

# HMU: Dialogues

Harrison Middleton University

11/14/2018

Volume 5, Edition 2

## Letter from the Editor:

As usual, Harrison Middleton University students, staff, and fellows have been busy! First, Joseph Coulson, HMU President, jumped into his new duties and wrote his own Program of Study through the Great Conversation Course in order to examine the HMU experience firsthand. Working on curriculum, Joe has been meeting with staff and students in order to get a deeper feel for the culture, and in October, he spent ten days in Phoenix, immersing himself in HMU history and operations. A long-time reader of the classics, Joe has been joining many conversations, and his ideas and experience are already making an impact.

Furthermore, this newsletter highlights some truly wonderful student accomplishments. Visit the Student Corner for more information on graduations and book awards. We also hope that the three book reviews pull your attention toward some contemporary works which may complement a great idea that you study or enjoy. Finally, check out the upcoming events for more ways to join the conversation.

In the previous *Dialogues*, Harrison Middleton University announced its inaugural fellowship program. In this newsletter, we must wish them well as they continue their excellent pursuits. We are grateful for the 2018 *Fellowship in Ideas* recipients: **George Hickman, James Keller, Benjamin Peterson, Matt Phillips, Sam Risak, and Carter Vance**. Thank you and keep in touch!

Thanks to all of our community. We are lucky to have such accomplished students! Happy holidays!

Thanks! *Alissa*

## Reviews and More:

This newsletter will feature three book reviews from *Fellowship in Ideas* recipients: **Sam Risak, Benjamin Peterson, and Carter Vance**. Each of these books addresses topics that we discuss every day at HMU.

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*Awayland: Stories* by Ramona Ausubel  
Review by Sam Risak

The characters are all out of place in the very best way in Ramona Ausubel's second short-story collection *Awayland*. Her fabulist aesthetic brings evaporating mothers, a cyclops, and animal mummies into the real world, the contrast of realities and settings reflecting our forever longing for the other. The collection is divided into four sections: Bay of Hungers, The Cape of Persistent Hope, The Lonesome Flats, and The Dream Isles, each of which illustrate the insatiable human desire to go away, even after we get to where we wanted to go.

In "Remedy," one of the darker stories of the collection and a personal favorite, protagonist Summer, already the leftover from her parents' death, cannot imagine living with such separation again. She grows inescapably

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## *Reviews (continued):*

aware of her own mortality after watching her neighbor die falling off the roof and decides her boyfriend Kit should have one of her hands so that they may always be together. Kit does not want to doubt Heather—who seems healthy in every way—for such disbelief is sure to encourage distance between them. He agrees to pursue the procedure in Thailand, hoping the beautiful landscape will distract his girlfriend. After a few days of seeing the doctor off and on, both are relieved when, instead of a surgery, they are provided with massages, believing the silly doctor had misunderstood their request. But Summer and Kit underestimate him, as the characters in the collection consistently underestimate the lands they are in, and the doctor gives them exactly what they thought they wanted.

The absurdity of the procedure illustrates the Western inclination to distort other cultures and reduce them into their most foreign attributes. Like most of the stories in the collection, “Remedy” critiques a Western assumption for superiority as Summer worries about the adequacy of the clinic doctor they find. Despite being in a foreign country, Heather is concerned by the doctor’s lack of English fluency and wishes for someone with a Harvard degree.

*Awayland* moves from America, to Europe, Asia, the Arctic, and heaven. The characters all long for something unfamiliar and novel, revealing their personal privileges, misunderstandings, and naiveté. Ausubel’s beautiful prose provides readers the warmth of the beach, the chill of the Arctic, the ache of the heart as the characters learn to cope with leaving a loved one, leaving home, or leaving this corporeal world.

## *Faculty Highlights:*

~ **Joseph Coulson, David Curd, Michael Curd, Becca Fisher, and Lauren Guthrie** attended the Distance Education Accrediting Commission’s Fall Workshop in Scottsdale, AZ from October 21 to 23, 2018.

~ **Michael Curd** attended the Society of International Business Fellows (SIBF) Annual Summit in Austin, TX from October 4 to 7, 2018.

~ **Lauren Guthrie** attended the Distance Education Accrediting Commission’s Midwest Regional Meeting in Chicago, IL on September 7, 2018.

~ **Philip Stewart** attended the 48th Annual Great Books Institute Weekend at Pocono Manor, PA from November 2 to 4, 2018.

~ **Deborah Deacon** gave two presentations at the ASU School of Art titled “The History of Anime” and “Ghosts and Ghouls in Anime.” In September, she attended the G.I. Film Festival in San Diego, CA (where she met George Takei (Mr. Sulu from *Star Trek*)). She also gave a presentation at the Scottsdale Civic Center Library on October 23. The title of this talk was “Women and the Military: From Art to Service.” She served as a discussion leader at the 48th Annual Great Books Institute Weekend at Pocono Manor, PA from November 2 to 4, 2018.

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## Student Corner

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~ **Dr. Peter Ponzio** attended the 38<sup>th</sup> annual "Dickens Universe" at the University of Santa Cruz in July. The subject of the conference was the novel *Little Dorrit*. He also attended the conference of the Loyola Victorianists on October 27, 2018. The theme was "Hideous Progeny: the Gothic in the Nineteenth Century." His recent book, *Themes in Dickens*, was named one of the top 75 books for community college students by *Choice 360*, which reviews books for libraries and colleges. Details can be found at [www.choice360.org/blog/the-top-75-community-college-september2018-edition](http://www.choice360.org/blog/the-top-75-community-college-september2018-edition), under the section on Humanities books. Ten years ago, **Dr. Ponzio** started The Fremont Great Books Club. Happy anniversary to the group, who are currently reading *Dracula*. [fremontgreatbooks.org](http://fremontgreatbooks.org)

~ **Dr. Phillip Perry** attended the biennial conference of the Society for Novel Studies at Cornell University from May 31 to June 2, 2018.

~ Doctor of Arts student **Ann Wagner** attended Great Books Council of San Francisco's Poetry Weekend from November 3 to 4, 2018 at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park, CA.

~ HMU Fellow in Ideas, **Matt Phillips** recently published *Know Me From Smoke*, an old school crime novel. Find this and others at his website [mattphillipswriter.com](http://mattphillipswriter.com).

~ Congratulations to **Dr. Ellin Marie Demaree Iselin**, who successfully completed the Doctor of Arts program at Harrison Middleton University. **Dr. Iselin** submitted a film, *Soul in the Machine*, as her Capstone in partial fulfillment of the requirements of her degree.



The cast and crew film *Soul in the Machine* at the home of Fritz and Barbara Iselin. From left: Carlos Carreras Rodriguez (director), Johnny Mac (Tom), Ellin Iselin (computer Angela), and Carlos Iselin Rodriguez (Luke).

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## Book Review: *The Conversations* by Michael Ondaatje

by Benjamin Peterson



To any scholar of American moviemaking, the name Walter Murch carries a hallowed ring. In the late '60s, while everyone else his age was experimenting with strips of psychotropic blotter paper, young Walter hitched up with Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas's one-van frat pack in San Francisco and started experimenting with strips of celluloid. By the end of the following decade, these Hollywood ex-pats would cast a bigger shadow than anyone else on Hollywood's future (save for that classmate of theirs who dropped out and made *Jaws*). Across four entirely unlike editing systems and as many decades, Murch has personally accumulated nine Oscar nominations for his inventive postproduction cobblery on such pictures as *Apocalypse Now* and the three *Godfathers*—films drenched in the sweaty stew of legend. He is to sound design and film editing what Day-Lewis is to film acting, what van Leeuwenhoek is to microbiology, and what Julia Child is to roast chicken.

Stumbling as I did across *The Conversations*, novelist Michael Ondaatje's extended interview with Murch, is a lot like stumbling across a well-fed wonder cabinet, and suffering an avalanche of eclectic curios falling down on the tender, green grass of your mind. The book transcribes a tetralogy of dialogues—styled as Q&As but reading like friendly gabs over bread pudding—between the two men circa 2000, when Murch's latest undertakings included a buffed-out *Apocalypse Now* update and the long-delayed realization of Orson Welles's vision for *Touch of Evil*. They prove to be fast friends and like minds separated by a generation, a cultural background, and their vocational medium.

Though himself no small-potato artiste, Ondaatje reliably fills the role of pupil to Murch's hermetic sage. The writer seems continually awestruck by the immensity of his interviewee's knowledge and ken—a reaction that befell me in turn, as I pored over theories of “precipitive sounds” and an undiscovered notation system for movies. Author and subject's mutual bronzing in the light of film theory reads well under this balance of forces between student and master. Instead of competing, their intellects cooperate.

As Ondaatje and Murch savor the mysteries of the creative process and the distinct magic of prose and film, *The Conversations* becomes something like a fleshed-out, lightning-rodded expansion of Murch's own treatise on filmmaking, *In the Blink of an Eye*. That slim but electrifying sutra offered a glimpse of the extraordinary worldview that Murch has accumulated over his years of dark-room dancing with the Moviola machine. Many of those ideas—including the book's centerpiece, a fascinating parallel between blinking and film cutting—are revisited here, and in dialogue with Ondaatje are drawn out in even greater detail. Though probably the more famous composition, *Blink* really feels like a preamble to the longer, meatier probe that Ondaatje has compiled. Initiates of the Murch school of cinemancy be warned: *The Conversations* is essential reading.

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## Upcoming Events:

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### January Quarterly Discussion:

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The next Quarterly Discussion will take place in January 2019. We will be discussing various readings in natural science. Visit [hmu.edu](http://hmu.edu) for dates and times, or e-mail [asimon@hmu.edu](mailto:asimon@hmu.edu) for more information.

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### HMU Annual Film Series:

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Nothing blows up. Not a single car chase. It all takes place on earth. No one changes shape, disappears, or leaps a tall building in a single bound. All remain fully clothed. And there is a conspicuous lack of those words your mother used only when playing field hockey. However, there are four reasons you may want to join us: Marlon Brando, Sidney Poitier, Katherine Hepburn, and Dustin Hoffman.

Harrison Middleton University invites you to its annual film series. This 2018-19 winter event will explore a variety of texts and films by several American Greats. HMU faculty member, Gary Schoepfel, will lead all four discussions. Participants will read the text and screen a film in advance of the 90-minute scheduled discussion, which will then be conducted via conference call using a toll-free telephone number provided to participants. You can be anywhere to participate! Participants may join one, two, three, or all four discussions. Discussions will be held on Thursday evenings at 5:00 pm PT/6:00 pm MT/7:00 pm CT/8:00 pm ET. The first discussion will be held on Thursday, November 8th.

November 8th - *A Streetcar Named Desire* (text and film)

December 6th - *A Raisin in the Sun* (text and film)

January 10th - *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (text and film)

March 7th - *Death of a Salesman* (text and film)

To register please contact [rfisher@hmu.edu](mailto:rfisher@hmu.edu). Once registered, additional information on the texts, films, and call-in information will be provided.

*"Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good."*

~ Bertrand Russell

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## Education Opportunities with HMU Partners:

Great Books Chicago 2019 is now open for registration. This year's theme, "Something Wicked This Way Comes," explores the wickedness that people contemplate and perpetrate. The readings are:

~ "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor

~ "The Grand Inquisitor," a chapter from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

~ *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

~ *The Meaning of Human Existence* by Edward O. Wilson

We also have some great ideas for enriching outings for this special weekend. For more information, visit: <https://www.greatbooks.org/giving/great-books-chicago>

*Harrison Middleton is a proud supporter of the Great Books Chicago 2019 event.*

## *Despite Flaws, Liquid Society, is Umberto Eco at His Most Relatable: Review by Carter Vance*

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Though it may be an inadequate title to describe his many talents, the late Umberto Eco was one of the last of a particular kind of writer often labelled a "public intellectual." Most famous in the English-speaking world for his distinctly postmodernist novels, such as *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, the broader body of Eco's work spans six decades and a variety of forms. Ranging from intricate studies of medieval literature and symbology to children's books, and with a good percentage of it not translated out of the original Italian, Eco was nothing if not versatile. One gets a sense from both this broad range of interests and the manner in which his writing easily integrated knowledge from a variety of specialist fields into compact narratives, that Eco was a man bursting with ideas and notions, and often struggling to fit them into established forms.

At the same time, likely owing to his early experiences as a cultural editor for the Italian public broadcaster RAI, Eco was also deeply interested in how to convey complex ideas to a mass audience. Despite the variety of grand themes that his work touched upon, the technical quality of his writing remained accessible, eschewing obscure academic verbiage. Perhaps more importantly, Eco consistently aimed to place his writing in outlets which would be read by those outside of academia, and connected his ideas to a common parlance of everyday life and popular culture. In this respect, one of his first pieces to receive wide acclaim, "Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno" (Phenomenology of Mike Bongiorno), which probed for meaning the antics of a popular Italian quiz show host, is something of a guidepost for his later work. *(continued on page 7)*

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## Reviews (continued):

*Chronicles of a Liquid Society*, originally published in Italy in 2016 and translated by Richard Dixon for a 2017 English release, was Eco's final publication before his death, but it is not consciously designed as any sort of summation or epitaph. Rather, it is a curated collection of short columns that Eco wrote for *L'Espresso* magazine, ranging in terms of original publication from 2000 to 2015. The columns are organized by theme, rather than chronologically, but share a broad mood of acute anxiety and fears of lost connection in an increasingly small and globalized world. Much of Eco's writing remains as deeply engaging as the day he wrote it, even if some of the hot-button appeal of his thoughts on the issues of the day is lost. His dissections of the attractiveness and fault of conspiracy theories, in particular, have only become more relevant in the time since he wrote them. Eco also shows a rare sensitivity in his discussions of the role of religion and secularity in the public square and education that may belie his reputation as a *de rigueur* European intellectual.

Parts of *Liquid Society* have aged better than others, as might be expected of a collection spanning such a period of time. The columns dealing with the "War on Terror" were mostly written in the immediate wake of 9/11 and, though perhaps brave at the time for their unwillingness to beat war drums, appear as conventional wisdom in hindsight. Others deal with specificities of Italian political life that were likely common knowledge to their original readership, but will require at least some googling for an international audience.

This book is not a sustained exploration of a particular history or set of ideas, in the way that Eco's highly-acclaimed 2010 novel *The Prague Cemetery* delved deep into modern anti-Semitism. Rather, it is best viewed as a set of missives from an ever-active and ever-curious mind, attempting to grapple with the unique features of the post-digital landscape in the same manner as it did the television era, or, indeed, the cultural artifacts of the 1300s. What makes *Liquid Society* as enjoyable and breezy a read as it is, despite the variety of occasionally heavy subject matter that Eco touches on, is the cheery curiosity he brings to the table, and the new perspectives on seemingly mundane topics he asks the reader to adopt. Though occasionally he lapses into grumblingly old man mode, these minor missteps are forgivable in light of the genuine insights elsewhere.

Harrison Middleton University is a great ideas, great works, great conversations, distance learning university that offers graduate education in the humanities with concentrations in imaginative literature, natural science, philosophy and religion, and social science. Harrison Middleton University promotes student-faculty scholarship through research, discussion, and the development of collaborative publications.