, where

rats the size of loaves of bread routinely hustle across the alley behind our house as if dodging sniper fire. Occasionally, one

like food.

But Bruno loves the rat in his book. He loves to announce his presence. "It's a rat!" he says, with joy. "He's going to eat him up!" And that's exactly what happens, each time. The brave young owl swoops down and goes "snip-snap." It never gets boring.

The other night, because it was late, I cheated. I tried skipping some of the text. I figured it was all about the pictures, anyway. Bruno corrected me, immediately. "You didn't say, 'And so he did,'" he pointed out. He was right. I went back and read the words. Then we moved onto the rat page.

Every word, it seems, really does count.

Good writing to you all.

"But when a rat shows up and starts eating their feed and scaring the chicks, nature takes over and our tiny owl saves the day. He eats the rat."

drunk enough on leftover pizza crusts and chicken bones will wander out in front of a passing vehicle, providing us and our neighbors with a little *memento mori* (no one ever wants to pick them up), its body growing flatter over the next couple of days with the passing of more vehicles, until it eventually blends into the pavement, a shadow. What I'm saying is, these creatures just don't seem



Dr. David Dayton nominated his mentee Christopher Thacker, for the Graduate College Thesis Award. In July 2008, the two presented elements of Thacker's thesis at the International Professional Communication Conference in Montreal, Quebec.

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challenge that Chris faced. He and I must have spent at least 30 hours in intensive conversation, face to face and on the phone, over the course of a year. We also exchanged thousands of words by e-mail discussing the first-hand reports Web site that I envisioned as a way of collecting qualitative data from technical writers about innovative methods and tools that are re-shaping the practice of technical communication. "

Thacker, who plans to expand his technical communication knowledge by pursuing a doctorate in the subject, was "delighted to discover that I

was nominated," he recalled. "Professor Dayton put my name forward, which was an immense honor. To win the award felt like a validation of all the long hours that I spent researching the topic. The research for the thesis was particularly daunting because it required a crash course in the discipline of technical communication: epistemology and history. Professor Dayton provided excellent guidance through the process. "

A Baltimore Writers' Conference recap

Just in case you missed The 17th annual Baltimore Writers' Conference, held at Towson University on Nov. 8, let's recap. The event started with featured keynote speaker Larry Doyle, former writer and producer for *The Simpsons*, current writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, and author of *I Love You, Beth Cooper*, which will soon be released as a film. After his speech, Doyle stuck around to sign copies of his book and talk to attendees, and then the sessions began! Session topics included nonfiction writing, young adult fiction writing, screenwriting, magazine and journals, agents and publishers, and blogging.

Writing for Kids and Teens session

By S. Ann Johnson

Author Somerset Maugham once said: "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

Panelist Margaret Meacham, who authored 14 children and young adults novels, shared this quote with attendees. The 14-time author then offered them practical advice: she encouraged attendees to write down their ideas, use reading as a solution for writers' block, and choose a publisher that they know a lot about.

Fellow panelist Elissa Weissman, a Johns

Hopkins University Writing Seminars graduate, provided guidelines for age-appropriate children's books, which ranged from pop-up and novelty books for ages 0-3 years to 150-250 manuscript pages in young adult novels for ages 12-18.

The latter, Weissman said is often "edgier material presented in an unapologetic way. "YA is a place where anything goes."

YA books also have a much longer shelf life than adult fiction, said Weissman. Yet, even with the benefits of writing for YA readers, she opted to write for a slightly younger audi-

ence.

Weissman's two-book contract with Simon & Shuster

targets ages 8-12 years. Her first soon-to-be-released "Middle Grade" novel is *Standing for Socks*, a title that's she's learned to love.

It turns out that authors in this genre do not choose the titles of their books or their book's cover art—an astounding bit of information that wowed the audience.

Meacham, who has worked with both local and national publishers, said that smaller publishers give more freedom to authors during the editorial process.

But Weissman added that the "powerful sales team" of larger publishers is unmatched.

Either way, the panelists agreed that it is always a good idea for authors to market themselves. Meacham, a former librarian, suggested talking to librarians and attending teacher conventions—both great places to market a new YA or children's book.

**"YA is a place
where
anything
goes."**

**—Elissa Weissman,
middle-grade author**



Elissa Brent Weissman, a Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars graduate, has degrees in creative writing and children's literature. Her middle grade novels, *Standing for Socks* (cover art above) and *The Trouble with Mark Hopper*, are set to be released through Simon and Shuster in 2009.

The panelists offered these questions to inspire YA writers:

- What was the one thing you really wanted when you were a child that you couldn't have? At age 6, 10, 12?
- What was the worst fight you ever had as a child or teenager? Who was it with? What about?
- What was the thing that scared you most? Did you get over this fear? How?
- What imaginative games did you play? What was your role? Who else played?
- What was the bravest thing you did as a child? What was the meanest? Of what are you most proud? Most ashamed?
- What was the best holiday or birthday you can remember? What was the saddest?
- Can you remember the first time you were away from home over night? What was it like?
- Can you remember the first time you were away from home over night? What was it like?
- Do you remember the first time you realized someone had lied to you? Who was it? Why did they lie? How did you feel? What did you do?



Margaret Meacham, below, is an award-winning author of fourteen novels for children and young adults, including *Oyster Moon* and *A Mid-Semester Night's Dream*. She is currently working on her first adult novel.

Screenwriting session

BY S. Ann Johnson

Panelist David W. Warfield, who wrote the 2008 straight-to-DVD movie *Linewatch*, offered his 20-year-inside perspective of the Hollywood film industry. Here are some of the screenwriter's words of wisdom:

What is screenwriting?

One word: "Storytelling," said the Writers Guild of America member.

How much freedom does a writer have?

"The writer has no power in movies. Whoever owns the script can change the script. Producers can change the script."

Do screenwriters often work in teams?

"Hour-drama sitcoms are a different hierarchy," said War-

field, who added that while most sitcoms are written by a staff, "most feature-film writers work alone and not on a salary."

What advice do you have for aspiring screenwriters, trying to sell their first script to a producer?

"Unless you're already an A-list writer," said Warfield, "their imagination doesn't allow them to think that someone [thinks of an original idea] and writes a script. They're more likely to accept a project that is based on a true story."

What advice do you have for taking an idea and turning it into a script?

You "should outline the story to cut down time," he said, noting that writing a script is very time consuming.

How should you copyright your

script?

Through the U.S. Copyright office, said Warfield, who added that you could also register your script through the WGA, but for approximately the same \$20 fee, you might as well go through a governmental agency.

How much money is in screenwriting?

"No one's getting rich off of it except producers."

Should writers write based on the trends in the movie market?

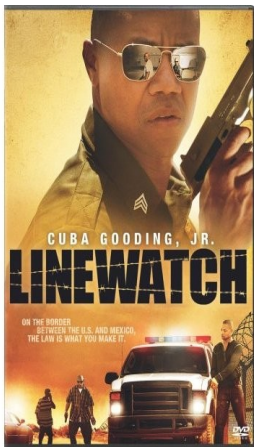
"You can't chase the market," said Warfield, "but you can't ignore it either."

Warfield gave the examples that it is statistically "harder to sell scripts with a female lead than a male lead."

And while short films are fun and good for exposure, "there is no actual market for short films."

"The writer has no power in movies. Whoever owns the script can change the script."

— David Warfield, screenwriter



Screenwriting session panelist David Warfield wrote the screenplay for *Linewatch*, a recently released straight-to DVD movie starring Cuba Good Jr.

David Warfield's top books and links for screenwriting:

Books

- *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri
- *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler
- *Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman
- *Screenwriting, The Sequence Approach* by Paul Joseph Gulino
- *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writers' Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay* by David Howard and Edward Mabley
- *The Power of Film* by Howard Suber
- *The Hollywood Standard* by Christopher Riley

Web sites

- www.script-o-rama.com
- www.scriptfrenzy.org
- www.iscriptdb.com
- www.scriptapalooza.com
- www.simplyscripts.com
- www.scriptpimp.com
- www.dailyscript.com
- www.storysolver.com
- www.writersstore.com
- screenwritingexpo.com
- creativescreenwriting.com

Travel Writing with Peat O'Neil

By Carrie Oleynik

Grab your laptop and get your camera ready. According to Peat O'Neil, a multi-time author and travel journalist, travel writing is about real people, doing real things – not just about you or a cool building that you saw on your summer vacation. So what form does travel writing take?

O'Neil shared the following possibilities:

- **Literary essays:** Usually placed in lit mags, these don't usually pay well. On the plus side, this is great for a writer's portfolio.
- **Journalism:** Self-explanatory, pick up a newspaper or magazine.
- **How-to or just facts:** Easy for novices, this form of writing provides information not already seen or written and explains how to do something in a particular place.

Among many helpful tips on how to break into travel writing, the quality of the idea is what sells the piece. During O'Neil's session on travel writ-

ing at the 2008 Baltimore Writers' Conference, she asked the audience to think of a place and write down what someone may hear, see, taste, feel, or smell at the location. She advised doing a similar exercise, if possible, when working on a travel piece.

Of course, the quality of the writing needs to speak to the experience. O'Neil discussed the writing process of travel writing, including using visible, audible verbs and, in the editing process, replacing dull verbs with more active descriptions.

"Focus on movement rather than what you think is happening," she said. "Travel writing is rich, inspiring writing."

She also reviewed the elements that needed to be present within a travel piece, regardless of the length. This included a title, lead, a sentence or paragraph to get the reader to on the ground location, why the reader is where he or she is or a theme, character development, and details on the location – this includes facts that most people haven't heard before about a particular location.

"Travel writing is rich, inspiring writing."

- Peat O'Neil, travel journalist and author

In addition to advising writers to "establish yourselves at home first" or build a set of clips in areas that may tie into travel writing (she used food writing as an example), O'Neil shared the following tools that a travel writer may find useful in the long-run:

- Keep a journal, post cards you send to others, or send e-mails to yourself about the location.
- Take an inexpensive camera.
- Develop in-country friends or local friends.
- Read widely and read before travelers were writing about a particular place, learn about the geography, literature and anthropology of the place.
- Save personal impressions for other kinds of writing, the travel reader is not reading about the writer, but the people there and the place.
- Pick a target publication and read it regularly.
- Build a presence on the web.
- If a writer wants to include the travel piece in his or her own blog, take a part of the writing and place on the web in smaller amounts.
- Go beyond the submitting process and look into a product you can produce yourself – use the same research and repackage your work.
- Be gutsy. Sell yourself and your work.

Ready, Set, Blog

By Francesca Jenét Tadle

The Blogging for Bucks session was led by a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who blogs about dog cloning and an author/speaker who writes on politics and trout-fishing. John Woestendiek and Bruce Jacobs, respectively, provided an interesting look at the world of blogging while offering good advice to novice bloggers.

Woestendiek, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his investigative reporting at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, created the *Baltimore Sun's* "Mutts" blog and continues to write about canines on his own Web site. Jacobs uses his blog as a forum to discuss issues on politics, race and the occasional

trout-fishing story.

"It is a way for me to extend the work that I do as an author and a speaker," Jacobs said of blogging.

"I put entries at 3 or 4 in the morning, at some unreasonable hour."

— Bruce Jacobs, political writer and blogger

Both men agreed that blog topics should be an interest or a hobby of the writer. Successful blogs offer in-depth and thoughtful entries that may range from a few lines to several paragraphs. Woestendiek and Jacobs encourage bloggers to provide links to other pertinent Web sites, as the additional links help readers find their blog.

Once a readership is established, about "10-20 percent of content comes from reader suggestions," said Jacobs.

Woestendiek reminded attendees that "there is no editor," so it is very important to fact check and proof read all entries before posting.

Maintaining a blog can be hard work.

"It can take over [your life]," Woestendiek warned.

In fact, both men have found themselves posting entries at all hours during the day.

"I put up my entries at 3 or 4 in the morning, at some unreasonable hour," said Jacobs.

Yet, they continue to blog nearly daily and enjoy it. The smiles on their faces during the session gave it away.

"The idea is to connect with people," Jacobs said.



Tips for Blogging:

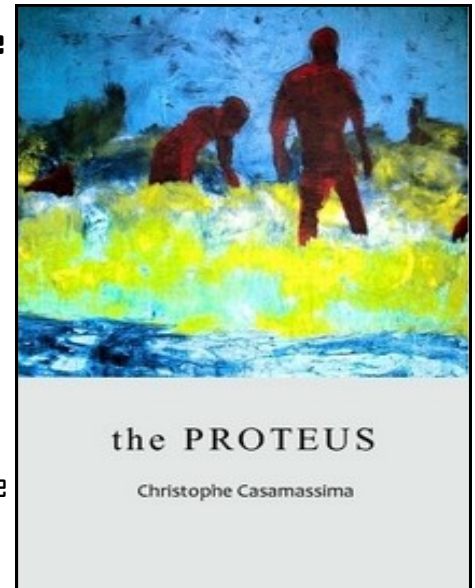
1. fact check
2. proof read
3. screen reader comments
4. provide links to other Web sites
5. contribute frequently – mix it up with short and long entries
6. give your readers a reason to come – pick interesting topics and write an in-depth, thoughtful discourse

PRWR news:

- Current PRWR grad student **Maggie Beetz** won first place in City Paper's poetry contest for her poem "Breakfast Triolet"... congrats Maggie!
- **Dr. David Bergman** has signed a contract with Sheep Meadow Press to publish the translation he wrote with Katia Sainson, of the Foreign Languages Department: *The Selected Poem of Jean Senac*, and Algerian poet, who was assassinated in 1973 and may have been the first victim of Islamic fundamentalism. His anthology *Gay American Autobiography: From Whitman to Sedaris* will be out this spring from the University of Wisconsin Press. You can also find published poems by Dr. Bergman in the Charon Review and the Kenyon Review.
- **Dr. Harvey Lillywhite** will be offering PRWR730 Writing Reviews this mini-semester. This will be a 100 percent on-line class. It will be a writing workshop that focuses on writing many kinds of reviews, including restaurants, movies, performances, books, etc.
- After graduating from Towson University's Professional Writing Program, **Katie Arcieri** was hired in 2006 as the business reporter for The Capital, a roughly 50,000 circulation newspaper in the state capital of Annapolis. Katie has used the skills she gained from Towson's writing program to sharpen hard news stories and write compelling feature ar-

ticles. Katie recommends the professional writing program to writers interested in a wide range of concentrations, from journalism to novel writing.

- Alumnus **Christophe Casamassima** published two books of poetry: *the Proteus* with Moria Books and *Jays: A Catalogue of Disappointments* with Blaze VOX Books. Casamassima has become the Director of Literary Arts at the Towson Arts Collective and also teaches undergraduate English courses at Towson University.



To purchase PRWR alumnus Christophe Casamassima's first book of poetry, the **Proteus**, (cover art above) go to : <http://www.lulu.com/content/2570894>

- **Program Director Geoffrey Becker** has won the 2008 Flannery O'Connor Prize for fiction for his short story collection, *Black Elvis*, which will be published next fall by the University of Georgia Press. In addition he is also the winner of the 2008 Parthenon Prize for Literature for his novel, *Hot Springs*, which will be published by Tin House Books. He has short stories forthcoming in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *Shenandoah*.

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