

Jackson Returns to UO a Major Poet

An interview with M.F.A. graduate and author of Leaving Saturn, Major Jackson

M.F.A. graduate Major Jackson ('99) returned to the University of Oregon in October to read from his poetry as a guest of the Creative Writing Program's 2004-2005 reading series.

Jackson's first book of poems, *Leaving Saturn* was selected by Al Young as the winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize for the best first book by an African American poet. The book was also nominated for a 2002 National Book Critics Circle Award.

His poems have appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *Callaloo*, *Grand Street*, *Post Road*, and *The New Yorker*, among other literary journals.

Formerly the Literary Arts Curator of the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, Jackson is the recipient of fellowships and awards from Bread Loaf

Writers' Conference, Pew Fellowship in the Arts, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, as well as a commission from The Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia. In 2003, he received the prestigious Whiting Writers' Award.

He has given readings around the country and participated in many festivals including the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, Poetry Society of America's Festival of New American Poets, and The New Yorker Festival in Bryant Park, New York City.

He is a graduate of Temple University and the University of Oregon's Creative Writing Program. Major Jackson is an associate professor of English at the University of Vermont, a faculty member of the M.F.A. Creative Writing Program at Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina, and a former Witter Bynner Fellow for the Library of Congress.

He lives in South Burlington, Vermont. His second book of poems, *Hoops*, will be published next spring by W.W. Norton.

LR: *How did your experience at the University of Oregon shape you as a poet, as a teacher, as a human being?*

MJ: Even with five years distance, I cannot firmly say how matriculating in a creative writing program such as University of Oregon has impacted my life. That is the stuff of memoir, which I am not terribly interested in pursuing. I will remark on the bonds and friendships, the community of peers, who despite the anti-M.F.A. rhetoric that suggests a homogenization of taste and world view, aided and abetted in my intellectual growth. Through suggested readings, through late-night, and often quarrelsome, conversations, I was given the kind of criticism that brings warring par-



Major Jackson

ties together in the end, a multiplicity of lenses by which to critique my work and to assess the contemporary landscape of world poetry. I came in hungry, self-consciously so. The task at hand was always to grow, to learn all I could. My mentors were generous, and, yes, at times ferociously demanding in their expectation of our work. This was a challenge that conveyed the seriousness of the undertaking of art-making and writing poetry. I am grateful for their pushing us to see how what we write is part of a large, grand conversation. As a teacher, I seek to raise awareness around the literature, the arts, around the dialogue of what it means to be human.

LR: *In the time between graduation from UO and the publication of your first book, Leaving Saturn, how did you maintain the momentum with your writing?*

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M.F.A. Graduate News



2004 M.F.A. graduates at the Second-Year Reading at Tsunami Bookstore last June

William Archila '02

William Archila's poem "At Minton's" is forthcoming in *Obsidian III*. Another poem, "The Art of Exile" was published this summer by the *Crab Orchard Review*. Archila recently served as a judge in the poetry category of the PEN Center USA 2004 Literary Awards.

Lory Bedikian '02

Lory Bedikian's work has appeared in *Westwind*, *Drumvoices Revue*, *Timberline*, *Harpur Palate*, *Ararat*, and in a special issue of the *Crab Orchard Review*: "Wander This World: Immigration, Migration and Exile." One of her poems was recently selected for the Common Prayers Project by Writers at Work in Los Angeles for citywide distribution. Since graduation, she has given readings at California State University at Northridge, University of California, Los Angeles, University of Southern California, the Los Angeles Poetry Festival, KPFK's Inspiration House, The World Stage, and the YWCA of Pasadena. Bedikian received the Alpha Gamma Sigma Honor Society's Award for "Most Devoted Instructor," at Citrus College in Glendora, CA, for 2002-2003.

Serena Crawford, '98

Since graduation, Serena Crawford's short stories have appeared in *Epoch*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Nimrod*,

The Florida Review, *Other Voices*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *New Delta Review*, and elsewhere.

Philip Memmer '95

Philip Memmer's first full-length collection of poems, *Sweetheart, Baby, Darling*, was published in August 2004 by Word Press. New poems are forthcoming in *Kestrel*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The English Record*, and the anthology *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*, edited by Billy Collins. Memmer and his wife, Michelle, had their first child, Henry Owen, in April. They currently live in upstate New York.

Paige Newman '97

Paige Newman is the Movies Editor at MSNBC.com, which involves producing and editing the film section of the Web site. She also writes entertainment columns for MSNBC.com.

Gina Ochsner '97

Gina Ochsner's collection of short stories, *The Necessary Grace to Fall*, was published in 2002 by the University of Georgia Press and selected for the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. Ochsner's newest collection of stories, *People I Wanted to Be*, will be published by Houghton Mifflin in May 2005.

Alana Noel Voth '04

Alana Noel Voth's short story, "Genuflection," was published by *Best Gay Erotica 2004*, and then went on to be nominated and selected for *Best American Erotica 2005*, which is forthcoming from Simon & Schuster. Voth is currently teaching at the University of Oregon and Pioneer Pacific College.

Corrina Wycoff '01

Corrina Wycoff has recently published short stories in *Other Voices* and *The Clear Cut Future* and an essay in *Best Essays Northwest*. Her poem, "Rita," was selected by the Seattle Art Council for Seattle's "Poetry on the Buses" program in 2004. She was also the recipient of The Hugo House Award, a grant from the Richard Hugo House, a Seattle-based not-for-profit literary arts center. Wycoff currently teaches at Pierce College in Lakewood, Washington.

Attention M.F.A. graduates: *Literary Reference* wants to hear from you. Tell us about new jobs you've taken, awards you've won, and stories, poems, or books that have been published or are forthcoming. Send updates to the editor at rruble@darkwing.uoregon.edu. ■

Literary Reference

Literary Reference, the newsletter of the Creative Writing Program, is published quarterly in conjunction with the University of Oregon Office of Publications.

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Ford Named New Director of Creative Writing Program

Karen Ford, an associate professor of English, former director of the University of Oregon's English graduate program, and an accomplished scholar of American poetry, has yet another designation to add to her *curriculum vitae*: Director of the Creative Writing Program. Wendy Larson, the Associate Dean of Humanities, announced Ford's appointment in September. Ford replaces associate professor David Bradley, who remains the program's Director of Fiction.

Though Ford said she felt some trepidation about directing a program she didn't teach in, she was intrigued by the prospect of working with poets and fiction writers whom she respects and admires. She was also interested in the possibilities for collaboration between writers and literary critics and between the Creative Writing and English departments. At the time of the offer, Ford was just stepping down from her six-year post directing the English graduate program and thought a new administrative challenge sounded appealing. "I welcomed the opportunity to bring my administrative experience to a new set of graduate students with distinctive concerns," said Ford.

Asked what she enjoys most about the position, she said the people. "Working with the office manager [Colleen Morgan] is a delight, and I learn new things from her every day. All of the faculty have been responsive and cooperative. Now that the reading series is getting going, it will be fascinating to be more involved in the writers' visits than I have been as a fan in the audience before. As I get more settled in the job, I'll visit workshops and seminars, and I imagine that will be provocative and fascinating. Seeing other people teach is always helpful to one's own teaching. The graduate students have also been a

pleasure to meet with; they're frank, serious about their work, and eager," said Ford.

Ford is still in the process of sorting through the needs of the program and determining how best to address them, but she's already identified a number of projects she wants to complete this year. Some of the projects include finalizing curricular refinements that the faculty

initiated last year, revising the graduate program handbook, and creating promotional print materials for the program to coincide with the updating of the Web site.

"Mainly, I want to keep the day-to-day tasks of the program running smoothly, so faculty and students can do their writing and teaching," said Ford. "I have a lot to learn in order to do this, but everyone seems willing to let me (and help me) learn. I want to run an efficient, responsive, above-board operation. That seems to me an environment in which everyone can flourish."

Ford's academic interests are in poetry and poetics, especially American poetry. "I'm interested in the politics of literary form, and my work often looks at the ways various writers, especially disenfranchised writers, engage with convention and tradition. Though some people regard form as ahistorical (this is one of the most persistent charges against the New Critics), I take the view that form *is* history," said Ford.

Ford's publications include *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and The Poetics of Modernity*; *Gender and the Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade*; "These Old Writing Paper Blues: The Blues Stanza and Literary Poetry;" "Making Poetry Pay: The Commodification of Langston Hughes;" and "Do Right to Write Right: Langston Hughes's Aesthetics of Simplicity." She has taught at the University of Oregon for 12 years. ■



Faculty News

David Bradley recently completed work on a book he is co-editing with Professor Shelly Fisher Fishkin of Stanford University, *The Sport of the Gods and Selected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. The book will be published by the Modern Library in 2006. In November, Bradley gave a reading with University of Utah assistant professor Paisley Rekdal for the Lane Literary Guild's Windfall Reading Series. He also gave readings earlier in November in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Bradley is still at work on what he has come to call "The Eternal Book," a.k.a. *The Bondage Hypothesis*. He says he is about 120 days away. He's looking for 120 days.

Laurie Lynn Drummond recently won the Violet Crown Texas Book Award in Fiction for 2004. The paperback edition of her book, *Anything You Say Can and Will Be Used Against You*, will be released in January by HarperCollins. Following the release, Drummond will begin a six city book tour through the Midwest. Her book just sold to a Finnish publisher for translation and publication next year (how do you say "Freeze" in Finnish?). An essay, "See for Yourself," appeared in *Fourth Genre* in October, and a story, "Cleaning Your Gun," will appear in *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* in December. Drummond also gave readings and appeared on panels this fall at the Texas and Louisiana book festivals.

Cai Emmons is nearing completion on her second novel, *Pizzazz*. Her story "Deeds" will appear in an upcoming issue of *Arts and Letters*. Emmons will read at the Coos Bay Library in December and will be lecturing for Willamette Writers in January. This winter, she will be teaching a graduate seminar which will examine the construction of powerful sentences.

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Major Jackson

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What jobs were you working? What were you doing to make connections? How were you working towards your goal of publishing a book?

MJ: I was fortunate, despite not having “The First Book,” to land a tenure-track job at Xavier University of Louisiana, founded in the early part of the 20th century by Sister Katherine Drexel of the

could not keep something as instinctive as writing poetry inactive for long. Those columns of student writings soon turned into my motivator. I ardently began to keep quiet vigil by my muse, writing as often as I could, during lunch breaks, in the evenings. For the most part, poets do not have connections, and the most important relationship that needs constant cultivation is the one they have with their writing. I cannot say I was even thinking about a book during those days in New Orleans, a

criticism proved life-saving.

LR: *Many of the poems in Leaving Saturn explore the multi-layered lives of black males in inner-city Philadelphia. How do you balance the exploration of social and political issues while maintaining the artfulness of your work?*

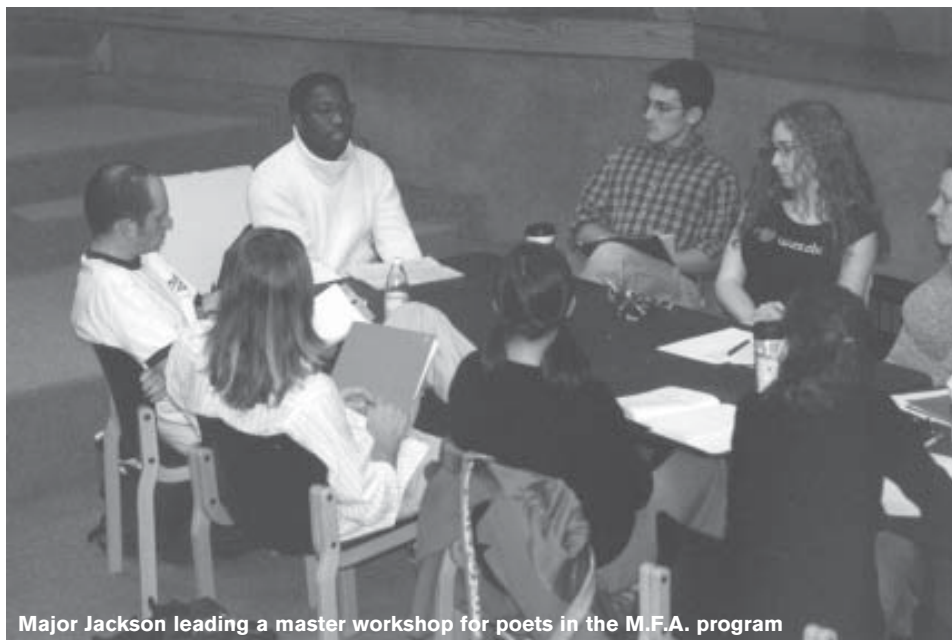
MJ: The artfulness is the entry. Tending to the particular formal demands of a poem leads to the moral questions. There is a point in writing a poem in which I am less interested in the subject and more interested in questions of lineation, rhythm, movement, sound; but then, that tension between what the poem is trying to say (content) and how it is saying it (form) works and builds to a pitched engagement of ideas and choices. At whatever resolution or epiphany I arrive, I am satisfied because I have kept a conscious eye and ear on the structure of the poem, which prevented me from falling into the pit of self-righteousness and didacticism.

LR: *Your second book of poems, Hoops, which is forthcoming from W.W. Norton, is written as an epistolary poem to Gwendolyn Brooks. What is your passion behind this project and how did it come about?*

MJ: I am totally turned on by Gwendolyn Brooks as a human being and poet. I think the decisions she made in her life are exemplary of the kinds of decisions a host of American poets eventually will have to make in their lives: the question of audience, the purpose of art, the next direction of one’s gaze, the evolution of a poet’s aesthetic. I want to celebrate her. She has wide-appeal as an artist and is a person of legendary intellect and generosity. Her oeuvre is in much need of study. I want to point to some of the issues her life and work raise. I am a huge fan of epistolary poems, a neglected tradition in English poetry. I’d like to add to the storehouse of letter poems.

LR: *The poetry in Leaving Saturn features a combination of both free-verse and form. What was behind your decision in choosing the epistolary form for Hoops? What challenges have you encountered while writing this book that have been different from your experience with your first book?*

MJ: It was something new. I wanted to try my hand at the rime royal, so con-



Major Jackson leading a master workshop for poets in the M.F.A. program

“There is a point in writing a poem in which I am less interested in the subject and more interested in questions of lineation, rhythm, movement, sound; but then, that tension between what the poem is trying to say (content) and how it is saying it (form) works and builds to a pitched engagement of ideas and choices.”

--Major Jackson

Philadelphia Drexels. My friend Terrance Hayes and I were hired as young poets. I taught mostly composition. The teaching load was brutal and mind-numbing and crushing of any instinctive creativity. I could not see past the stacks of student papers that somehow had piled on my desk. For a while there, they became my life and the source of my income. Then, I snapped. I

fiercely diverse and excessive city, which provided all kinds of material. During the summer months, I worked as an accountant for a law-firm specializing in environmental law, but even still, this was part-time. It was during the summer, that I met poets Brad Richard, Peter Cooley, and Kay Murphy. We began to meet at a coffee shop Sunday mornings called City Perk. Their friendship and



Major Jackson reading at Knight Library

summatly modeled in Auden's "Letter to Byron." The challenge, of course, is to avoid monotony. The ear cannot take such a beating. So, variation in rhythm and types of rhyme have proven important. More than a challenge, the poem is teaching me much about the work of prosody, which undergoes serious consideration in contemporary verse.

LR: *What have you learned about yourself and your poetry through your work on this book?*

MJ: Mostly that form is a fantastic means of tapping the subconscious of one's mind, but also of the age. The assertions and associations I am making in this poem I would not have made by any other means. But then, again, that is the pleasure of writing poetry: discovery and the joy of enlightenment.

LR: *Can you describe your process and approach to revision?*

MJ: It changes from poem to poem. However, with "Letter to Brooks" I am printing out each stanza of the poem in large font sizes on 6 x 6 sheets of paper and posting them on my wall in my office. I make necessary marks as I go about my day advising students or preparing for class.

LR: *What advice do you have for poets who are just starting out?*

MJ: Be hungry to know the possibilities and profits of language, which requires wide reading and engagement with literature of all ages and peoples.

LR: *What is next for you?*

MJ: Ha! Another book of poems, I hope. I am not terribly ambitious to make my mark in any other genre of writing. ■

Faculty News

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Ehud Havazelet was a Distinguished Visiting Writer at the University of Idaho last April. He is currently at work on a novel, *Bearing the Body*.

Garrett Hongo published both a poem, "Elegy, Kahuku" and a personal essay, "The Mirror Diary," in the summer 2004 issue of the *Georgia Review*. A brief essay, "Poke" appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in October. Hongo has recently given readings at California State University at Fullerton, Pitzer College, and the Lensic Theater with Richard Ford in Santa Fe. He taught at the Santa Fe Writers' Conference in August and gave two talks at the Pitzer College Writers' Festival in October: "The Poetry of Detention" and "Civil Liberties and the Patriot Act."

Dorianne Laux just returned from her home town of San Diego where she gave a reading and workshop at the University of San Diego. She also gave readings this year for California State University at Fresno, University of Minnesota, Pacific University, Mt. Hood Community College, Florida International University, Broward Community College and the Petaluma Poetry Walk with poet Frank Gaspar.

Recent poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Great River Review*, *Speakeasy*, *Quercus Review*, *Court Green* and *River Styx*. Laux also published a short piece that came out of her seminar on the Poetry of Sex and Death called "Talk Dirty to Us: A Thank You Note to Sallie Tisdale" in *Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing*.

Her poem "Democracy" received a Pushcart Prize honorable mention in 2004, and this year she joined poet Jane Hirshfield to co-judge the 2005 Pushcart Prize in Poetry. Laux's entire works are in the process of being translated into Portuguese by Rosângela Vieira-King of Howard University.

This summer Laux taught at The Skagit River Writer's Conference, the Split Rocks Arts Program in the Twin Cities, and at Esalen in Big Sur, Cali-

fornia, with her husband Joseph Millar. She and Millar also spent two weeks at The Anderson Center in Redwing, Minnesota on a writing residency where she completed her fourth book of poems, *Facts About the Moon*, which will be published this fall by W.W. Norton.

Robert Hill Long just received an NEA Fellowship for 2005.

Five of his poems and prose poems were recently published in *Turnrow*, the literary journal of the Louisiana State University at Monroe. The poems include "A Flatboat on the Cape Fear," "Battle Hymn of Drug Van Boy," "The Question of the Heron," "Vesica Piscis," and "Orientation Sketch with Key, Inmate 122054, Wynne Isolation Unit, Texas Penitentiary System."

His prose poem "Winter Sentences" appeared in *Sentence*, a new journal devoted to prose poetry and flash fiction. "Winter Sentences" has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by editor Brian Clements.

The Portland-based journal of Northwest public policy and culture, *Open Spaces*, recently published his sonnet "Kingfisher Over the Umpqua River." A sonnet titled "Anniverse" is forthcoming in a love poetry issue of Chicago-based *Poetry East*, and the New York City journal *Rattapallax* is publishing another of Long's sonnets titled "Why Keep a Journal."

A 19-sonnet sequence titled "The Book of Joel" (an elegy for his friend's son) is forthcoming in *Marlboro Review*.

Long's poem, "The White Ibis," was recently published in *Birds in the Hand*, an anthology of poems and fiction that was co-edited by M.F.A. alum Dylan Nelson.

Pimone Triplett's newest collection of poems, "Double Life," will be published by Four Way Books this spring. The collection was the winner of the Larry Levis Poetry Prize in 2003. She and her husband, poet Andrew Feld, recently welcomed a new son, Lucas Vimone Triplett Feld. ■

Upcoming Reading Series Events

Henry Alley**Thursday, January 27, 2005, 8 p.m.****Browsing Room, Knight Library**

Henry Alley is the author of three novels, *Through Glass*, *The Lattice*, and *Umbrella of Glass*. He is also author of the scholarly study, *The Quest for Anonymity: The Novels of George Eliot*. Over the past thirty years, his stories have appeared in journals such as *Seattle Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Outerbridge*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Alley is currently a Professor of Literature in the Honors College at the University of Oregon.

Robert Hill Long**Thursday, February 10, 2005, 8 p.m.****Browsing Room, Knight Library**

Robert Hill Long is the author of three books, *The Power to Die*, *The Work of the Bow*, and *The Effigies*. His poems and prose have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Flash Fiction*, *The Best of the Prose Poem*, and in journals such as *Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and

Zyzyva. He is the recipient of several fellowships, including a NEA Poetry Fellowship for 2005. Long is the Director of the Kidd Tutorial and teaches creative writing at the University of Oregon.

Susan Straight**Thursday, April 14, 2005, 8 p.m.****Browsing Room, Knight Library**

Susan Straight has published five novels, *Aquaboogie*, *I Been In Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All The Pots*, *Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights*, *The Gettin' Place*, and *Highwire Moon*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. Her new novel, *A Million Nightingales* will be published in fall of 2005. Her short fiction has appeared in *Zoetrope All-Story*, *McSweeney's*, *TriQuarterly*, *Story*, *Ploughshares*, *The Ontario Review*, and *North American Review*, among others. Her short story "Mines" was chosen for Best American Short Stories 2003 and won a Pushcart Prize in Fiction. Straight lives in Riverside, California.

Deborah Digges**Thursday, May 5, 2005, 7:30 p.m.****Location TBA**

Deborah Digges is the author of three books of poems, *Vesper Sparrows*, *Late in the Millennium*, and *Rough Music*. A new collection of poems, *Trapeze*, is forthcoming from Alfred A. Knopf. Her poems have appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, and *Salmungundi*. She also has written two memoirs, *Fugitive Spring* and *The Stardust Lounge*. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Prize, The Kingsely Tufts Prize, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is a professor of English at Tufts University.

All readings are free and open to the public. Book signings follow. Visiting writers host master workshops for UO M.F.A. students on Fridays following the Thursday night readings. The master workshops are held from 2:00 to 4:50 p.m. in the Ben Linder Room of the EMU. The public is invited to observe.



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