Message from the Chair
Ball State English Department alumni survey - We want to hear from you!
-find out more on page 3

Faculty Feature:
Dr. Robert Habich
Intern Rhiannon Racy interviews Dr. Robert Habich about his book, Building Their Own Waldos, to celebrate its first year anniversary.
-find out more on page 4

Faculty Publications
Celebrate our faculty’s hard work and successful accomplishments this year.
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Alumni Guest Feature
Former BSU English student Phillip Call is forced to confront a daunting question as he enters into his first year of high school teaching.
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Quick Hits

Volume 1, Autumn 2012

Outstanding Senior Heads to Harvard

We all know the dreaded question. Most of us who major in the humanities and willfully choose to forsake untold riches (or, in truth, even the certainty of financial security) to pursue a passion for the written word live in mortal fear of the well-meaning aunt or prying stranger who will certainly inquire upon learning one’s major, “And what are you going to do with that?” As a double major in English Literature and Religious Studies, my go-to response to this most dreaded of interogations has been an admittedly snarky “everything and nothing.” Now, as I prepare to attend Harvard Divinity School in the fall to work toward a Master’s in New Testament and Women, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion, I see that my curt reply really encapsulates my understanding of the rebellious and powerful possibilities of humanities education.

My route to English Literature and Religious Studies (and, ultimately, my beloved amalgam “Biblical Studies”) has been nothing if not circuitous and kind of weird. In high school, I loved to read and talk about books but never considered that to be something you could get rich doing. And that’s the point of college, right? So, I dutifully took up a major in Accounting and realized the error of my ways before even attending a single class. From there it was the slightly less practical English Education, but I soon realized that I wouldn’t be able to keep my other major, Religious Studies, and graduate on time. As I began to consider changing my major yet again, my humanities professor said something in passing that struck me—a degree in the humanities prepares you for everything and nothing at the same time. I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, but being doubly prepared for everything didn’t seem half bad to me. So I went to the advising office and made it official. Little did I know the impact my fellow students and my professors would have on helping me see possibilities for an exciting future I certainly never thought possible.

Although they seem to be two quite different subjects, combining Literature and Religious Studies has proven to be a fascinating and productive way to look at what it means to be human.

In my work in Religious Studies, I have been made aware of the variety of ways that people engage in behaviors such as ritual, belief, worship, and the reading of sacred texts in order to orient themselves to themselves, their culture, and their world.
States, that inhere unnoticed within our two together may seem like “nothing,” literature so permeate our culture that the 20th century. Although religion and 19th century lit, religious doubt in poetry, tuition at the number of times I’ve turned literature faculty, they would express exasperation that people express themselves religiously oft-unacknowledged overlap in the ways sacred within the mundane. 

texts that highlight the presence of the influence of religion on culture to skills necessary to apply this awareness universe. As a Literature major, I have SENIOR Continued from page 1

ered, I realized that I that had so confused me might somehow offer this answer snark-free to all who ask what I plan to do in the next two years. If could not only examine these conundrums for myself, but in so doing, perhaps, I could help other people recognize the critical importance of the Bible in a country whose political, legal, and cultural system is so heavily influenced by these 66 books. In short, I had found my niche and certainly would have not done so were it not for those, like Dr. Habich, Dr. Peterson, and Dr. Marchal in Religious Studies, who continually provide much-needed encouragement and the occasional push as I continue to work toward engaging in new, and possibly dangerous and unsettling, ways with the texts that define my identity as a Christian and a scholar. This faculty support and the open and challenging academic community offered at Ball State is, I think, quite unique to the state school experience. Were it not for the accumulation of both small and large acts of kindness and genuine interest on the part of the faculty in both departments, I certainly would never have dreamt of preparing to enter into one of the best Biblical Studies programs in the world. All of the quickly answered emails, the draft reviews, the opportunities for work outside of the classroom, and even the occasional attempt to get me out of a shift at work, which may seem like “nothing” to faculty who are so used to doing these things as part of their job, have really changed everything in my life. There are approximately 943 miles between where I’m going and where I thought I’d be, and each of those miles was covered not just by my passion for the subject, but also by the efforts of the English and Religious Studies departments at Ball State. In July, my husband and I packed everything and moved to Cambridge, MA as I pursue yet another degree in “everything and nothing.” Upon completing my undergraduate degrees in English Literature and Religious Studies, I now offer this answer snark-free to all who ask what I plan to do in the next two years. If my experience in both worlds has taught me anything at all (and indeed, reader, it has), it is that humanities is the most subversive of all scholastic endeavors. Even when it seems to be preparing you for nothing that will get you on the cover of Forbes magazine, it is helping you change everything. ●

Quick Note from the English Department Chair, Dr. Elizabeth M. Riddle

Warmest greetings to all our alumnae and alumni!

Can you believe that there have been nearly 6,000 graduates in the history of the Department of English? The department has certainly seen many changes since the days of those first students clad in suits and dresses. Choices of programs abound, including two undergraduate majors with four options, four minors, four MA degree programs, which include three emphases, and a Ph.D.in English with three possible concentration areas. See our website for more details: http://www.bsu.edu/english/

Among our latest innovations in teaching has been the development of Immersive Learning courses, which the university defines as a course in which students gain hands-on experience in developing a product or service for a community partner. In addition to one-time offerings on exciting special topics, our immersion courses include a regularly offered two-semester sequence producing The Broken Plate literary magazine, and Creative Writing in the Community, a course in which students teach writing techniques and collaborate on a creative project with children at a local school or with those served by a community agency. We are also adding experiential components to various courses in English Education and in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESOL), among others, and considering the role of online teaching and learning in English Studies. We welcome your own suggestions as well! You can contact me at emiddle@bsu.edu.

Some relatively recent personnel changes include the retirements of Dr. Linda Hanson in Rhetoric and Composition, and Ms. Jama Gibson, Secretary to the Assistant Chair of Operations, both of whom are greatly missed. We recently welcomed Ms. Catherine Atkinson, the new Secretary to the Assistant Chair of Operations, and three new tenure-track faculty last year: Dr. Jennifer Grouling in Composition and Rhetoric, Dr. Miranda Nesler in Renaissance literature and Shakespeare, and Dr. Maria Winstead in Early American Literature. Dr. Susanna Benko in Secondary English Education has joined us this fall.

We hope that you will enjoy keeping up with the latest news from your departmental alma mater and that you will keep us posted on what has been happening in your lives as well, great and small. You might also like to share a good memory about a department member, whether student, staff, or faculty. And it is always wonderful when a former student drops in to chat, so don’t be shy. Even those of us who don’t know you personally welcome these visits and reminiscences.

With best wishes,

Elizabeth M. Riddle
Professor and Chair
Building Their Own Waldos: An Interview with Dr. Robert Habich

Intern Rhiannon Racy interviews Dr. Habich to discuss his book, Building Their Own Waldos, as well as his research process and some of his more memorable research moments.

What inspired the book? How did you start writing Building Their Own Waldos?

In 1999, I wrote an article about one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s early biographers. From this experience, I discovered many biographers were in disagreement about how to write Emerson’s life. The book tells the stories of Emerson’s six early biographers and the combination of their perspectives on Emerson’s life and the experience of being a biographer in the 1880’s.

How long did the project take?

It took about ten years of research visits to more than twenty libraries and historical societies. The materials were scattered not only across the United States but overseas as well. I used about 20 libraries in the United States and 4 in Great Britain. Some libraries such as the Library of Congress, Harvard University Libraries, and Columbia University had large collections, and I visited them repeatedly. My overseas travels took me to the British Library in London, The University of Reading, and The Manchester Central Library. Not only did I search libraries, but I also visited local historical societies where I discovered other useful information on Emerson’s life and his biographers.

What was your most interesting find?

My favorite or most interesting find was about biographer Oliver Wendell Holmes. Holmes was one of Emerson’s most well-known biographers, and Holmes wrote Emerson’s biography because he wanted more money in his retirement in order get a better summer house. His current home was close to the railroad tracks, and he wanted to move. While researching in a historical society in a small town north of Boston, I became curious as to what happened on the floor Holmes lived in. One of the society’s volunteers told me that they moved the house from its original location and volunteered to take me there. The woman living in the house invited me in and brought me to the front porch. She had me put my hand on the carpet and feel the crescent shaped depressions in the floor. I realized that this was where Oliver Wendell Holmes created depressions on the floor as he wrote in his rocking chair. Go where the research leads you. It’s like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, but you don’t have the box it came in. I had no idea of the final picture. That was the fun of doing this research.

What is your favorite part of a project like this?

I enjoy seeing a story come together, and I suppose that’s part of the writing I enjoyed the most. Building Their Own Waldos is a story about storytellers, a narrative of people who wrote narratives, biographies of people who wrote biographies. The main point of Building Their Own Waldos is to show what we know about authors is often determined by personal considerations such as family or commercial needs. Each of the six biographers was writing at the same time, so in some sense they were competing for who would tell the best story. They cooperated, but they were also competing for book contracts—and, therefore, publishers were influential in their writing. It is fascinating that non-literary considerations come into play in the making of an author’s reputation. What was your favorite part of the book?

I’m honestly not sure what was my favorite part of actually writing the book, but my favorite part of the research was traveling around England and using big repositories like the British Library and smaller public libraries that tended to be older and dustier. They tended to be a little more exciting because you just look through boxes and boxes of things that are all uncatalogued. You never knew whether the next piece of paper you looked at was going to be the key to everything.

How does this work fit in with your work here at Ball State?

It fits in very well because I teach a graduate level class on literary biography; I teach classes on Emerson and his contemporaries; and I also teach a graduate research class—and this book is almost exclusively unpublished research.

What are your future plans?

Right now I am working on some more Emerson essays, but I also have an interest in that is called “literary tourism.” This concept deals with the ways in which tourism and literary studies intersect. I recently spent time in England at Henry James’s house, looking for ways in which houses construct biographies of the writers who lived there. I look at and dissect the placement of furniture, the artwork on walls, or the talks the guides give. I look at how all of those things create a material biography of the author. Overall I am generally interested in the non-literary influences on literary history.

In October, Victoria Barrett’s press, Engine Books, published Other Heartbreaks by Patricia Henley, which was featured in this month’s O, The Oprah Magazine. (And its author, Patricia Henley, was here recently to read.) The press has also recently released another title, Echolocation, by Myfanwy Collins.

Adam R. Beach’s article, “African Slaves, English Slave Narratives, and Early-Modern Morocco,” was accepted for publication in Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Elizabeth Dalton’s creative essay, “Mama, Master,” has been accepted for publication in Goddard College’s literary journal, Clockhouse Review. In addition, she and Honors College Dean James Ruebel lead an Honors field study to Rome and Florence in May.

Sean Lovelace published a flash fiction piece in Juked magazine. He was also published in La Granada Magazine, NANO Fiction’s 10th anniversary issue, and Stripped: A Collection of Anchor Flash Fiction. This fall Lovelace’s stories were accepted by Hobart, The Chautauqua Review, and Booth Magazine.

Miranda Nester’s article, “Closeted Authority in The Tragedy of Mariam,” appeared in Studies in English Literature.

Craig O’Hara’s story “City of Diseases” won third place in the Monkey Puzzle Press’s 3rd Annual Flash Fiction Contest and will be published in the upcoming issue of Monkey Puzzle Magazine.

Andrew Scott’s book, Naked Summer: Stories, was recognized as a notable collection by the Story Prize. He has agreed to terms with Press 53 to edit an anthology of short stories titled 24 Bar Blues: Two Dozen Tales of Bars, Booze, and the Blues, which will make its debut in early 2013.

Peter Bethanis has poems forthcoming in the Anthony Hecht Poetry Anthology.

Jill Christman’s memoir, Darkroom: A Family Exposure, has been released in paperback. Recent essays (with accompanying author interviews) were published last summer in Willow Springs and rcr.vry.

A musical based on Cathy Day’s novel The Circus in Winter and written by Ball State students was performed by the Ball State Department of Theater and Dance in September and October.

Robert D. Habich has been invited to write the chapter on Ralph Waldo Emerson for Oxford University Press’s new Oxford Bibliographies Online, an interactive web guide networked and linked to online journals, databases, and other electronic resources. He is also working on an essay on biography for the book Emerson in Context (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press).


Carolyn J. Mackay and Frank R. Trechel have a forthcoming publication appearing in the International Journal of American Linguistics.

Michael Meyerhofer’s third poetry book, Damnatio Memoriae (winner of the 2011 Brick Road Poetry Book Contest) was just released, as was his fifth chapbook, Pure Elysium (winner of the 2nd Annual Chapbook Contest from Palettes and Quills). He also recently had poems accepted by Hayden’s Ferry Review, Southern Indiana Review, Portland Review, and other journals. Two of Michael’s poems were reprinted in Verse Daily, and he also had a literary fantasy novel accepted for publication, due out as an e-book in about a year.

Jackie Grutsch McKinney has two forthcoming publications. The first (written with Becky Jackson), was published in the “Focus Articles” section of the Fall 2011 Praxis: A Writing Center Journal. Second, a book review (written with Ball State PhD student Emily Standridge) of The Online Writing Conference by Beth Hewitt, which is forthcoming in The Writing Center Journal.

Debbie Mix directed a Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry seminar on vernacular memorials in Delaware County. In addition to creating an interactive online map of these memorials, the fourteen students enrolled in the seminar also published a book entitled, In Loving Memory: A Study of Vernacular Memorials in Delaware County.

Matt Mullins’s book, Three Ways of the Law, was released in August with Atticus Books. Mullins, along with Rich Swingley (TCOM) and Dan Finnen (TCOM grad) were honored at the Broadcast Education Association (BEA) “Best of Media” Festival.

Mark Neely’s book of poems, Beats of the Hill, won the 2011 FIELD Poetry Prize, and was published by Oberlin College Press in March 2012. He also has new poems forthcoming in Gulf Coast, The Pinch, PMX, and Hunger Mountain.


Craig O’Hara was published in the Main Street Rag Press anthology, Altered States and The Dos Passos Review.

Rai Peterson was awarded a Provost’s Initiative Immersive Learning Grant. The grant funded five student groups who conducted archival research, created a digital

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more of a student-centered class by giving
generic assignments about different
kinds of nonfiction and informational
texts, allowing students to choose the
texts themselves. The student-centered
approach didn’t work so well with To
Kill a Mockingbird, so we moved to class
and group activities that fed into stu-
dents demonstrating their understanding
through writing assignments as opposed
to close-ended test questions. With the
rapid approach of the state’s English 10
End of Course Assessment (ECA), which
all students must pass in order to gradu-
ate, I’ve found myself trying to incorporate
a test prep without devolving completely
into a “teach-to-the-test” teacher, but
the gravitational pull of this standardized
test is so strong that it’s been hard not to be
completely sucked in as I’ve stepped a bit
closer to it.

Reflecting on these erratic fluctuations
between teaching styles has made me
wonder if it’s been an overall good
experience for students. Part of me
wants to answer that it has been good
since I’m experimenting and trying to
meet the different needs of my students
in different contexts. However, part of
me also acknowledges that students
have experienced a type of educational
whiplash as we’ve moved so drastically
between class formats. While I believe
that my philosophy of education and my
knowledge of good practices have not
been compromised in most of my
versions of class, I think that my students
and I would benefit from some sort of
consistency amid all of the changes. I need
a consistency of principle(s) that would
lead to deeper understandings of some
core idea(s) through the instrumentality
of the whole, rather than despite it. Since
I don’t want to ever imagine myself
going through a school year without
changing something up or experimenting
with something new, I truly believe I need
to either create a principle(s) that can
be applied in my experimentation or that
can be a signpost to students that, even
though we might be tweaking about in the
waves, we’re still making our way toward
some definite destination.

So, here’s what I’ve come up with: How
you think is more important than what
you know.

I don’t just want to give this idea lip ser-
vise; I want to figure out how to make ev-
everything I do point explicitly toward this,
giving meaning to what we do. I don’t
know exactly how to do this (how to
teach students how to think), but I think
it’s something worth trying to figure out.
Additionally, I think it’s a coherent rallying
point for me personally—a principle I
can stand up for when confronted with the
alternatives offered by standardized tests,
scripted curricula, broad yet shallow cov-
erage of content, and other educational
movements that, while not explicitly op-
tosed to teaching students how to think,
tend to direct too much focus on what to
know and be able to do.

When I’ve had the chance, I’ve been
asking family members, friends, old profes-
sors, and fellow educators how exactly
they think one can teach someone else
how to think, and I’ve been rather in-
trigued by the diversity of answers. Some
research I’ve read has also been enlight-
ening. I’m hoping to get enough ideas to
help me figure out exactly what I’m going
to do next year.

If “How you think is more important than
what you know” works as a good prin-
ciple for you, go for it and stick to it. If
not, I’d definitely encourage you to figure
out what you believe in, what you will
stand for, what you’re willing to work and
perhaps even fight for when you face an
onslaught of pressure from administra-
tors, parents, or some part of your
consciousness that wants to be a model
student and go blithely along with state
mandates. Getting our students to think,
I believe, will depend on a lot how we
think.●

Frank Felsenstein

Dr. Frank Felsenstein has been work-
ing on a database project called “What
Middletown Read” for several years that
compiles records of what books were
checked out from the Muncie Public Li-
brary from the years 1891 to 1902. Now
that the database has been made available
to the public, the project has received na-
tional attention in several prominent pub-
lcations such as Slate and the New York
Times. Follow the links provided to read
“Book This is 119 Years Older Than The
Wondrous Database That Reveals What
Americans Checked Out of the Library
A Century Ago” from Slate, and “What
Slate: http://slate.msnbc.com/ NY
Times: http://nyti.ms/tHZqEb

Frank Felsenstein: http://nyti.ms/tHZqEb

Rai Peterson

Dr. Rai Peterson was awarded a grant last
year with which she began a 33-week
immersive learning seminar project with
several students from across various dis-
ciplines within the university. Her project
sought to reshape and expand the reach of
the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library in
Indianapolis via several approaches,
including new marketing, expanded ad-
vertising, and the presentation of original
and rare Vonnegut artifacts. This ambi-
tious project has garnered much national
attention, including an article entitled
“Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library Tack-
ling Digitization,” which appeared in “The
Digital Shift,” an extension of Library
Journal. Follow the link provided to read
the article from “The Digital Shift” online:

Faculty Awards & Publications continued

AWARD Continued from page 5

humainties database, filmed oral history
interviews, designed products, created a
traveling museum, and wrote a five-year
marketing plan for the Kurt Vonnegut
Memorial Library in Indianapolis.

Mary Theresa Seig received a $1
million, two-year grant funded jointly
through the State Department and the
Iraqi Government (Higher Council
for Educational Development in Iraq)
to develop and in establishing an
Intensive English Program linked to the
Prime Minister’s Office to educate Iraqi
scholarship students in English prior to
their undergraduate or graduate study in
an English-speaking country.

Geralyn Strecker taught a spring
2011 VBC seminar that produced a
documentary entitled Black Baseball in
Indiana, which was selected for
screening at the National Baseball Hall of
Fame’s annual baseball festival in
Cooperstown, NY in September 2011.
Strecker was also recently named book
review editor for Black Ball: A Negro
Leagues Journal.

Trey Strecker was named Coordinator
for Ball State’s Indepednmental Minor
in Sports Studies.

The Broken Plate, 2011 issue, won
this year’s Indiana Collegiate Press
Association’s award for “Best Single
Issue” of a student literary magazine.

For a complete list of the
Department of English’s Good
News, please visit our blog
on WordPress (bsenglish.
wordpress.com).

Ball State Faculty Featured and Quoted in National Publications

How to Think: Phillip Call Reflects on his
Teaching and Learning Philosophy

Here at the end of my first year teaching
high school English and English as a New
Language (ENL), I have been asked by
Dr. Beach to share some thoughts about
what I’ve learned or what I wish I would
have known before starting.

One lesson I’ve learned that you might
take some comfort in is that a degree from
Ball State holds a lot of street credit in
K-12 applying and interviewing circles.

One thing I wish I would have known
before starting is a bit more complicated,
but I think it can be summed up in this
way: I wish I would have known how to
teach students how to think.

Let me unpack that a bit.

I became conscious of this wish the other
day when, after a curriculum meeting
where I had my first personal encounter
with departmental politics, the head of
the district’s ESL services reminded me, “You
didn’t go back on your principles, did
you?” I mumbled through a reply in an
effort to be positive but left the conversa-
tion wondering, “What exactly are my
principles?”

I had left Ball State with a pretty firm
phil-