

Books of biography, poetry, science fiction and other novels may not belong on the same shelf in the library, but they all merit equal importance in the office of Dr. William Peden, professor of English. There the books are products of former students in the creative writing program offered on the Columbia campus and former contributors to the literary magazine he sponsors.

Gone are the days when young writers emerged from years of hermitage in musty garrets. Today, potential authors are most often stimulated in school and are usually first published in student publications. This is the case at Ol' Mizzou, where undergraduate students are offered a program in creative writing, including beginning poetry, beginning short story, and seminars in poetry and the writing of fiction. These courses are also open to graduate students.

Crooked-Backed Serpent

Many students here have their first published works in *Midlands*, the student literary magazine sponsored by Peden, who also teaches fiction writing courses. A combination of poetry and short story with a sprinkling of literary criticism, *Midlands* and similar student publications are often the only outlet for the budding collegiate author.

On the Columbia campus, the next step after publica-



John Windrow

Senior in creative writing from Tennessee, Windrow wrote "Crooked Back Serpent."

Crooked-Backed Serpent

The snake sprawled on the half submerged log in the middle of the lake. It was late afternoon. The serpent was sleeping in the sun's warm rays to relax and rest himself before the darkness came, when he would abandon his perch and roam the brushy lake's edge in search of food. The lake was full of frogs, the bank around it writhed with field mice and in early summer he occasionally dined on duckling.

The snake seldom had any trouble snaring his prey; he was at least six feet long and could strike half the distance of his length. Graceful as the tail of a comet, he would

glide oillike over the water, never stirring a reed or brush branch, silent as a feather riding a puff of April breeze, only his noiseless wake gently rippling the water betrayed his path.

A hunter, not a warrior, the cottonmouth seldom struck out in anger. In the hotter days of the summer in his breeding season, an unusually violent aggressive temper seized him. He would viciously guard the edges of the lake, driving off even the cattile that came to drink, but this was a rarity.

It was in such a mood that he crossed paths with Brooder Garfield one steaming hot Sunday in July. Brooder was a sharecropper

who lived in a small frame house about a mile from the lake. The crops were laid by and he had decided to fish until evening. As he reached the bank and was threading an earthworm on his hook, the snake charged at him from a clump of cattails. Brooder stumbled, fell backwards and gasped about for a weapon.

He grabbed a stick and dealt the snake a powerful blow on the lower spine, but he had missed the head of the viper. The snake, now thoroughly enraged, lunged forward and sank his fangs into his foe's thigh.

Brooder threw his arms over his face and rolled over the ground kicking violently. The serpent fled, hit the water and went to the bottom of the lake, where he wrapped himself around a dead tree top.

From that day on, the large water moccasin bore a mark of Brooder Garfield's futile self-defense, his spine was crooked, and the bend in his backbone caused the last foot or so of his body to veer off at an angle from the rest of his person.

Brooder was not so lucky. He stumbled home and having neither telephone nor automobile, died before he found aid. Many a tale was told by those who found him, attempting to explain how Brooder Garfield died of snakebite in his own home.

Today the snake was in no hot breeding anger; contented he lay on the log, bathed in purple and crimson, while the sun slipped over the horizon. Long shadows came from the trees and stole across the earth. Insects jeered at the silence as they shone and buzzed their way about the water. Whippoorwills and field larks lifted their siren song through the ever-growing darkness. The darkness began to gather in patches around the forests and then creep over the earth; a rolling warm tide of deep indigo blackness engulfed the scene. The stars appeared blue and yellow and ashy white.

The moon began to rise steadily, rapidly changing from orange to yellow to white, and halted majestic and full in the heavens, the eye of a cyclops overseer gazing down

& Other Student Works

tion in *Midlands* is the Associated Writing Programs — a group of 26 colleges with good writing programs (including the University of Missouri-Columbia) which publishes a worksheet of the best student contributions from participating colleges three times a year. Bantam Books then prints a paperback anthology, *Intro*, from these selections. It is quite an honor for a college student to be published in a nationally marketed book, and Missouri

over his holdings.

The creatures of darkness stirred from their rest and began to prowls about. Ring-tailed raccoons scuttled down to the shore of the lake to catch a crayfish or minnow. Foxes stole through the meadows toward some farmer's hen house to plunder a meal. A hound dog stirred and shook himself at a farmhouse across a pasture and bayed at the moon, a long low trumpet call of restlessness.

And the cottonmouth lazily swirled about his domain, content that all was in order. He glided toward the bank and settled down in a brushy willow tree, awaiting a careless motion of some potential meal.

The snake's patience was impressive, he would remain motionless, unseen, undetected for hours until his prey betrayed itself. Tonight, however, his endurance was soon rewarded. In less than an hour a bullfrog lulled by the twinkling of the stars, the glossy beams of moonlight and a belly full of insects, released a loud croak and resettled himself on the bank. The serpent, who was less than three feet away, cast himself out like a flyline and swallowed the frog in one swift, deft motion, and scooped him up like a shovelful of grain. The viper now dived to the bottom of the lake, his usual action after an attack, and wrapped himself about a dead submerged stump.

After a while he resurfaced and moved to a reedy section of the shore line next to the sandy beach on the south shore. As he traced across the water the moonlight glimmered down upon his body and his silent wake rippled in the pale illumination of the moon. He settled in the reeds drowsy and satisfied, and if some reckless crawfish stumbled upon him, he might devour or spare it, depending on his fancy.

Across the meadow, a '55 Chevy bounced along a dirt road bordering the field, its headlights sending crazily bouncing beams through the night air. The car stopped; a warm spray of fine dust settled around it.

T. O. Covington and Sally Buchell got

out of the auto and began to stroll toward the lake. Sally was tall and leggy with dark hair and eyes and white gleaming teeth. T. O. was big and strong, solid chest, muscled arms, thick calloused hands. They had left their shoes in the car, so they could feel the soft wet clover underfoot and damp sweet *lespedeza* clinging at their ankles and calves.

The boy would at intervals across the length of the meadow pick Sally up and swing her about; she would place her slender arms around him and tickle his ear and neck with her warm wet lips. Crossing the meadow they came to the lake's south shore and disrobed on the sandy beach.

T. O. had been drinking whiskey and felt rather splendid. Sally was wild and free by her nature and never required alcohol to feel brave and reckless. They ran into the water, thrashing about, kicking and splashing at each other. The water rose and fell, each drop separating, gleaming in the moon bathed air like a prism.

T. O. lunged at her, she laughed and ran from him prancing through the shallows like a fine leggy colt. He grabbed her arm and wheeled her about, pressing her to him. She kissed him, and then looked him over.

"T. O., ain't you scared of snakes? This lake's probably full of 'em."

"Hell no," he yelled. "I can whip any snake in the woods."

The serpent coiled in the reeds, was afraid; the splashing, the yelling, the laughter disturbed him; he remained still. His instinct cautioned him not to give away his presence.

The boy pushed her from him, she fell on the sand. "I'll find one and throw him on you," he said, and ran toward the reeds at the end of the sand.

"T.O., come back here, don't go looking for one."

"I'll find one and throw him on you," he repeated. The whiskey had made him braver than wise. He was confident that any snake nearby would have surely fled his presence.

He crouched in front of the reeds like

students' works regularly appear in these publications.

Further encouragement in creative writing is provided by the annual Mahan competition. Made possible by a bequest of George A. Mahan in memory of his wife, the competition is an annual literary contest sponsored by the English department. Cash awards for short story, poetry writing and non-fiction are offered. Each spring, *Midlands* publishes prize winning entries.

Despite Columbia's midwestern atmosphere, no one particular type of writer has emerged from the program. Students come from all over the country, depart for all parts of the world and as a result, alumni have developed a diversity of subjects and techniques. But the creative writing program does provide a stimulating climate. At least 100 novels or books have been published by former participants in the program. □

a big bullfrog and spread his arms.

"O.K., Mister Snake, I'm coming in after you."

Then he sprang forward and began to beat the reeds down with his arms.

"O.K., snake, this is it!"

The viper, terrified, backed up and then struck, snapping through the air like a whip, and hit T. O. in the neck. Then, dashing past him, the serpent dived down to the lake's depths, shaken and afraid.

T. O. stood straight up with his hand clasped over the wound.

The girl had seen the snake and stood trembling on the sand.

"T. O. Are you all right?"

He walked back toward her calmly, he knew he would die soon and he didn't want her to watch. He sat down on the sand.

"Go get help," he commanded quietly.

She gathered up her clothes and ran toward the car. Fear had made him sober, he knew there wasn't much time. Sitting mutely, he gazed over the water. Presently, he heard the car engine start, heard it roar and bounce away. He saw the headlights playing over the grass, going back toward town.

The snake broke the surface of the water and lay swirling about on the middle of the lake, watching T. O., fearful of another attack by that loud, reckless enemy.

T. O. caught a glimpse of the serpent, a flash of his sick crooked back flashed between the water and the moonlight.

"Damn Snake."

He began to feel ill and lay down. He thought of the snake's poisonous venom seeping toward his heart. Then he choked, couldn't gain his breath. His chest felt like some great weight lay upon it. Coldness then racked his body. He gasped, rolled over and died.

The snake watched him for a long time. Then, fear left: the snake knew death well, he'd seen it before. Calmed now, he leisurely crossed to the opposite bank and curled himself in a hollow stump, waiting for a reckless bullfrog, a careless crayfish.

In Late Fall

Bursting upward like a patch of sod
torn from the earth, the eagle mounts.
Like roots the serpent in his claws
weaves and struggles, bound to go along—
blood and sinew, root, stem and leaf.

We were eagles once. Feathered lances sharp
we fought and struggled for our soil.

Weighted wings sweep and fold.
He drops upon a fence post,
teeters, peers between his toes,
nervously adjusting his next meal.

The eagle scowls. His hooded eye plunges
down black binocular tubes to mine.

Head aslant, the bird stares, secure.
My people have forgotten how to make
war bonnets out of eagle feathers. L. H.



Jerry Dethrow

Jerry Dethrow from Chester, Illinois, won last year's Mahan competition in fiction.

Just off the Gasconade

In the deepest ditch
of the slough
two beavers have shut off
shallow water from the Gasconade River.

As dusk comes on
a water moccasin slithers
across, barely disturbing the water.

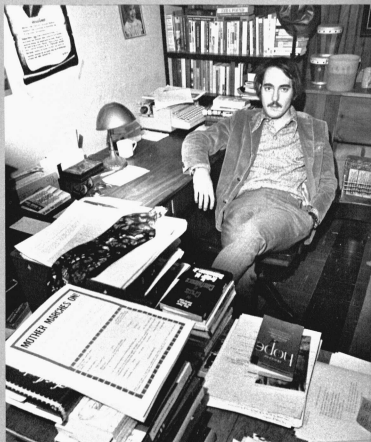
Wood ducks fly
for a safer roost
in the trees.

A pair of raccoons
trim the bank for blue channel cat.

I stand alone
a stranger with no quills,
no bite, no eyes
capable of confronting night. J. D.

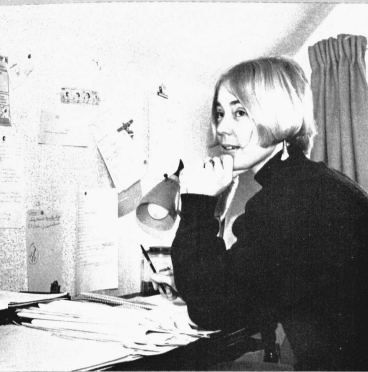
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& Other Student Works



Louis Gallo

A PhD candidate, Louis Gallo has won the Mahan prize in nonfiction and in poetry. He has also been published in *Intro*.



Linda Hasselstrom

Linda Hasselstrom, graduate student and instructor, has been editor of *Midlands*. She has published poetry and fiction.

A Modern Love Poem

You are beautiful in disarray.
The zeal alone of love is real,
Forget forever—I want you today.
Tomorrow love is not love,
Though memory undermine
The real devastations of Time.

My love residually becomes herself
In garters, rouges, brooches, and things
I find in drawers and closet floors.
Then when I tell her what Age brings,
The artifacts of Eros disappear,
Meteors screech outside the door,
The end of Love is here—

Until it resurrects in Spring.
Each new love is more violent than the last.
Or the future more passionate than the past.
Whatever the cause, mortals will sing
Their loves to legend, and legends will ease
Very blasé affairs into mythologies. L. G.

Guilt

how much more would we appreciate guilt
if it were rarefied, if some craftsman
turned it on his wheel into something precise.

but whoever makes guilt a vessel
also faces a moral impasse:
is it to be practical or decorative?
personally, i favor the first
since from it we drink
the ocean of our passion.

yet there is this to be said for the other:
if guilt is with us, which it is,
let's make it exquisite for God's sake.

i'm thinking of
the geometric school of Attica. L. G.

In What Arena?

will this our broken scene be played
ages on, by actors just as sure as we
the lines they speak are new?

Above the amphitheatre at Leptis,
the Roman matron contemplates,
holding her child. The Mediterranean
rolls and recoils beyond her marble eyes
as it has done since she was balanced here
in 2 A. D. Libyan sands undulate behind her,
where lions mate, roar and hunt.
No longer are they snared to maul gladiators
as the crowds scream for blood and circuses.
Now their only fears are zoos,
bars that stay between them
(the crows gasps, eating popcorn)
and the victims they would rend.

We pace, gesticulate, mouthe words,
hypnotized before the ancient snake
of making some old worn mistake—and yet
committing something strange. L. H.



David Flynn

Creative writing student David Flynn is a University senior who hails from Bemis, Tennessee.

Winter, 1969

Cold is only hell to passion born on ice.
Then know the horror of angels frozen real.
D. F.

Dog Days

There was a dog who could point a car and
he died.
The leaves fell like bracelets on his grave.
D. F.