

Revise This!

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WILKES UNIVERSITY CREATIVE WRITING NEWSLETTER

October 2020

Cha-Cha-Changes!

This year, more than most, has been a year of lasts...and firsts. Co-Founder and Program Director, Dr. Bonnie Culver, celebrated her last term before retirement. The Maslow Family Graduate Program in Creative Writing hosted its first online Residency. Associate Director Bill Schneider accepted another position in the airline industry, and Joyce Anzalone orchestrated her last groups of cohorts, as she too retired. And, for the first time in program history, the Wilkes creative writing community welcomes its new director, Dr. David Hicks.

In this edition of *Revise This!*, **Bill Schneider** shares his tale of transition in *Onward and Upward*. **Vicki Mayk (M.F.A. '13)** shares news of her debut book, *Growing Up on the Gridiron* (September 2020). You can read our interview about her Wilkes experience, her pathway to publication, and her advice for worried writers still wrestling with the first-draft process. Best-selling author and recent Wilkes alum **Jennifer McLaughlin** explores how her Wilkes writing life continues on, even after graduation. Finally, three current students reveal how a virtual residency compares to a traditional one.

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Program Updates

- The January 2021 Residency will take place online, from January 8-16.
- Morgan M.X. Shulz of Wilmington, NC is this year's winner of the James Jones First Novel Fellowship, a \$10,000 prize. Jessie Roy of Chicago, IL is the runner-up (\$1000).
- Michael Mailer (Film) and Nina Solomon (Fiction) have decided not to teach for our program any longer. We thank them for their superb teaching and wish them all the best.
- Beginning next fall, we will be offering online Master Classes (CW 698: Post-Graduate Project Revision) in every genre for graduates of MA/MFA programs like ours. In this six-credit class, students will receive expert guidance on how to advance a manuscript to its final version and how to submit it to agents and editors.
- Also beginning next fall, we will offer online 15-week versions of our Foundations classes as part of a "4+1" (a combined BA/MA) class at several universities, as well as to adults interested in an introduction to creative writing.
- The MFA "Letter of Intent," for all students in the MA program who would like to continue to the MFA program, is due November 1.

Onward and Upward - Reflections from Bill Schneider (M.F.A.'14)

Thursday, June 4, 2020

More than 1.8 million cases and over 101,000 deaths related to COVID-19 in the United States were reported today by the CDC.

Today is my first day of retirement following my seven-year affiliation with Wilkes University where I served as a graduate assistant in Marketing Communications, Managing Editor for Etruscan Press and Associate Program Director for the Creative Writing Program.



I had hoped today would be the start of a new life chapter: traveling all around the world while I savor the cocktail hour of my life journey, similar to *The Life of Riley*. Boy was I wrong!

Since being quarantined on March 17th, I got a head start on being home full-time as life dramatically changed. Program alum and Wilkes University's Executive Director of Communications and Graduate Marketing — Gabrielle D'Amico M.F.A.'17 — said it best of all in a recent email: "I'm sorry your final weeks at Wilkes feel like the Twilight Zone."

Earlier this year, I accepted an offer to be a consultant with my former employer from the 1970s. This new opportunity is based in Chicago, the headquarters and a major gateway for United Airlines, where I will have access and resources to produce video segments about airline employees and retirees and their travel experiences. With nearly 100,000 employees on the United team, storytelling is integral to the culture of this legacy airline. The stories I will share through the company's intranet portal have a common theme: heartache and hope. My commitment is to bring light to the United community, especially because too much darkness clouds the horizon.

Preparing for the transition

Working with co-founder and program director Bonnie Culver since January, when I announced my retirement, we focused on developing a handbook to provide the new program director with a road map for the day-to-day activities to support the Maslow Family Creative Writing Graduate Program. To provide some context, Bonnie and I were retiring at the same time as Joyce Anzalone who oversees administration of our program. Ross Klavan says, "Between Bonnie, Bill and Joyce, the entire knowledge of how the program works is in their hands ... each of them connecting/networking, and talking the faculty in and out of corners."

By mid-March, our focus shifted. We began to prepare for the June residency to be delivered entirely online. This tireless effort required all hands-on-deck while each day brought more grim news about the pandemic.

Preparing for a virtual residency

Bonnie immediately reached out to the entire faculty to begin discussions, brainstorm, and conceptualize online residency modules. The transition from face-to-face teaching to a virtual Zoom platform provided Bonnie and the faculty with the perfect opportunity for the program to re-emerge as the first-class program it is. This seamless transition evolved because of one component: the sense of community that permeates throughout the Wilkes Creative Writing Program. I think of this as harmony and grace, the ingredient that first attracted me to the Wilkes program in 2011.

A major challenge in rolling out the June residency as a virtual experience was how to replicate that special ingredient that creates

community. As I prepared to retire from Wilkes, the world began to change as the pandemic closed international borders. Throughout the country, cities and states continued to escalate self-quarantine mandates. The entire world was on lock-down.

As Memorial Day arrived, the June residency was about to begin. The community of writers that comes together twice a year to share work and renew friendship continues to be the fabric of a tapestry woven from the spirit of our remarkable faculty.

Friday, June 5, 2020

The stay-at-home order was lifted today for Pennsylvania residents in Luzerne County. This release from home confinement was conditional because I still do not have the freedom to travel anywhere in the world. There is no longer a welcome mat for Americans in many other countries, and most domestic travel requires a 14-day quarantine upon arrival. Flying for a weekend getaway is something from the past. Fortunately, I am a writer and an editor, both of which require solitary confinement.

Instead of packing for my move to the Windy City, today is the day my movers notified me they will not travel to Illinois because of the high number of COVID-19 cases.

Tuesday, September 1, 2020

More than six million cases and over 183,000 deaths related to COVID-19 in the United States were reported today by the CDC.

It has been 13 weeks since my retirement began. Every day it has been buns on the bench. I have focused on my writing and the never-ending connection to the Wilkes Creative Writing community. This is the connective tissue that keeps me grounded, hopeful, and confident. As coffee percolates, or later in the day, a martini shakes, I recall the advice offered by my Wilkes mentors.

One of the most resonate suggestions came from Dr. Nancy McKinley during my first CW-501 workshop. The writing prompt, about the beauty of Wilkes-Barre in the middle of winter, forced me to look beyond the potholes. *Writing is about doing the best you can and making the most with what you have.*

What is certain about tomorrow is that it will be a better day than today.

Bill Schneider (MFA'14) is the managing editor of *Etruscan Press*. He served as the associate program director of the Wilkes University Maslow Family Graduate Creative Writing Program from 2015 through 2020. His

previous experience includes a three-decade long career in the music industry accompanied by extensive travel throughout six continents.

Interview with Vicki Mayk (M.F.A. '13)

For any bibliophiles that get the opportunity to sit down with their favorite authors for a Q&A, one of the questions that is bound to come up is something along the lines of “Where do you get your inspiration, your ideas?” While this might be a fascinating topic to dig into, what I find more fascinating is learning, as a writer, how the story chooses you.



I recently had the opportunity to work with Vicki Mayk on her *Write Life* post, “When the Story Chooses You.” We were discussing her writing experiences as a student at Wilkes and her pathway to publishing *Growing up on the Gridiron: Football, Friendship, and the Tragic Life of Owen Thomas*, published and released by Beacon Press in September. Our phone conversation stretched from one hour to two and her story about learning how to tell someone else’s true story emerged, along with several challenges unique to the nonfiction genre.

I invite you to sit in on part of our conversation about the art of research and the craft of creative nonfiction.

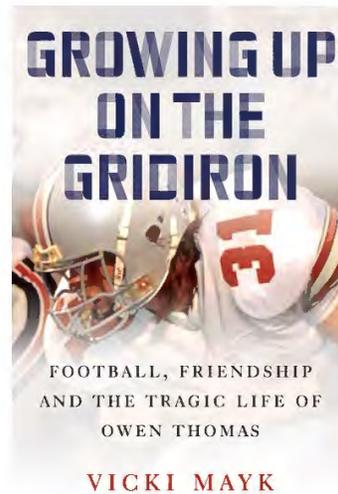
Who or what drew you in to the Maslow Family Graduate Program in Creative Writing?

I had always wanted to earn an MFA in writing. I actually had entered a program at the University of Pittsburgh back in the 1970s (yes, I’m that old), but that was before there were low-residency programs. Unable to go to school and work full-time, I put the dream on hold after one semester. Fast forward to 2009: When I was hired by Wilkes University, I realized that I could finally earn the master’s degree I had always wanted. I had worked as a writer for my entire career – but the program changed my life, opening up new ways to tell a story.

You have some exciting news...a recently published on book! Can you

tell us a littlebit about that project? What is this book about?

Growing Up On The Gridiron: Football, Friendship and the Tragic Life of Owen Thomas is about University of Pennsylvania football player Owen Thomas who died by suicide in 2010. After his death, he was found to be the youngest amateur player at that time found to have the traumatic brain injury CTE – which was being found in former pro players and was linked to playing football. The book is about his short but remarkable life and about young men's love affair with the game for football.



What was it about *this* story that sunk its hooks into you and drew you into this commitment to another longform project?

This was a case of “the story chose me.” What really drew me in was Owen Thomas, the young man who is at the center of my book. When he died by suicide in April 2010, I was invited to join a private memorial page that friends set up for him on Facebook. The way that everyone talked about him – from his teammates at his high school near Allentown, PA, and on the University of Pennsylvania Quakers team to friends, former teachers, casual acquaintances – haunted me. They told stories about him being a warrior on the field and one of the kindest humans off the field. One girl in his high school said Owen changed the energy when he entered a room. I wanted to answer the question: Who was Owen Thomas and how did his life come to this tragic end? When it emerged that he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, what we know as CTE, that added another important dimension to the story.

The path to publication is unique for every author. Can you tell us a little about your path to publication? What kinds of challenges did you find your way around with this project?

Because I had a full-time day job, the interviewing and research for this book had to be done at night and on weekends. What I had originally envisioned as a two- to three-year project actually took nearly eight years

from the time I started interviews and research to a finished draft. (And we all know that there is always more revision ahead.) I was dragging my heels, so I took an independent study with Mike Lennon and was able to complete a draft. He urged me to submit to agents and I was signed by one in 2018. But I was far from done. Everyone who had seen the manuscript – me, Mike and my agent– envisioned a significant revision. I worked with my agent to create a book proposal that outlined a slightly different direction for the book. The book was actually sold on the basis of that proposal – not on the manuscript. When I began working with my editor at Beacon Press, Joanna Green, she and I had a similar vision for the book. It involved developing the stories of Owen’s friends and required me to do some additional research and interviews. Yes, more research after nearly eight years of working on the book. I completely revised the existing manuscript in about six months in 2019.

What did you learn about yourself as a writer through the many stages of creation, revision, and release?

I learned that it was a good thing that I had a long career making my living as a writer who was required to meet deadlines. (I’m laughing as I answer this.) All joking aside, I now see that all those years of writing on deadline have made me a slave to deadlines. If I have a deadline, I will meet it. That is why I finally took an independent study to finish the book. The deadline forced me to do it. I was able to revise it in six months because my editor was holding me to specific deadlines. Even after all these years as a writer, I’m trying to figure out how to create a structure that puts me in the deadline mindset – even when there’s no “real” deadline. I guess that’s a challenge we all face

About craft?

The biggest takeaway about craft was that we always have something to learn. I had been a journalist for years before entering the program, but in writing this book, I realized that I was able to write it because of what I learned studying creative nonfiction in the program. Day-to-day journalism can fall into a “just the facts” approach. The craft elements that I learned at Wilkes – to use the techniques of fiction to tell a true story -- allowed me to do things in the book I might not have attempted earlier in my career. It includes things like recreating scenes and dialogue.

If you could offer a few words of wisdom or a piece of advice that has served you well through the rough parts of the writing process, what would you most like to gift to other

writers hitting those rough patches?

Don't doubt yourself: it's really easy to fall prey to impostor syndrome. You'll hear your inner critic asking, "Who do you think you are to write this book?" While working on my book, I came across a quote from Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote "Hamilton." He said, "You have to live with the notion of, 'If I don't write this, no one's going to write it. If I die, this idea dies with me.'" Remember that you have a story that only you can tell.

How have the members of our Wilkes community supported you as a writer? Is there anyone you would like to give a shout-out to? Perhaps a few key people?

I received so much encouragement from so many people in our creative writing community. If you read the comments in my book, I call Mike Lennon my "literary godfather." I think there were times I kept going because I couldn't stand the idea of disappointing Mike. I also received sound advice from Bev Donofrio, Kevin Oderman, Kaylie Jones and Jeff Talarigo. Dawn D'Aries Zera was the person who first told Mike about my book and she insisted I talk to him about it. And my writing group was an important source of support. They are all Wilkes alums from many different cohorts: Aurora Bonner, Kelly Clisham, Jennifer Jenkins and Francisco Tutella. The book title came out of a brainstorming session with them.

Wilkes and the Afterlife

By Jen McLaughlin

A lot of people (or, at least, I'm *assuming* a lot of people) think that once you leave the Wilkes University Maslow Family Graduate Program...it's game over. You never speak to your faculty again, never see your cohort, forget all your friends, and cry into an endless eternity of deadlines and graded papers. I'm here to tell you...

YOU'RE WRONG! That's right, I said it. You're wrong.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself, "Who is this Jen girl anyway? Who is she to tell me what I know and what I don't know?" Well, I'm *you*. Or, I was you, depending on where you are in the program. Whether you are entering it now, considering entering it, in it, or recently graduated, I'm here to tell you that what you're getting from the program isn't just some fancy letters or some sharpened writing tools...though those are

pretty amazing, too.

What you're getting is a community. Friends. A *family*.

You see, my cohort (arguably the best cohort EVER...just ask anyone on the faculty—especially Nancy McKinley) graduated with our M.A. in September 2019, and those of us who went on to earn our MFA will graduate this September (in 2020, the cursed year that will forever live on in infamy). Though some of my cohort has been done for over a year, guess what? We are still friends. We still write together. Not even a pandemic stopped us. Let that sink in for a minute. I'll wait. While the world was begging for us to stop writing, to lose our creativity because who the heck could create anything among chaos and pain and fear...we did it. We created, we supported one another, and we didn't give up.

Because we're *family*.

Sure, we did it via Zoom once a week (something we will be continuing once we all return to the classrooms to teach and learn), and sure, we talked about a lot more than just our work, but you know what? It kept me going, kept me thinking, and most importantly? My cohort/friends/family kept me writing. The writing life is so valuable to us as writers and artists, and when you lose that, you lose a piece of yourself. Well, fear not. When you enter this program, and when you leave it, you will maintain a strong bond to those who went through those residencies with you, who poured over your words as if they were your own, and who cheered you on as you read your work out loud for a room full of people...and so will the faculty.

My mentor, the amazing and indestructible Nancy McKinley, never stopped having my back, or offering me opportunities, and quite frankly, I truly hope my time in the program, though officially finished, never ends. Rather, I hope it expands in many other ways, and that I can take the knowledge this program and my forty-nine published books have given me, and I can continue to build that community, friendships, and family the program gave me. My only remaining question to you, if you're not with us yet, is...

What's holding you back, besides perhaps yourself?

About Jen McLaughlin

Jen McLaughlin is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of many genres and types. *The Unforgiven Kingdom* came to life when she couldn't find her daughter's bedtime story, and by the end of the "bedtime story" she realized she



had the first chapter of a book. As a lover of adventure and chaos, she strives to tell tales of strong female leads that take readers to unseen worlds. Jen was mentioned in Forbes alongside E. L. James as one of the breakout independent authors to dominate the bestselling lists. Jen resides in Pennsylvania with her husband, four kids, one dog, and five cats. She spends her time writing, and teaching high school and college students how to write creatively. Jen earned her MFA in Creative Writing at Wilkes University and is currently pursuing her Doctorate of Education. She is represented by Louise Fury at The Bent Agency.

Faculty News

- ▶ **Gregory Fletcher's** short story "Ismene in Venice" is included in the new anthology *The Night Bazaar: Venice*, published by Northampton House Press.
- ▶ **Lenore Hart** is pleased to announce a new volume in *The Night Bazaar* series, Northampton House Press' fantastic fiction anthologies. Volume two is entitled *The Night Bazaar Venice: Thirteen Tales of Forbidden Wishes and Dangerous Desires*. Hart is the series editor and contributor of the story, "Plenty of Fish in the Sea". Short stories by Wilkes alums Dana Miller, Corinne Nulton, Frances Williams (writing as Aphrodite Anagnost), and Carol MacAllister, along with faculty members Kaylie Jones and Gregory Fletcher, are featured as well. Additionally, Hart has published two poems, "Looking Into the Eyes of a Woman I Must Tell She's a Writer" and "Hypatia in the Library" in *AMERICAN WRITERS REVIEW 2020* (San Fedele Press). Two Poems, "The Well-Shooter's Wake" and "On Visiting the Castle of My Drawn and Quartered Ancestor" were published in **FOOTNOTE 4: A LITERARY JOURNAL OF HISTORY* (Alternating Current Press).
- ▶ **Ross Klavan** has a new novella due to be published in October by Down & Out books. It's another in a series of noir crime stories, this one entitled, "Cut Loose All Those Who Drag You Down". It is part of a compilation— three authors, three crime novellas— the book is called *Third Degree*.
- ▶ **David Poyer** via Northampton House Press announced the publication of the trade paper edition of Susan Mailer's memoir *In Another Place; With and Without My Father, Norman Mailer*, available worldwide beginning September 1. The 2019 hardcover was critically praised, and the new edition contains all the text and photos of the original \$27.95 edition. It is also available in e-book format.

Additionally, Poyer also published a short story in the latest edition a dark fantasy anthology entitled *The Night Bazaar Venice: Thirteen Tales of Forbidden Wishes and Dangerous Desires*. Set in 1348, the year the Black Plague arrived in Italy, "The Thousand Injuries of Fortunato" prequels Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" in explaining exactly why Fortunato richly deserved to be bricked up in Montresor's catacombs.

Alumni News

- **Jennifer Bokal (M.A. 2010)** will release her eleventh novel, *Colton's Secret History*, in September 2020 and her twelfth novel, *Agent's Mountain Rescue*, in November 2020. Both are being released by Harlequin Romantic Suspense. This fall, Jennifer will be teaching on-line workshops at Broome Community College; Painless Novel Writing and Solving the Publishing Puzzle. Jennifer is currently president of RWA's newest chapter, Aged to Perfection Seasoned Romance Writers of America--where they believe that love is timeless.
- **Todd Conner (M.A. 2019)** launched an audio podcast called *The Cariorker* in December 2019. For Season One he translated, produced and performed 13 short stories by Machado de Assis, Brazil's most renowned literary son. Season One was cut short by the pandemic, but Season Two is slated to begin in November on location from Rio de Janeiro, when he will deconstruct and interpret the early classics of Samba and Choro for American ears. *The Cariorker* is available on major podcast platforms and at www.thecariorker.com.
- Two poems by **Caitlin Downs (M.A. 2020)** were included in the anthology *Erase the Patriarchy* published by University of Hell Press, which is available for purchase (August, 2020). She was awarded a new contract and faculty status at the Pennsylvania College of Art & Design and will be establishing the new writing center this fall.
- Cooper Gorelick (M.A. 2017) wrote a one-act play titled "A Fragment of the Day" (which was specifically written for "drive-by" theater). His play is set to be produced in early October in Cherry Hill, NJ.
- **Tara Marta (M.A. 2018)** had her first novel, *Look Back to Yesterday*, published in June. She was recently interviewed about her book on PA Live and VIA Radio. On Thursday, August 27th she offered a virtual reading and Q&A for the Abington Community Library.
- **Bill Schneider (M.F.A. 2014)** announced his retirement as assistant program director of the Maslow Family Creative Writing Graduate Program at Wilkes University.
- **Ora Smith (M.A. 2017)** is pleased to announce her book, *The Pulse of His Soul: The Story of John Lothrop, a Forgotten Forefather* was released on September 8, 2020. This is Ora's first historical novel to be published. Previously, she has illustrated and written a children's picture book titled *A Christmas Story of Light* released in 2018.
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Michael Soloway (M.F.A. 2014) founded a digital magazine in June at AuthenticityMags.com. The goal is to publish articles with unique voices from authentic people, so others can find their authentic selves. Their motto is: For the People. By the People. They have several Wilkes alumni contributing, but they always need more. Please reach out via michael@authenticitymags.com! He would love your feedback and participation!

Student News

- 🌟 **Andree Catalfamo** won Honorable Mention for her poem, "Expendable", in the annual *Passager Journal* poetry contest. The poem was published in September 2020. She also had a short story, "Blooms," published in June 2020 in *Yellow Arrow Journal*.
- 🌟 **Tonya Chadi's** poem *Lately* was accepted for publication by IndolentBooks.com *What Rough Beast*. It was posted 7/11/20.

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Wilkes University

84 West South Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

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