

Revise This - March 2015

Revise This!

Wilkes University Creative Writing Newsletter

Revise This! | March 2015

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Marlon James Continues to Knock 'em Dead with Seven Killings

UPDATE Oct. 13, 2015: Creative Writing grad Marlon James '06 has won the 2015

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[Man Booker Prize](#) for *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. He is the first Jamaican author to win the Man Booker Prize, considered one of the most prestigious prizes in literature.

Recently, Wilkes alum Marlon James has been making international news in the literary world with the release of his latest novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, which has been featured in numerous media outlets from *The New York Times* to BuzzFeed. The novel takes readers from the violent streets of West Kingston to New York, and then within the scope of a 30-year span, back to a drastically changed Jamaica. The story reveals the perspectives of a wide range of characters including gunmen, drug dealers, CIA agents, and spectral beings. The “briefness” insinuated in the title as well as its specificity of body count are belied by its near 700-page length and abundant body count, which immediately signals the reader to the novel’s weight, both metaphorical and literal.

Even though James was born and raised in Jamaica, he has stated that his fiction is only minimally related to his own life story. In an interview with *Biographile*, he detailed how he (along with four other researchers) did extensive studies on the time period of the book, from the history of the CIA and The Cold War to back issues of *High Times* and Bob Marley books. Not incidentally, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* begins with the attempted assassination of Bob Marley and his family.

James made an appearance on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, on March 3rd, and spoke candidly about the inspiration for the novel: “I was writing a story about this sexually-conflicted gay man in Chicago trying to kill this Jamaican guy.” He tells about how he “kept running into dead ends,” not only with this character but another, and he thought they were simply failed attempts at novellas until his friend Rachel told him, “You know this is one story,” which helped him bring it all together. Additionally, he relates that there are actually eight killings in the novel, but he retained its title because *A Brief History of Eight Killings* would be “so unsexy.”

A Brief History of Seven Killings has been named one of the best books of 2014 by *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *Newsweek*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, and many more. It also brought in the New Year by placing on the BBC’s list “The Top Ten Books of 2014.” Additionally, it was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, the second time he has been nominated for this award. *The Book of Night Women*, his

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second novel, was also a finalist.

James received his master's in creative writing from Wilkes University in 2006, as a member of the first cohort and joined Macalester College's English faculty in 2007. His writing has since earned an impressive list of accolades. John Crow's Devil, his debut novel, was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and The Commonwealth Writers Prize. It was also a New York Times Editors' Choice. His later novel, The Book of Night Women won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and the Minnesota Book Award. Considering his continually growing array of success that is bolstered with each new release, Marlon has evolved from a student into a beacon of the program's excellence.

Cracking Open Nesting Dolls

Salena Fehnel's novel, Nesting Dolls, recently received the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award and has served as a platform to talk about the cyclical nature of domestic abuse. Her novel starkly illustrates the patterns of behavior caused by parental influence through the narrated accounts of three generations of women and further highlights the struggles of the younger generations to forge a new path against the tide of those patterns. Fehnel explains, "domestic abuse is one of those imprints that seems to stick from generation to generation, with primarily the women choosing abusive partners. I wanted to write a story about breaking that cycle."



Nesting Dolls does just that by demonstrating the connection between mothers and daughters, and the trials they face. Fehnel continues, "since Nesting Dolls came out, I have had so many women come up to me at events and tell me that they are the first generation to break the cycle of abuse, which is incredibly gratifying to hear, since the book was inspired by such stories."

When Fehnel first started writing this story in 2004, Valentine's perspective was dominant, but as she continued the story, issues of Valentine's past left Fehnel with so many unanswered questions, other points of view began to emerge.

Valentine, one of three main characters in Nesting Dolls, comes from a long line of dysfunctional relationships and neglect. In caring for her six-year-old brother for the entirety of his young life, she comes to realize

how devastating and dysfunctional her family's behaviors have been and commits to making change. The story shifts back to her mother Theresa, a pregnant thirteen-year-old and shifts again to her grandmother Caroline, who herself is in the midst of an abusive marriage. Each character's narrative takes place in a similar age bracket, which helps to depict the divergent characteristic of the various time periods. Fehnel said her biggest challenge was "separating them enough that they felt like individuals." As the plot formed and their circumstances became more vivid, their voices evolved in riveting dialogue and subtext.

"We all have family 'stuff' that we don't share with other people that lies deeply hidden and is sometimes never spoken about," Fehnel says. "Valentine's is more visible to the outside world, but who she chooses to become, how she chooses to break the cycle, and ultimately what she does for the generation that will follow her and her brother, is done through love, a lot of bravery, and heart."

Fehnel's second novel, *The Payment Plan*, is in the final stages of editing and will be released this summer. Her third novel *Fortunemaker* is in progress. When Fehnel isn't writing, she is teaching fiction and aiding her students in finding their voices.

Fehnel is also proud to be working on a project called *A New Day*, which is a GoFundMe campaign that finances domestic abuse kits for women in difficult and potentially dangerous situations. "It's just getting started," she says, "but I am dedicated to making it work because, like Valentine, Theresa, and Caroline, it could make the difference in entire generations to come."

More and More Alums Migrating "Home" to Wilkes

"Attending Wilkes is my No.1 hobby!" says Florida native Michael Soloway, who has returned to the program to study fiction writing. While many alums stay both active and vocal in the Wilkes community beyond graduation, Soloway is a part of a trend of alums returning to the program to pursue additional degrees in either different genres or the recently added track in publishing. Alums are awarded for returning with a reduced tuition



rate and the advantage of knowing the ins and outs of the program and its substantial successes.

For Michael, writing is no hobby; it's a profession (though he does list among his hobbies a proclivity to the infamous Talarigo naps). He is the editor of Georgia Southern Magazine at Georgia Southern university as well as their assistant director of University publications. Among his current works in progress are a full-length play, two 10-minute plays, and a novel to boot. He also maintains a healthy habit of reading most recently with Gregory Fletcher's new craft book, *Shorts & Briefs*, among others.

Soloway was originally inspired to apply to Wilkes University after researching Beverly Donofrio. When he saw that she "teaches at the low-res writing program" at Wilkes, he "instantly applied." Now he "can't seem to stay away." He compares it to a family like in the *Godfather* that keeps pulling him back in and challenging him in new ways.

As an ambitious student, Soloway originally studied creative nonfiction/memoir, which led to his own memoir, *Share the Chameleon*, about his attempt to liberate himself from the previous patterns of family abuse after he became a father for the first time at 41. He continued to explore this theme in his M.F.A. analytical paper, which examined the "masks [both literal and figurative] that people wear to hide fear, shame and guilt growing up in an abusive household." Soloway was also fortunate and driven enough to have received a double concentration in playwriting with Greg Fletcher, who was instrumental in helping Soloway shape his memoir. He had a love for both genres, and, after writing the first draft of his memoir, he "wanted to let it sit, take a break from prose, and explore more of [his] love for the stage." Soloway then developed, as the final piece of his M.F.A. creative work, a full-length play titled, "The Flower Rules," which he composed under the tutelage of Jean Klein.

Soloway notes that the Wilkes creative writing program has fulfilled all of his expectations so far, and though he has participated in other low-residency writing programs at both Hollins University and Lesley University, which have been ranked as the “best,” Soloway believes, “Wilkes supersedes them in every way. This is one case in which numbers do lie. Rankings are nice to look at and brag about and refer to, but ultimately it’s all about comfort, structure and guidance.” He continues saying that “the ‘top’ programs are only tops if they’re the best fit for you.” Beyond the curriculum, he stresses the importance of finding the right mentor (or mentors) to guide student writers. He also praises the cohort model, saying “lifelong friendships are made that way; it’s what gives Wilkes that family feeling.”

Soloway admits to being a bit of workaholic having originally drafted his memoir in three months, and he has written in several genres. He says, “ultimately, I decided to return because I trust the people at Wilkes. It’s home. And I needed help in finishing a novel, something with a longer narrative arc.” He hopes to one day teach, and he knows that a M.A. in fiction will better his resume.

If you are you a Wilkes alum, and you are toying with the idea of returning to Wilkes to pursue an additional degree, Soloway says, “I’m not a Nike guy; I like Adidas. But I say, ‘Just do it!’” “With the wide variety of mentors, genres, and experience Wilkes never runs out of skills to add to a writer’s toolbox and that makes it well worth the tuition.”

Soloway knows that his time at Wilkes has been a cornerstone to his goals of publishing, producing, and teaching. He has been on the journey to becoming an author and full-time writer since the third grade, and he concludes with “even on those days when I’m not following my dream, I know it’s still following me.”

Gaia: A Story of How Human Gardens Can Make for a Successful Screenplay

Over the past year, Autumn Stapleton-Laskey’s science-fiction screenplay *Gaia* has been the recipient of numerous awards such as first place in the Science Fiction category at the World Series of Screenwriting and first place in The Indie Gathering’s Sci-fi Feature Contest. Currently, it is publicly available to read, free of charge, on the Screen Writer’s Showcase and The Black List. The screenplay is set in a near-future world where human clones are grown in gardens to provide organs for non-clone citizens. The

very first clone, Gaia, “wakes up” at the beginning of a harvest season and head scientist Cecillia Roden, who happens to be Gaia’s creator, endeavors ceaselessly to understand how.



Stapleton-Laskey worked on Gaia, which was originally her thesis at Wilkes, for about a year to a year and a half. During that time she lived on steady flow of Monster beverages. She ate, drank, and breathed the story as she fostered its evolution into what it is today.

Her original inspiration for Gaia came from an image while completing her screenwriting course. This image consisted of a body, lying in an incubator, and generating organs like a plant in a greenhouse. This became the basis of her “human garden” concept and the screenplay quickly grew from that image. According to Stapleton-Laskey, she outlined, wrote, edited, revised the outline, wrote, edited, revised the outline again, wrote, edited and repeated- again and again and again until Gaia was completed. She struggled with every aspect of this initial foray into screenwriting. She fought the expansive urges of the text and her own anxieties to limit her scope, though the world of the text invited so many other areas of exploration. Additionally, crafting natural dialogue was an unfamiliar enterprise. However, despite the difficulties, she found that the process itself was a font of excitement.

Supplementing its awards, Gaia also became a quarter-finalist for Shore Scripts, and when it took its initial top placement in the Science Fiction portion of the World Series of Screenwriting Competition, it garnered her screenplay further recognition which put it in the quarter-finals of both Shore Scripts and Story Pros International’s 2014 screenplay contests. She added, “I’m extremely proud that Gaia is appreciated by these separate groups, and the recognition gives me an extra grain of confidence that’s so beneficial to the writing process.”

Stapleton-Laskey advises novice screenwriters to stay true to themselves because “writing a screenplay that you hope others will enjoy is much like a relationship. You have to lean into preferences and expectations of others, but you also have to stay true to yourself, and you can’t do that unless you know yourself.” While writing Gaia, which is a sci-fi screenplay on the surface, many elements of horror found their way into

the script. When faced with whether or not to cut these so that it would better fit the genre, Stapelton-Laskey, herself inclined toward themes of horror genres, decided to keep them. Her instinct helped distinguish her screenplay from others in the genre and shape Gaia's success.

Stapelton-Laskey hopes to one day see Gaia on a 20x50 foot screen in theaters, but she is currently working on several other projects, including an experimental film about a woman who accidentally runs over her own son. Aside from that, Stapelton-Laskey is serving as the secretary for the board of the Dallas Screenwriters Association, which is a non-profit organization that serves the needs of the Dallas/Fort Worth screenwriting community.

A Talk with Gregory Fletcher about his Shorts

Recently released by Northampton House Press, Gregory Fletcher's new craft book, *Shorts and Briefs*, highlights various concepts and tools for the aspiring playwright's toolbox. He discusses "tips for story structure, building a character, discovering an individual's vocabulary, and creating action within dialogue" within the framework of "short" plays. These kinds of plays are "a great place to begin as a playwright," he says.

"[They're] the perfect learning tool before taking on a one-act or full-length play."

Raised in Texas, Fletcher's New Yorker parents brought with them their love of theater, and that love was quickly instilled in young Gregory. Such was his early fervor for the stage, that he was writing scripts while attending elementary school. This devotion, however, was merely a candlelight in comparison to the fire that would be ignited when he connected with his great aunt and uncle, Matilde and Theodore Ferro. Both incredibly successful screenwriters, they wrote for "such series as *Peyton Place*, *The Patty Duke Show*, *Dr. Kildaire*, *Guiding Light*, etc." They also had a radio serial that ran for 14 years and wrote many teleplays for live television. At 10, Fletcher "discovered gold" in finding one of their actual scripts for *Leave it to Beaver*. He has been driven to write ever since.



BY GREGORY FLETCHER

Conceptually, *Shorts and Briefs* is a craft book in two parts. First,

Fletcher uses nine of his own short plays as examples, not only for writers, but also beginning directors and actors to hone their own skills.



He uses the term “short” as opposed to the more traditional “10-minute play,” because, while the traditional term relies on a stopwatch, a “short” play is limited to 10 pages and may or may not fall under the time restraints, given the choices of the director. The second portion of the book is a series of brief tips and principles that Fletcher uses when he writes. “[So] Shorts and Briefs not only became a literal description of the book, but also a play on words with men’s underwear. Which makes me smile. Not that men’s

underwear makes me...next question?”

Fletcher has had seven of his plays produced Off-Off-Broadway with several others produced in regional and university theaters, and he is currently a professor teaching playwriting at CUNY - Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. *Shorts and Briefs* is currently available on Amazon, and a reading will be held the At The Inkwel Reading Series at KGB Bar on East 4th Street in New York on Thursday, June 4th at 7 pm. Beyond the stage, Fletcher has also recently completed a fourth draft of his memoir entitled, *Skipping a Generation* and plans to begin a YA manuscript as well.

Guidance by Mentorship by Austin Bennett

Knowledge can be obtained through books and experience, but empowerment—that is beyond self. It is the parent who says, “I love you;” or the teacher who says, “I believe in you;” or the coach who says, “You got this;” or the spouse who says, “I trust you.” Trusting your own abilities does not come easy. Confidence is gained through failure. It also comes by way of continued encouragement and guidance. Mentorship is essential to success.

There once was a particular academic tradition where professors referred to their students as “distinguished comrades.”* Education was built on mutual trust and respect. It was



a mutual endeavor built around camaraderie not mere self-reliance. Similarly, in the Ancient Near East, the Hebrews viewed those who pursued scholasticism as part of a family unit. Instructors were referred to as “fathers.” Students were referred to as “sons.”* Much like a child learning from a parent, students were guided by teachers for the betterment of self and community. In both traditions, a close-knit-community was formed around scholasticism and teachers were viewed as mentors.

When I chose to pursue my M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Wilkes University I was promised a mentor-based education. At that time, I did not fully know what that meant nor did I whole-heartedly buy the rhetoric knowing the competitive nature of colleges. Yet, what I found was something closer to camaraderie and kinship than cool academia. I became at once a peer and a son. When I wrestled with choosing my creative thesis, fearing I was out of my depth, encouragement came in the most unlikely of ways. I had a dream. The program director, Bonnie Culver, came to me like a fairy-god-mother and squelched my fears by pointing to mentorship. She said, “That’s why we’re here.” When my wife gave birth to our first child mid-way through my creative thesis, my mentor, Jeff Talarigo, offered more than advice on writing: he offered fatherly advice.

**Kuper, Abraham. Scholarship: Two Convocations Addresses on University Life. Trans. Harry Van Dyke. Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2014. Kindle file.*

Originally published on the Wilkes Mesa

blog:<https://wilkesumesa.wordpress.com/2015/02/16/guidance-by-mentorship-by-austin-bennett/>

Faculty/Staff Notes

Faculty member Beverly Donofrio was interviewed in HBO's series, *Road Trip Nation*, which was broadcast in January 2015. Donofrio's children's book, *Where's Mommy?* published by Random House, was selected as one of the 10 Best Children's Books of 2014 by the New York Times. Donofrio's essay, "Choosing," appeared in the anthology, *Faith: Essays from Believers, Agnostics, and Atheists*, edited by Victoria

Zackheim and published by Atria Books.

Faculty member Christine Gelineau has an essay, "The Courtesy of the Gravedigger," posted on the New York Times Opinionator Blog: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/courtesy-of-the-gravedigger/> (December 21, 2014).

Faculty member Gregory Fletcher had his essay *The Sealed Envelope* read at KGB Bar for At The Inkwel Series on December 10, 2014. The essay will appear in the soon-to-be-released Anthology *Being: What Makes A Man*, published by University of Nebraska-Lincoln Gender Programs.

Faculty member Wendy Hammond's play, *What You Will*, opened on February 19, 2015 at the Cunningham Theatre in Davidson, NC.

Staff member Dawn Leas read in January at the Bridgewater International Poetry Festival at Bridgewater College in Virginia. Her poem "Slipstream" appears in the 14th anniversary issue (December 2014) of ThePedestalMagazine.com. She has also received two Pushcart nominations this year: one from SwanDive Publishing for "Seaside Heights, 2012," which appeared in *Everyday Escape Poems*, and another that allowed her to select and submit three poems for consideration.

Faculty member Michael Lennon's *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, published by Random House on December 2, 2014, was chosen as a book of the week by *Publishers Weekly* (December 8, 2014); and selected as an Amazon book of the month (December 2014) in the biography/memoir category. It has been widely reviewed, including the following: *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *TLS*, *New York Times*, *Weekly Standard*, *Washington Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Artery (WBUR-FM)*, *The Tablet*, and *the Daily Beast*.

Staff member Lori A. May has received two Pushcart Prize nominations this year: one for an essay, "The Comfort of Ignorance" published in the fall issue of *Border Crossing*, and another for a poem, "Place Settings," from her new full-length poetry collection, *Square Feet*. Her latest book, *The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship & The Writing Life*, was published by Bloomsbury in December. Lori's work has also recently been published in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *1966 Journal*, *Pine Hills Review*, and in issue 52 of *Creative Nonfiction*. Her next book, *Creative Composition: Inspiration and Techniques for Writing Instruction*, co-edited with Danita Berg, will be published in May 2015 with Multilingual Matters. Lori will be presenting a panel on literary citizenship at the AWP conference in Minneapolis and reading at Subtext Books.

Faculty member Taylor M. Polites participated in a reading from the

anthology *Knitting Yarns* at the Wellfleet Preservation Hall in Wellfleet, MA on October 26th, a panel discussion on historical fiction at the Providence Public Library on November 2nd, and a talk at Roger Williams University on November 18th as part of the Mary Tefft White Reading Series.

Faculty member Richard Uhlig's comedy film *Can't Dance* was a 2014 Festival Finalist for Public Broadcasting's Shorts Showcase. Richard wrote the screenplay while at a Wilkes residency. In August his novel *Mystery at Snake River Bridge* earned a four and a half star review from IndieReader and made the IndieReader Approved list for best books of the year. Richard's feature screenplay *Tammy* is currently in development with Dikenga Films.

Student/Alum Notes

M.A. student Molly Barari was published in the Holiday 2014 edition of *East Meets West* literary journal. Her essay on South Dakota life appeared in the "Bridging the Gap" section. She also completed the Norman Mailer Center's memoir writing workshop with Kaylie Jones in Salt Lake City in July 2014.

M.F.A. student Austin Bennett published his article, "Guidance by Mentorship," on the Wilkes Mesa blog. It can be found at the following link: <https://wilkesumesa.wordpress.com/2015/02/16/guidance-by-mentorship-by-austin-bennett/>

M.F.A. alum Kait Burrier has launched Union Square Slam, a weekly open mic and reading series, in New York City. Kait hosts the series, which features curated readings and poetry slams, each Monday at Bar 13 near Manhattan's Union Square. Two of Kait's latest poems, "On the Queensboro Bridge" and "The Earrings," were published online by Germ Magazine. She reads regularly, most recently at :Kiss*Punch*Poem:.

M.F.A. alum Tara Caimi's memoir *Mush: from sled dogs to celiac, the scenic detour of my life* was published by Plain View Press, and her essay "Lucky Teeth" was published in *Oh Comely* magazine.

M.A. alum Cindy Dlugolecki had an excerpt of her one-woman play, *Violet Oakley Unveiled*, performed at the grand opening of The Underground Student Union in the Capital Blue Cross Theatre of Central Penn College (Summerdale campus) in mid-January. Violet shared the spotlight with only one other performer: Maestro Stuart Malina, conductor of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra.

M.F.A. alum Brian Fanelli's poem, "Surviving Winter," was published in

the December issue of *Two Cities Review*, and another poem, "956 Johler Avenue," was published in the fall issue of *Slipstream*.

M.A. alum Donna Ferrara's short story "Arms Raised in America" was published by *Amarillo Bay* and her short story "Fairy Godmother" placed second in *East Meets West* Holiday Short Story Contest and will be published in Spring of 2015.

M. F.A. alum Patricia Florio has been hired as an adjunct in the English Department of Brookdale Community College.

M.A. student Kimberly Behre Kenna's short story "Grotta Azzurra" won honorable mention in the *East Meets West* Holiday Contest.

M.A. alum "11" Donna Malies had a production of her one-act play, "Broken," as part of Pensacola 24 Hour Theatre, March 21, 2015.

M.A. student Margaret McCaffrey's story "Ironing" was read on the 'Cover to Cover' program for Vision Australia Radio (1179 am) and Iris (DAB+) on Sunday 11 January 2015.

M.F.A. alum Linda M.C. Nguyen's short story "'A' Like in Math" was published by *Every Day Fiction* in September 2014.

M.F.A. alum Laurie Elizabeth Powers' short script "The Importance of Sex Education" closed out 2014 by winning best short screenplay in the 16th LA Comedy Fest and was an official selection for the Houston Comedy Film Festival in February 2015.

M.F.A. alum Michael Soloway's essay "Share the Chameleon" has been selected for inclusion in the 2014 Sundress Press Best of the Net Anthology.

M.F.A. alum Joseph J. Schwartzburt was featured in Savannah Magazine's January 2015 issue along with other local Savannah writers who are "the young cubs reclaiming [Savannah's] storied history from the South's literary lions—and rewriting it for the future." Also, as board member and performer with Seersucker Live, Joseph hosted an all-Wilkes line-up in February 2015 featuring Beverly Donofrio, Neil Shepard, David Poyer, and Lenore Hart who were nearby teaching workshops at the Ossabaw Island Writers' Retreat.

M.A. student Ann Von Mehren is revising an article that's been accepted for publication by the Hellenic Mathematical Society *International Journal for Mathematics in Education*.

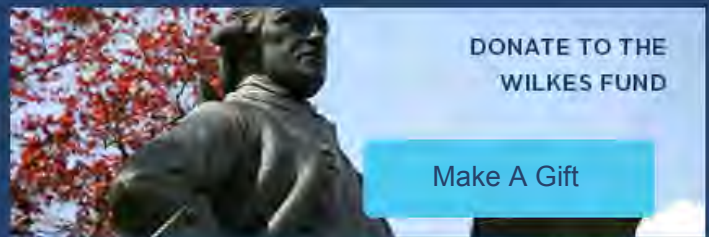
M.F.A. alum Alyssa Waugh's short story "The Stranger In The Glass" was published by *Beyond Science Fiction Literary Magazine* in December 2014.

M.A. alum Barry Wolborsky's essay, "Like a (Pizza) Virgin," appears on *Medium*, <https://medium.com/@barrywolborsky/like-a-pizza-virgin-7896d1b6a461>.

M.A. student Emily Wolfel's short story, "His Tears Tasted like the Sea," appears in issue 10.5 of *Cactus Heart*.

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