

Investigating Religious Freedom from Oregon to the Supreme Court

An interview with Professor of Law and novelist Garrett Epps

University of Oregon Law Professor Garrett Epps read from his work as a guest of the Creative Writing Program's 2005-2006 reading series. A graduate of Harvard, Duke Law School, and the Hollins College Creative Writing Program, Professor Epps is the winner of the Lillian Smith Award for Best Work of Fiction About the South and a recipient of an individual fellowship in creative writing from the National Endowment for the Arts. He has published two novels, *The Shad Treatment* and *The Floating Island: A Tale of Washington*. His most recent work of non-fiction, *To an Unknown God: Religious Freedom on Trial*, was a finalist for the American Bar Association's Silver Gavel Award.

Paul Martone: *How has your career as a Professor of Law at the University of Oregon shaped your experience as a writer?*

Garrett Epps: I come from a legal literary family and combine the two curses in one person. As a legal scholar, I write

stories; as a writer, I am drawn to stories that have a strong normative quality—that examine the effect of rules on human lives. Usually that effect isn't good.

PM: *As a writer of both fiction and non-fiction works, how would you describe the differences and similarities of each process?*

GE: Writing fiction is much harder. In nonfiction, one canvasses the evidence and then puts oneself in the position of the people one is writing about—why did so-and-so act that way? When there is a breakthrough in doing that, it is quite exhilarating; but one is bound by the evidence. In fiction, one must make everything—characters, setting, plot, houses, trees—out of oneself, and it sometimes feels like gnawing off a leg to escape a trap. The mechanics, however, are very similar—one learns to set a scene or evoke a character, and you do it the same either way.

PM: *How old were you when you began to write fiction? Which writers significantly affected your style and influenced your work?*

GE: I was about ten years-old when, inspired by Booth Tarkington's *Penrod*, I started my first novel. Still unfinished, alas. The two major influences on my wanting to become a writer were Dickens and Robert A. Heinlein, and when I was a kid I wasn't sure who was a better



Garrett Epps

writer of the two. Now I think it is Dickens by a nose.

PM: *Your most recent book, To An Unknown God: Religious Freedom on Trial, chronicles a six-year duel that called upon the United States Supreme Court to decide whether the First Amendment protects the right of Native Americans and others to seek God through peyote. The Court eventually ruled that the Bill of Rights provides no protection for obscure and minority religions if the legislature chooses not to recognize their needs. In response to this ruling, unlikely alliances formed to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993. Now that the Court has invalidated the Act, where do minority religious groups stand today? Is the Smith case ruling something the Court regrets, or do they regularly apply it to the law?*

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M.F.A. Graduate News



M.F.A. graduates at commencement in June 2005 (left to right): Wil Lobko, Paul Martone, Amanda Regan, Jada Pierce, Mark Sleiter, Emily Besley, Margaret Brodie, Emily Carson, Erin Hoover, Jenny Calixto, J. Kracker, Ranee Ruble, Michael Davis, and Ashley Van Doorn

Philip Memmer '95

Philip Memmer has new work appearing this fall in *Tar River Poetry* and *Mid-American Review*. He and his wife Michelle are expecting their second child in March 2006.

Lysley Tenorio '98

Lysley Tenorio just started her third year as an Assistant Professor in the MFA Program at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, CA. She was a Stegner Fellow in Fiction from 2000 to 2002 and has done residencies at Yaddo and MacDowell in the past year. She had stories published in *Ploughshares*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Atlantic*, *Manoa*, and *The Best New American Voices*. Her story "Monstress" was nominated for a 2004 National Magazine Award, and her story "The Brothers" was recently awarded a Pushcart Prize. She is currently finishing her first collection of stories.

Christian Knoeller '81

Christian Knoeller, Associate Professor in English at Purdue University, recently completed a 1000-mile bicycle tour tracing the Lewis and Clark route from Great Falls, Montana to Portland, Oregon. He has also written a brief article chronicling the trip.

Jamie Keene '04

Jamie Keene's short story, "Alice's House," was selected by Guest Editor Jane Smiley and Series Editors John Kulka and Natalie Danford for inclusion in the *Best New American Voices 2006* anthology.

Susan Rich '96

Susan Rich has work forthcoming in the anthology *Family Matters* due out this winter from Bottom Dog Press. Poems are also forthcoming in *International Poetry Review*, *Poetry East*, *Quarterly West*, and *Talking River Review*. Rich will guest edit the upcoming issue of *In Posse Review*. She also continues her work as an editor at *Floating Bridge Press* in Seattle.

Major Jackson '99

In the Spring 2006, Major Jackson will serve as the Jack Kerouac Writer-in-Residence at University of Massachusetts-Lowell. *Hoops*, his second book of poems, will be published in March 2006, upcoming readings can be found at www.majorjackson.com.

Attention M.F.A. graduates: We want to hear about new jobs you've taken, awards you've won, and work that has been published or is forthcoming. Send updates to: pmartone@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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Garrett Epps

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GE: We will find out very soon because the Smith issue returns to the court next week in a case concerning huasca, a psychoactive tea used by Brazilian natives for religious purposes.

PM: Your book eloquently weaves together legal facts with the personal histories of the Smith case's litigants. As a result, it reads like a work of fiction, complete with characterization, plot, tension, and drama. What caused you to choose the legal narrative as a literary form? What were your models?

GE: My models were mostly good novels and good works of creative nonfiction. Of the novels, I suppose again Dickens, Dos Passos, Hemingway (a good master for nonfiction writers, who usually know much more than they should tell). Of nonfiction writers Richard Kluger, Jonathan Harr, and George Orwell.

PM: In addition to tracking the Smith case from its humblest beginnings to the Supreme Court Chamber, *To An Unknown God* also explores the history of the state of Oregon. One might argue that the landscape itself functions as character. How would you describe the relationship between the book's setting and its narrative events?

I missed the desert, the mountains, and the sense of geology that the state brings to a visitor. Coming back to Oregon always reminds me of the moment in a Disney cartoon when the slide reads: THE DAWN OF TIME and you see dinosaurs.

PM: What is next for you? Is there a new book in the works?

“In fiction, one must make everything—characters, setting, plot, houses, trees—out of oneself, and it sometimes feels like gnawing off a leg to escape a trap.”

--Garrett Epps

GE: I wrote *To An Unknown God* in a small cold apartment in Concord, Massachusetts during a sabbatical. The Oregon in the book is almost a hallucination of home from far away. I would sit down and ask myself what about the place and its landscape had astonished me when I arrived here at 42, a lifelong Easterner.

GE: I have just completed *Second Founding: How the Framers of the Fourteenth Amendment Planted the Seeds of American Democracy*. It is a work of historical narrative that plunges pretty deeply into the minds and spirits of the key framers of the 14th Amendment in 1866. It should be published next year. ■

Faculty News

Dorianne Laux's most recent poems have appeared in *Calapooya*, *River Styx*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Cairn*, *Sycamore Review*, *Court Green*, and *American Poetry Review*. In October, she traveled to New York City to read with Gerald Stern at NYU and to attend a book party for her latest collection, *Facts About The Moon*. Four of Dorianne's poems from *What We Carry* and *Smoke* were translated into Italian: "Ray at 14," "Fast Gas," "Firestarter," and "The Shipfitter's Wife." NPR recently did a feature on *Sleeping Beauty: Contemporary Women Poets on Housework*—one of Dorianne's poems was read on the show and included on the website www.npr.org/templates/story. Over the summer, Dorianne taught at the Mendocino Writer's Conference, Esalen in Big Sur, and The Truro Center for the Arts in Cape Cod.

Robert Hill Long has accepted a position in the English Department at The Pennsylvania State University, starting Fall 2006. (His wife Sandra Morgen, director of the Center for the Study of Women & Society, will be joining Penn State's Women's Studies Program.) The journal

Southern Cultures reprinted his poem sequence "Grandfather Long the Last Time" (from *The Power to Die*) to accompany an article by novelist Lee Smith, "All Wrought Up: the Apocalyptic South of McKendree Robbins Long." With the Young Writers Association, Robert has received a grant from the Oregon Cultural Trust to produce a CD of young writers' poems and prose recorded during the past eight years in the "Mixed Voices" radio program at NPR affiliate KLCC; this CD will be distributed to Oregon school districts. Several RHL poems are forthcoming in *Del Sol Review*, and he has been invited by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center to take part in their 35th anniversary reading at the 2006 AWP Conference in Austin. "Flood," a collaborative flash fiction by RHL and Bruce Holland Rogers, has been taken by *Clackamas Literary Review*.

David Bradley gave readings at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities and Queens College in New York (which included a public interview at the New School for Social Research). While in New York, David also met with fellow

co-editors of the Prentice Hall Anthology of American Literature. He is currently finishing work on a book of essays, entitled *Lunch Bucket Pieces*. The book consists of a combination of pieces written on assignments from various magazines over the last thirty years. There are also a number of short introductory essays that will be unique to this volume.

Cai Emmons's novel, *The Stylist*, will be published by William Morrow in 2006. One of her writing exercises will be included in an upcoming publication entitled *Write Now: Writing Exercises by Today's Best Writers and Teachers* (Tarcher Publications 2006). Cai has also been offered a residency at Caldera.

Laurie Lynn Drummond had a residency fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in August/September where she continued work on her novel, *The Hour of Two Lights*. She gave readings at the Eugene Public Library in September as part of the Windfall Reading Series; Penn State; Altoona, and the Non-fictionNow Conference at the University of Iowa. ■

Upcoming Reading Series Events

Dorianne Laux

Thursday, February 2, 2006 at 8:00 p.m.

Browsing Room of the Knight Library

Dorianne Laux is the author of *Awake, What We Carry, Smoke* (BOA Editions) and *Facts About the Moon* (Norton 2005) as well as *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (Norton 1997). Winner of a 2001 Guggenheim Fellowship, her



poems and essays have appeared in *The Best American Poetry, The Best of the American Poetry Review, The Harvard Review, The New England Review, The Alaska Quarterly Review, The Southern Review, The Kenyon Review,*

Shenandoah, Ploughshares, ZYZZYVA, The Washington Post, DoubleTake, Five Points, Barrow Street, and others. She's the two-time recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry, an Editor's Choice III award, and a Pushcart Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Ehud Havazelet

Thursday, March 2, 2006 at 8:00 p.m.

Browsing Room of the Knight Library

Ehud Havazelet is the author of two books, *Like Never Before* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux) and *What Is It Then Between Us?* (Scribners). Havazelet has been the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation

Fellowship, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and a Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation Fellowship.

He was also a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. His stories have appeared in such journals as *DoubleTake, New England Review, The Southern Review, ZYZZYVA, Iowa Review, Ontario Review,* and *Crazyhorse* and have been chosen for the Pushcart Prize. He is the winner of both the California Book Award and the Oregon Book Award for fiction.

Tobias Wolff

Thursday, April 27, 2006 at 8:00 p.m.

Browsing Room of the Knight Library

Tobias Wolff chronicled his early life in two memoirs. *This Boy's Life* (1989) concerns the author's early adolescence through high school, while *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994) records his tour of duty in Vietnam. Wolff's 1984 novella *The Barracks Thief* won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for 1985. Whether writing fiction or non-, Wolff's writing is united by an exploration of existential terrain. As Wyatt Mason wrote in the London



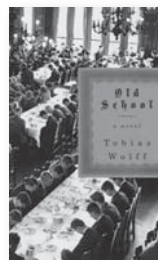
Review of Books, "Typically, his protagonists face an acute moral dilemma, unable to reconcile what they know to be true with what they feel to be true. Duplicity is their great failing, and Wolff's main theme." Wolff's work has found a wider audience though its adaptation into film. *This Boy's Life* was adapted into a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert DeNiro, and Ellen Barkin.

Edward Hirsch

Thursday, May 25, 2006 at 7:30 p.m.

Location TBA

Edward Hirsch is the author of six books of poems: *Lay Back the Darkness* (Alfred A. Knopf 2003); *On Love* (1998); *Earthly Measures* (1994); *The Night Parade* (1989); *Wild Gratitude* (1986), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award; and *For the Sleepwalkers* (1981), which received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from The Academy of American Poets and the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award from New York University. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur foundations, an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award. He has been a professor of English at Wayne State University and the University of Houston. Hirsch is currently the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.



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