

# WORD!

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Towson University Professional Writing Newsletter

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## Let Us Know!

Do you have accomplishments or news that you want to share with others in the Professional Writing program?

Contact us at:  
[prwr@towson.edu](mailto:prwr@towson.edu)

## A Word! from the Director

By: Geoff Becker

Greetings! I hope this year has been a productive and enjoyable one for you. Here are a few program-related news items:

**Dr. Chen:** Some years ago, we received an application from a young woman in China. As a writing sample, she sent a semi-surreal short story about a Chinese student having to take *Gaokao*—the grueling set of exams required of high school students there. It turned out Chen Chen had spent a year in Towson as a high school exchange student and was now interested in returning. We admitted her and she worked as a program graduate assistant. She focused on creative writing classes, but also enjoyed her rhetoric and teaching ones, and after completing her degree with us (her thesis was a collection of short stories), she went on to additional study in rhetoric and composition at North Carolina State University. As of May, 2018, Chen Chen has successfully defended her PhD thesis and been awarded a doctorate degree. Not only that, but she has also landed a teaching position at Winthrop University in South Carolina. So, huge congratulations to Dr. Chen Chen on her next step in what has been a remarkable journey!

**Dr. Brown:** Professor Cheryl Brown has retired after many years at Towson. Cheryl has been a wonderful mentor to our students interested in writing pedagogy. More than a few of her students, like Chen Chen, have gone on to earn doctorates in rhetoric and composition. We will miss Cheryl and her dedication to helping her students become the very best teachers.

**Good Contrivance Fellowship:** The Professional Writing Program now has a fellowship—awarded twice a year and funded by an anonymous donor—that allows one of our students to spend two nights at Good Contrivance Farm in Owings Mills.

Good Contrivance is the latest project of writer Ron Tanner, and it's a beautiful spot to get away for a little while. You can read more about Ron and the farm here:

<http://houselove.org/farm/retreat/>

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## Upcoming Writing Contests



**The UNO PRESS LAB** is accepting previously unpublished submissions of book-length fiction. **Submissions can be a novel or a collection of short stories.**

The winning author will receive a \$1000 dollar advance and a contract to publish with UNO Press.

**Submissions will be collected until August 15th.**

**Milkweed Editions' Max Ritvo Poetry Prize** is accepting submissions for a book-length poetry collection of up to **48 pages.**

The winner will receive \$10,000 and publication of their collection.

**The poet can't have already published, or be set to publish, a collection of poems.**

**Deadline for the contest is June 30.**

Check out their websites for more details!

The fellowship is open to any PRWR student—you don't need to be in the creative track. Our very first winner was Shelley DeMarco; our spring winner is Travis Madden. Congratulations to Shelley and Travis! The next deadline for applying will be in the fall.

**Literary News:** Professor Michael Downs has a new novel out: *The Strange and True Tale of Horace Wells, Surgeon Dentist* (Acre). Professor Leslie Harrison was a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry for her most recent collection, *The Book of Endings* (U. of Akron Press), and Professor Jeannie Vanasco, hot on the heels of her acclaimed first book, *The Glass Eye* (Tin House), has another memoir scheduled for publication next year.

Good writing to you!

Geoff

## How Scary is a Thesis Defense?

By: Alyssa Higham

On Friday, April 6, PRWR student Casey Lichtman defended her thesis *Doubting Disease*, a memoir in the form of a collection of nonfiction essays. For some students, the thought of devoting countless hours towards a thesis sounds terrifying. Defending it in front of professors sounds even worse. I got the opportunity to sit in on the defense and learned this isn't at all the case.

A thesis defense is a cross between an interview and a writing workshop. Casey's thesis advisor Professor Jeannie Vanasco and the defense committee, consisting of Professors Leslie Harrison and Michael Downs, began by asking Casey several questions, such as what inspired the collection. In all, these questions demonstrated Casey's development as a writer, encouraging her to evaluate her writing process and how her thesis evolved over time. The atmosphere was incredibly friendly, full of jokes and laughter.

Feedback for the thesis was given in the same, supportive manner. Each professor gave advice on different avenues and subject matter Casey could explore if she expands her thesis. There were also, of course, book recommendations to help prepare Casey for the MFA program at George Mason University, where she has been accepted for next fall. At the end of the defense, Professor Harrison and Professor Downs congratulated Casey on completing her thesis and wished her the best of luck.

The thesis is a 6-credit independent project that is normally spread over two semesters, and culminates in a written work that is a minimum of 50 pages in length. Casey explained that her collection

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**Dates to Remember:**

Are you halfway through the PRWR program? **It's time to submit your portfolio!**

Fall portfolio submissions are due **October 31**.

If you are graduating **December 2018**, make sure to apply for graduation by **August 15!**

began as separate pieces for a class in Fall 2016. In all, she estimated that writing her thesis took about a year. It was clear, though, that Casey is not through with her subject matter. She says she intends to continue working on *Doubting Disease* with the goal of making it a full-length book.

We wish Casey all the best as she begins the next step in her writing life. And remember, if you decide to do the Master's thesis option, the professors in our program will give you the tools and support you need to take your work even further.

## Professor Leslie Harrison on Her New Book and Being a National Book Award Finalist

By Chase Childress

**Last fall, PRWR Professor Leslie Harrison's collection of poems, *The Book of Endings*, was one of five finalists for the National Book Award in poetry. The National Book Awards, first established in 1936, are presented by the National Book Foundation on an annual basis. As one of the most prestigious literary prizes, awards are given in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and young adult literature with judge panels consisting of writers, librarians, booksellers, and literary critics.**

**What happens when you're selected as a National Book Award Finalist? How did you find out? Did you see this coming or was it kind of a surprise?**

I was stunned. I found out I was a semifinalist when a friend emailed me a giant CONGRATULATIONS! And I was like, uh, for what? Then, when he told me, I burst into tears. So apparently one thing that happens, if you're me, is that you cry.

But here is the thing: we're writers. Anything like the National Book Award, or getting a book published or getting a poem taken by a journal is amazing and astonishing and beautiful and exciting. But it is about the past—about what you've already done. And at the end of the day, you have to write the next thing. I said at a recent reading that as writers, we live our public lives in the past (giving readings of published work), but our private lives in the future—that which we're writing that is not yet done, not yet in the world.

You get up the next morning after that kind of huge news, and maybe one of your dogs throws up on the rug, and you still have to teach class and grade a stack of papers and make dinner and mostly and always you still have to write.

**How did the collection begin? Did you know that you were going to write around these central themes of grief and absence? Or did you start writing and the themes emerged?**

My first book, *Displacement*, came out two months after my mother died. I already had a few poems toward the next book, and then I didn't write anything while I struggled with the grief of her death, and then, months later, the grief of my grandmother's death. These two losses were huge, so I think, looking back, it was inevitable I'd need to engage

with loss and grief—it consumed my world for a while, and that kind of attention has its own gravitational pull.

**Are there other writers to whom you looked for inspiration while you were working of *The Book of Endings*?**

I'm an obsessive reader, so yes. I always look to other writers for inspiration. This book was eight years in the writing, so the list is formidable. Two of my poetry touchstones are Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Berryman. They both were deeply original poets and their work gave me courage to keep writing what seemed to me to be very strange poems.

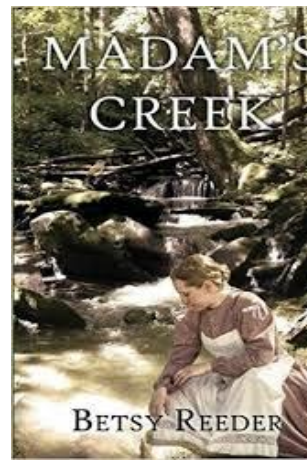
**You spoke on the panel on Writing About and Through Grief at the Baltimore Writers' Conference last fall. Could you give us a snippet of the conversation?**

I think what I (re)learned from that panel is writers are all different. I think one of the panelists equated writing to therapy and Prof. Vanasco, who was on the panel, disagreed and talked even about the risks of that kind of equation. And it really made me think about why I had written the book I wrote. It isn't "about" my mother so much as it is about grief itself. Which means, I think, I'm not interested in therapeutic writing so much as I am interested in whatever is consuming my mind and heart at the moment.

**What can students look forward to when they take your poetry class?**

Well, we try to have some fun. I know that most students are not going to become poets. I'm totally fine with that. But if you can learn to read poetry closely and attempt to write poems, it will do amazing things for all the rest of your writing. So I am really teaching close reading and I am really teaching attention as a form of love—I want poems to get under my students' skin, to come alive in them. I want my students to be brave and experiment in a form that seems to

intimidate some people. I want them to love poetry, to have joy in it.



Catching up with PRWR Alumni: Elizabeth ("Betsy") Reeder

By: Alyssa Higham

**Elizabeth recently published her first novel, *Madam's Creek*, under the penname Betsy Reeder. We got the chance to ask her a few questions about her experiences writing the novel.**

**What inspired you to write *Madam's Creek*, and how long did it take you to write it?**

The first inspiration for *Madam's Creek* was a novel called *The Man Inside the Mountain*. It is a tale about a Civil War homecoming that stirred my thinking, particularly about the effect of the war on the region where I live – central Appalachia.

I've been writing all sorts of things (much of it unpublished) for decades: poetry, articles for nonprofit newsletters, some academic writings, a memoir, a nature journal, a children's book, etc., And I'd always thought it would be a blast to write a novel, but I never had an idea. Then the realization of the turmoil and suffering, not only for the soldiers, but for the entire population of this area began to work on me and wouldn't let go. It's hard to imagine living in an area that began the war as a Confederate state (Virginia) and became a Union state (West Virginia) halfway through. I wanted to zero

in on a particular couple and their families, who would reflect the larger picture.

The initial draft took about six weeks. I was obsessed with it. Then I went back and added more detail, more history, and an additional chapter. The revision process lasted about a year, off and on.

***Madam's Creek* is set in the mountains of western Virginia during the Civil War era. What kind of research did you do for this story, and how long did you do research before you started writing?**

Actually, I didn't do any research at all before I began writing – that came later. Of course, I used the Internet extensively. I also found a fabulous book at the local library, a history of my county written a hundred years ago. Equally helpful were a book written by a woman in her nineties, explaining the old ways of farming, as well as relevant books about the Civil War. And I talked to people. Much of local history has been passed down by oral tradition. For example, a woman at a local convenience store directed me to the grave of Jefferson Bennett, a minor character in the novel. The story of his murder is well known here. I wound up adding a good bit of nonfiction to my fiction, which is the nature of historical fiction, after all.

**While the Civil War has a major role in your work, it is a resulting internal conflict that stands as an obstacle between Marcus and Maylene's relationship. When did Marcus and Maylene really come to life for you?**

I never intended to write a novel about the Civil War but, of course, I couldn't write about its impact on Marcus and Maylene if I didn't know much about it. My focus was on Marcus and Maylene, however, who felt real to me from the start. I think it was their childhood fishing calamity that brought them truly to life. From that point on, they led the way, and I did my best to keep up.

**What was the hardest scene for you to write in the novel? What was the easiest scene to write?**

I believe the hardest scene to write was Marcus's meltdown. His emotional collapse was a turning point and key to his healing, which made his surrender to pain a kind of triumph. I could rewrite that scene ten times and probably not be completely happy with it.

Many scenes were easy to write because they were fun. One that comes to mind is Johnny teasing his older brother during that brother's—Marcus's—honeymoon. I could picture the family at the breakfast table and sense each member's reaction to Johnny's wisecrack. Our imaginations love to be turned loose!

***Madam's Creek* is your first novel. Do you think your writing process has changed from the day you first started writing *Madam's Creek* up to the point of its publication?**

I certainly had to become more self-disciplined. Initially, the writing was pure play, but I could have saved myself a lot of revision headaches if I hadn't given myself such free rein. Later on, I spent hours removing semicolons and adverbs, as well as passive constructions. I'm working on another novel now and trying to avoid the same mistakes, with only modest success.

**What advice do you have for PRWR students, as well as graduates of the program, who are interested in writing fiction?**

I know it's a cliché, but fiction writers must write more from the heart than the head. Fall in love with your characters and their story. If your narrative isn't catching fire, don't feel like a failure if you trash it and start a new one, or go in a completely different direction than you anticipated. When your characters start telling you their story, not vice versa, you're off to the races.

Finally, you've got to have a thick skin because rejection is the norm. Keep sending out those query letters and keep writing. Believe in your tale and your talent, and hang in there! I wish you all success. The world needs you. Fiction is so much more than escape, opening entire landscapes of insight and imagination.

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## Catching up with PRWR Alumni: Peter Rouleau

**Peter has completed *Masquerade Ball*, a collection of short stories.**

### **What inspired this collection?**

For the longest time, I'd been focused on writing the Great American Novel (which I still hope to do someday) but some years ago, I entered a short story contest in which the word limit was 3,000 words. That was an interesting challenge and made me more interested in short fiction as a medium. I wrote the first draft of a story in this collection almost eight years ago. I chose the title "Masquerade Ball" after noticing a common theme of deception and self-deception in the stories. They're all, in some way, about how much of ourselves we conceal and how little we often see of the world and those whom we share it with.

### **How can people read this collection?**

It is not yet for sale. I have submitted it to Kindle Scout Publishing. Readers have the option of visiting my campaign page and nominating the book for publication. If it is chosen, I will receive a publishing contract, and everyone who votes for the book will receive a free Kindle copy.

If it is not chosen, I will self-publish on Kindle, Nook, and perhaps in print as well, and query it out to publishers.

### **How did the Professional Writing program help in the creation of this work?**

I didn't workshop any of these stories in PRWR; I regrettably did not have the opportunity to take the Writing Short Fiction course. I feel, however, that my experience in the program made me a more efficient writer. The courses Writing the Novel, Writing Creative Non-Fiction, and even Editing helped learn how to hook the reader, organize a story, and concisely convey relevant information.