

SUMMER 2024

# GIVE ME GOOD NEWS

The Department of English Newsletter

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1

## What's up with you?

Our English faculty share their latest updates and adventures!

### Alan Ambrisco

Alan recently had two poems appear in this year's *Dead of Winter* anthology, published by Milk & Cake Press. The poems—"Rust-Belt Winter" and "A Rust-Belt Warming"—were indeed written in the dead of winter, and "A Rust-Belt Warming" was written late at night while the History Channel's show *Ancient Astronauts* was playing in the background. You need not ask—in this poem, spring isn't the only thing to arrive when the weather breaks!

### Bill Thelin

Along with catching up on his reading, Bill will be working on two articles this summer, one about Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and another about the film, *Unforgiven*. On top of that, he will try to make progress on the novel he has been writing.

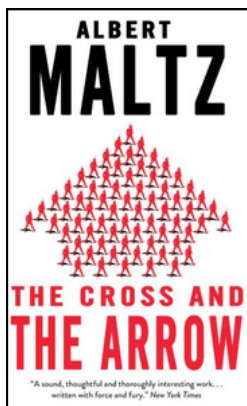


### Lance Svehla

Lance had an essay accepted for publication in an edited collection on the rhetoric of Trump. The essay is titled: "The Audacity of Trump: The Rhetorical Strategy of President Donald J. Trump."



### Patrick Chura



Patrick will be on sabbatical next year! But he will mainly stay in Akron except for a family vacation, some travel to research archives in the fall, and a January trip to MLA in New Orleans.

The next two volumes in his "Rediscovering Albert Maltz" project with London-based Alma Books will be out soon. Maltz's 1944 novel *The Cross and the Arrow* will be reissued in July, and in October *The Journey of Simon McKeever* will see the light of day for the first time since 1949. Both are truly great books that were removed from library shelves during the McCarthy era.

Patrick wishes everyone a great 2024-2025 academic year.

# David Giffels

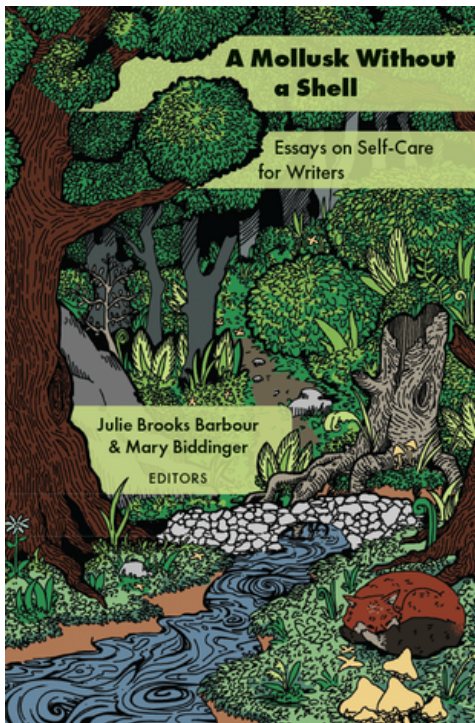
During the spring semester, David continued the book tour for *The Beginning Was the End: Devo in Ohio*, published by the University of Akron Press, with readings and talks at Cincinnati's Mercantile Library, the Ohioana Book Festival in Columbus, the Inter-University Council of Ohio Book Club in Columbus, and the Akron Book Festival at the downtown Main Library.

The definite highlight was the Cleveland International Film Festival. Following the closing-night premiere of the new documentary "DEVO," Professor Giffels interviewed the surviving members of the band, who Zoomed in on the big screen at the Palace Theater in Playhouse Square.



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# Mary Biddinger



A highlight of the spring 2024 semester was celebrating the release of *A Mollusk Without a Shell: Essays on Self-Care for Writers* with the students of Advanced Poetry Writing, along with visitor Noah Snyder, who Zoomed in from his study abroad in Japan.

Mary also had the opportunity to lecture about the new book during a visit to Lake Superior State University, where her co-editor Julie Brooks Barbour is on faculty. Julie and Mary signed copies of the book at the 2024 Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference in Kansas City, as well.

This summer Mary will be finishing a last round of edits on her debut work of fiction, *The Girl with the Black Lipstick*, a novella forthcoming with Black Lawrence Press in July 2025.

# Alumni News

## Kayla Hardy to Publish Novel

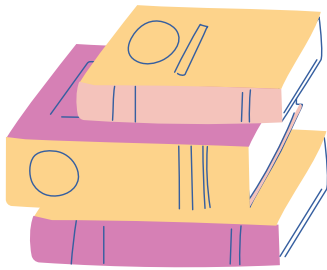


Hardy

Kayla Hardy, who holds a B.A. and an M.A. in English from UA, has just made a two-book deal with Ballantine. We're very proud of our alumna's success! See her press release here:

### Hardy's 'Queen' Coronated by Ballantine

In a preempt, **Natalie Hallak** at Ballantine has signed world rights to **Kayla Hardy's** *The Quarter Queen*, along with an as-yet-untitled second book. The deal was negotiated by **Emma Kapson** at Verve Talent & Literary. Ballantine said *The Quarter Queen* is "a mother-daughter saga set in a magically and racially divided 19th-century New Orleans" that tells the story of "the daughter of voodoo queen Marie Laveau, who must race against the clock to navigate the power struggle of her city in order to save her mother, in the process discovering her own inner magic and its connection to a dark secret, intertwined with Marie's rise to the throne 20 years earlier." No pub date has been announced.



Read any good books lately?

Check out our faculty's recommended reads!

### Bill Thelin

- *Wandering Stars* by Tommy Orange
- *Night of the Living Rez* by Morgan Talty

### Lance Svehla

- *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* by James McBride

### David Giffels

- *There's Always This Year: On Basketball and Ascension* by Hanif Abdurraqib
- *James: A Novel* by Percival Everett
- *The Best American Essays 2023* edited by Vivian Gornick

### Alan Ambrisco

- *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* by Suzanne Simard

### Mary Biddinger

- *The Morningside* by Téa Obreht
- *Piglet* by Lottie Hazell

# Tales from the Classroom

featuring

Dr. Hillary Nunn's [Un]class Students,  
Greer Brightbill & Maddie Smith



As part of our project for the 'Round Howard Street [Un]class this past semester detailing the Cosmopolitan Club's atmosphere, our group of four visited the grave of Clifford Johnson. Johnson was a jazz musician on Howard Street during its heyday, and at the age of eighteen, he was considered a prodigy in the music world. He possessed perfect pitch and could arrange off the top of his head. We found out that he arranged music for the band he played with, The Pete Diggs Band, which was on circuit playing at the

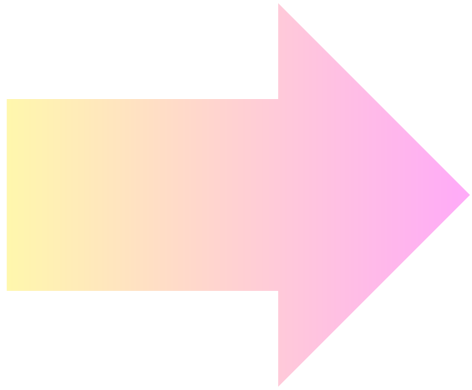
Cosmopolitan Club on Howard Street when Clifford was murdered by an ex-girlfriend at a nearby theatre. Johnson is buried in Mt. Peace cemetery, just around the corner from the University of Akron.

Clifford Johnson became a crucial part of our project, and the tragedy of his story compelled our group to visit him. We were looking to put a physical sense into the feelings we developed about him, his story, and his presence established at the Cosmopolitan Club. We felt seeing his grave would make our research more tangible, and it did.

With permission from Dr. Nunn, the four of us trekked out to the cemetery during class time, got directions, and found Clifford in the corner of a lot with grass clippings covering the edges of his reddish colored headstone. We took turns brushing the clippings off with our hands and placed the flowers we had brought around his grave.

Standing there, one of us remarked that this felt like the kind of moment where someone ought to read a poem, or say something nice. We laughed, and it lightened things enough to make it an incredibly gratifying moment for all of us. It felt good to pay our respects to a young person who was such a defining entity in our semester's worth of work. Clifford was younger than each of us in our group when he died. We suspect he might have been considered one of the jazz greats had his life not been taken at such an early age. We also did a grave rubbing to share at our [Un]Class showcase event, and it was incredibly rewarding to see our attendees as excited as we were about Clifford Johnson. We felt that bringing attention to his life and death was a crucial part of our research, and it added a lot of dimensions to the way we spoke about our findings. He was just one example of the real people whose lives we researched to provide a deeper and more truthful narrative about Akron's historic Howard Street.

You can read more about The Cosmopolitan Club and Clifford Johnson's accomplishments on the [Green Book Cleveland](#), [our group website](#), and [here](#).



NOW THAT'S A GOOD

# STORY!

**Featuring Jim Wallace**

During my time as an instructor at UA, I have taught a lot of students (in the thousands) and gotten to know them along the way. Consequently, I can remember a lot of the "firsts": first time that I taught someone older than me (1990); first set of twins in the same class (girls from Wadsworth in the mid-1990's); the first student whose parents were younger than me (spring of 1995); even the first mother/son pairing (I had Mary in 94-95, and her son Rayde in spring of 2000). I was beginning to think that there weren't a whole lot of "firsts" left for me, but isn't that always when one more comes along?

In the fall of '23, I got a note from the contact DL-guidance counselor, Melinda Weakland, at Springfield High School regarding the students joining the DL section remotely due to the school being closed for state testing. At the end of the message, there was a note from Ms. Weakland:

"Have you been at UA long? I was a student there starting in the fall of 1988 and you look kind of familiar."

Despite what Workday says, my initial date of hire is 8/88, so it was feasible (not something I'm quick to admit). It took a little searching, but she was able to confirm that she had had me for 111 in the fall of 1988 in East Hall (If you're wondering where East Hall is, well, it would be directly across Union St. from Olin Hall, except they tore it down in 1996 and closed that section of Union St. around the same time). Her memory of the class was that it was fun but difficult, and her memory of me was "You looked so young." (Not sure how to take that, but we'll call it a compliment).

So, that's my latest first. I'd say there aren't likely to be any more, but who knows?

*And Now a Word from*  
**THE AC\***

**\*Assistant Chair Lisa Rhoades**

*Hello friends,*



Emily Price and Scott Kenimond

It is hard to believe summer is around the corner. We have had such a busy Spring semester, full of activities, honors, and celebrations. We have six seniors graduating with their English Degrees, five students graduating with English Minors, nine earning their Creative Writing Minor, and two with a minor in Popular Lit and Culture. Seven students will be taking home certificates in Linguistics and/or TESL. Both Emily Price and Scott Kenimond will graduate with Honors, having completed and presented outstanding creative projects this semester.

This semester, four of our undergraduate students' proposals were accepted for the CEO (College English Association of Ohio) conference, held at Dominican University. Olivia Kurylo presented her work, "Transforming Notions of Female Psychology in Gillian Flynn's Novels." Chloe DiMario shared her creative works, presented in her session, "The Poetic Plague of the Body," and joined peers Scott Kenimond and Jericho Dale later in the day for a workshop session on Scrapbook poetry. They were among only five undergraduate presenters at the conference, and they made UA proud.

Our students also received accolades for their participation in this year's Celebration of Scholarship, hosted by BCAS. Scott Kenimond shared his biographical piece on our esteemed chair and resident poet, Dr. Biddinger; Jericho Dale shared some original poetry, and Gwen Bushen presented her work on Aristotle and Plato, taking home the first-place award.

The open mic night sponsored by Ashbelt and Upstart Crows was a big success again this semester. Dr. Ambrisco's poetry reading was a big hit with all, alongside the many talented student poets. Moving forward, we will see these two student groups continue to work together, creating even more opportunities for all students.

On the scheduling front, the shift to Workday has been a bit challenging, but we are getting students registered for some great classes in the fall. Once the system can communicate with Stellic, we should have even greater success tracking those DPRs and keeping everyone on schedule to graduate.

I hope everyone has a wonderful summer! Check some books off your reading list and enjoy your break.

*Take care,  
Lisa*

# Letters

FROM THE CHAIR

*Dear English Department Colleagues, Students, and Friends,*



Mary Biddinger and Julie Brooks Barbour  
lecture on *A Mollusk Without a Shell:  
Essays on Self-Care for Writers* at Lake  
Superior State University.

Thank you for all of your efforts and energy this past spring semester. From my office next to the faculty mailboxes, I appreciated the foot traffic and lively banter in the halls, and was grateful to everyone who visited the department and stopped by to say hello. Even with a few late cold snaps, we had a beautiful spring, and campus was looking its very best in time for graduation pictures.

One highlight of the Spring 2024 semester was traveling to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference in Kansas City along with students and faculty from the NEOMFA program. We enjoyed sunny weather, panels on interesting literary topics, a busy book fair, and some tasty food while there. I'll probably never again commit to doing two book signings and four different readings over the course of three days, but it was a memorable trip nonetheless.

In early May I had the honor of once again co-emceeing the NEOMFA graduate reading. Congratulations to UA NEOMFA graduates Madison Helbig and Susan McKenzie! With the new fiscal year I'll be starting a three-year term as NEOMFA program director, and look forward to that new leadership position in addition to continuing as the English department chair. I also had the chance to attend the BCAS Commencement ceremony (as a spectator, cheering on my own graduate) and was happy to see our English majors and minors cross the stage.

Have a fun and restful summer filled with sunshine and good books!

All the best,

*Mary B.*

# Three Cheers

## for Awards Season!

The 2023-24 English Department Awards Ceremony was held on April 17th, 2024. After a four-year hiatus, we were finally able to meet face-to-face and celebrate the accomplishments of our amazing students. Faculty, students, and families joined to honor this year's recipients at a nice reception in the Honors Common Room.



## *ELI Summer Offerings*

### ***TOEFL Preparation***

The English Language Institute (ELI) is offering a 100% online summer enrichment course on TOEFL test preparation between 6/3/2024 to 7/26/2024. International students and community members who are interested can [click this link](#) to read the course description and register for the course.

### ***SIOP Workshop***

The English Language Institute (ELI) is offering a five-day workshop on the SIOP model, a research-validated model to teach both content knowledge and academic English to English language learners from 9:00 am -11:30 am from 7/29/2024 - 8/2/2024 as part of its Summer Institute for International Instructors. UA students, especially TESL Certificate and TESOL Endorsement seekers as well as faculty members interested in learning about the SIOP model are welcome to join the workshop free of charge.

For inquiries about these offerings, please call 330-972-7544 or email [ua-eli@uakron.edu](mailto:ua-eli@uakron.edu).





# DON'T FORGET

The semester kicks off  
**Monday, August 26th!**



**thanks for  
reading**

SEE YOU NEXT TIME!

Submit your updates for the next  
edition to Kate Christie at  
kit4@uakron.edu!



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