

noted



Joel Dinerstein is an Associate Professor of English and the Director of American Studies at Tulane University.

My meeting with Professor Joel Dinerstein was not what I expected. By that I mean I had planned a quick meeting to get an idea of what he's been working on to write a short profile piece. Having taken a class with him, Jewish American Literature, I should have known better. He was inviting, and I left an hour later with a completely different story to tell.

The conversation kicked off when he caught me eyeing a framed *Village Voice* newspaper cover hanging on his wall. The July 30th, 1985 cover story read "Diary of a Mad Teacher: Why One Man Won't Go Back to School"; Professor Dinerstein's picture was right next to the headline. Surprised, I turned to him, "I never knew you were a teacher

or a writer for *The Village Voice*." "It's a good story," he said to me, "you're going to like this story."

Shortly after graduating from the State University of New York at Buffalo, he moved back to his hometown of Brooklyn and began teaching at a local middle school. The school was a tough, inner-city school in an impoverished neighborhood. He had his teaching certification, but being a novelist was what Dinerstein really wanted to do. The job was taxing, and he realized that he could not write and teach at the same time. More than that, the experience of teaching in the New York City school system had turned him inside-out emotionally and intellectually: "I had to write a piece about it. I needed to write about it to make sense of it for myself." Six months later, he quit his teaching job and began working in a word processing center at a major law firm on Wall Street to subsidize his writing career.

During this time, Dinerstein mapped out an article that he described as "an indictment of the New York City school system" and he pitched it to a few publications. About four months later, after having already assumed defeat, Dinerstein got an odd hand-written letter from Nat Hentoff, then a *Village Voice* columnist, that simply read: Will you call me? In their phone conversation, he encouraged Dinerstein to write a spec piece that Hentoff would then try to get published. Hentoff called the piece "superb" in what Dinerstein says was "a great moment in my life."

Cont. on Page 4



Great Writers Series Jonathan Franzen visits Tulane

Page 3

Rebecca Mark is an Associate Professor of English at Tulane.

For many years Rebecca Mark's scholarly focus has been on Southern writing, particularly Eudora Welty. Her first book, *Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's 'The Golden Apples'* won the Eudora Welty Award, and she was recently honored with the Phoenix Award for Distinguished Achievement in Eudora

Faculty Spotlight:

Rebecca Mark

interview by Clifford Thompson

Welty Scholarship. But her current research is more broadly rooted in American cultural studies. Her new book project, entitled *Ersatz America: Hidden Traces, Graphic Texts, and the Mending of Democracy*, is a study of non-alphabetical forms of constructive communication, which she calls "visceral graphism."

I had the opportunity to talk with Professor Mark about this project. "Visceral graphism is regenerative. It's always regenerative. It creates. It may create another narrative, it may create another text. It is regenerative connective tissue," she teaches me, as exemplary images move from her description to my imagination. Visceral



Eudora Welty



graphism is the patterned footprints created by the Ring Shout movements of enslaved peoples; it is the cracks in the frozen river that separate slavery from freedom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The concept is present in texts and in history; one just needs to know how to read examples of visceral graphism. Professor Mark gives a detailed example: "A student of mine, Ryan Woodruff, wrote a paper for the Southern Literature class, on Destrehan Plantation, and the houses that had been built by the enslaved people. They mixed mud and Spanish moss to create a mortar between bricks. The enslaved people, in order to push the mortar in, had pushed with their fingertips, so there are fingerprints of enslaved people all over this mortar forever. That's visceral graphism. We know the basics: enslaved people made this. We know that they had individual identities; these are their fingerprints. We know they had to work, they had to push their fingers into the mud. And that this whole house, which stands for enslavement, mastery, white supremacy, is built from the fingertips of these people... that is just incredible to me." "Visceral graphism is a constructive process," she explains. "It is a type of language without phonetic equivalency but with potent communicative meaning, and it shatters the ersatz myths that obscure colonialism and genocide."

Our conversation shifts gears as we discuss her experience teaching an unusual class. "The course I taught as a performance class called 'She Who Laughs Last' was about women in stand-up comedy. My students wrote

stand-up routines about everything. And we went all the way back to Phyllis Diller, and Lily Tomlin, up to the latest, cutting-edge women." Everything she describes about the class raises my disappointment about being a second-semester senior: I wish I had taken it. Where before her verbal brook swirled around theoretical discussion, here it increases to a torrent; her enthusiasm radiates from the anecdotes she relates. The class was not just focused on modern comedienne either, says Professor Mark: "If I could write a book tomorrow it would be on Mae West. I absolutely love Mae West. She's the oldest person we studied, but the students loved her. They went wild over her." And the memorable fun of the class was not just because of such unanimous agreement. "We were roaring laughing. We were crying, we were fighting. It was just raw, I mean, every single student in there was 100% involved." Professor Mark's courses are very popular, and it is no surprise that she has won awards for her teaching, including the Sheldon Hackney Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, the Honors Professor of the Year Award, and the John Stibbs Award from the Undergraduate Student Government. She has also taken a leadership role on campus, spending the past two years serving as Tulane's mentor for the Posse Foundation, a national leadership program for students. She has also served as Founding Director of the Newcomb College Institute at Tulane as well as Program Director of the Deep South Regional Humanities Center.

We conclude our conversation by comparing favorite comedians and writers. We shake hands, and I leave with a great deal of imparted information. I did not even need my stock interview questions, although, for those who are curious, her defining drink would be a frothy black tea latte with honey and almond milk. ♦



faculty in action

To see the rest of our faculty's newest books, papers, articles, panels, awards, and achievements, [click here!](#)

Jonathan Franzen is a novelist and essayist. His fourth novel, *Freedom*, was selected for Oprah's Book Club and *The Corrections*, his third novel, won the National Book Award. Franzen's remarkably honest work depicts contemporary America from the perspective of the people who live in it. He visited Tulane as a part of the Great Writers Series, and on March 5th gave a reading from *Freedom* as well as a question and answer session. A group of Tulane students, including seniors Clifford Thompson and Annie Ogburn were lucky enough to briefly talk with him beforehand.



Annie Ogburn: You wouldn't really guess it, reading his essays and interviews, but Franzen is an incredibly shy person. That was the most striking thing to me: watching this celebrated author speak so softly to a crowded room that was hanging onto his every word. At the end of our conversation he actually told me he'd embarrassed himself—even though he was in a room full of people giving him nothing but praise!

Clifford Thompson: When I joined the conversation, Mr. Franzen was already answering Annie's question. His manner was shyer and more deferential than I expected, but although he faced questions from all sides, he made a point to finish giving Annie a complete response. His responses to each person were similarly well-considered and attentive. For a writer who must weather hundreds such engagements, he exuded a patient sense of caring that seemed contradictory with the writer of characters' capable of such intense anger.

Annie: Knowing about his characters' frustration and anger, I asked if Franzen had any advice for a young idealist and activist hoping to balance a socially reasonable, acceptable attitude. He has often expressed a certain fringe radicalism, both through his characters (like Walter Berglund, the father in *Freedom* who is made infamous by a youtube clip in which he declares humanity a "cancer on the planet" and near the end of the novel is a rather pathetic, solitary old man with a vendetta against the songbird-murdering neighborhood cats) and personal essays (in which he laments the degradation of a society in which people no longer read). He clearly has some insight in holding an

idealistic view of the way the world should be, but at the same time recognizes the uselessness of anger when the world inevitably does not live up to the ideal. Franzen's advice on the subject was at the same time hopeful and worldly: "the world needs idealists," he said, "you can't disillusion yourself."

Cliff: When I spoke to Mr. Franzen, I asked a question based on an event in *Freedom*, when Walter Berglund and his unlikely best friend attend a concert. It is a Bright Eyes concert, a band that is earnest about being earnest. Walter's clean-cut, hard-working, long-suffering Midwestern personality is countered by his friend Richard Katz, a cynical, charismatic, physically-imposing rock star. Walter is enamored with Bright Eyes. Richard is not; the band makes him feel derisive, and simultaneously too old and too cool to be attending. I asked Mr. Franzen what he personally thought of Bright Eyes, and which character's point of view he shared.

"That album, the album *Lifted*, was very important to me once. I listened to it on a long drive through Northern Michigan, during a June snowstorm, and that music really spoke to me; I had the record on repeat throughout the drive. At some point though, the lyrics might be a little too un-self-conscious for me. With all music I think you have a time when it means more, a specific time." Mr. Franzen had driven the road from Walter to Richard, perhaps. "A June snowstorm": descending flakes shining in sunlight came to my metaphorical vision. It was an



excellent image for the question: united opposites, intricate burly Katzian snowflakes and true, unyielding Berglundian solar photons clashing. Temporary, like Mr. Franzen's professed affection for the album.

Annie: I also asked about his media interests—more specifically, his famous dislike for e-readers. Franzen is an artist with a talent for angering a talkative portion of his fans. For example, there is a feminist debate over his right to success as a male writer taking on a traditionally feminine literary form, and a minor storm of bitter hashtags after every anti-social media remark he makes. I can imagine it is depressing to achieve this sort of reputation, even among his literary successes. Luckily, his focus in life seems to be the process rather than the end product. In our conversation, and later at the reading he expressed the same sentiment: "One can't be weighed down by anger, or guilt. To fight for a cause you believe in is a worthwhile thing." He also expressed a good-humored sarcasm as he signed the back of my Kindle, upon which I'd read his novels, "Franzen is not here."

In his presentation, Franzen joked with the crowd, not beginning until making a myriad of comments of introduction that slid into a sharp and knowing delay of the audience's gratification. The excerpt he read was not his usual choice: instead he read the words of Richard Katz giving an interview to an amateur music journalist. The persona that initially seemed shy was only the polite half of a cutting wit. Hearing Mr. Franzen rant in Richard's voice into the microphone, the audience was privy to his honesty and his own worthily-fought-for causes. ♦

Dinerstein - Cont. from page 1

The quick, instant success of the story was such a surprise to everyone that a woman in the law office where he worked came up to him, pointed to his picture on the cover, and said, "this looks a lot like you." The article made a big splash; various people wrote letters to the editor, and Dinerstein was asked by *Newsday* to write a follow-up piece. What he calls his "fifteen minutes of fame" culminated in an invitation to appear on *The Phil Donahue Show*, in an episode on education. On the stage of the show was the superintendent of the Houston public school system, the vice president of the National Teacher's Union, and young Professor Dinerstein.

When he wasn't writing controversial articles for major publications, Dinerstein was working on his writing. He eventually channeled his interests, what he labels "Jews, blacks, Brooklyn, race relations, rock and roll," into academia. He got his PhD in American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. His dissertation became a book called *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). The book earned the prestigious Kayden Press Book Award, given each year to the best book published in the humanities by an American university press.

Currently, Dinerstein is working on a second book that explores the concept of cool. He is also the co-curator for an upcoming photography exhibit called American Cool, scheduled to open at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian in March 2014. Dinerstein is co-curating with friend, Frank Goodyear, the photography expert at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC. Together, and with the input of colleagues and students, Dinerstein and Goodyear have come up with 100 iconic people who they feel embody the idea of cool. They explore how the concept has changed over time and means something new and different to each generation.

Dinerstein is about to become the Director of the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South. The idea behind this endeavor is to create an intellectual community around the study of this region. At Tulane there is a new inter-disciplinary major that goes along with this study, entitled Musical Culture of the Gulf South. Clearly, Professor Dinerstein is very busy. In addition to teaching, writing, curating art exhibits, and developing new programs, you can listen to him on WWOZ New Orleans 90.7 FM. He hosts a morning show, every Monday from 6-9 am, so tune in! ♦

Student Spotlight

Sophie Unterman is a Tulane English major in the class of 2012. A writer, she turned a portion of an ongoing creative nonfiction project into a thesis for departmental honors. The project narrates her grandmother's childhood during WWII, tracing her experience from her hometown of Ludz, Poland through concentration camps and finally, liberation.

Last July Sophie and her grandmother, Eva, visited Ludz, as well as the concentration camps at Stutthof, Aushwitz and Krakow, funded in part by a Newcomb grant. As a family, they visited the distinct geography where the stories took place—Sophie taking notes, Eva telling stories.



Sophie Unterman (right), with her grandmother Eva

Although any depiction of the Holocaust is dark, the project has had its lighter moments. Sophie recalled her grandmother's excited suggestion that Sophie "turn my story into a murder mystery!" Although she appreciates so much enthusiasm, Sophie wants to more fully record the story, which is also depicted in a children's book written by her younger sister. Although the first portion of her work only narrates Eva's youth, Sophie intends to continue the project after graduation and describe Eva's immigration to America, where she worked in retail until her retirement.

In addition to writing, Sophie is the Director of Featured Readers for the 1718 Society, which hosts readings by local authors. Involved with the society for three years, she loves the opportunity to see professors read their own works, as well as work with recently published local writers.

After graduation, Sophie intends to continue adding to her writing portfolio in New Orleans and someday earn her MFA. ♦

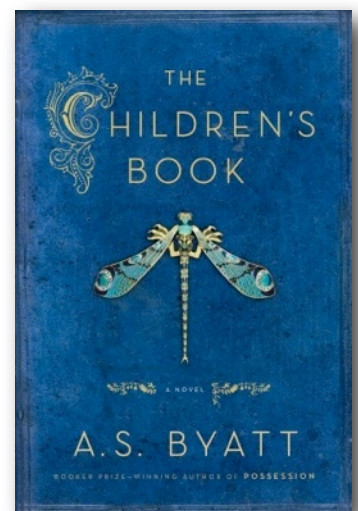
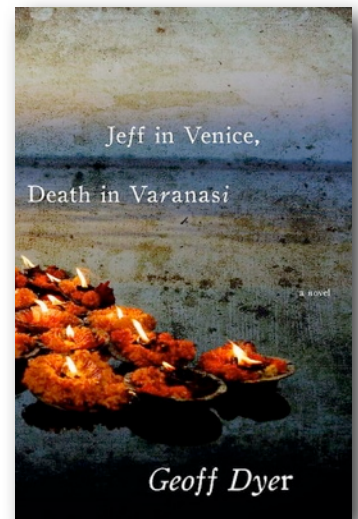
events

Fall
&
Spring
2012-
2013

Geoff Dyer
October 2012

Pierce Butler
Chair Lecture
November 2012

A.S. Byatt
February 2013





Chair's News

As the end of my term as Chair approaches, I want to thank the members of our department for their generosity, patience, good humor, and service. My colleagues have worked so very hard to improve our department by conducting reviews of our programs, developing innovative courses, promoting student research, and hiring new members. My deepest thanks to everyone. The officers of the department have taken on many extra duties, so I want to send a special thank you to Molly Travis, former Director of Undergraduate Studies; Michael Kuczynski, our Director of Graduate Studies; and Thomas Albrecht, our current Director of Undergraduate Studies. Molly Travis did double duty for our department on many occasions, even after stepping down as DUS, and we have benefitted from her experience in our program reviews and new curricular initiatives. Students often tell me how much they appreciate Tom's concern and advice; Tom has managed a number of difficult assignments superbly. Mike has worked tirelessly on behalf of the department: he has been a valued advisor to his colleagues. We are fortunate that he has agreed to serve as our next Chair: with his experience as former Chair and the great respect in

which he is held across the University, we know we are in excellent hands.

There is so much good news! Please note the numerous awards won by our students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty this year linked to the newsletter. I want to highlight a few achievements. Two English majors have won prestigious Fulbright awards: Ryan Judd, who will be conducting research in China, and Amy Holiday, who will be conducting research in Malaysia. Seven of our remarkable students delivered papers at the national Sigma Tau Delta conference of the Honors Society for English majors this spring: Casey Boersma, Paige Davis, Elizabeth Furey, Kari Heideman, Kat Hines, Courtney Rooney, and Shelby Simon. Thanks to Megan Holt for her leadership of our award-winning chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Outstanding Creative Writing students attended the Association of Writing Programs national conference: Engram Wilkinson, Mary Katherine Brake, Anna Schults, and Zack Berman. Two of our M.A. students will be entering doctoral programs this fall: Lindsey Sherrier will matriculate at Rice University, and Scott Zukowsky will attend SUNY Stony Brook. Three exceptional graduate students earned their doctorates this year: Kellie Warren, Shelby Richardson, and J.T. Taylor.

Members of the faculty have not only been extremely productive in the past year (see the faculty achievements) but they have also undertaken a number of special duties to enhance the department and the University. Congratulations to Scott Oldenburg, who just won the SLA Young Mellon Award! Joel Dinerstein has been appointed Director of the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, overseeing course development and exciting new service learning projects. Rebecca Mark steps down from her two-year Posse Institute role, and Gaurav Desai steps up. The members of the Executive Committee this year—Barry Ahearn, Mike Kuczynski, Tom Albrecht, T.R. Johnson, Supriya Nair, Felipe Smith, Scott Oldenburg, Michelle Kohler, and Molly Travis—have handled some challenging situations wisely and effectively. Zach Lazar has served as the

head of the Creative Writing Program while Peter Cooley was on sabbatical with a prestigious ATLAS grant. We are grateful to Zach for taking on these responsibilities in his first year with us. Zach and his Events Committee colleagues deserve our thanks for their work staging the Sherman Alexie, Naomi Nye, and Jonathan Franzen events. Barry Ahearn arranged another terrific Pierce Butler Chair Lecture this past fall with Professor Brian Reed from the University of Washington, and Tom Albrecht invited Professor Joseph Bristow, UCLA, to give the annual Josephine Gessner Ferguson Lecture in the spring, our best yet. Thanks to both Barry and Tom for adding to the intellectual vibrancy of the department.

We completed searches for two new faculty members: Professor Edward White, University of Florida, will become our new Pierce Butler Chair in January 2013: he will be associate professor of early American literature. Dr. Melissa Bales will join us in the fall as assistant professor in 18th-century literature. Look for their profiles in upcoming newsletters. Thank you to Barry Ahearn, Supriya Nair, Adam McKeown, Mike Kuczynski, Felipe Smith, and Michelle Kohler for their service on these search committees. We also will welcome new Mellon postdoctoral fellow, Dr. Catherine Michna, and new visiting assistant professor in English and Gender and Sexuality Studies, Dr. Heidi Hoechst. In the fall they will join Dr. Jennie Lightweis-Goff, who continues as our distinguished ACLS New Faculty Fellow for another year, and the multi-talented Dr. Roger Bellin, our visiting assistant professor. I want to thank our departing visiting assistant professors, Dr. Ashley Bender and Dr. Michael Rubenstein, for their exceptional collegiality and superb teaching. Ashley leaves us to take a tenure-track position at Texas Women's University, and Mike will assume his duties as assistant professor at Stony Brook University. Our best wishes go with them.

Cont. on Page 6

Summer Reading Suggestions by Faculty, Staff, and Students

- **Tom Albrecht:** *Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel
- **Scott Oldenburg:** *The Bricklayer's Arms* by Gary Hatcher
- **Michelle Kohler:** *Railsea* by China Mieville
- **Molly Travis:** *The Glass Room* by Simon Mawer
- **Dan Mangiavellano:** *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg
- **Daniel Sanchez (staff):** *Dirt Music* by Tim Winton
- **Holland Phillips (student):** *The Universe in Miniature in Miniature* by Patrick Somerville
- **Engram Wilkinson (student):** *2666* by Roberto Bolano



Boyette Prize Winners

Spring 2012

Ashley Richardson

"High Heels: Are They Worth it?"

Dayton Hunn

*"Democracy's Dilemma"*Tulane 34 Award

- Derrick Toups

2012 Senior Scholar in English

- Leah H. Askarinam

Academy of American Poets

- Abi Pollokoff

Henry Clay Stier Award

- Nicole Nolan

Class of 1903 Shakespeare Prize

- Teresa J. Clifton

Donald Pizer Award

- Derrick Toups

Virginia Gleaves Lazarus Award

- Lauren Menking

Writer's Residency Award

- Anna Shults

Dale Edmonds Prize for Best Short Story

- Engram Wilkinson

Quarante Club Prize for Best Short Story

- Emma Boyce

Senior Achievement Award in Creative Writing

- Sam Thomas

Award for Service to the Literary Community

- Sophie Unterman

Chair's News Continued...

Our postdoctoral fellows have been active this year. We will miss our interim Director of Freshman Writing, Dr. Ashlie Sponenberg, who has been a very able steward of that program during T.R. Johnson's sabbatical, when she takes up her new position at the University of Massachusetts. Dr. Lauren Cardon has been appointed Assistant Director of the Freshman Writing Program for 2012-13. Dr. Sean Connolly ran the Works in Progress series and then landed a tenure-track position at Bluefield Valley State College in West Virginia. Dr. Tom O'Connor has served in a number of capacities while a fellow, including coordinator of the certificate program for our graduate students: he has completed his fellowship but will continue to teach for us next year. Dr. Ryan McBride, the creator and director of the Debate Education Society and the City Debate League, has come to the end of his fellowship but will continue his good works under the auspices of the Center for Public Service while teaching for our department. We welcomed Dr. Rick Godden in the middle of the year, and we look forward to four new fellows joining our ranks next fall: Alexander Ruch (Duke University), Anne-Marie Womack (Texas A&M), Kellie Warren (Tulane University), and Vikki Forsyth (University of St. Andrews).

Laura Lecorgne will be leaving her position as Creative Writing Program Coordinator: we thank her for her spectacular work staging our many events over the past two years, and we are

delighted that she will continue to teach Creative Writing for us. We had an outstanding staff of adjunct instructors this year to whom we will be saying goodbye: thanks to Jerry Giddens, Andrew Feldman, Rich Cooper, Katherine Eisner, and Elaine Leyda. Joel Elmore will be remaining with us as an instructor in Creative Writing.

As always, Barb Ryan keeps the whole department running smoothly: we are fortunate to have her expert assistance and counsel. Our new administrative secretary, Daniel Sanchez, has been the epitome of quiet efficiency, and we are delighted that he will be with us again next year. The office staff, Nicole Nolan, Holland Phillips, and Engram Wilkinson, brightened our days and lightened our loads. We wish Nicole well as she heads off to medical school in Kentucky. Holly is starting a new position with LSU and beginning a library science degree. Engram, I am delighted to say, will be with us again next year.

Our alumni have donated a number of generous gifts, which we use to support student research. These gifts have a real impact on the education and futures of our students. We thank our alumni for their continued support of the work that we do. It has been a privilege to serve this remarkable department as its Chair and an honor to communicate with far-flung and accomplished alumni.

Thank you!

Molly Anne Rothenberg
Professor of English and Chair

Click here to see the latest awards and achievements of our post-doctoral fellows



Click here to see what our alumni are doing

Were you a Tulane English Major?
Send us your news!

Our thanks to:

Brekke McDowell - Dinerstein Interview
Clifford Thompson - Mark Interview
Annie Ogburn/Clifford Thompson - Franzen Interview
Annie Ogburn - Student Spotlight
Daniel Sanchez - Design/Production
Michelle Kohler - Publications
Coordinator
Michelle Kohler - Faculty Advisor
Barbara Ryan - Distribution

become a friend

Help us develop a network of alumni! You are the windows to possible futures for our majors.

Our goal is 100% participation by our alumni. Please join at the level that is right for you: \$20.00, \$50.00, \$100.00! The amount you give is far less important than your willingness to participate.

To become a friend, all you have to do is send your check to:

FRIENDS
Department of English
122 Norman Mayer
Tulane University
New Orleans, LA 70118

Don't forget to send in something about yourself for our Alumni News! Email us now at english@tulane.edu.