Getting It in Writing

FIVE EMERGING WRITERS MAKE THEIR MARKS ON THE LITERARY WORLD.

STORY BY SONA PAI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB HILL

NO ONE EVER SAID THE WRITING LIFE WAS EASY. SO, WHY do writers write? Why do they struggle to communicate complex images and characters through mere words? Why do they endure the loneliness of withdrawing from the world in order to engage in it? Why do they choose a path so frustrating and solitary, and paved with rejection letters?

"There has to be a stubborn little kernel inside you that makes you do it," says Marly Swick, professor of English. "There's a need to communicate, an innate talent, and a love of reading that drives writers to write."

In MU's English doctoral program in creative writing, students who possess that stubborn little kernel have the option of producing a creative work — a novel, a novella, a book-length collection of short fiction or a collection of poetry — as an alternative to a purely academic dissertation. Students who choose the "creative dissertation" face the usual rigors of doctoral study and the demands of teaching undergraduate English classes, as well as the unique challenges of the writing life.

In required workshop courses, these students craft original work, share that work with their colleagues, receive and offer constructive criticism, and revise, revise, revise. In the end, they find that, although the writing life may not be easy, when given the time and encouragement, it can be deeply rewarding.

Here's a look at five of MU's most promising up-and-coming writers from the creative writing program, the core of the Center for the Literary Arts. Four of the five have published books in the past year, and two are recent winners of the prestigious $20,000 National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship Grant, only 35 of which were awarded for 2002.

Christie Hodgen

2002 National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship Grant

2001 Associated Writing Programs Award for short fiction

Published collection of short stories, "A Jeweler's Eye for Flaw" (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002)

LIKE MOST WRITERS SEEKING PUBLICATION IN LITERARY magazines, Christie Hodgen is no stranger to rejection. She says she's one of the lucky ones, though, lucky enough to be "in the upper echelon of rejection." Rather than the standard form rejection letter, Hodgen often receives a thoughtful explanation of why her work has been declined.

"It doesn't bother me too much to get rejected anymore," Hodgen says. "You can't expect to please everyone."

Recently, editors at *The Atlantic Monthly* rejected Hodgen's short story "A Jeweler's Eye for Flaw," citing its "unrelenting bleakness" as the reason. *The Georgia Review* accepted the same story, praising its "unyielding toughness." It's the title story of her new collection of short stories, published by University of Massachusetts Press.

"I've always liked to read short stories, and there's a lot of freedom in writing them," Hodgen says. "In a short story, a writer can look at a day or an entire lifetime, and a reader can get a full emotional experience in half an hour."

In the story "A Jeweler's Eye for Flaw," Hodgen writes from the perspective of Sandy, a disenchanted, self-described "sulker and a moper, an eye-roller," enduring what feels like an interminable senior year in high school. As Sandy plots her escape from a lonely and unstable mother (her father is long gone), she begins a tentative friendship with James, her mysterious, suicidal classmate and neighbor, who is "friendless, and therefore the victim of rumors." The story unfolds against the backdrop of a city in decay — a concrete and chain-link environment of unemployment and abuse, clouded with incinerator smoke.

Hodgen admits that her subject matter is often bleak — she recently won a contest with her novella titled *Going Out of Business Forever* (*Quarterly West*, November 2001) — but in one way or another, her characters find some respite. She writes about lonely, alienated people, and she brings them to life by artfully juxtaposing humor with their circumstances. Hodgen, a prolific short-story writer, says her inspiration often comes from real life. "It's a strange compulsion, I guess, and sort of selfish," she says. "I observe people or see things, and I want to tell their stories. If I don't, I'm unhappy."

Bill Grattan

2001 Pinyon Press Novella Contest Winner

Published novella, *Ghost Runners* (Pinyon Press, 2002)

Bill Grattan doesn't believe in writer's block. It's just a convenient excuse for procrastination, he says, a myth to allow writers to stall for a while before putting pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard.

"We say we love what we do, but sometimes it's so hard to just sit down and do it," Grattan says.

Once Grattan does sit down to write, though, he stays put. He likes to write in the long form — novels and novellas — stories with plenty of breathing room for characters to develop and drama to build. Grattan says he imagines a loose narrative map before he begins to write, and then he lets the story guide him.

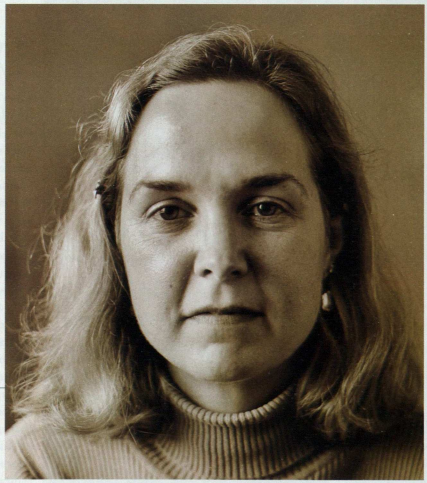
"Sometimes I'll start with a character, or a place or an image in my mind," Grattan says. "Then, as I'm writing, I go with what feels right."

Grattan's novella *Ghost Runners* takes place in the 1970s in a Pennsylvania town that's been hit hard by the steel industry's decline. The protagonist, Nick, is 13 years old and well aware of the tough times the local steel mill's closing has brought to his family and his community. While the men in town remain jobless, hoping the steel mill will reopen, Nick's church adopts the Phans, a Vietnamese refugee family with a son, Eric, who is Nick's age and eager for Nick's friendship. When the Phans begin to flourish in their new home, racial tensions escalate in the economically depressed town, and Nick struggles to understand how he should behave.

"The story is about a loss of innocence," Grattan says. "It's about what happens psychologically to a person who, when faced with a dilemma, chooses not to act."

Grattan says he drew from his experiences growing up in a suburb of Pittsburgh and working for local newspapers to paint a picture of the economic and social climate in Nick's community. He writes for the satisfaction that comes from experiencing something and then replicating it in words.

"It's one thing to understand something in your head, a personality or a certain situation — but writing and reading writing make it real," Grattan says. "Writing solidifies things, and I want to participate in that."



Joanie Mackowski

2000 Associated Writing Programs Award for Poetry

2000 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award

Published collection of poems, *The Zoo* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002)

Joanie Mackowski writes poetry the way the best musicians create jazz. She plays with poetry, dances with it. She's well-versed in the formalities of meter, rhyme, syntax and structure, and when she writes, she twists the rules, turns them inside out and then sets them right again. "I want to work with formal techniques and innovate them like crazy," Mackowski says. "If I had a saxophone, poetry would be like playing riffs."

Mackowski has studied classical piano and painting, and she worked for several years as a journalist. She says she took up poetry because it seemed such a difficult form of expression. As a poet — widely published in some of the best literary magazines — Mackowski brings all of her talents to her work: her ear for music, her eye for imagery and her journalistic skills of observation.

"If I fault poetry as an art form, it's only because it can be inaccessible," Mackowski says. "I'd like to loosen it from whatever's holding it back. I want people to read poetry, and I want it to be relevant."

Mackowski's debut collection of poetry, *The Zoo*, offers lively, imaginative descriptions of subjects such as ants, cemeteries, clouds and iceberg lettuce. In the poem "Electric Storm on Brayton Point," Mackowski observes the way "lightning reaches down like turkey feet." In "Walking," another poem in the collection, "orangutans hang in the fir trees like enormous peaches."

Mackowski's words swerve from formal arrangements into the sort of rhyme and rhythmic structure found in nursery rhymes. She says the technique gives her poems a comical sort of obviousness while allowing the underlying themes to remain subtle. The poems in her collection examine the boundaries between subordination and authority, powerlessness and power, and reason and the lack of it. A line in *The Zoo's* title poem perhaps best describes Mackowski's work: "At the zoo, essence and ornament meet."

For Mackowski, writing a poem is like having a conversation. Every poem is a learning experience, a process of discovery.

"I believe in not knowing where a poem is going until I get there," she says. "If I come up with something that's no surprise to me, then it won't be a surprise to anyone else. The poem must be smarter than I am."

KIRA SALAK

2001 ASSOCIATED WRITING PROGRAMS PRAGUE FELLOWSHIP IN NONFICTION

ANTHOLOGIZED IN *BEST NEW AMERICAN VOICES 2001* (HARCOURT, 2001)

PUBLISHED NONFICTION BOOK, *FOUR CORNERS* (COUNTERPOINT, 2001), NAMED A NOTABLE BOOK OF 2001 BY *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

WHILE RIDING IN THE BACK SEAT OF A LAND Rover as it slogs along a muddy road somewhere in Papua New Guinea, Kira Salak begins to worry. She slams against the side of the vehicle every time it hits a bump or swerves on the waterlogged road. She doesn't trust the two men in the front seat, who have promised, reluctantly, to take her where she wants to go — a camp of refugees and guerilla soldiers from Western New Guinea, violently displaced by the Indonesian military. The last Westerner to enter the camp was murdered.

Salak, 24 years old at the time, realizes that no one (including Salak herself) knows exactly where she is or whom she is with. In her thoughts, she finds strength in her resolve: "If they try to do anything to me, I won't make it easy for them."

This bulletproof determination courses through Salak's book *Four Corners*, a vivid, harrowing account of far-flung adventure and self-discovery. *Four Corners* tells the story of Salak's quest to be the first Western woman to traverse the lush, untamed land of Papua New Guinea. Salak travels alone, with only a backpack and a thirst for challenge to keep her going.

Salak's spare prose is lovely without being flowery, personal without being self-indulgent. She strikes just the right tone, leaving the reader with new insight about a faraway place and respect for the woman who dared to cross the country alone.

"For some reason, there's this idea that women shouldn't travel alone, that women can't do all the things men can do. That's just not true," Salak says. "I thought if I could do this, I'd learn something about who I am."

Salak first ventured out of the United States on a trip to Egypt when she was 19 years old. Since then, she's been to Madagascar, Mozambique, Borneo, Cambodia and Bangladesh among other distant locales, and she says she feels most alive when she's immersed in the unfamiliar and unpredictable.

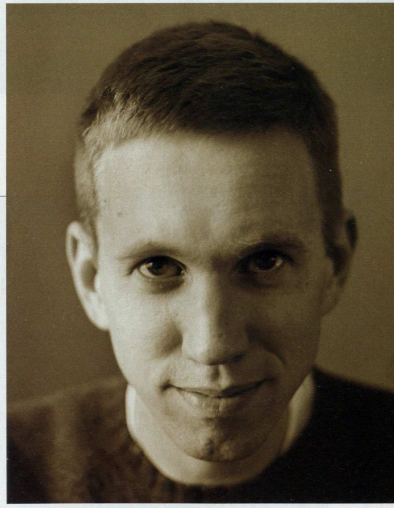
"I like to go where tourists don't like to go," says Salak, who has found herself in the middle of a civil war, an attempted coup, bandit attacks and stifling jungles clouded with swarms of mosquitoes. Lately, she's been working on assignments for the magazine *National Geographic Adventure*, where she says she's known as the woman who will go anywhere.

"I've always thought of writing as a kind of hope and comfort," says Salak, who writes both fiction and nonfiction. "By writing, I can live vicariously through my characters. I can go anywhere I want to go."

Anthony Varallo

2002 National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship Grant

2001 Associated Writing Programs Intro Journals competition fiction winner



There was a time when Anthony Varallo thought the secret to breaking into the world of literary magazines was all in the details. Put the page numbers in the right place. Use an appropriately literary typeface. Write neatly on the requisite self-addressed, stamped envelope, and use sophisticated postage, nothing goofy or sentimental.

"It's easy to get caught up in the little things, like it's some kind of game," he says. "The truth is, there's no fooling an editor. It doesn't matter if you use the perfect paper clip or if your margins are just right. A story either works or it doesn't work."

As a senior fiction adviser for MU's literary magazine, *The Missouri Review*, Varallo has seen the other side of the editorial curtain, and he says it's opened his eyes and helped his writing. When he reads stories that don't work, he makes sure to avoid the same pitfalls in his own writing. When he notices trends in subject matter and style, he's careful to steer his stories in original directions.

Varallo writes short stories and says the form — somewhere between novel and poem — captures something about the human experience that other written expressions can't.

"Short stories give you a narrowly focused scope," Varallo says. "They capture moments in life that involve change and transformation, and they maintain an intensity that grips the reader's attention and keeps it."

Varallo's stories are often about children or told from children's perspectives. He says he doesn't write "coming-of-age" stories, but rather stories of children catching glimpses of the adult world. Varallo's sharp ear for dialogue, fresh imagery and his keen sense of relevant detail make for precise, believable and sometimes haunting prose.

In his story "The Knot" (*Mississippi Review*, September 1997), an improperly fashioned necktie "curved inwards from the knot down, looking like a tongue tasting a lemon wedge." In his story "The Pines" (third-place winner of *The Atlantic Monthly's* 2001 Student Writing Contest), a neighborhood bully's laugh is "like a stomped balloon."

Varallo keeps a journal to record story-worthy bits of overheard dialogue or striking images, and he says writing is his way of gaining perspective on the world.

"Writing lets you extend sympathy and make sense of things," he says. "It's a way to make a form and shape out of the shapelessness of being alive." ❋