Beyond Harry Potter

A community-based literacy project brings together two libraries, 30 teens, a handful of local schools and teachers, several Metropolitan State students, and one very enthusiastic librarian.

It’s a Wednesday afternoon at Metropolitan State’s new Library and Learning Center. An assortment of college and high school students are using the computers and checking out the stacks on the second floor. Fourteen-year-old Rasheed heads for a door marked “Special Collections,” off limits to everyone except library staff. After he enters the room, he settles into an overstuffed chair to read a book that is so new, it hasn’t reached bookstores yet.

Rasheed is participating in “Teens Know Best,” a program that gives local youth the chance to read and review the best books for young adults published in the United States every year. As he relaxes in a chair in the special collections room, Rasheed will lose himself in a biography of John Lennon, a graphic novel about a superhero or even a book of poetry. Then he’ll make his way to a computer, where he will enter his evaluation of the books he’s read. When a committee of the American

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At the Art Museum

By John Lienhard

This article was originally a radio broadcast by John Lienhard, M.D. Anderson professor emeritus of mechanical engineering and history at the University of Houston. Professor Lienhard’s radio show is called “The Engines of Our Ingenuity,” and it can be heard on KBEM, 88.5, Monday through Friday at 9:26 a.m. and at 6:26 p.m. The show also has a Web site at www.uh.edu/engines/

Last night at the art museum, my mind gradually slowed from its work-a-day churn, into reflection. Finally, in the exhibit of modern Texas art, I asked a security guard, “With all the hours you spend in here, which is your favorite work?”

“Sir,” he said, “as a matter of policy, we don’t express opinions on the art.” He paused, then smiled. “I’m going to break that rule and tell you. Actually, I like all the art.”

I laughed at his self-deprecatory, fool-nobody, diplomacy. He’d put me in the right frame to enjoy the good humor of modern art. When we passed again, I said, “Someday, you’ll be president of the United States.” He pulled a long face: “Now why should you have such a low opinion of me!”

Then he said, “Let me give you the real answer to your question. The finest art in this room isn’t hanging on the walls. It’s the people who come through here. People aren’t the same in here as they are walking through a supermarket, you know. They’re different. They’re open. They come here to be changed.”

I looked at the man with astonishment. Of course! That’s what art is all about. He’d gone right to the center of it.

Long ago, Louis Pasteur talked about creativity. He said, “Chance favors only the prepared mind.” But while Pasteur offered no guidance as to how we prepare our minds, that security guard did. People don’t move through museums the way they move through supermarkets. Art is more than just a product served up for our pleasure. Art is a trigger to our imaginations.

We all live in need of ideas. We all have problems to solve. At some point, most of us realize that, when our problems need creative solutions, they cannot be attacked with purely methodical tools. Method takes us down familiar roads. Creativity means seeing the shrubbery-shrouded side roads that we ignore by habit.

The hardest thing in the world is to leave the highway and float above the land. Music, theater, sculpture—they all cut us loose from the road of method and common sense.

The so-called creative leap isn’t a leap in the dark— without antecedents or stimulus.

Rather, it happens when we find a liminal state, on the very edge of awareness, where ideas arrive without order or hierarchy. In that mental world, cowpaths are as important as freeways. And one way to find that creative state is to give ourselves over to art.

Inside the museum, we lay aside our shopping lists of needs to be met. Art serves us when we leave our supermarket lives to wander the woods, eating the unexpected nuts, berries and wild fruit.

That’s what that security guard saw. He saw people without shopping lists, ready to be taken into alien spaces. He’d seen you and me, ready to be led onto byroads of thought, ready to wander into places we didn’t know were there—and so very close at hand.
New Faculty Member: Aureliano DeSoto

By Carolyn Whitson

If you’ve spent any time recently at the College of Arts and Sciences offices in Saint Paul, you’ve probably met Aureliano DeSoto, a new faculty member in Ethnic and Religious Studies. He seems to create community everywhere he goes, whether at the department open house in September, where he handed out new multicultural literature as door prizes; or in the mail room, making friends and looking for advice on how to settle in. Aureliano has already connected with numerous faculty, staff and students, and he has been central to recent campus events such as Hispanic Heritage Month and National Coming Out Day.

Aureliano comes to Metropolitan State from Bard College in New York State, where he was an assistant professor of American studies. Before teaching at Bard, he was on the faculty at two universities in California. Aureliano will be teaching core courses in ethnic studies, as well as developing curriculum in Latina/o Studies. This year his courses include “Introduction to Chicano Studies,” “Immigration and the New World,” and “Politics of Protest and Resistance.”

Aureliano’s scholarship focuses on the development of the Chicano/Latino intellectual. He is finishing a book-length manuscript on how these thinkers mold and transform their native and ethnic identities, and how these identities interact with other North American identities, in particular that of the African American.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Aureliano didn’t think he would become a professor: “I was aiming for something more visually artistic. But events conspire to bring us to where we are, and, to quote the Pet Shop Boys, ‘I was faced with a choice at a difficult age: should I write a book, or should I take to the stage?’ I chose the book.”

I had the opportunity to observe Aureliano when he moderated Metropolitan State’s National Coming Out Day forum. He presided over a panel of speakers who focused on little-discussed issues in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) community. The audience was composed of a diverse cross-section of the Twin Cities community. As Aureliano interacted with the audience and panel members, participants expressed both the anguish of alienation and the joy of... 

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Dance Lesson

By Matthew Spillum

I wonder if you still recall the night you knocked me flat. I lay there, blinked my eyes and saw your face above; “Are you alright?” I nodded, hobbled to my beer and fries.

I watched you while my throbbing jaw kept time, heart pounding out the Lindy Hop while you and Navi went through spin and turn. Sublime, the way you lead... I’ll learn... I want that, too.

Bemused (or stunned), I watched you twirling her with confidence and trust I’d yet to learn. And, from my chair, I silently wondered, were we ever going to take another turn?

That boy I was, cold beer and ice on jaw, who learned to lead in pain, so sharp and raw.

This poem, by writing major Matthew Spillum, appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of Metropolitan State’s arts and literature magazine, Haute Dish. To see the most recent issue, go to http://hautedish.metrostate.edu/
New Faculty Member: Tammy Durant

By Carolyn Whitson

When Tammy Durant, new resident faculty member in the Literature and Language Department, talks about teaching, she invokes the unusual metaphor of the “reverse dragon”: “I am a gatekeeper for this enormous stock of fabulous cultural treasures and my job is to distribute as many keys to the treasure to as many people as I can.”

Tammy comes to Metropolitan State from Centre College, Danville, Ky., where she taught in the humanities program, and from the University of Kentucky, where she taught in the honors program. She will be teaching British literature surveys and genre courses, like the novel and the short story. Her chief area of expertise is the British Romantic period. Of particular interest to her in the British 19th century is the dialogue between the Enlightenment’s scientific discourse and Romanticism’s exploration of the roles of imagination and emotion in establishing alternative ways of knowing.

In her previous appointment at Centre College, Tammy designed and taught a course on this dialogue, called “Frankenstein’s Children.” The course starts with Mary Shelley’s novel and raises questions like: What is a human being? If an intelligent being is created by a human, does it have a soul? What are our responsibilities toward created individuals? What rights should be given intelligent artificial beings? She looks forward to talking with students at Metropolitan State about dark visions of artificial beings in such contemporary works as Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and movies such as *Gattaca* and *Blade Runner*.

As a scholar, Tammy plans to research the previously uncollected works of early 19th century dramatic author, Joanna Baillie. Baillie wrote a series of plays on subjects such as hatred, love, jealousy and ambition, penning a comedy and a tragedy for each emotion. Tammy is researching the ways in which Baillie used gender issues in her time to establish her theories about dramatic structure. “I’m also hoping to edit, in one volume, Baillie’s complete collected *Plays on the Passions.*”

Tammy grew up in the country outside the small town of Harrodsburg, Ky. “It was rather dull. The absolute highlight was “library day,” every other Thursday, when my mother scrupulously returned our library books and we selected new ones. The library was an enchanted place filled with innumerable worlds, futures, possibilities, friends, magic, creatures, adventures. I loved it all and would bribe my sister to check out the books I wanted with promises that I’d play Barbies with her.”

With her husband and nine-month old daughter, Tammy moved to their new home, a 1909 house in the Dayton’s Bluff’s area of Saint Paul. After living in less populated regions of Kentucky, she’s looking forward to enjoying the cultural treasures of a major urban center. Tammy has experienced a large snow only once in her life, and she’s thrilled at the prospect of a dramatic Minnesota winter. She and her husband plan to take up cross-country skiing, or snow-shoeing: “I’m open to recommendations.”
Tammy’s classroom experiences so far at Metropolitan State have been positive: “The students, as a group, are more experienced and mature than the more traditional students I’ve encountered in the past. My Metropolitan State students have been handing me keys of their own, enabling me to enter into true cultural exchange with them. I’ve always depended on students to keep me current on new exciting material for teaching, but these students have offered me new insights into methods for teaching itself.”

Tammy Durant brings to Metropolitan State many keys to teaching and learning. We welcome her, and we can only hope she gets the snowy winter she longs for!

Carolyn Whitson is an associate professor in the Literature and Language Department.

Mist

By Steven Shea

Small fingers, that I could snap inside my squeezing, wrap half asleep inside a nap around a trust that I won’t, and that I will not, not be here when his hopes re-open to the burn of wooden blades chopping tar-black water. From shore, I watch this boy, my boy, rowing. Row fast. No, faster, past the edge of the weeds, past the end of the world after. Shamefully, these pleas go unborn, thoughts coughing, choking on dirt, their lives bought and aborted before ever seeing their birth as words. I told her, I wanted her to get an abortion. Row faster, out across the awful. I didn’t mean it. The moon is dead, the dark ate the stars, and I hate my hate that is their replacement. From shore, I hear your oars shoveling, pouring coal over coal, over and under your quilt you rest. Baby’s breath and squishy pink flesh rests beneath little boy hairs peeking at their maker, the taker of time, the giver, the whittler of wood, shaving, splintering slivers into your virgin skin. I am the snake, slithering across on scales, unbalanced, tongue split, licking at your fingers. Row fast.

Steven Shea is majoring in writing. This poem appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of Haute Dish.

From the Dean

Below are comments made by Dean Ed Malecki at a faculty meeting in August 2005.

I came to Metropolitan State three years ago. The university was changing then, and it is still changing now.

In 2002, 59 percent of our revenue came from state appropriations; in 2005, only 43.8 percent of our revenue came from state appropriations, while 53.8 percent came from student tuition. In three years we’ve shifted from being a state-supported university to a state-assisted university.

During the same time period, students on financial aid went from approximately 25 percent of the enrolled population to over 60 percent in spring 2004. As state support declined, student tuition was increased to maintain existing total budget levels. As the result of these tuition increases, more and more students turned to financial aid to support their education.

Despite all the fiscal changes, the College of Arts and Sciences continues to move forward. We’ve added the master’s program in computer science, the bachelor’s degree in computer forensics, and we will soon launch the master’s in liberal studies. We’re seizing the opportunity of co-location with Minneapolis Community and Technical College to create a “black box” theater space for Metropolitan State student productions. The CAS faculty has focused on creating a welcoming climate for the Ethnic and Religious Studies Department and its new faculty members, Aureliano DeSoto and Anallyssa Gypsy Murphy. Finally, our faculty continue to do amazing things, from developing innovative community-based learning projects to publishing novels and doing important research.

Whatever we do, students are the reason for our existence. Although our goal is to serve the educational needs of students, we are not a business and our students are not customers. The customer, as the saying goes, is always right. But, while students are always to be respected, their performance in our classes may be very strong or very weak. We owe it to our students to give them honest feedback on their work.

As always, I am grateful to our faculty, staff and students for all they do as the university negotiates the waters of change.
Beyond Harry Potter continued from page 1

Library Association (ALA) meets in January, librarians who are creating a list of the 2006 best books for young adults will carefully consider his book reviews. That list will influence what books appear on library shelves. It will determine what books are used in classrooms. It will shape what kids read.

The project began when Adela Peskorz, Metropolitan State librarian and expert on young adult collections, was appointed to the Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA) committee of the ALA. Adela had two goals in mind when she started on the committee: get teen viewpoints on the books being considered by the committee; and involve Metropolitan State students in mentoring teen readers and reviewers.

When the project first started in 2003, the new library was not yet open, and Adela had to improvise. Now that the library is up and running, “Teens Know Best” is rocking. Here’s how it works:

- Adela and Rebecca Ryan, library community outreach worker for Metropolitan State’s Center for Community-Based Learning, identify area middle and high school teachers and students willing to participate in the program.

- Adela and Rebecca recruit Metropolitan State students to work with teens on the BBYA program. In particular, Adela recruits heavily from her CAS adolescent literature class.

- Hundreds of young adult books are delivered to Metropolitan State’s Library and Learning Center. These free books are shelved in the Special Collections room on the second floor. Many of these books are not yet published; some are even in galley form.

- Teens read books—lots of them—using the special collections room as their base.

- Teens and Metropolitan State students meet monthly at the Dayton’s Bluff Branch of the Saint Paul Public Library, managed by Joanna Brooks. At these monthly gatherings, university students talk with teens about how to evaluate books; they solicit the teens’ opinions and act as mentors.

- The teens become book reviewers. After reading each book, they fill out an online form giving their evaluation. (See sidebars for examples of their reviews.)

- Adela gathers the reviews together and uses them in developing her own list of recommended books. She then goes to the ALA meeting and nominates books for the BBYA list.

As program coordinator, Adela believes that “Teens Know Best” really helps the teens in their intellectual development. “One benefit is that the teens learn to articulate critical evaluation of books; they learn how to identify literary features, like compelling plots and character

Below are excerpts from several reviews of young adult books by students in the “Teens Know Best” program. These books are highly recommended by the teen reviewers, and they all made the nominee list of Best Books for Young Adults, 2006.

**Book:** The Light of the Oracle
**Author:** Victoria Hanley
**Reviewer Age:** 18
**Comments:** . . . The Light of the Oracle is one of the best fantasies I’ve read in a VERY long time. Bryn is a sweet character, and the others are unique and interesting as well. The plot is slightly obvious, but the twists and turns Bryn takes as she studies at the Temple of the Oracle make up for general knowledge of what the evil plot is from the beginning. However, what really makes this book great is its fantasy elements. The prophecies and bird-gifts are thought out and work well together. I enjoyed discovering this new magical world right alongside Bryn. My review can’t do this book justice. I will be EXTREMELY disappointed if it doesn’t make the BBYA list.

**Book:** Prom
**Author:** Laurie Halse Anderson
**Reviewer Age:** 14
**Comments:** This is not a book I’m going to forget I read any time soon, and considering
development.” At the same time, Metropolitan State students, many of whom are education majors, learn about the process and politics of book selection. “They learn how materials are chosen and valued. They immerse themselves in the genres and formats of teen literature, whether it’s graphic novels or nonfiction. They read and review books themselves all the time, and they learn from the teens.” In addition, Metropolitan State benefits from the torrent of young adult books that pours into the library every year.

“Teens Know Best” is a model for bringing university expertise and resources together with community interests and needs. Adela has been amazed at the commitment of the participants. For example, a teacher from Woodbury’s Crosswinds Middle School recently drove several kids to Chicago, so they could participate in the ALA meeting. Two Metropolitan State students served as chaperones. “Support for the program has been terrific from the Saint Paul Public Library, the Center for Community-Based Learning, and especially David Barton, library services dean, who’s been behind the program all the way,” says Adela.

What’s next for “Teens Know Best”? Although Adela’s term on the committee will be up at the end of this year, she will continue to work with the teens and pass their reviews on to another committee member. In addition, a formal internship has now been established that enables a Metropolitan State student to serve as cofacilitator of meetings, reviewer of books and mentor to teens. Adela has one more trick up her sleeve: “The big goal is establishing a state book award system that relies on teen input. Right now Minnesota has the Maud Hart Lovelace annual ‘best’ books process, but the age for this program tops out at sixth grade, the earliest end of adolescence. Teens in Minnesota have no separate vehicle to express their opinions and I’d like to change that.”

So next time you’re in the library, peer into the special collections room on the second floor. You just might catch a teenager sneaking into the room to read a good book.

I can never remember what I read even three days ago, that’s quite an accomplishment. Prom, written by Laurie Halse Anderson, was inspiring, hilarious, down to earth and realistic. I absolutely loved the entire thing—chalk up another point for this book as I usually disagree with the whole concept of school dances, including proms. I would definitely recommend this book to make the final BBYA list.

It was absolutely hilarious and definitely unforgettable. New and original, it had great life in it, and you could tell that the author had fun writing it. Some books just have a dry feeling about them, like the writer didn’t really put their heart in to it, but this one is filled with spirit.

Book: Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close
Author: Jonathan Safran Foer
Reviewer Age: 14
Comments: i loved this book. i think that oskar was such an interesting character and the format of the book was really cool. i liked how there were pictures and it was more like a case file with evidence than a novel. the fact that the whole time there were two stories going on was not as confusing as i thought in the beginning and some one with a better attention span would understand it better than me. i tried to read everything is illuminated [another book by Foer], but the style of dialogue that he uses didnt work in that book because he uses so much of it. since he doesn’t use the normal style of dialogue you lose track of whos talking but it worked in this book. !!!!!!!!!!
intellectual discovery. At the end of the evening, several speakers noted that they felt community had been created that very night.

Outside of his work at Metropolitan State, Aureliano enjoys walking in both urban and rural areas. He reads a lot of online news sources, keeping up with politics and commentary. “I tend to be cautious around bombastic statements, suspicious of polemic and dismissive of easy solutions.” Aureliano has a vivacious style that combines quick-witted New York observations with playful California intimacy. Please extend him a warm welcome.

Carolyn Whitson is an associate professor in the Literature and Language Department.