A production meeting at the Purnell Center for the Arts—Sharon Dilworth, Matt Kopel, Ben Pelman, and Alie Kolb.

Indie Film in Pittsburgh
The Creative Writing Department Takes Writing to the Big Screen

In a production room in the Purnell Center for the Arts, Ben Pelman is trying to get his team’s script idea about an insane angel across to a circle of students. He looks a little frazzled, as if he has been up all night working on the current version of his script. Pelman is pitching his team’s idea, but the producers aren’t buying it.

“It’s a religious-based script, with an angel named Cliff,” says Pelman, using his hands to illustrate his points. “He seems a little nuts in the eyes of the public.”

“Yeah, but what is the movie about?” asks producer Bob Moczydlowsky. Pelman looks confused for a moment, and Moczydlowsky explains: “What we need is log lines and treatments, a synopsis of the plot that we can use to sell these films. Otherwise, how are we going to get people interested in the film?”

Everything becomes silent as the twenty-five students and two professors think about this. They have to work together to decide what is the best path for this film. They have to make this decision now before they can go any further.

The pressure is intense, but this isn’t Hollywood: it’s a Video Production class at Carnegie Mellon. The purpose of the class is for two teams of undergraduates to write, design, and shoot a film by February, and have it completed...
by May. According to Sharon Dilworth, the Creative Writing professor who is a producer and creative consultant on the films, the project started due to an interest in filmmaking that she saw among her students.

“Our Business Manager Danny Josephs, along with some colleagues in the department and undergraduate students, made the film *Tyrant’s Kiss,*” says Dilworth. “Danny and I were good friends, so I heard about the steps in the film in great detail. It seemed so interesting and so doable. What impressed me the most was that they made the film in one year for very little money. I admired the project from start to finish.”

At the same time, Dilworth saw that many of her students were applying to film school. “The graduate programs were looking for completed projects to show that the students could work an idea from start to finish,” she says.

As her course came to fruition, Dilworth saw it as an opportunity to work with professors in other departments. She really wanted to work with Shirley Saldamarco, a professor of television production at Carnegie Mellon. “Shirley and I had shared students over the years,” says Dilworth. “I heard about her, she heard about me. I met her last year and was impressed with the experience she was giving the students in her production course. We talked about collaborating and the idea for the course came to be.”

The two professors planned out the course: Dilworth would be the producer and creative consultant, overseeing the creative writing aspect of the film; Saldamarco was the executive producer, in charge of overseeing production. With the producers in place, all they needed were scripts to shoot. Dilworth contacted several different undergraduate writers interested in screenwriting and formed two writing teams: one includes Ben Pelman, Matt Kopel, and Alie Kolb; the other includes Ryan Coon, Deanna Muyle, and Brian Leahy.

“I wanted to write the film,” said Pelman. “I was excited about it because it wasn’t a writing workshop, it was actually writing a film. I would get to see the whole writing process, and be involved in the production process as well.”

In the spring of 2005, the two teams met with Dilworth and Saldamarco and started pitching ideas. The professors decided which films would be shot based on what would be the easiest to shoot, what had the most potential, and what would teach the most in class. During the summer, the writers went through several radical revisions based on comments from Dilworth and Saldamarco. Two films came about through this process of writing and revision: *The Book of Cliff* (written by Pelman, Kopel, and Kolb), about a man who may be an angel or he may be insane; and *Plant X* (written by Coon, Muyle, and Leahy), about a road trip on a day in Pittsburgh when the buses aren’t running. When school began in fall of 2005, several graduate students from the Heinz Business School signed up to be producers, and the writers started working with them to make further revisions.

“The two writing teams are fantastic,” says Dilworth. “They’ve worked beyond what I have imagined. The scripts are now complete, and I love the narratives, the stories and what the students achieved. There was an incredible amount of work that went into the scripts. They met on weekends, often working ten hours at a stretch in order to get scenes in.”

The screenwriting process has been hard for the students, but everyone has enjoyed it. “The innovation process has been long, but our group has worked together well, all of us adapting to the
notes and changes that needed to be made in the script,” says Kopel. “Working together has given us sounding boards, which help us refine the product more. It can be difficult when ideas conflict, but never for more than a moment, at least for us. We seem to have similar creative streams.”

“The best part has been learning about collaboration, working with other students on the project,” says Pelman. “It’s been much better than a workshop.”

Kopel agrees with this. “It really is a lot different from the creative refinement and process that you learn in a workshop,” he says. “It’s given me a mechanical understanding of screenwriting and a starting place for screenplays in the future.”

Professor Sharon Dilworth

One can see how the writers and the producers work together by sitting in on the production meetings. While the scripts for the two films are being developed, the two production teams meet every week to discuss each other’s drafts and give constructive criticism. This week, the two teams are sitting in a circle and discussing the latest version of The Book of Cliff. During the discussion, Dilworth and Saldamarco toss in suggestions and helpful ideas, but they let the writers and the producers, the students who will be shooting the film, make their own decisions.

The producers are trying to figure out from the writers what it is that the script is all about: the writers have a very clear idea of what they want to see on the screen, but the producers are looking for a plot synopsis to sell the film. As they discuss the film some more, the writing team decides that it is a psychological drama about truth and illusion. The producers and the writers are happy with the results. “This is a great move forward,” says Moczyldowsky.

These kinds of results have made Dilworth very happy since the beginning of the project. “People warned us that the project would fail,” she says. “They were assured of this because we were working with undergraduate writers. But having worked with undergraduate writers for sixteen years, I knew our skeptics were wrong. The students have worked together with very little fighting and have something everyone is proud to work with.”

For the Creative Writing department, this is a new and different kind of project. “Writing is a solitary and lonely business. Screenwriting is an ensemble, which is different for writers,” says Dilworth. “I think we’re all looking forward to the next stage of the project. Shirley knows what she’s doing and I think it’s going to work beyond our expectations. There are going to be hurdles and struggles, but everyone on the project is more determined than ever to see the scripts be made into films.”

Dilworth has been encouraged by the successes of this course, so much that she is starting to plan for next year. “Now we’re just looking for next year’s stellar students,” she says.
Social Change Through Art
Jane Bernstein’s New Documentary Focuses On Disabled Adults

Some writers use their work for information, some as therapy, and some as pure art. With her new book, Jane Bernstein uses her writing as an offensive weapon.

“There are lots of entitlements that support the education of a disabled child,” says Bernstein. Bernstein has been using these benefits to support her younger daughter Rachel Glynn, who was born with optic-nerve hypoplasia. “When that child turns twenty-one, all of those entitlements are gone.”

Rachel has turned twenty-two.

Bernstein found herself, a widowed mother of a disabled daughter, placed in a difficult position; how could she support her daughter and work full-time as a professor at Carnegie Mellon? Would she have to choose between the daughter she loved and the career that helped support her daughter? Her experiences in this conundrum inspired Bernstein to write her next book, about working with social services to find a way to support her daughter, in order to highlight the problems that developmentally disabled people have in today’s society.

Writing about her family is familiar territory for Bernstein. She wrote Loving Rachel, about her experiences as the mother of a developmentally disabled child, in 1991; and Bereft: A Sister’s Story, about her sister’s murder and its repercussions, in 2000. Her writing is known for its courage in illustrating difficult issues in her life and making peace with them. She continues this trend in her latest book.

From the beginning, it has been a tense process. “The social services net that is meant to support our citizens is gone,” says Bernstein. “I didn’t know if Rachel was going to get a job, or a house, and I didn’t know if I could work and support her at the same time. The law says that the government has to give education, but there is nothing else after that.”

Bernstein worked through social services to find work and housing for Rachel so that her daughter could support herself as an adult. The results were not encouraging. “We were told by the state of Pennsylvania there was no possibility of housing,” says Bernstein. “They said it had to go to more dire cases. You can’t sue the government for housing.”

It has not all been a negative experience. Rachel was able to find work through the developmentally disabled community: she got a job at Citizen Care T.O.C. in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania. She lives ten minutes away from home, working and supporting herself, yet still close to her family.

The project has also allowed Bernstein to become closer to her eldest daughter, Charlotte Glynn. Charlotte directed a documentary that corresponds to the book. Bernstein’s concept was that the book would chronicle her own experiences in dealing with social services, and the film would capture Rachel’s day-to-day life. She is planning for both projects to come out.
simultaneously, and to be used as tools for advocacy groups.

Charlotte has done a previous project with Rachel, a short film made during her sophomore year in film school, but she wasn’t certain about the current project. “Charlotte is more interested in narrative film than in documentary,” says Bernstein. “But then she shot some initial footage and realized that she wanted to work on the project.”

The deciding moment was when Bernstein went to Lifesharing, an assisted living facility for developmentally disabled adults. Charlotte came along to shoot footage and was appalled. “I was balancing work and family at the time, and was going along with this adult housing, but Charlotte showed me how wrong it all was,” says Bernstein. “Charlotte is twenty-five and very fiery. It’s great to hang out with someone who is full of outrage. It reminds me that I should have outrage as well.”

While the project has been about fighting the system, Bernstein loved working with her daughters. “As an artist, the project has been intense,” she says. “Rachel became a family business. We were following her around every day. It’s also been a great collaborative experience. I really respect Charlotte as an artist, and I loved the privilege of working with her. Plus it was a lot of fun having young artists (the film crew) working in the house.”

The first draft of the book is almost done, and Bernstein is looking for funding to complete the editing of the film. “This film will happen,” says Bernstein. “It won’t be a talking heads documentary, but much more artistic. It’s going to be great.”

The Epic Poem
Anthony Butts Takes the Poem to New Heights

“Writers must get out more,” says Anthony Butts, professor in Carnegie Mellon’s creative writing program. “The writing community is great, but you must experience more and bring that to the table.”

This is something that Butts believes implicitly. As a poet and writer, his work can never be considered isolated. For example, the inspiration for his latest project, a poem in the epic tradition of the Odyssey, came from a conversation he had with two psychology professors. “They were amazed that there has never been an epic poem about peace,” says Butts. “They have always been about war. And since I wanted to write a book length manuscript for my next poem, it was the perfect idea.”

Professor Anthony Butts
An epic about peace is the kind of project that fits perfectly into Butts’s repertoire. He has always been an innovative poet, fusing new concepts with classic poetic forms. His work has focused on topics of science, religion, and international war while inspired by the stylings of Shakespeare, Keats, and Homer. An epic, novel length poem that contradicts the classic purpose of the epic to tell stories about great battles does not seem unlikely for this poet.

“Perhaps it’s because I started as a pre-med student when I was an undergraduate,” he says, when asked about his inspirations as an artist. “But then I thought that poetry would accomplish what I wanted to achieve more than science. I wanted to heal the soul.”

As he worked on his art as a poet, Butts never abandoned ideas of science or social commentary. In his most recently completed manuscript, Male Hysteria, which will be published by Crab Orchard Press, his poems are focused on freedom of speech issues in times of war, focusing on the Korean War and the current war in Iraq. In his previous books Fifth Season (1997) and Little Low Heaven (2003), he has written poems about gender issues, minority issues, the middle class in America, psychoanalysis, and astronomy and astrophysics.

“Poetry is a kind of bridge between science and humanities,” he says. “I want to counter the idea that only humanities are subjective. Science is subjective as well, which is why it changes so often. There is always something about it that is evolving.”

While Butts uses his work to challenge science and humanities, he also uses it to discuss issues that are more personal. His own religious faith is a major topic in his writing, especially since he converted to Catholicism ten years ago. “It speaks to me about continuity, about art and the soul,” he says. “I couldn’t help but to do it.” While he does have a strong faith, he believes that he must speak out against aspects of his church that he does not think is right. “I attack the ministry with my poetry, even though I am not supposed to,” he says. “But I’ve seen so much hypocrisy in religion. Religion is a very personal thing, and yet many people use it to support their own hang-ups.”

For instance, Butts tells a story that happened to his sister before her wedding. “They met with a minister who told them that she would have dozens of kids. I thought that was crazy, and my mother thought I was blasphemous.” He smiles sheepishly and adds: “I do have a fear of being excommunicated for my poetry!”

Butts writes about issues he does not agree with but he doesn’t use his work to simply complain. He tries to come to some kind of understanding between two different viewpoints, like art and science, poetry and psychoanalysis, religion and true belief. “These times really need someone to say what they really feel,” says Butts. “It is the charge of the poet to come up with answers. The poet is a spokesperson. They can’t just complain.”

As for the future poets, Butts is very optimistic about his students at Carnegie Mellon. “I have read the best poetry from students at Carnegie Mellon,” he says. “They keep asking questions, and I encourage them to ask more questions through their writing.”
Pressing Issues
Gerald Costanzo’s Publishing Experience at Carnegie Mellon University Press

Gerald Costanzo is a difficult man to reach. In fact, we had to set up three separate appointments until we finally met for this interview, which shows just how busy the head of the Carnegie Mellon University Press is. When we meet, Costanzo is very apologetic.

“There are millions of details about books,” says Costanzo. “We are sending seventeen books to publishers, and we want to make sure that they are error free. It’s a very busy time of year.”

He isn’t kidding. Carnegie Mellon Press has received several hundred manuscripts from poets and writers from around the world, and Costanzo and his staff must sort through all of them in order to choose which books they will publish. “We usually publish twenty books per year,” says Costanzo.

Costanzo founded Three Rivers Press in 1975. “My first book was published in 1975, when I was 28,” says Costanzo. “There were poets I was reading in 1975 who were excellent, who had paid their dues in their late thirties and forties and who still had not been published.”

Costanzo began taking classes in the design department of the Print Management School at Carnegie Mellon University, independent of his teaching. “I started the press from a desire to help poets of my generation, and Carnegie Mellon gave me an opportunity to do that.”

After a conversation with President Richard Cyert of Carnegie Mellon, Costanzo joined his company with the university. Three Rivers and Carnegie Mellon became publishing partners, and were distributed by the University of Pittsburgh. After that, HarperRow distributed the press publications until they were dropped after a merger that made HarperRow into HarperCollins. Now it is distributed by Cornell University Press. Since the merger with Carnegie Mellon, Costanzo’s position as the head of the press...
became a full-time position. “I never anticipated it becoming a full-time job, since I started it as a hobby,” says Costanzo.

The press has expanded to include several different genres. Even though they still focus on poetry, they also publish collected short fiction, edited by Sharon Dilworth, literary criticism, business texts, art history, and even a cookbook. There is not a unifying form that the books have to follow. “We’re looking for what we think of as excellence, books that really adhere to the university mission of scholarship,” says Costanzo.

The publishing house runs with one full time staff member, assisted by a number of undergraduate students. “They are the ones who are the prime movers,” says Costanzo. “Without the students in editing and publishing we could not do what we do.”

One of the major tasks that the students take on is choosing several manuscripts from unpublished authors to publish every year. The students go through several hundred manuscripts that are submitted every year and find forty that they meet with Costanzo to discuss. This year, four manuscripts were chosen from two hundred and fifty to five hundred submissions.

It seems mind-boggling that four manuscripts could be chosen to publish from so many, but Costanzo was very confident in his students. “Last year we had an exceptional group of students,” he said. “The students apply the standards that they have learned in the workshops. This gives them the chance to see how writers put together manuscripts. It’s a learning process for them as well. When you read that many manuscripts, about 10% of them announce themselves as publication ready. Students are able to pick that up really rapidly.”

“What is important is that the press stays relatively young while I grow older, and the students help with that,” says Costanzo. “They identify some of the younger generation, the one that is closest to theirs. It’s been a pretty healthy thing for everyone involved.”

Costanzo has enjoyed running the press for the past thirty-five years. He believes that the best part of the job has been the relationship he has with his students, especially the ones who go on into the publishing field. “For me its been education of the most desirable sort; a learning process for the students but one which prepares them not only for a career in making books but also prepares them for intellectual aspects that make them succeed in this career. It’s a tremendous reward and one that goes on and on.”
Besides writing new poems and stories, teaching full time at Carnegie Mellon and running the Creative Writing department, Jim Daniels has also written and produced a new film. When asked how he chooses all these different projects, he laughs and says, “It’s not so much a choice as they choose me!”

The new film is called Dumpster and was shot on the Carnegie Mellon campus. It’s about a janitor who discovers a wealthy frat boy living in a dumpster on the campus of an elite university. Daniels worked with director John Rice and actor David Conrad, a Pittsburgh native who is currently starring in the television show The Ghost Whisperer. The film premiered at the Pittsburgh Film Festival on November 5.

Working across genres is nothing new to Daniels. He frequently works with different artists in the Pittsburgh area. “I like to reach out to artists in other genres who give me new ideas,” he says. In fact, he is not the only professor in the Creative Writing department at Carnegie Mellon who works in different genres. “We’re not afraid to challenge ourselves,” says Daniels. “Sometimes we fall flat on our faces, but that informs the next project.”

This isn’t Daniels’s first film. He wrote No Pets, which started as a one-act play and evolved into a film. He learned a great deal from that experience about how to make an independent movie with little or no budget. “For a low budget film, you have to be careful how you set it up, because you don’t have much to work with,” he
says. “With *Dumpster*, there are only three settings: a frat house, the worker’s house, and a dumpster right by Baker Hall.”

Although it was difficult working with a very limited budget, Daniels found that he enjoys working on an independent film. “You build a sense of camaraderie, even when you don’t have any money,” he says. “You know that it will never show in a multiplex, so you make something that you can be proud of.”

Working on a film has been a great experience for Daniels and his other writings. He finds that writing a screenplay has helped his poetry and vice versa. Writing in different styles has led Daniels to using different techniques in his poetry and fiction writing. “I’ve been using simultaneous narratives in my poetry, kind of like a jump cut in a film,” he says. “Also, film is a very visual medium, and dialogue is essential to fiction. By working on a screenplay, it helps me write better dialogue in fiction and create better characters.”

While working on *Dumpster*, Daniels also worked on a project with photographer Charlee Brodsky, a professor of photography at Carnegie Mellon. The show is a series of photographs taken by Brodsky of the remnants of the steel mill neighborhoods in Homestead, accompanied by poems by Daniels and Creative Writing professor Jane McCafferty, at the Westmoreland Museum. Daniels and Brodsky also recently published a book entitled *Streets*, a collection of photographs of people on the streets of Pittsburgh, accompanied by Daniels’ poems.

Daniels continues to produce his own work. He is currently gathering poems and short stories for a new book. In the meantime, one of his new short stories will be published in *Nighttrain* literary magazine. “It’s a story called *United States Street Football*,” says Daniels, “and it’s about a group of kids who play football in the street. They mark off their field by writing USSF on it.”

Then he smiles. “Well, I could tell you what happens next, but that would ruin the story,” he says.

The premiere of *Dumpster* was quite a success. Both shows at the Melwood Screening Room on November 5 sold out. Daniels seemed bewildered after the reception, but very enthused. “This is really great,” he said. “I saw some people here who I haven’t seen in years.”

When asked if he was ready to make his next movie, Daniels laughed. “No, not yet. So many people helped us to make this film, gave us so many deals so that we could afford to make it, that I wouldn’t want to impose again.” Then he smiled sheepishly. “Then again, I did start working on a new script….”
The Past as Present
Hilary Masters Works His Past Into His Current Writings

Hilary Masters’s office is very comfortable. There is a leather couch, a huge printing of multiple images of Anton Chekhov, and, of course, shelves of books for perusing. But it’s the little things about an office that tells you about who inhabits it. If you look closely, you will notice a postcard on his desk advertising a young Hilary Masters for public office in the 1950’s. He doesn’t look much different now as he did then—wiser, more experienced, which comes from many years as a publisher, a writer, and a teacher at many universities, including Carnegie Mellon. When I ask him why he is a writer, he flashes a disarming smile and says, “I like to tell stories. I come from a family that tells stories about the family.” Then he tells a short story about his grandmother, who worked on the Pendergrast campaign in Kansas City, which was well known for corruption. Then he goes back to his own writing. “It’s the act of storytelling, making something up from what is in my memory or on the table, that is fascinating and a challenge.”

The challenge of storytelling has led Masters to write nine novels, several books of essays and memoirs, and many articles for literary journals. His latest novel, *Elegy for Sam Emerson*, will be published in May. The title character is a chef in Pittsburgh who grew up in East Liverpool, Ohio and New York City. As the novel begins, he is trying to figure out what to do with the ashes of his recently deceased mother. Throughout the story, as Sam Emerson faces the issue of death, he keeps running into his own past.

“I purposely set the novel before September 11 to eulogize how things were, before paranoia and radical changes in society. I definitely want to preserve the innocence of the time,” says Masters. “I’ve always been interested in one’s past and present and how they feed off of each other.”

The past is an important factor in Masters’s other novels. His novel *Shadows on a Wall* is about E.J. Kaufmann hiring muralist Juan O’Gorman in 1940’s Pittsburgh. *Home is the Exile* is about two soldiers, one in the Spanish Civil War and the other in the Iran-Contra scandal, in a story about heroism and ideals. Masters even traces his interest in the past back through his family, to his grandfather, Tom Coyne, who was an immigrant from Ireland who was obsessed with the past; and to his father, Edgar Lee Masters, a writer known for writing *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915. Masters wrote about their lives in *Last Stands: Notes From Memory*, a memoir that covers over a hundred
years of history through his father and grandfather. Since the past is such an important part of Masters’s art, it only makes sense that his latest novel is one that he wrote thirty years ago. “My wife found it while poking around in a trunk,” he says. “I’ve been working on it ever since, making corrections and typing it into my hard drive.” The novel was written from 1974 to 1975, and is very different from his other work. “It’s a post-apocalyptic novel set at a castle called Ballerman’s Island in the Hudson River,” says Masters. “There’s no real plot to it. It’s really about a bunch of people getting together and telling stories. The stories are about love, trust, honor, and belief in language. It’s very cerebral.” Then Masters laughs. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with it!” he says.

Continuing the Tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr.
By Katherine Quinn Tyler
How many people take the time to remember the man behind the federal holiday when January 17th rolls around? How many people sleep in, watch daytime TV and never once pause to think about the struggles and sacrifices of the fallen civil rights leader? At Carnegie Mellon we remember and the Creative Writing Department encourages others in the community to do the same.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Writing Awards have been held to commemorate this occasion for six years. The contest was founded by Jim Daniels, professor and director of the Creative Writing program.

Race has been a central issue in Daniel’s life, having grown up in the racially-divided city of Detroit. After compiling Letters to America: Contemporary American Poetry on Race, an anthology of poetry on this controversial subject, he was inspired to found a contest based on the same idea. Daniels sought to, “bring people together to talk about the subject that so often divides us,” he said.

With every passing year, the contest has grown bigger and more successful. This year the Creative Writing Department received submissions from local high schools and Carnegie Mellon. Students competed in two categories: poetry and prose (fiction or nonfiction) for cash prizes and the opportunity to read their work during the university’s celebration of the life of Dr. King.

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 17 students proudly read their honored writing in front of a large audience in Rangos Hall. No two pieces were alike, each student shared a personal experience with race, reminding the audience that physical and social differences continue to divide us.

One of the most poignant and relevant readings was by Kami Smith. Taking home the 2nd place in poetry for Carnegie Mellon, Kami’s The Discovery of the Article...was written in response to the Natrat controversy of 2004. Traditionally for April Fool’s Day the writers at the Tartan publish a farcical issue of the school paper, but last year’s issue offended more than it amused. At the heart of the campus outrage was a comic featuring a racial slur. Kami finishes her poem with these words:
“If you believe that we’re dividing by looking at how far we’ve come,  
You are sadly mistaken because we are a nation of all people  

But there are still injustices in this world on both sides  
Which I am not excusing, but  

We should all be able to look back at our history, every group,  
Because the existence of this time and of this month  

Is not only for me to reflect on, but also a learning experience  
For you, but apparently, this fact stopped, checked you out, and rolled right on past.  

And for this, I pity your ignorance.”

The final reading at the awards ceremony was *Oreo*, by Patrice Desirae Alexander, a high school student from Winchester Thurston. She writes,  
“I think about the long battle Martin Luther King, Jr. fought to achieve civil rights for people. I believe that we live in a nation today where people aren’t judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their characters. Strong, determined people break the racist stereotypes of the past every day. We live in a nation today where people can do whatever they want to do with their lives and become whatever they desire to become if they are willing to meet the intellectual requirements of their destiny and society. Even if I can only change one person’s perspective at a time, I won’t stop doing so until everyone believes in opportunity.”

The ceremony demonstrated that the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. has not been forgotten. Dr. King brought a message of hope to all the people he touched and that message continues to resonate in the future leaders of this country.
News at 11:00
Carnegie Mellon Graduate Sonni Abatta Tells Stories Every Morning on KDKA

Even in the middle of a conversation, Sonni Abatta always seems to be watching the room. Even as she sits and answers the questions for this interview, she is listening to conversations that go on around her in the coffee shop, or watching as people come in and go out and order cappuccinos. It’s not that she’s trying to eavesdrop; she is always interested in stories. It’s part of her job.

As an anchor and reporter for KDKA, Abatta’s work is always about capturing the story. For the morning show, she writes her own material for her slot as an anchor on the morning newscast. Then in the afternoon she’s a reporter, pitching ideas for the evening show, putting them together, writing the story, then going out with a crew and filming it. Abatta is writing her own material and appearing on television twice a day, every day, which might seem daunting for a writer. But Abatta takes it in stride.

“It’s not about being in front of the camera, it’s appreciating the story,” she says. “I enjoy capturing someone else’s story. Sometimes one and a half minutes isn’t enough, but it’s still great.”

Abatta has been following stories on television ever since high school, when she was a writer for the high school sports show in Robinson Township. While a sports writer, Abatta discovered the aspects of journalism that she really enjoyed--writing, talking to people, pitching ideas, and delivering information. She was drawn into writing for television journalism, even though she was shy in school. “I always enjoyed doing it in school because it made me get out of my comfort zone,” she says.

When she came to Carnegie Mellon University, she went into creative writing, where she took screenwriting, novel writing, workshops, and journalism courses, which “consists of my only journalism training in college,” says Abatta. All of the creative writing classes Abatta took were her favorites at Carnegie Mellon. “The way you write says a lot about you,” she says. “I wasn’t great at novel writing, but I really liked short story writing. There is a certain gratification in completing a piece in one day.”

She also took fine arts classes—voice, movement, and direction—that helped her become more confident in front of the camera. “It’s a different feeling when you know what you are talking about is real,” says Abatta. “You know you’re not performing, but you also know that you are in front of thousands of people. The classes really helped!”

While at Carnegie Mellon, Abatta did internships at on-line magazines, at Dateline NBC, and two internships at KDKA in Pittsburgh, in the sports and news departments. As her second internship came to an end, she put together an audition tape to shop around at other stations around the country. She gave it to people at KDKA for a critique, and wound up with a job offer.

“I think I just had a lot of luck. There were a lot of people who were willing to take a chance on me,” says Abatta. “And for that I am very grateful.”
Abatta started at KDKA two weeks after her graduation from Carnegie Mellon. She spent six months shadowing reporters, watching how they prepared their stories. Once her supervisors felt that she had grown enough, they started her in the weather department and a fill-in anchor. After about a year she dropped weather to become an anchor on the KDKA Morning Show, and a reporter for the evening shows.

As an anchor and a reporter, Abatta puts her objective writing skills to use every day. While she still enjoys writing fiction, she likes to focus more on chronicling, which fits perfectly in her job as a TV news anchor. “The best part of the job is that I get to talk to people for a living,” she says. “I meet different people in different circumstances. Being a writer I can appreciate people’s stories. You never know where you will end up.”

Carnegie Mellon Graduate and UPMC Nurse Meg Burke

Hospital Stories
Carnegie Mellon Graduate Meg Burke Works Writing Into Hospital Career

Writing has been, and always will be, an important part of Meg Burke’s life. Even though she works as a nurse, she always finds way to work writing into her career. “I’m always walking along and observing, and seeing things that might make a great story,” she says. “I look for the unpolished sides of people; the sides that people don’t want you to see. That makes great poems and characters.”

Burke is a rare person in the world of English studies—she graduated from Carnegie Mellon with a degree in Creative Writing in 1998 and went on to University of Pittsburgh Medical School with a degree in nursing in 2003. Going from writing poetry to professional nursing might seem like quite a leap, but for Burke, it wasn’t that difficult. “I have always been fascinated by the human body,” says Burke. “My dad bought me an invisible woman when I was little. You could look right through it and see all the guts and watch biological processes. It was gross, but very cool.”
Burke has always had an interest in what goes on beneath the surface: both in anatomy and in hearts and souls of people around her. She doesn’t seem that kind of person—during the interview she is very personable and outgoing—but she says happily, “I’ve always liked gritty, ugly writing. It’s so different from my life. Writing always comes from someone’s experience. When I read something like this, I know that it’s out there, and this is fascinating to me.”

Her interest in the darker side of literature is reflected in her favorite authors. “I’ve always liked Sylvia Plath. Richard Wilbur’s ‘The Writer’ is the most beautiful poem ever. Joyce Carol Oates—I like that she writes across all genres; poetry, novels, essays. And Wally Lamb edited a collection of short stories about women in prison. There were so many similar things in their lives, and to see how this led them into prison was totally fascinating.”

Burke was interested in writing and literature from a very young age. She used to write stories as a little girl and entertained her parents with them. In high school, she became more focused on reading literature and took AP English courses. She started as an English major at Dickinson University, but then discovered the writing program at Carnegie Mellon. “I loved everything—the campus, the size of the school, the program, the location,” says Burke. During her studies, she leaned away from the fiction workshops towards poetry. “I have a natural tendency towards poetry,” says Burke. “I like how short poetry is. It’s that you get to fit as much as possible into a small package. The thrill is in looking for just the right word.”

As an undergrad, Burke worked at the Carnegie Mellon Press, and during her senior year she ran the student reading series. During one of the student readings, she met Paul Burke, her future husband. They have been together ever since. After graduation in 1998, Burke and her husband moved to Austin, Texas, and worked at Trilogy Software Corporation for a year, where they designed recruitment materials, but decided to return to Pittsburgh to be closer to family.

After returning to Pittsburgh, Burke decided to follow her other interests and began looking into medical school. “I always wanted to work in a field where I can help people and communicate with them,” says Burke. “Trilogy Software didn’t give me that at all. But I thought that nursing would.” She applied to the University of Pittsburgh and was accepted; she graduated in 2003, and began working at the Shadyside Medical Center.

Even though she went for a nursing degree, she is glad that she did her undergraduate degree in creative writing. “The degree teaches you how to communicate. There’s a lot of that from day to day. You have to be a liaison between doctors and patients, family, etc. You must be knowledgeable and able to communicate, and to form trust.”

Communication and trust are two things that Burke uses the most in her work. She looks after an average of five patients per day, and must communicate not only with them, but also with their family members. She finds that these are the people she has to communicate with the most; to act as a kind of impromptu teacher, teaching them how to care for their surgical wounds, how to take their medicines, and how to handle diseases. “It’s like teaching on an informal level,” says Burke.

Burke also supervises nursing students, a position that she was in herself not long ago. With her experiences in creative writing, she finds that she is very good at it. “I never really wanted to go into teaching, but I really like it,” she says. “I like to be approachable for the students, and to help them learn their jobs.”

After her career choice, the obvious question is whether Burke regrets her undergraduate degree. The answer is: not at all “You’d be amazed at how many Creative Writing majors go on to medical professions,” she says. “Three friends of mine from my class all went on to medical careers, not just me. I don’t think it was a mistake. I know that I will always use it.”
Seven Best Decisions I Made as a Writer
By Sue Stauffacher

Choosing Carnegie Mellon over New York University’s undergraduate School of Dramatic Writing.
The longer I am a writer, the more I realize that whatever good writing we have to offer the world is drawn out of us. Choosing a more intimate and personal program was much better for my development. Having teachers like Lynne Barrett, Jim Daniels, Erwin Steinberg, and Dave Demarest gave me the best models for narrative and poetry, academic writing and journalism, while offering me the space to experiment.

Finding the Right Life Partner
If I had to choose just one ‘best decision,’ this one would be it. I fell in love with Roger Gilles’s writing in a junior-level workshop and remember hoping fervently that he did not look like a troll (sadly, the last guy’s writing I’d fallen in love with did). Fortunately for me, Roger was very nice to look at. But more importantly, he has been absolutely critical in any success I can claim as a writer: a calm, steady, wickedly funny and encouraging presence in my life. We married in 1985, and both headed to the MFA Program at the University of Arizona. Roger decided to go on to get a Ph.D. and is now a professor in the Writing Department at Grand Valley State University. Always supportive of my struggles to be published, Roger calls me his retirement investment, and I call him a great patron of the arts.

Having Children
Simply put, my children have taught me more about what it means to be human—and therefore enriched my writing and my life—than I could have imagined. Like the best of teachers, they have drawn out whatever good we possessed and nurtured it (while laying waste to our schedules, our bank account, and our favorite former pastime of lying around the house and reading).

Choosing to Write for Young People
In my MFA program, writing for young people was considered a genre and so was not allowed. Looking back, I always want to laugh about this because, in today’s publishing milieu, “Catcher in the Rye” would be considered a young adult novel. So, too, would “To Kill a Mockingbird,” “The Heart is a Lonely Hunter,” “Oliver Twist” and “Robinson Crusoe.” There is not nearly as much drama in New York surrounding children’s publishing, though Harry Potter may have changed all that. Drama and profits are inextricably bound. But in our completely bizarre business, I have a very traditional relationship with my editors at Knopf. I have just completed my fourth revision of my latest novel. This kind of editing attention is rare today, and as I am the sort of writer whose manuscripts are wild and rough, I’m very fortunate that editors like this still exist.

Becoming a Book Reviewer
In addition to giving me thousands of free books, being a book reviewer has been like taking a master class in publishing. There is no ladder to becoming a published author. We’re just thrown out there and told to go for it. Unless you go to New York or L.A. and begin working in some entry-level capacity at a production company or publisher, you simply write and submit, almost like launching your manuscript over the side of a ship in a bottle. Will it ever be read? As a book reviewer and journalist, I interviewed countless authors, editors, publicists, and bookstore owners.
I began to understand the how and why of the business. It was immensely helpful.

Reading Viktor Frankl
In the preface to the 1992 edition of “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Victor Frankl talks about the phenomenal success of the book and how he never intended this to be the work that made him famous. He actually wanted it to be published anonymously. He goes on to say, “Again and again, I therefore admonish my students both in Europe and in America: ‘Don’t aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s dedication to a cause greater than oneself.” Frankl’s words sparked in me the realization that writing is less about what we want than what life wants from us. Writing is about the passion to express, about the deep certainty that you are called to do something. Once I knew that—and I mean really knew it—the worry about what would or would not happen to my publishing career began to abate.

Having a Mid-Life Crisis
Mid-life crises can be useful. As usual, I wanted to be first and so had mine in my late thirties. I’d gone ten years since my first book was published and decided that, perhaps, the universe was trying to give me a hint. So I abandoned writing for two years and took a full-time job in which I experienced the profound joy of earning a regular paycheck. The job was creative, flexible and fun. But I was close to miserable. One week before September 11, 2001, I quit my job and decided that even if I had to self-publish my novels, I was going to write one just for myself. Six months later I sold that book, “Donuthead,” to Knopf, now a division of Random House. The result of following my instincts without regard to what is wise, publishable or profitable has resulted in five more book contracts.

Sue Stauffacher (H&SS, ’83) is the author of three novels and a collection of folktales. She is married to Roger Gilles (H&SS, ’83). They live in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with their two sons, Max and Walter. You can learn more about Sue and her books at www.suestauffacher.com

How Personal Crisis Begat No Tell Motel
By Reb Livingston

Discouragement and general malaise almost prevented me from initiating what is probably my most enriching project to date. I always wanted to start a literary journal, but every time I considered embarking on such a project, the damning voice in my head would say, “Do we really need another literary journal?” It’s a fair question; there are thousands of literary journals, the majority with miniscule readerships. Another issue to consider was “what could I offer that wasn’t already being offered?”

After completing my MFA at Bennington in 2001, I was anxious to continue “my life of letters” and maintain a connection with a poetry community. I did what seemed logical, kept writing, kept reading, always had work submitted in the pipeline. I attended conferences and readings, placed poems, book reviews and the occasional essay or interview in both print and online journals. I maintained a mailing list of my graduating classmates so we could easily keep in touch and encourage each other. As the months turned to years, a significant number of my community slowly dropped out of the writing scene, some discouraged by their lack of quick publishing success, some seeming to lose their interest in writing all together. My community was getting smaller and I, quite lonesome.
Here’s the part of story where I hit “bottom.” Literally. It was a beautiful October afternoon and I was walking on a path in my neighborhood and wearing my new powder blue exercise suit. I had that false sense of contentment one gets when one can’t quite figure out what’s missing from her life. A young mother was pushing her toddler on a swing. I waved, said hello, gazed a second too long on the happy pair, didn’t see the treacherous single leaf that made me lose my footing, sending me tumbling, hitting my head, badly spraining my right ankle and fracturing my left elbow. My next six weeks were spent sulking on my sofa, gaining 10 pounds and spending some serious time discovering poetry blogs and reading online poetry publications.

Online pubs weren’t new too me, but before my accident, I was only familiar with a few. I couldn’t believe how many were out there nor was I expecting the level of quality to trump many of the print publications, far more relevant than the safe and stiff ones my professors touted. In addition to the huge range of poetic styles that I wasn’t accustomed to reading, the journals were being done in many different ways. Some editors chose to flaunt the technology, do hypertext, sound, animation. Some editors were more visually oriented. Some kept it simple, focusing solely on the written work.

I shouldn’t have been surprised by any of this. Of course the savvy up-and-coming editors were choosing online over print. Print publications are expensive, distribution a huge hurdle. Paying subscribers? Good luck. Even the established and esteemed journals, those with affiliations with universities and receive grants struggle to survive. It’s a cruel and harsh world out there for upstart print journals. For every Fence or Tin House, there’s 100 journals you never heard of that made it to issue 1 or 2 and died because the editor decided to instead pay his rent that month.

That is the single reason why online journals are making such a big difference in the publishing scene and will continue so. Online journals have readers, lots of them and for most writers, that’s why we publish our work in the first place. Sure, some are concerned with prestige, but most online publications get more visits per month (or even a week) than the Paris Review has circulation. Prestige is subjective and potentially quite lonely and like I said, I already had enough of that.

After surveying the online poetry scene for a few months, I started my own blog and expanded my writing community in ways I never thought possible. I still hadn’t made any strides towards a literary journal. I bemoaned this to P.F. Potvin, one of my Bennington classmates who was still living his life of letters. I said, “Oh, but there are so many poetry journals out there already.” His terse response: “Can there ever really be too many poetry journals?”

P.F. was right and honestly, there is still a lot that isn’t being done yet, plenty of ideas that haven’t been implemented yet, plenty of poems and poets to discover. For someone who wanted so desperately to have a part in the “greater poetry community” it was time I stepped up my own contribution to it.

I came up with an idea based on my formal literary education from Bennington and Carnegie
Mellon plus my four years professional experience at America Online. In my opinion, the biggest flaw with many online publications is that they think and operate like a print publication, despite all the high-tech bells and whistles, they publish issues. This makes absolutely no sense for the online medium, which is designed to be dynamic and fluid. There’s no printing press for online publication—and I wasn’t interested in limiting my journal into an old model when there is so much more flexibility.

My goals for my journal were the following:
* Create an easy to navigate, aesthetically pleasing site that showcased the poems and gave proper attention to the over-looked poet and give the poet a voice for the work.
* Publish on a daily basis to encourage readers to visit frequently.
* Publish compelling and lively work by both known and unknown poets.

I pitched my idea to Molly Arden, a poet and translator I long admired. While she liked the idea, she was hesitant that we’d be able to maintain the quality and momentum by publishing every day. After a lot of discussion she decided to give it a try. We decided to have fun with an editorial image that was closer to whom we really were instead of trying to be urban or hip or try to pass ourselves off as ivory tower academics. We’re married women in our early 30’s, who do most of our work from our suburban homes while raising small children. Naughty housewives it was and the No Tell Motel (www.notellmotel.org) was born.

I hired Nancy King, my roommate from my Morewood Gardens and Mudge days who’s now a freelance web designer, to do the design and implementation. I assigned numerous technical and programming tasks to my always-helpful husband, Chris Morrow, another treasure acquired during my Carnegie Mellon days. Both Nancy and Chris helped select and reprogram a free software package that allows me to schedule No Tell Motel’s content months in advance.

Before launch Molly and I solicited poems from poets we admired, about half of them we knew on some level and half we had no previous connection. Some were wonderfully gracious and helpful, others not so much. One supposedly hip poet professed he was too cool for the online journal school and that it wasn’t his scene. We weren’t about the argue the “scene,” we had no problem finding other poets, such as Jennifer Michael Hecht, Amy Gerstler, Karl Parker, Anthony Robinson, Heidi Lynn Staples and Shanna Compton who were more than willing to send work to our journal, sight unseen.

We launched No Tell Motel in August 2004. Each week we feature a new poet and publish a new poem each weekday. We have readers all over the world (another nice perk of an online journal, you can tell where you readers are from); our visits increase every week, as do our submissions. We get a lot of exciting work and accept less than 5% -- often having to decline generally good submissions.

Will one day being published in No Tell Motel mean a huge boost in one’s literary career? Oh, we can dream, can’t we? Will editing it mean a bevy of publishing and professional opportunities for Molly and me? We won’t hold our breaths. Is it fulfilling finding wonderful and exciting poems and making them accessible to thousands of readers? Oh, yes. I haven’t fallen on a path since.
Alumni Updates

By Jessamyn Ansary

When I went on the Clippership cruise freshman year, chunky heels were in style, the song of the moment was *Bootylicious* by Destiny’s Child, and I had just left San Francisco, California for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I didn’t know anyone at Carnegie Mellon, but my head danced with visions of “college life,” and I was full of eagerness and anticipation for the years ahead.

My RA told us about the Clippership “booze cruise” that would happen our senior year. *Open bar,* she said. *It will be the pinnacle of your Carnegie Mellon experience.* I talked about the senior booze cruise with my friends, discussed it and planned it with the same zeal with which many girls plan their weddings. Over the years, the senior cruise began to take on a mythological grandeur. It would be our last hurrah; a final opportunity to tell off all the people who had wronged us, to confess our love to all those we had secretly pined for. “*Someone will walk the plank,*” one friend crowed eagerly. “*Friends will be punished; enemies will be befriended*” shouted another.

And, most importantly, at the time of the senior Clippership cruise, I would be (drum roll please) a *senior,* with all the rights and responsibilities implied therein. As a freshman, I had boarded the boat young, naïve, and unsure of my future; as a senior, I would board the boat as an adult. I would have my life together; would know whom I was and where I was going. Perhaps I would have published a novel, weathered a marriage (or two), traveled the world, or even held a position in the government.

Fast forward to 2005: pointy-toed heels are in style, and the song of the moment is *Candy Shop* by 50 cent. In the days leading up to the big event, I got a haircut and bought an expensive new outfit. Visions of planks danced in my head.

Of course, the reality of the cruise itself bore little resemblance to my youthful fantasies. First of all, our dream of an open bar, where margaritas flowed like water and payment was deemed passé, was smashed from the get-go. *Cash bar,* we were informed by surly Clippership staff. *Beer and wine Only.* Cash bar? Beer and wine only? Already, it was a far cry from everything I had imagined.

And then there was the small matter of plank-walking. To begin, no plank was in sight. Perhaps the surly staff people had hidden it for their own personal use; perhaps its presence had been a fabrication all along, a feeble metaphor for the closure we wished to have with all our friends and enemies. Either way, there was no plank—real or metaphorical. Most of the people I longed to see (either for plank-walking, or love-confessing purposes) had decided against Clippership entirely. Most people, it seemed, had already moved on.

If Clippership was nothing like I imagined it would be, then “adulthood” is even further from what I envisioned as a green 18 year old. Like so many of my peers, I have no job to run to after graduation. I don’t know where I’ll be living in a month; much less a year, and as for the novel I thought I’d have published...I think they hid it in a closet, along with the plank. Yet this uncertainty is not disappointing to me; rather, it indicates that Clippership was not an ending to anything; it was merely a prelude to what lies ahead. Panic attacks, cold sweats, and heart palpitations aside, I wake up most days filled with brilliant excitement for everything that is yet to come.
And so, after the bright disco lights have faded, and the endless I.C. Lights have been taken out with last week’s recycling, I am left with the understanding that Clippership, like adulthood, is full of bewildering surprises and unexpected joys. I may not know who I am or where I’m going, but at least I know what to look for; the same thing I think we’re all looking for—that open bar and plank at the end of the rainbow.

Shannon Gibney

Fiction writer Shannon Gibney of Minneapolis is managing editor of the Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder newspaper. She is the recipient of the 2002 Hurston/Wright Award and is a recent graduate of Indiana University’s MFA program. Her work concerns race, identity and power. Her writing addresses questions such as: Who gets to define “blackness” and who gets to be “raceless,” and in what settings? How does identity shift from group to group? What is the power of naming and claiming an identity? Gibney will use her fellowship to complete her novel, Hank Aaron’s Daughter.

The Grape Crusher
By Rachael Brown

I am often told that I take too much pleasure in my job but I ask you, what could be more satisfying than the exhausting labor and permanent stain of grape crushing?

If only society could resemble this: whole families would tremble and burst beneath the weight of my impoverished foot like the ripe white grapes whose juice is forced down the barrel’s iron throat, to ferment.

I mean, not that I would equate grape-smashing with genocide. But just think, I could be the crowned god of discipline, glittering sinister with the blood of those who gave their lives for something greater, namely a rare and unusual
wine. What an incredible power!
What a putrid stench.

**Characteristics of the Work of the Wise**
**By Benjamin Saalbach-Walsh**

The wind sweeps by in a cold steady drive
bringing a shower of leaves from the tree.
These are the thousands of marvelous works
of someone with clear-seeing eyes.
I watch them fall to the soil…
They will decompose for the seeds.

Elsewhere, people are raising their seed
but living the rat race. Their drive
for status doesn’t teach the soil
the practice of raising a worthwhile tree.
For they narrowly focus on fortunes with their eyes
and every good citizen “works.”

Lutherans say forget about Works
That the Kingdom of Heaven has no seeds
they can see. Some eye
their faith without being driven
to grow nuts or leaves on their tree
and pass away forgetting to turn into soil.

Greatness can often or occasionally soil
intent, and when only works
are the aim then the trunk of the tree
is forgotten, and so all the seeds
are weak from their limited drive
and there’s not much more than is clear to the eyes.

Wildly staring and wide-open eyes
are frantically searching for long-fertile soil,
as the plows that pass over drive
them from calm. And the difficult works
feel unsettlingly hard and we don’t plant the seeds.
I’m half-hesitating, half-meditating beneath this tree.

But this man is a respectable tree
who does what he can as he works
With a smile he buries the seeds,
thrusting them into the soil
where they have passed from his eyes
into faith, and faith is a drive.

I will find I am driven, and as easily as trees
sway in wind I will steadily work, undaunted though my eyes
see the world committed to the soil. I want to plant good seeds.

**Bellows Crashing**
By Mark Cullen

Christian shouts of *ugly, ugly*, pushed against dry rain
as the red anarchist tattered faces spit upon line's defenders.
Separated sidewalk from the street, the bluest men enraged
on all the minds dreams of bloody beating's splendor.

The American Rebel wanders through the gaslit night
balmy coffee-shops and back-seats of home he trusted.
He retches in his head and he throws-up in a bag,
His bristled baby-fat face squints to think of justice.

Remember that viper's head pushing on your back
an unused abused hippie who used to know your Dad
rushed you with his hands in pocket, shouldered you
then stared against, convinced you mustn't go unheeded.

The baiters and the bullies, used her as a whore
pushing her and filling her and screaming out for more
Drove nails in their faces just to prove they're not like you
as if their souls' weren't barren and constantly debuting.

Dreaming on the express: boys threw shit at thieves
as the perilous colored lady in the wedding dress believed
that in each and every person lived entire countries,
and we boarded up our windows toward the darkness.

The G-men hate the street-men, angry with their height
and they hate them with life's fire burning louder.
In a vision of the alley, they spit and yell out *Fuck someone should record this, I'm Tolstoy in a locker.*

The fog was only hearing, as it glassed the sky and stole
the very accidental sunlight that the waves demanded.
Stillness of forgotten time, etched a word in paint
and armies watched the rotting general, twice commended.
We're living in a drum solo and banging on the walls that Don Quixote put up when he lanced Washington's diamond. And the transcendental sloth men live so they won't be judged by the marimba playing idealist waddling in mirror pond.

Like a shovel from an ancient war, years have been preserved from the senseless mindless daughters of the commies now interred. The reckoning was entertainment, so it never really came but the bustle of the back-road hard-blown singer fell like rain.

So the painter on the school bus, dreams of neon dawn as an acute lucky foreigner shouts out *which side are you on?* and Lenin is an angel in a world with only pawns and we boarded up our windows toward the shoreline.
Poet Laureate Ted Kooser signs books at a reception following a reading at Carnegie Mellon.