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# THE INTERLOCUTOR

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Newsletter of the Division of Humanities and Teacher Education  
Seaver College, Pepperdine University  
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## FROM ENGLISH MAJOR TO FUNDRAISER

*Kristina McClendon graduated from Seaver College in 2012. She shares her memories and experiences from HUTE to graduate studies to her current position at NYU School of Business.*



My first essay assignment as an incoming Pepperdine student included an essay entitled “Finding Your Heart’s True Calling” penned by Professor Gary Selby and a prompt asking us to consider and describe our own thoughts on vocation and potential plans. In all honesty, I don’t remember most of the content of the essay or my written response. However, in spite of the absent details, this essay signaled the beginning of a significant theme for my time as an English major at Pepperdine and career development after graduation.

I graduated from Seaver College in 2012 with an honors degree in English and countless memories with my friends and formative experiences ranging from volunteer opportunities to travels all across Europe with Pepperdine’s International Programs. In reflecting on these experiences five years later, I

am increasingly reminded of how significant my time in the Humanities division was in shaping my vocational goals, career development, and passions in life. Within HUTE, I participated in several organizations and activities including the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society, worked as a research assistant for Dr. Julie Smith, presented papers at multiple undergraduate conferences, and attended the Summer 2011 English Major program in London.

This program, in particular, was key in awakening my passion for my chosen field as well as preparing me with the tools and skills to succeed in a rigorous graduate program. Under the leadership and inspiration of Dr. Julie Smith, our program embarked on a robust and vibrant two-month period of studying literary

*This issue features reflections and responses from several alumni of the following programs: creative writing, English, Great Books, SAAJ, screenwriting, and teacher education. We wish to thank the contributors for taking the time to reflect about their experience during and after HUTE.*

*Tuan Hoang (faculty editor) & Katrina Winnett (student editor)*

London of the nineteenth century through diverse reading lists, tours of the city and key Victorian sites, and the ability to complete a large research project utilizing the University of London's Senate House Library extensive research collections. For me, this aspect of the program was hugely instrumental in allowing me to work with research methods and resources unavailable in Malibu and gain exposure to working with rare books and texts. Beyond enjoying the course work and time in London, this program provided me with insight on my chosen vocation and was a direct catalyst to pursuing my MA in Victorian Studies back in England in 2014–2016.

My career development has involved two parallel tracks, both largely influenced by my time as an English major and HUTE student. Certain classes at Pepperdine and mentorship from specific professors helped me narrow down my literary interests, select a specialty, and identify a path towards graduate school and academia. Under the guidance of HUTE faculty members such as Dr. Julie Smith, Dr. Constance Fulmer, and Dr. Cyndia Clegg, I was able to determine that a one year master's program in the United Kingdom would provide the best fit in terms of research opportunities, preparation towards a doctorate, financial costs of tuition and living expenses, and the opportunity to return to a country and city I deeply loved.

Although I applied for several master's programs in Victorian literature, Birkbeck College at the University of London offered a renowned interdisciplinary program on all aspects of the Victorian period. Learning from many of the top scholars in the field, I adapted to a different and challenging academic system, completed course work that required interaction with and exploration of London's Victorian past through museums, material culture, and lectures, and worked with new academic materials, research methods, and archives. (Photo: With fellow graduates at Birkbeck.)

My major highlights from the program include numerous hours researching at the British Library, attending my first professional academic conference, and conducting archival research at Oxford's Bodleian Libraries for my dissertation. In addition to solidifying my desire to become a professor and scholar and preparing me to pursue a doctorate, my master's course also allowed me to develop a community of scholars, peers, and friends in my field. My time in London was characterized by a tremendous amount of professional and personal growth, significant friendships both in academia and beyond, and the opportunity to explore and savor a city I love most.

HUTE was influential in helping me work towards my vocation within academia. However, I know that for many students and early-career professionals, the path towards your dream job often takes time and includes



many diversions along the way. My own career trajectory has involved several detours and positions that do not directly relate to my career goals or aspirations. My most looming question after graduating from Pepperdine was how I could translate the skills I had developed as an English major to positions and roles less obviously connected to the Humanities.

My first two professional jobs after graduation were facilitating office administration and coordination for Pepperdine's Office of International Programs and the Pepperdine Fund. My role fundraising for the Pepperdine Fund has subsequently led me to my current position at the NYU Stern School of Business as the Assistant Director of Annual Giving.

I never imagined that my English degree would lead me to a career in higher education fundraising or prepare me with the necessary skills and training to work in a finance and business-operated industry. I have found through several of my positions though, that Humanities degrees prepare students with skills in critical thinking, writing, editing, and thorough research that are valued in many industries and fields. As an English student, I have been able to adapt to professional writing, effectively manipulate language for multiple purposes and outcomes, synthesize creativity and critical thinking, and develop analytical and detail-oriented approaches to project management and research.

Thus, my advice to current Humanities students and recent graduates would be to remember that your degree is valuable and transferrable to diverse industries, positions, and career possibilities. Through your training at Pepperdine you possess the skills and ability to adapt your experience to many different jobs, career paths and vocational goals.

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## NEW GRADUATES & FACULTY HUTE COMMENCEMENT RECEPTION 2017



*From left: Lauren Davila (English) and Prof. Cyndia Clegg.  
McKenna Tompkins (Teacher Education, Math) with her parents and Prof. Carrie Wall.  
Kaithyn Caughfield (English) and Prof. Julie Smith.*



## TWO RECENT GRADUATES LOOK BACK...

*Matt Finley (English Literature) and Rachel Siegman (Teacher Education) graduated in April 2016, then pursued graduate studies towards their goals in teaching: Matt at Stanford and Rachel at Oxford. Here are their responses to two questions asked by The Interlocutor.*

### How did the experience at Seaver and HUTE affect or influence you?



**Rachel Siegman:** Pepperdine is my rock, my home, and has shaped much of my current career. “Purpose, Service, and Leadership for one” is the mantra that I have for my students and myself. The communitarian values and emphasis on faith at Pepperdine has helped nurture my soul so that I can foster youth development. Not to mention my courses: SAAJ was one of the most challenging courses at the time but also one of the best decisions. HIST 204, Geography, and California History are all essential if you want to teach middle school/high school and pursue the liberal arts professionally. And there was my favorite class in my major: Education 351 because I am quite keen on early childhood education. I also loved Education Foundations because this covered all the essential theorists needed to

be an educator. These theories and philosophies helped me to shape my own pedagogy and teaching beliefs. The unique writing assignments, case studies, and speakers we had also helped amplify these classes.

**Matt Finley:** As a teacher, I use what I learned at Pepperdine every day. I draw on classwork and syllabi from my literature courses to identify the texts I would like to work with and try my best to remember the conversations we had in seminars to develop a bank of questions that I work through with my students. I also have to give credit to Dr. Julie Smith's extremely strict attitude towards grammar and mechanics in essays. As a student, I always thought she was pretty tough, but as a teacher I find it useful to be hypersensitive to grammar—even if I don't always correct it! The Humanities courses are also very useful, particularly in terms of giving me a sense of a text's context that I can draw on if I find it relevant to the curriculum.



### Tell us about one of your memorable experiences regarding your time at Pepperdine.

**Rachel Siegman:** A memorable experience happened through the University but within the greater Los Angeles communities: my teaching placements. Through Pepperdine, I had the experience to carpool with fellow future teachers to Juan Cabrillo, observe a good friend teach as she did the same for me, represent our university at a Title 9 Elementary school in Thousand Oaks, and pursue Special Education at Agoura High. These experiences profoundly relate to my career as an educator, K-12 teacher, and shape much of my perspective coming into Oxford.



**Matt Finley:** One memorable experience that I was fortunate to enjoy at Pepperdine was being able to lead a club convo. In my sophomore year, I stayed in Malibu and a few friends and I decided to band together and start the "Breakfast Club" where we met once a week to just kind of debrief and bond over breakfast. One of us suggested applying for a club convo, and at first we kind of laughed. We decided to go for it though, we were approved, and, in about 5 minutes, I had to write a curriculum for 6 weeks worth of meetings, explain it to the convo team, and implement it! It was a blast, and my friends and I grew so much in that time.

We decided to continue the Breakfast Club until the end of our senior year. Our last club convo had a full roster of 15 participants, and the opportunity to serve my friends as a guide inspired me to seek out a career where I could keep working with texts in group settings to help other people grow. Currently, I'm in Stanford University's teacher training program, and I still certainly use the methods I developed as a club convo leader to develop rapport and self reflection among my high school students.

## EACH CLASS IS A JOB INTERVIEW!

*Eric Martin is a screenwriter and author. While studying at Pepperdine, he served as president of the graduate film society, Courier 12, and was a semifinalist for the Academy of Arts and Sciences Nicholl Fellowship. Recently, Eric adapted the novel The Liar's Chair for the screen and wrote the forthcoming novel, Cicero. Currently, he writes on the premium cable drama "Heels for Starz" and is developing TV comedy "King Elizabeth."*



The view is distracting. I should be honest about that. The campus is simply too majestic for its own good. I mean, on the outset, studying writing at Pepperdine seemed like a great idea. That view has to be inspiring, right? Wrong. It's distracting. All I wanted to do was stare out at the ocean. However, once I got past that awe-inspiring setting and wandered into a classroom, I discovered the true value of Pepperdine.

The MFA screenwriting program is made primarily of writing workshop classes, where the students read, critique and pitch on how to improve each other's work. This is not too dissimilar from writers' rooms, where recognizing and building upon a good idea is just as important as having been the good idea in the first place.

But what really made my time at Pepperdine valuable was the professors. The program is populated with a rotating stock of working screenwriters – people versed not just in the craft, but the current realities of the business. And since Hollywood is all about who you know and I knew exactly nobody, I treated each class like a job interview. So, I put my head down, worked hard, wrote all the time and never shied away from helping my classmates. I guess it worked, because from my time with my Pepperdine writing instructors, I gained lifelong friends, mentors and even jobs (this last one is pretty important, trust me).

## INTERVIEW OF JESSICA HOOTEN WILSON

*Jessica (2004) is a graduate of the Creative Writing and Great Books programs. She lives in Arkansas with her goofy family (photo) and works at John Brown University as an associate professor of literature and creative writing. This year sees the publications of her first two books on Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy. (A third is scheduled for next year.) Jessica will return to Seaver College on December 5, 2017 to give a talk about her second book.*

**In the acknowledgments of your first book, you trace the origin of your book to a course with Prof. Paul Contino at HUTE, in which the class read *The Brothers Karamazov* and *War and Peace*. Can you tell us a memory about that course?**

The amount of reading was initially daunting, but so exciting! Few classes pushed me so much and demanded so much, and I was grateful. I still remember key ideas that I learned from Contino, which I have since used either in my scholarship or in my teaching: notions of *nadryv*, Simone Weil's essay on attention, kenosis in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and his explanation of the Pantocrator icon. Also I recall that Dr. Contino let me be rather creative with my final exam. For my in-class essay, I created a dialogue between the characters of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy where they could debate their stances on art and faith. It was a fun assignment and has probably driven my continuous desire to meld my creative and scholarly interests.

**The book addresses, among other things, the "incarnational aesthetic" of Dostoevsky and O'Connor. What does it mean?**

"Incarnational Aesthetic" is a fun term that some of us Christian scholars use to describe the way in which Dostoevsky and O'Connor wrote. It has manifold meanings: it can apply to the artist's disposition, the structure of the work, the language choices, the themes, and even the objective for the reader. For all of these categories, the writer makes the Incarnation central: how does the fleshly life of God make certain demands on the way that an artist writes and the way that her fiction is formed? The Incarnation is such a crazy idea--that God lowered himself to become a human being, to be fully God and simultaneously fully a human! The incarnation provides permission to the artist to uplift the mundane, to find the transcendent within the dirty and the ugly in the world, to understand her role as one of my lowering the self just as Christ lowered himself.



***"If you love, you will belong to God. With love all things may be redeemed, all things may be rescued." ~ The Brothers Karamazov***

**Your second book continues the subject of Dostoevsky, albeit in connection to another American writer: Walker Percy. How did your experience of reading and writing the second compare to that of the first book?**

The first book on O'Connor was built on a hunch that started when I was an undergraduate that Russian writers, especially Dostoevsky, shared something in common with Southern writers. This hunch came to be fulfilled as I studied the theological meaning in Dostoevsky and O'Connor's fiction.

When I left graduate school, I decided to continue pursuing my hypothesis--I ventured off to Vanderbilt libraries to research the archives of the Agrarians and Fugitive poets, then to Princeton library to look into Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon further, then to Walker Percy's archives at Chappell Hill. What was uncovered in each library was Percy's fascination with Dostoevsky. Each library held letters from or to Percy about his reliance on Dostoevsky from one of the other writers that I was looking into.

Then, when I hit the collection at Chappell Hill, it was a treasure trove! Percy learned how to become a Christian novelist--his very goal--**by imitating Dostoevsky**. For me, I felt like I had uncovered a lost secret, an unknown key to how to communicate the gospels to an unbelieving world. Percy realized that he had to retell the good, true and beautiful from other writer's stories in his own time and place. I learned from Percy and Dostoevsky.

The research was completely different: rather than focusing on reading the texts closely and investigating their theology, I was digging through unpublished manuscripts, book annotations, teaching notes, letters, and so forth to garner evidence about what Percy was attempting as a novelist. My Christian eyes then made sense of what I was seeing; my theology provided the lens to understand why Percy's method mattered. If we are made in God's image and Christ has instructed us to follow Him, then imitation becomes spiritual practice.

**Returning to Pepperdine, please share one or two memories of your time at HUTE, inside or outside of the classroom.**

Great Books was the primary reason that I attended Pepperdine. I remember reading *The Odyssey* on Westward beach, learning about Dante's trek through the afterlife from Dr. Ditmore as he showed us illustrations of Florence, arguing the idea of revolution versus evolution in Dr. Gose's class. The Great Books classes were the only classes where I worked to become better and thought less of the grade.

That said, I do tell a story about Dr. Gose to my current students, a story in which my paradigm shifted from grade-centered to learning-centered. After receiving a "B" in the fall with Dr. Gose, I met in his office and told him I could only take his class in the spring if there was a chance of an "A" (embarrassing audacity here!). He made me a deal: if I wrote a short 2-3 page paper on each text for each class, and I was on the line between A/B, he would consider at the end of term whether I deserved the A. I still received a "B."

And, it didn't matter anymore. What I had gained in that class could not be evaluated by the letter. I was on a search for life that began in Great Books and continues now as I teach Great Books at my current college.



## OTHER ALUMNI NEWS



Two English majors, **Meredith Rodriguez** (2008, left) and **Danielle Claypool** (2015, right), interned in Jerusalem, Israel, for a peace organization called Musalaha (meaning reconciliation). Both Meredith and Danielle did research in Middle East studies over the past summer. Meredith is finishing an MA in Near Eastern Languages. Danielle won a Fulbright to Turkey, but her program was cancelled due to political unrest. She pursued this internship instead, and was finishing work in Jerusalem before deciding on the next step.

**Katharyn Blair** (BA English, MFA Screenwriting) has her debut novel, *The Court of the Undone* (HarperCollins) scheduled for publication in 2018.

In addition, she was recently picked up as an author for Penguin, and has a duology under contract entitled *The Breath of Bones* in their Penguin for Young Readers Series. It is slated to come out in 2019.

**George Kovalenko** (Creative Writing & Theatre) completed an MFA in poetry writing at NYU last year. He is currently enrolled in NYU's doctoral program in German Literature.

**Angela Smith** (English) won the Teacher of the Year Award for 2017 at Haringey Sixth Form College in North London, UK, where she has been teaching for a number of years. She has founded a literary magazine at the school that features student writing, and also organized a community arts event each year when the magazine is published. This event features the reading of student work as well as music and dance. Angela also raised money to allow a group of her students studying Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to travel to Transylvania to tour sites related to the novel. Angela is second from right in this photo taken in Transylvania (right).



**Left:** Lisa Smith presented a paper on using comics to teach students write analytically at ComicCon International. **Middle:** David Holmes gave the address entitled "Roles and Rhythms" during this year's Baccalaureate Service for Seaver graduates. **Right:** Tuan Hoang spoke about the Fall of Troy and the Fall of Saigon at Rollins College. They are only three among many examples of HUTE faculty speaking at academic and public venues during 2016-2017.