

# The Write Track



The *Atlantic Monthly* ranks UNLV's graduate-level creative writing programs among best in the nation

By Barbara Cloud  
Photography by R. Marsh Starks



Master of fine arts program director  
Claudia Keelan  
and English department interim chair  
Douglas Unger

It was an email of just a few lines, but it spoke volumes of good news to Doug Unger. One of the founders of UNLV's master of fine arts in creative writing program, Unger was serving as interim English department chair last summer when he received an unexpected email from a fact checker at *The Atlantic Monthly*. The email asked him to confirm information for an upcoming *Atlantic* article recognizing UNLV's graduate-level creative writing programs as among the best in the nation.

"It was wonderful news," says Unger. "To have this publication—one of the most sophisticated magazines in the literary world—acknowledge our creative writing programs was truly confirmation of our success."

The article, titled "Where Great Writers Are Made," appeared in August and named UNLV's master of fine arts (MFA) program in creative writing as one of the five most innovative in the country and the doctoral program as one of the overall best of its kind.

The article praised the UNLV master of fine arts program for its emphasis on global literature and its unique partnership with the Peace Corps, which encourages students to spend two years abroad with the Corps as part of their programs. They

also must translate a major work of literature.

The Peace Corps partnership has created a lot of buzz in the literary world, according to the article's author, Edward J. Delaney. Though he hadn't heard much about the UNLV program before he began his research, Delaney says the program was mentioned "again and again" as he interviewed some 350 program directors, professors, students, and graduates across the country to gather information for the article.

The MFA in creative writing was approved by the Board of Regents in 1997. It includes emphases in both prose and poetry and is taught by a well-published faculty, including poets Claudia Keelan and Donald Revell, novelists Richard Wiley and Unger, and MacArthur Fellow Dave Hickey. Several internationally renowned visiting authors also contribute to the program. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has participated, as has novelist, translator, and poet Pablo Medina, who has served as visiting professor for the last two academic years. The program has also sponsored visits and readings by award-winning guest authors such as John Irving, Tobias Wolf, George Saunders, Doug Powell, Paul Hoover, and many others.

UNLV's English department has a strong history of

supporting creative writing as an area of study. Novelists and poets have long served on the department's faculty, and graduate students have produced a variety of works of fiction through the years. But it wasn't until the 1990s that the faculty formalized these interests and created the master of fine arts in creative writing.

English professor Chris Hudgins, former department chair and now interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts, recalls that when he came to UNLV in 1976 the faculty included many published writers, including poets James Hazen and A. Wilber Stevens, as well as novelist John Irsfeld.

"These faculty members formed a foundation of strength in this area, which contributed to our decision to propose an MFA in creative writing," Hudgins says. "Several of our master's students had written 'creative theses' for their final projects, and several others completed collections of short stories under these founding faculty."

Hudgins says the department faculty realized that the first step toward establishing an exceptional MFA program was to build the faculty with well-respected authors. In 1990, they hired novelist Richard Wiley, who had won the prestigious PEN Faulkner

Award for his novel *Soldiers in Hiding* and was a graduate of the prestigious MFA program at the University of Iowa.

In 1991, the department hired Unger, another Iowa MFA graduate and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in literature, who says that he left a tenured position with the department of English at Syracuse University to come to UNLV because of the opportunity to develop a new and innovative MFA program.

Both Wiley, who now serves as the assistant director of UNLV's respected Black Mountain Institute, and Unger, who continues to chair the UNLV English department, have received the Board of Regents Award for Creative Activities.

"Our program developed as a result of Chris, Richard, and I sitting down and blue-skying about what an MFA program should be," Unger recalls. "Our contention was that for UNLV to build a program that would put the school on the map, it would have to have a unique emphasis."

Unger and Wiley were kindred spirits on the subject of the importance of international experience; both had spent time abroad and incorporated their experiences into their writing, and they felt strongly that living abroad could invaluablely enrich a writer's work. Thus, the idea for the partnership with the Peace Corps was born, and the development of the program was under way.

With the support of then-UNLV President Carol C. Harter, the Board of Regents approved the program in April 1997, and the first three students enrolled in the fall of that year. The Peace Corps partnership was implemented a year later.

"Since then, the international emphasis has distinguished our program," says Unger, adding that it produces a kind of writing that "looks out from America to the world," offering a more expansive perspective. "A few programs out there are now imitating us, which is the proof that it is working."

In addition to the MFA program, the English department established a creative writing track as a part of its Ph.D. program in 2001. (The English doctorate was one of UNLV's earliest; it was established in 1987.) Doctoral students in the creative writing track meet the same requirements as other Ph.D. students, but each submits a creative dissertation, usually a book-length collection of stories or poems or a novel. Two students, one in poetry and one in fiction, are admitted each year.

These students receive doctoral fellowships, which provide them with funding to facilitate the completion of their dissertations. This fellowship program was created with the support of local gaming executive Glenn Schaeffer, an alumnus of the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Schaeffer also funded the Elias Ghanem Chair, which has brought internationally renowned writers such as Soyinka and Derek Wolcott, both

Nobel laureates in literature, to campus to teach and work with students. (The Rogers Fellowships in English are also offered to students completing scholarly dissertations.)

The Schaeffer fellowships are vital to the program because they enable students to concentrate on their writing, says English professor Claudia Keelan, who directs the MFA program.

"We've been very lucky to have private funding for these fellowships," says Keelan, adding that these positions are the mainstay of creative writing programs. "The students who have received fellowships have already started exceptional careers simply because they were funded at a level that made them free to think almost entirely about their own work."

The fellowships also serve as an important recruitment tool for the English department, enabling faculty to attract the best students. This, in turn, makes UNLV competitive with the finest institutions across the country.

Accolades such as those found in the *Atlantic* article also boost recruitment, Keelan and Unger agree. They note that applications to the MFA program have quadrupled since the article's publication, and they hope for more as the accolades continue to roll in. Unger recently received word that *Poets & Writers*, a respected trade magazine, listed UNLV's MFA program as one of nine distinctive programs in the country in its Nov./Dec. issue.

To Unger, this is yet another form of affirmation indicating that the program has arrived, bringing with it recognition and praise for the whole institution.

"What we are seeing is that literary studies at UNLV are beginning to take a place on the national stage," he says. "And we couldn't be more delighted about it."

**Penning Success**

Graduates and students of UNLV's creative writing program are publishing regularly and garnering numerous awards. Some recent examples of their accomplishments are listed below.

**Recent Publications—Poetry**

- Meredith Stewart** "Jesus' Shadow," "New Heaven New Earth," and "The Christmas Truce," published in *Rock & Sling*
- Leo Jilk** "Clepsydra" and "Forestcaped Shore" in *Notre Dame Review*
- Mani Rao** "The Sky is Fitted Linen..." in *Contemporary Voices of the Eastern World: An Anthology of Poems*; "Epitaph" and "Calling" in *Zoland Poetry*; numerous poems in *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English*
- Joshua Kryah** "The Lark, the Spur"

- in *Pleiades*; six poems from *Closen* in *The Iowa Review*; two poems from *Closen* in *Shenandoah*; four poems from *Holy Ghost People* in *Slope*
- Peter Golub** Russian translations in *Ashville Poetry Review*, *Absinthe: New European Writing*, *Caketrain*, *Cimarron Review*, *Circumference*, *St. Petersburg Review*, *Rhino*

**Recent Publications—Fiction**

- R.D.T. Byrd** "The Deep End" in *Folio*
- Joe Cameron** "Yama's Embrace" in *Texts' Bones* and "The Last Moments of Nawaf Alhazmi" in *Heavy Glow*
- Flash Fiction Anthology**
- Juan Martinez** "Divers" in *West Branch*; "Souvenirs from Ganymede" in *River Teeth*; "The Coca-Cola Executive in the Zapatoca Outhouse" in *Conjunctions*; "The Spooky Japanese Girl is There for You" and "The Lead Singer is Distracting Me" in *McSweeney's*

- Matt Swetnam** "In the Walrus Colony" in *Portland Review*
- Short stories by **Jaq Greenspon**, **Bliss Esposito**, and **Vu Tran** in *Las Vegas Noir*

**Honors and Awards**

- Vu Tran** 2007 O. Henry Award for "The gift of years"
- Chris Arigo** Transcontinental Poetry Prize for *Lit interim*
- Sasha Steenson** Alberta Award for Poetry for *A Magic Book*
- Joshua Kryah** Third Coast Poetry Prize Finalist for "Numen"; finalist for the Glasgow Prize for Emerging Writers for *Glean*
- Megan Merchant** Honorable mention in *Kaliopé Poetry* for "Ways to worship"
- Maile Chapman** *Best American Fantasy Writing 2007* for "Bit Forgive"



The *Atlantic Monthly* named UNLV's master of fine arts program in creative writing one of the five most innovative in the country and the doctoral program as one of the overall best of its kind.

Images provided courtesy The Atlantic