

SOARING

Newsletter of Spalding University's MFA Alumni

HOMECOMING 2008: Schedule and details

May 30-June 1 are the dates for this year's Homecoming. Check out all the activities to choose from!

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Report: "Novels In Progress Workshop"

Held annually on Spalding's Campus, here's an inside look at the workshop and pitch session sponsored by Green River Writers.

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A self-interview goes where we feared to send our editors--into Joey's Brain!

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Festival Reports:

*Report from the **Inge Festival** & from the **Festival of Faith & Writing***

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AND SO MUCH MORE...

Coming Home?

Homecoming 2008 is a little over a week away and things are in place. We've even added a new event to our Friday line up as you can come to the Lectorium at 11 a.m. and listen to a live WFPL-FM radio broadcast of interviews with three of our published alumni. After that, we launch into our afternoon of lectures, followed by an evening with Pico Iyer and our initial Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni and reception. We kick off Saturday morning with a 10:15 alumni brunch at The Brown with the MFA staff with graduate readings and alumni readings in the afternoon, followed by graduation.

If you haven't sent in your registration, send us an email immediately to email@spaldingmfaalum.com and we'll continue to make room for you until it's logistically impossible. Selfishly I'd love to see as many of you as possible at the Saturday brunch with the staff, but the registration is a must to be a part.

I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible in Louisville.

Best always,

Terry

Terry Price, Fiction, 2006



SOARING

Homecoming 2008

Just a reminder here of the Homecoming schedule. ***NOTE: there have been some time shifts and additions.**

Please come to the 'Celebration' on Friday night, even if you are unable to attend the rest of Homecoming.

ALSO, we'd like to invite the Spring 2008 graduates (our newest alumni!) to join us at the brunch on Sunday morning at J. Graham's Cafe on the main floor of the Brown. Please note that this meal is **not** included in any registration; therefore everyone must pay for it separately.

Spalding Alums to Discuss Their First Books on WFPL's *State of Affairs* Radio Show

A novelist, a poet, and a nonfiction author—all first-time authors and all alumni of Spalding University's brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing—will appear at 11 a.m. Friday, May 30, on WFPL's (89.3 FM) *State of Affairs* radio program. Hosted by Julie Kredens, the hourlong program delves into the question of what it's like to have a first book published. How long does it take? What are the struggles? What expectations come with being published, and how does the reality compare? Sharing their experiences are Dawn Shamp, author of the novel *On Account of Conspicuous Women* (Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press), set in suffragette-era North Carolina; Jonathan Weinert, author of *In the Mode of Disappearance* (Nightboat Books), which won the 2006 Nightboat Poetry Prize; and Kathryn Eastburn, author of *Simon Says: A True Story of Boys, Guns and Murder* (Da Capo Press), an account of a triple murder in rural Colorado. **Listen to the live broadcast of this show in the ELC, Friday, May 30 from 11-noon.**



(Thursday, May 29 for alums who arrive early)

4-6:30pm PGRA readings followed by the Celebration of Recently Published Books by mentors (Crystal Ballroom)

7pm The Louisville Free Public Library (one block from campus) is offering a limited number of free tickets for a presentation by Lauren Weisberger, NYT bestselling author of *The Devil Wears Prada*. She will discuss her new novel, *Chasing Harry Winston*. Alumni wanting tickets need to email Katy at kyocom@spalding.edu by April 23.

Friday, May 30

- 11-noon Listen to the WFPL's broadcast of the interview with Dawn Shamp, Jonathan Weinert, and Kathryn Eastburn in the ELC
- 12:15-1:pm Terry Price Lunch Lecture on Copyright
- 1:15-2:30pm Graduate Readings
- 2:45-3:30pm Katy Yocom Plenary Lecture on Research
- 3:45-4:45pm Amy Holman Publishing Lecture
- 5:30-6:45pm Pico Iyer with Signing/Reception (Crystal Ballroom)

7-8:30pm Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni

(Crystal Ballroom)

FEATURING: *Joey Goebel, Erin Keane, Dawn Shamp, Pam Steele, Julia Watts, Jonathan Weinert & Kathryn Eastburn*

Saturday, May 31

- 10:15-11:45am Alumni Brunch with MFA staff
- 1:15-2:30pm Graduate Readings
- 2:45-4pm Alumni Readings in Lectorium
- 5pm Graduation followed by dinner at the Brown

Sunday, June 1 10am - ALUMNI ASSOCIATION BRUNCH

The purpose is to voice feedback on Homecoming 2008 and gather ideas for 2009. **All Alumni AND New Graduates Welcome!! Brunch is at J. Graham's Cafe on the first floor of the Brown. Please note that this brunch is NOT included in your Homecoming registration. [Everyone must pay their way.]**

SOARING REPORT

Novels in Progress Workshop

By Vickie Weaver (with help from Bonnie Omer Johnson)

Each spring, *Green River Writers* puts on a Novels in Progress Workshop at Spalding. www.nipw.org

Louisville is a great place to visit, *and* I would like to live there. But that's not going to work out for me, so I often take advantage of the fact that I live only three hours away and use any reason to return. Recently, Bonnie and I attended some sessions of the Novels In Progress Workshop. The week-long conference offers "faculty-led breakout sessions, individual instruction with faculty members, small-group critique sessions, a panel discussion with agents and editors, and opportunities for one-on-one meetings [pitch sessions] with agent and editor guests." Also included are a welcome dinner, mid-week pizza party, and closing party. Class topics included point of view, novel revision, and publishing, among others. Spalding alumnus Andrew Beahrs was part of the faculty, instructing about "Research and the Author" and "Tightening Your Writing." Jeff Yocom, a current MFA student (& Katy's husband) planned the event.

One great thing about this conference is that you can attend the entire week, or choose certain days to attend. The only session I attended was Saturday, the panel discussion followed by the pitch session. There were four agents at the panel discussion: Brandi Bowles (Howard Morhaim Agency), Paul S. Levine (Paul S. Levine Agency), Laurie McLean (Larsen Pomada Agency), and one editor, Lynn Price (Behler Publications). They provided insight into the relationships between agents and writers, editors and writers, and the business of publication. They fielded questions, shared success stories and gave tips on queries and pitching. The pitch session is like speed dating for your novel. This was my second time doing this, so I started off with an antacid. While I waited, I mentally prepared myself to make my novel sound like a novel they'd write a contract for, sight unseen. I vowed to be way cool when movie rights were mentioned.

Truthfully, I'm not so good at the pitch yet. Paring my novel down to one sentence, or three minutes, takes practice and grit. But generally, everyone that I pitched to was kind and gave considerate advice about how to tweak my pitch for success. Last year, when I told one agent that my novel was set in Kentucky, he said, "Kentucky? People in New York don't care about Kentucky. They don't even know where Kentucky is!" I guess he's entitled to his opinion. And I got another lesson in keeping my chin up when I got his less than favorable feedback about my work. This year, an agent did ask me to send sample pages and a synopsis (different book but with parts set in Kentucky). Okay, no contract was signed, but I have to start somewhere. Besides, I'd gained experience for the next time.

If you look at the website, you'll see that I paid \$169 for Saturday's pitch session. Of the four agents present, I pitched to three. As a result of the session, I have an opportunity to contact one agent at her invitation, so the envelope I send to her won't go straight into the wastebasket or slush pile. Whether anything comes of that, or not, I think it was a fair price for pitching my novel to qualified agents who paid attention when I spoke, asked pertinent questions, gave me advice, and wished me luck.

I like this event partly, I admit, because it feels like I'm returning to Spalding and Spalding feels like home to me. But I need to give Green River Writers the credit earned for its professional manner of providing a variety of options to learn, for writing and publishing instruction, for making everyone feel welcome, and for throwing in a little fun on top of all that. Jeff answered my email questions promptly, which I appreciated. As a result of attending, I'm gaining confidence in my pitching ability and learning more about myself as a writer. If you want to be added to the Green River Writers email list for next year, sign up on their website.

[Editor's Note: Agents and editors who will be at the next session will be listed on the 'Novels In Progress Workshop' website, www.NIPW.org. It's easy to research each agent either using the Writer's Market or the agency's own website. That way, you can determine how many agents may be potentially receptive to your specific novel.]

BONNIE SPEAKS:

I've attended this event for the past three years. One thing that stood out each time was the accessibility of faculty members and their genuine support for writers. From the Pulitzer Prize-nominated William Cobb (*A Walk Through the Fire* [1992]) to fellow alumnus, Andrew Beahrs (*Strange Saint* [2005] and *The Sin Eaters* [2008]), faculty and Green River Writers members were available to answer questions and share their own experiences.

A unique feature of this event is Saturday's pitch session. This is set up in Spalding University's ballroom. The day begins with an informative panel discussion so that writers know which agents represent, for example, horror or science fiction, historical fiction, literary fiction, nonfiction, or screenplays, etc. Writers then approach appropriate agents with a three-minute pitch. An agent sits at a table in each corner of the room, with one empty chair beside him. Kindly, but firmly, an agent will say that he/she is not interested, or, if interest is piqued, the agent may extend the discussion. Sometimes agents simply wish the author luck, or they may hand over their business card and ask the author to send the first three chapters, a synopsis, or an entire manuscript.

The pitch session forces writers to focus on the conflict and resolution of their novels, and to learn to draw out exactly the story's reason for being. For novelists, especially for me, keeping in mind the primary plot point, the tone and intent of the story is helpful when revising or when preparing a pitch. With practice, meeting with agents or editors becomes less daunting since you become the spokesperson for the work you've created. A healthy dialog with an agent strengthens a writer and perhaps the work.

The NIP Workshop has a lot of *bang for the buck* primarily because of the accessibility of faculty and the variety of agents who attend. Each agent is careful not to raise false hopes or waste a writer's time. They tell what kind of writing they represent, how they select manuscripts, and the appropriate ways to query and pitch. It seems that agents seek more commercial than literary properties, but all hope for quality writing. As its name indicates, the conference is designed for fiction writers only (including children's and genre fiction) and is not for poets, although screenwriters may glean useful information.



SOARING INTERVIEW

Joey Goebel: An Interview with Someone He Loves

By, ummm, Joey Goebel

Joey Goebel: Firstly, don't you think this is kind of self-indulgent — interviewing yourself?

Joey Goebel: No. Loreen asked me to do this, and I was happy to oblige. There is one pitfall: I run the risk of seeming “cute,” but I'll make sure that I keep the interview mean-spirited enough that this pitfall will be avoided.

JG: I don't think you have to worry about the word “cute” being used toward you. You look like something the cat coughed up.

JG: At any rate, this is my chance to promote the *Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni*. I am one-seventh of this Spalding literary extravaganza. It promises to be most bodacious.

JG: Fascinating. So you had two novels published before you attended Spalding, though in hindsight, both novels border on being unreadable. Why did you choose to go for an MFA?

JG: I learned what so many professional writers already knew: it is very difficult to live off of your writing alone. I get royalty checks from my publisher twice a year, and I never know how much I'll be making from one year to the next. I knew I'd be getting married soon, and I decided I wanted more financial security, and I also knew I wanted to teach. So with all that—plus with the costliness of my scrapbooking addiction—furthering my education made sense. I was also under contract to write my third novel, so since I'd be writing it anyway, I thought, “Hey—I could be getting credit in grad school for writing these chapters,” which is what I did. Each packet was one chapter from my novel, the one I ended up calling *Commonwealth*.

JG: How much influence did the Spalding MFA program have on the manuscript of *Commonwealth*?

JG: For one thing, it really sped me up on writing the first draft. Because of the packet schedule, every few weeks forty-some-odd pages were due, so by the time I graduated, I had a 500-plus page manuscript completed. On the other hand, I think my Spalding experience did just the opposite for my revision process. It slowed me down. I was self-conscious about my writing to begin with, but after all those workshops, all those lectures, and especially all those insights in the letters the mentors would send back to me, my carefulness in revising was taken to a whole new level, which is a good thing. As a result, it took me sixteen months before I finally stopped revising and editing and let my editor see it.

JG: Did any parts of your new novel get workshopped at Spalding?

JG: Yes. Part of a chapter was critiqued in Neela's workshop, and part of another chapter was critiqued in Kenny and Rachel's. That was a great opportunity for me to kind of test the material. I got some useful feedback, for sure.

JG: Who were your mentors at Spalding?

JG: Kirby Gann, Roy Hoffman, and Mary Waters. All three kicked fanny in the best possible way.

JG: Do you have any favorite memories of your MFA experience?

JG: I loved the whole Brown Hotel experience. It's one of those places where you feel cool just being there. It gives the program a grandiose feel, like what we're doing is momentous. For instance, I remember my first residency started with the big opening dinner in the Crystal Ballroom, which immediately suggested to me, “Wow. This is really something.” I'm ecstatic that the *Celebration of Recently Published Books by Alumni* will be held in this room, and I'm really happy that this will be the first place my new book will be on sale.

JG: What's your new book about?

JG: The human condition.

JG: Could you be more specific?

JG: Society?

JG: *Commonwealth* is about a really skanky young man named Blue Gene, but the high-concept twist is that he comes from a superrich family. It's basically a dramatization of American class conflict. It's a political novel with lots of mullet references.

JG: Anything else you'd like to add?

JG: Reading my new novel should be considered PLENARY.



This is YOUR newsletter.

Contribute ideas to:

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SOARING

FESTIVAL REPORT

MFA Scholarship

Fund

Pathways to Success: MFA Scholarship Gifts Are Matched



Spalding University is involved in a challenge grant with the James Graham Brown Foundation to raise endowed scholarship dollars for our students with financial needs.

[Mr. James Graham Brown]

The MFA Program will receive a fifty percent match for each dollar donated to our graduate creative writing scholarships through December 31st.

That means that for every gift of \$100 to the MFA Scholarship Program, the Brown Foundation will add \$50 to that gift for a total of \$150. All gifts designated for the Spalding MFA Program will only be used for scholarships for MFA students.

Remember donations are tax deductible.

To download a brochure with details go to:

http://www.spaldingmfaalum.com/MFA_Scholarship_Fund.html

For additional information or to contribute to the Spalding MFA Scholarship Fund, contact Kathleen Driskell at:

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Theatre Festival Report

By Jeanne Haggard

Listen up theatre people: there is a fantastic opportunity to come together with fellow playwrights, actors, directors and theatre lovers once a year in, of all places, Kansas. Yes Kansas -- more specifically, Independence, home of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and Oscar winning screenwriter William Inge. Every April, Independence hosts the **William Inge Theatre Festival**, coordinated by the arts center named in his honor.

This year was the 27th annual festival, and playwright Christopher Durang was the honoree. Adam Bock was the winner of the Otis Guernsey New Voices in Playwriting Award, and writers in residence Alice Tuan and Adam Kraar led workshops as well.

The festival begins on a Wednesday and runs through Saturday. This year it was held April 23-26. Most of the events are on the campus of Independence Community College, and some events are held at other locations in town. Things started with a production of Inge's play *Picnic*, directed by Michele Pawk, on April 23.

Thursday, Friday and Saturday were filled with various workshops. The main problem was that some workshops were scheduled concurrently, so you couldn't attend everything. The highlight of my festival experience was Christopher Durang's master playwriting class. He shared the first two scenes of his newest play and also imparted words of wisdom. In Alice Tuan's workshop, I was inspired to start a new piece.

Thursday evening there was a staged reading of *The Flowers* by the Otis Guernsey award winner Adam Bock, followed by the awards presentation. There was a gala dinner and auction held in downtown Independence on Friday. There was also a special screening of Inge's Oscar-winner, *Splendor in the Grass*, starring Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty. Saturday evening, the main event was the tribute to the honored playwright, followed by the awards presentation.

There were also opportunities to see scenes presented by scholarship-winning college students staged in William Inge's boyhood home. Scenes were selected from previously honored playwrights or an Inge play and students competed for the scholarships at regional Kennedy Center American College Theatre festivals across the country. There were also opportunities to learn more about Inge during special sessions with his biographer, during a driving tour of Independence, or by checking out the library's collection of his work.

This is the second time I attended the festival and it was as fabulous as the first time. I learned something in every workshop I attended, got to actually speak to Christopher Durang (one of my idols), and got my scripts signed. Does it get any better?

If you're interested in learning more about the William Inge Center for the Arts or the Inge Festival, check out the web site – www.ingecenter.org.

Hope to see you there next year!



SOARING

Big Chain Versus Independent Bookseller *By Loreen Niewenhuis*

I've been to the **Tattered Cover Book Store** in Denver, and **Carmichael's Bookstore** in Louisville, and the **Elliot Bay Book Company** in Seattle. The lovely thing about each of these independent bookstores is that while I was perusing, I never forgot what city I was visiting. The big chains, Borders and Barnes & Noble (B&N), pride themselves on delivering a consistent book-buying experience whether you're in Dallas or Dubuque, Anchorage or Atlanta. And they consistently deliver this homogeneity.

Ten years ago, I moved to the town of Battle Creek, Michigan (Yes! Home of Kellogg's!). At that time, I had to drive twenty minutes to Kalamazoo (Yes! There really is a Kalamazoo!) to find a New York Times. There was no delivery of that paper here, and there wasn't a bookstore (big chain or independent) any closer. About five years ago, a B&N opened in our mall and changed my life. I would call Mary, my B&N bookseller, first thing on Sunday morning and she'd set aside a Times for me. I'd pick it up at my leisure (and take some time to peruse the books), then spend some time engaging with the wider world in the pages of the newspaper. B&N also brought the first Starbucks to this town and I could finally get a decent cup of coffee or chai tea latte. So, yes, I have a certain affection for this big chain that has made this small town so much more livable.

So, what does it matter: big chain versus indie bookseller? What does it matter to the publishing business? To the consumer? To the writer? Since graduating from Spalding, and after having met some publishers from the independent presses along the way at Spalding (Kirby Gann works at Sarabande, Spalding has its own small press, Fleur de Lis, and several agents and publishers were speakers during my time at Spalding) and at conferences, I've had some time to give some thought (and do some research) into the different roles which the big chains play versus the indies.

This is not a polemic, but, rather, an exploration into the subject. Hopefully it will foster some discussion and make you think a bit before you click on Amazon or one of the big chain's sites. As a writer (of any genre), you may have a larger stake in the situation than you are aware. And what is the situation? Well, over the last ten years, about half of the independent bookstores in America have disappeared. Is this something we need to be concerned about as consumers? As writers?

The box at the bottom of this page contains portions of the mission statements from the two major chain booksellers, Borders and B&N, and then from Powell's, a large (six store) independent bookseller in Portland, Oregon. Read them over, and in the next issue we'll take a deeper look at the role of the independent bookseller in America. If you have a comment to add to the discussion, shoot a letter to the editor at SOARING@MFAALum.com.



BORDERS: Their mission statement is: "To be a headquarters for knowledge and entertainment." On their website, they list the 'personality' of their stores as "engaging, spirited, inspiring, and sincere..."

BARNES & NOBLE: Part of B&N's circuitous mission statement is: "Our mission is to operate the best specialty retail business in America, regardless of the product we sell. Because the product we sell is books, our aspirations must be consistent with the promise and the ideals of the volumes which line our shelves. To say that our mission exists independent of the product we sell is to demean the importance and the distinction of being booksellers...Above all, we expect to be a credit to the communities we serve, a valuable resource to our customers, and a place where our dedicated booksellers can grow and prosper."



The mission statement of Powell's in Portland, Oregon is: "We have a social responsibility to the community and to our industry to fight censorship, promote literary awareness and **encourage authors and their works.**" [emphasis added]

SOARING FESTIVAL REPORT

festival of
faith & writing

By Aimee Zaring

I've been wanting to check out Calvin College's biennial Festival of Faith and Writing (FFW) at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI for some time. This year, after learning that Yann Martel, Michael Chabon, Mary Gordon, and Elizabeth Berg were just some of the scheduled speakers, I finally took the plunge and signed up for the three-day conference (and at the early-bird discounted registration fee of \$165, a bargain).

I have to admit that I wasn't sure what to expect at the FFW. As one of my writing friends commented, writers in general can be a quirky crew; throw religion into the mix and no telling what you'll get. But those I met out of the roughly two thousand, mostly Christian, attendees were an open-minded and down-to-earth bunch, dedicated to discussing and celebrating good literature, improving their craft, and learning more about how different faith traditions, perspectives, and cultures inform the works of great artists.

To give you an idea of just how different in scope and concentration the FFW is from other writing seminars, here are some titles of session topics: "Is Fiction Moral?," "Literary Fiction: A Place for Faith?," "Truth and Beauty: Visual Artists in Conversation," "Writing Poems from Different Parts of the Soul," "Faith in One-self: The Writer Versus Hollywood," "Writ-

ing for the Middle-School Reader: War, Trouble, and Calamity," "The Eagles are Coming: Faith, Fairy Tales, and Fantasy," and "The Perfect Book Proposal."

And what other writing seminar can you find morning prayers and jazz vespers on the itinerary? Because there were so many great sessions — a mix of readings, panel discussions, lectures, and intimate interviews — scheduled concurrently, I also appreciated that the Festival recorded many of these sessions and have made the audio recordings available for download exclusively for Festival participants.

A few negatives: one draw for me was the Festival's invitation to participants to submit a pitch letter and writing sample of a finished manuscript prior to the Festival to be read by agents and editors attending the conference. If an agent or editor was interested in what they read, they would contact the participant and set up a time to meet during the Festival. During one agent/editor panel, I learned that these agents and editors hadn't had time to look through these submissions. I was also disappointed in the lack of diversity among the publishers and exhibitors represented at the conference.

The Festival overall was well coordinated and the campus was beautiful and easy to navigate, and for those staying at nearby hotels, shuttle buses were provided to and from the campus and off-site events. A Festival coordinator said on the first day of the conference that it was the Festival's hope that we not hear anything that sounded too familiar or too comfortable, because that would mean the Festival hadn't succeeded in stretching us. I can definitely say that my thinking — and faith — was stretched and challenged during my short

time at Calvin. In fact, the FFW was one of the first writing seminars I've ever attended where I left feeling as though my humanity was enriched as much as, if not more than, my writing.

The next FFW is slated for April 15-17, 2010. For more information, check out the Festival's website at: www.calvin.edu/academic/engl/festival.

COMING
ATTRACTIONS

* A POETIC DUET: Q&A with Jonathan Weinert and Erin Keane at a reading where they appeared together.

* Report: From Homecoming!

* Report from the London/Bath residency

* We'll continue to explore the role of the independent bookstore.

* Much, much more!

classifieds/services:

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The Southern Review Resident Scholar. This post-graduate position is designed for students who have recently graduated from an MFA, PhD, or equivalent program or who will have degree in hand by August 1, 2008. If possible, please forward to qualified students. More information can be found on our website at <http://www.lsu.edu/tsr>.

The Spalding MFA Alumni Association is an independent organization established by graduates of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program of Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky and exists to facilitate communication among alumni and between alumni and the MFA in Writing Program. The Association does not represent the University or the MFA program, and all activities, publications, views and statements are those of the individual writers who are affiliated with the Spalding MFA Alumni Association, and are not those of Spalding University, the MFA in Writing Program of Spalding, its staff, faculty, employees and agents.