

Learning the Literary Life

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A NEW GENERATION OF MU WRITERS EXPLORES ANATOMY,
ROCK 'N' ROLL, RELATIONSHIPS AND A REVOLUTION.

WHAT ATTRACTS TALENTED writers to Mizzou? Of course, there's the nation's first and arguably best J-School, but that's just for starters. The University also houses one of the nation's leading literary journals, *The Missouri Review*. MU is also one of only a handful of universities in the nation where graduate students can merge the study of literature and writing through the English department's highly regarded graduate program in creative writing, the core of MU's Center for the Literary Arts. Each year the program accepts only a handful of students from about 75 applicants, and a roster of alumni have gone on to teach at the university level and publish.

Mizzou's Department of Theatre has also seen its share of writing talent blossom through the Writing for Performance program. The innovative program incorporates playwriting with theater production so student playwrights have a chance to see their work presented on campus. This year two MU student playwrights were finalists in the

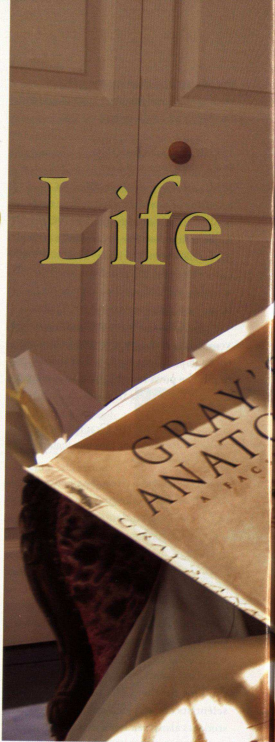
Kennedy Center's American College Theatre Festival, which judges the best short plays written at American colleges.

One of those students is an undergraduate business major who writes one-act plays examining human relationships. Other examples of the diversity of writing talent outlined in the following profiles are a poet who finds divinity in anatomy, a short-story writer with a background in music, and a memoirist searching for the roots of her father's violence in his journey out of China decades ago.

MUSES OF SCIENCE AND SPIRIT
When she writes poetry, Nicky Beer often consults one of a slew of reference books she keeps on hand, including *Gray's Anatomy of the Human Body* and *The DK Ultimate Visual Dictionary*. Such works are helpful for someone who writes to explore a sense of the divine in the human anatomy. "In my poetry, I see the human body as the site where science and the spirit may be reconciled," Beer says.

In the poem, "Avuncularity," which

was published in the *New Orleans Review* last year and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Beer writes that "every child ought to have a dead uncle" to blame for the development of one's own quirks. In another poem, "Post-Mortem," which Beer describes as a "kind of ode to an autopsied body," she writes about the relationship between a cadaver and the medical students who use it. In the poem, Beer writes: "We do





To achieve accuracy in her poetry, Nicky Beer consults anatomy books and refers to a miniature model of a human skeleton.

not like to linger on how the dead may still nourish us with beauty.”

Beer finds it “attractive to take a subject that is morbid and to see the beauty.”

She is not a morbid person, but she’s fascinated with the fragility and aesthetic qualities of the human body. This fascination springs from her own experiences. When she was 15, her father died of a brain tumor. Three years later when Beer was a freshman at Yale, her

mother died of breast cancer. Those experiences left her searching for answers, which she didn’t find until her junior year when she took an elective course on poetry with J.D. McClatchy, critic and editor of *The Yale Review*. Beer, a sociology major, had never taken a poetry class before, but something spoke to her as poems were read aloud in class, and the images and the sounds came together in her mind. Poetry gave her

a way to understand what had happened in her life, and so she decided to pursue a life of reading and words.

After graduation and a stint working in publishing in New York, Beer earned a master of fine arts in poetry at the University of Houston. For her doctorate, Beer never considered anywhere but Mizzou. She had read and admired the work of alumni from the graduate program in creative writing, including the

poetry of Joanie Mackowski and James Kimbrell, who have both published successful collections.

"There was just such a confidence in the voice of these poets," Beer says.

After she finishes the program at Mizzou in a few years, Beer would like to go on to teach writing and literature and to publish. For now she's happy surrounded by her reference books and writing poems that explore the human form. "You've got this incredible piece of art and architecture inside of you," she says.



Business major and playwright Erin McHugh gets to the point in her one-act plays.

STAGE EXPOSURE

In Erin McHugh's one-act play *Film Exposure*, a photographer tries to get a quarreling family to sit still, ignorant of the fact that before him is a portrait of a failed marriage.

"They're the quintessential American family," McHugh says, "but they're not. You have to see beyond that."

McHugh, a senior in business marketing from St. Louis, had to see beyond her own field of knowledge to explore playwriting. Having never taken a course on

the subject, McHugh enrolled in a beginning playwriting course at MU as a junior. In the class, she learned about the importance of making each word count, especially in one-act plays, which she prefers to write.

Two of McHugh's plays, *Film Exposure* and *Road Side*, were chosen for Mizzou's New Play Series. In the series, the Department of Theatre chooses the best plays from local playwrights to be read aloud by actors.

McHugh initially found it difficult to be the lone business major in a class of theater students. But the instructor, Kate Berneking Kogut, BA '88, MA '02, encouraged her to continue writing. In her senior year, McHugh took an intermediate playwriting course with Heather Carver, assistant professor of playwriting. Encouraged by Carver, McHugh, who had written *Film Exposure* for the class, entered the play in the American College Theatre Festival.

Judges selected *Film Exposure* as one of the national finalists at the January 2004 competition in Denver. Another play by an MU undergraduate, Matt Newlin, also was selected as a finalist. Although neither McHugh nor Newlin won this year's top prize in the festival — a performance of their play at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. — McHugh is not discouraged.

"Both Matt's play and my play were received well at the conference, and a faculty member from Meramec Community College in St. Louis asked if he can produce both of them next fall," she says.

Another short play by McHugh, *Road Side*, was one of five student plays presented in "The Ugly Tree and Other One Acts." As part of this series, which produces student work under the direction of MU theater professors, *Road Side* was performed in February. During rehearsals, McHugh was on hand to give input to the actors and director.

In the play, an older couple is walking on opposite sides of the road, engaged in a

humorous exchange about the fact that they have never been married. The play ends with a twist as the man proposes to the woman.

There is no twist for McHugh's own story; she plans to pursue a career in marketing, but she'll also keep writing one-act plays.

"I don't write big Broadway plays," she says. "I write to-the-point life stories that, if published, can be performed in classrooms or small theaters."



For Alyssa Sao-Chin Chen, writing a memoir has helped her understand the roots of her Chinese father's violence.

FIGURING OUT A FATHER

Before she came to Mizzou to earn a master's in creative nonfiction from the graduate program in creative writing, Alyssa Sao-Chin Chen had already taken a class with one of the program's instructors, Bettina Drew.

Drew taught a writing class at Yale University while Chen was an undergraduate there. The two kept in touch as Chen completed her master's in English at Columbia University in 2003. At the time, Chen was sharing with Drew sections of a

memoir about her experiences attending a New England boarding school.

Drew advised her to drop the boarding school material and expand parts about her family. The daughter of a Chinese father and a mother of Dutch descent, Chen grew up in New Haven, Conn., haunted by her father's violence. "As a child, I didn't want anything to do with him," she says.

For years, Chen couldn't understand why her taciturn father, Frederick, didn't talk about his past and disliked China so much that at one time he refused to buy anything made in the country. Expanding her memoir into a book at Mizzou has enabled Chen to learn why her father, the eldest son of one of China's most powerful families, behaved the way he did. "You can't always judge people based on one view," Chen says.

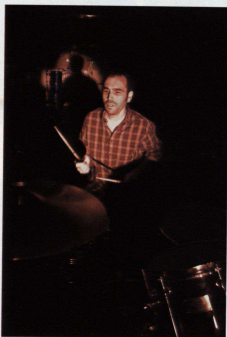
In her as-yet unfinished book, Chen writes about her father, the grandson of Chen Chi-mei, one of the men who participated in the Chinese Revolution of 1911 that advocated democracy and overthrew the ruling elite. When Mao Tse-tung came to power in 1949, Chen's father was just a boy. Mao and the Chinese communists wanted to wipe out any vestiges of the previous regime and killed members of Chen's family. Her father spent years in hiding, even living in a cave for a time. Eventually, Frederick escaped to Taiwan and came to the United States, where he attended Yale Law School, married and raised a family.

To the world, Chen's father was a successful law professor, but at home his violence could come out at any moment. One section of the book is Chen's recollection of the time her father poked out the eyes of the family's dog, Bingo, in a fit of rage. In her writing, Chen relates such incidents without anger or malice, using simple and direct language. By balancing those recollections with the story of her father's persecution in China, she says she tells a story in which her father is redeemed.

"It's a love story about my father," Chen says of her book. "It's my expression of understanding for him that he had this difficult childhood that caused him to do these horrible things."

A TOUCH OF POP CULTURE

In his fiction, Michael Kardos has written what he calls coming-of-age stories filled with details on bands and rock music. Such references aren't a stretch for Kardos, who, like the lead character in his short story "Behind the Music,"



For his fiction, Michael Kardos taps into his past as a drummer who once toured with a Bruce Springsteen tribute band.

once dreamed of finding fame and fortune by starting up a rock band.

As an undergraduate studying music at Princeton in the early 1990s, Kardos says he could have learned from writers such as Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates and Russell Banks. But at that time, Kardos was more interested in getting his band, Thirteenth Floor, off the ground.

"It was great and really, really, really hard," Kardos says of working as a drummer and manager of the band for eight years. He worked full time booking gigs,

securing rehearsal space and helping the band record a CD. Money was always short, and Kardos and the other band members eventually went their separate ways.

After touring for a year as the drummer in a Bruce Springsteen tribute band, Kardos started to focus on writing fiction, something he had done on and off since his teens. The solitary process of sitting alone in his apartment writing was a welcome change from the chaos of trying to coordinate the many functions of a band.

Kardos, who earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from The Ohio State University, came to Mizzou last fall with his girlfriend, poet Katie Pierce, who is also enrolled in the graduate program in creative writing. Kardos wanted to study under writers he admired, including Trudy Lewis, Speer Morgan and Marly Swick, and he likes the balance of writing and teaching at MU. Plus, he says there is something appealing about the open spaces surrounding Columbia — unlike the density of New Jersey.

Kardos' affinity for pop culture and his wry humor come out in the following sentence from "Behind the Music," when the narrator, a high school student, comes home to find his mother sitting in the kitchen: "A small plate with crumbs and an open can of Dr. Pepper are on the table, and what I want to ask her is why she doesn't at least try diet soda."

The scene goes on to reveal the mother has just learned of her husband's affair.

The humor in the story is countered by the knowledge that a family is falling apart. "I don't want to do it with too heavy a touch," Kardos says of injecting serious themes into his work, "because then it's just melodramatic."

On the other hand, Kardos says the humor can't overshadow the seriousness in a story. "Too light a touch, you can be faulted for bringing up issues and not carrying them out," he says. ☼