

# noted



**Zachary Lazar is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of English at Tulane.**

Originally from Phoenix, he grew up in Denver and attended Brown University. He received his MFA in creative writing from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, where he was awarded the James Michener/Copernicus Society Prize. Professor Lazar is the author of two novels, *Aaron, Approximately* (Harper, 1998) and *Sway* (Little, Brown, 2008), and a memoir, *Evening's Empire: The Story of My Father's Murder* (Little, Brown, 2009). He has previously taught at Washington University and Hofstra. This past fall was his first semester at Tulane.

I had the chance to sit down and talk with Professor Lazar. I asked him what he thought of New Orleans, and he had this to say: "I have always had a fantasy about being an expatriate

writer. Living in New Orleans is probably as close as one can get to that without actually leaving the country. It's been fascinating to live here, though I feel that it's far too early to start writing about the city because I'm still learning it."

He enjoys teaching Creative Writing courses at Tulane and tells me that he has been very impressed with the level of his students' writing. "It's literate and aware of current literary culture, which is far from common."

The conversation quickly shifted from his teaching to his writing. Over Thanksgiving break I read Professor Lazar's second novel, *Sway*, and was eager to hear his perspective. *Sway* was a finalist for Barnes and Noble's Discover Great New Writers Award. It was also named A Best Book of 2008 by *L.A. Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*, among many others. The novel is an exploration of 1960's counterculture. It centers on the Rolling Stones, a member of Charles Manson's cult, and the underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger. Lazar creates an intricate web, illuminating seemingly surreal connections between these iconic figures. His language is hypnotizing; finishing the book is like waking up from a dream.

Getting to speak with Professor Lazar brought it back to reality. All the events in the book are true. He says, "The facts are so bizarre and extreme that you can't make these things up." It becomes fiction in the way he delves into the characters' inner thoughts and feelings. Professor Lazar tells me "the point was to get the reader to live through the facts." I can understand this. To read the book is to feel as if you intimately know Keith Richards or Kenneth Anger.



## An Interview with Zachary Lazar

by: Brekke McDowell

## Writers' Writer Series Sherman Alexie visits Tulane

Cont. on page 3

Barry Ahearn has been at Tulane since 1982, and he has served for the past two years as the Pierce Butler Professor, an Endowed Chair. His research interests include both twentieth century literary criticism and the papers and correspondence of twentieth century poets, including E. E. Cummings, Louis Zukofsky, and Ezra Pound—especially Pound.

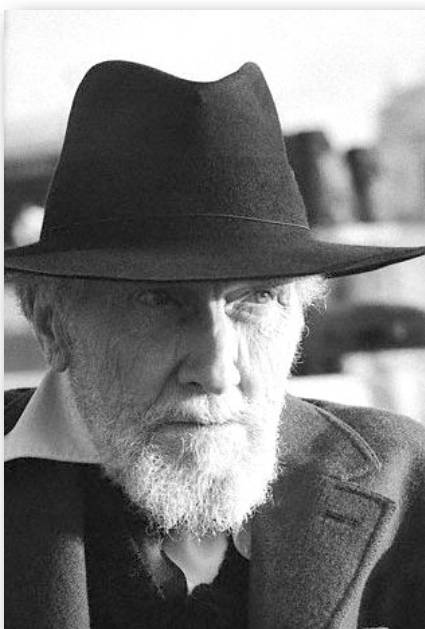
## Faculty Spotlight:

### Barry Ahearn

interview by Annie Ogburn

"Pound is at the center of everything," he tells me: "he corresponded with someone in almost every discipline. If you're studying the twentieth century, you're eventually going to run into Pound."

Pound certainly comes up again and again in our conversation. In addition to having published collections of Pound correspondences, Ahearn's latest research project explores the twentieth century critical interest in precision of language—a quality that Pound demanded of good poetry. Tentatively titled "The Imprecise Muse," Ahearn's project questions the origins of the interest in precision by literary critics, which he traces back to rhetoricians of



the late eighteenth century, but which was given a predominant role until the twentieth.

While poets criticized other writers for their ambiguity, their own work might itself be confusing or vague. Robert Frost criticized one scientist's metaphoric description of "space as something like curved" while his own poetry is full of the very word he derided, "something"! If the poets were inconsistent regarding the subject, so are the critics.

Ahearn is looking mainly at the body of criticism to understand its directions and trends. He explains the need for this type of study: "when you or I sit down to look at a poem, we are applying—either consciously or unconsciously—standards of rhetoric which have an origin. Just as it's important for doctors to look at medical histories, it is important for literary critics to look at the history of critical trends." I asked him about the future of criticism. "It will be much more multidisciplinary. Gone will be the days when a cursory understanding of sociology or anthropology, for example, will suffice. If the trends today continue, criticism will require a deep understanding of outside fields."

The expansion of resources available to critics is responsible for the demand for expertise. This is also a trend in the resources of critics interested in

biography. While the letters of writers like Frost, Cummings and Pound have been preserved, I asked him about twenty-first century correspondences. He half-joked that in the future someone will publish the collected text messages of great writers.

Of course, Ahearn's interests extend outside of this sphere as well. In charge of selecting the speaker for the Pierce Butler Chair Lecture series, he has brought dynamic speakers with a wide range of interests to Tulane. The 2011 speaker was Brian Reed, from the University of Washington, who spoke on the young poetic genre in which words from other contexts—like web pages or sports broadcasts—are manipulated and cast as poetry.

With his wide range of interests and a methodical and inclusive but easy manner of explanation, any of Professor Ahearn's future projects will be of value to the Tulane and greater literary community. ♦

The Pierce Butler Chair Lecture  
featuring  
**Prof. Brian Reed**  
of the University  
of Washington

**IN OTHER  
WORDS:**  
POETRY & THE  
ART OF REDIRECTING  
LANGUAGE

6:00 PM  
Nov 3, 2011  
200B Media Lab  
Norman Mayer  
Tulane University

## faculty in action

To see the rest of our faculty's newest books, papers,  
articles, panels, awards, and achievements,  
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Lazar is currently working on a new novel about Meyer Lansky, a Jewish-American gangster who fled to Israel to escape jail time. He tells me that a lot of research goes into writing books like *Sway* and the one he is currently working on. At the end of December, he will head to Israel to research the Israeli mafia.

Thankfully, Professor Lazar will be back at Tulane in January. Next semester he is teaching an Intro to Creative Writing course, as well as Advanced Fiction Writing. ♦

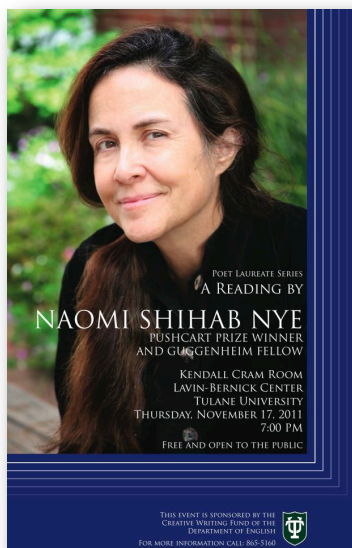
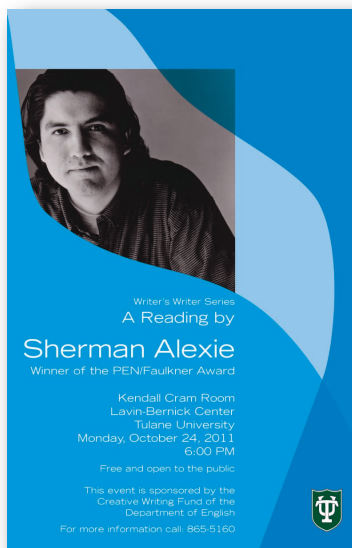
## Student Spotlight

A recipient of Tulane's Lurcy and Dean's Grants, senior English major and Honors student **Derrick Touns** is currently at work on an Honors thesis focused on editing and publishing the poetry manuscripts of his grandmother Cherylyn "Putt" Jackson Marchive. His project begins with research into the tangled editorial history of Emily Dickinson's nearly 1800 poems, all of which were left in handwritten manuscripts that continue to make editorial decisions challenging. Drawing on this research, Touns is collaborating with his grandmother to transfer into print approximately 50 poems she handwrote on notebook paper, envelopes, and shopping lists over the past 40 years.

Touns says this about his project: "It's been wonderful to show her the value of her manuscripts. She has always supported my artistic endeavors, so through my project, I am fortunate to support hers and help her realize the complexity of her own artistic expression." On a more academic note, Touns is "particularly interested in the editorial problem of representing handwriting and other manuscript features in print as well as the collaboration of editor and author."

Touns is also active in Tulane's theatre department and has had prominent roles this fall in Tulane productions of Aristophanes' *The Assembly Women* and Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*. With the support of the Dean's Grant, he spent summer 2010 in Kenya teaching phonics to preschoolers, and he is the co-leader and community outreach coordinator for Mission Honduras, a bi-annual service trip to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where he and other students work on community development and public health projects.

After graduation, Touns plans to bring together his interests in literature, literacy, international travel, and public service by teaching underserved populations through the Peace Corps or a similar organization. ♦



## events

mar

Jonathan Franzen  
Great Writers Series

Antonya Nelson  
Zale-Kimmerling  
Writer-in-Residence

Joseph Bristow  
Ferguson Lecture

## Alumni Spotlight

Alumna **Samantha Bruner** writes from Japan:

"I've been working as an elementary school English teacher at five schools in a town called Shimotsuma, in Ibaraki Prefecture. The levels I teach are from first to sixth grade. I came to Japan about a month after the earthquake, and the area was still having aftershocks once or twice a week. It was pretty unsettling at first, but after a while, they don't really bother you anymore. The students seemed like they were recovering well from the trauma of the earthquake, but I did get a lot of questions about whether New Orleans had earthquakes or nuclear reactors.

"During my summer vacation and long weekends, I've been able to travel quite a bit and see a lot of really wonderful things. I've been frequently to Tokyo, and have made trips to Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, Kamakura, Yokohama, and Nikko. Also, working in Japanese schools has given me the opportunity to absorb the culture in a way I wouldn't have been able to if I'd only come to Japan as a traveler. Being able to interact with the other teachers and the students on a daily basis allows me to see the real, everyday Japan – not just the kimonos and samurai." ♦



**Boyette Prize Winners****Fall 2011**

Carly Asher

*"The Bush Administration's Role in Detainee Torture"*

Max Seidman

*"Maintaining Austenticity"***Spring 2011**

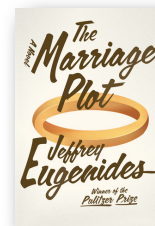
Nora Maria Fuller

*"Monsters and Metaphors"*

Andrew Jones

*"Soul Force through Food"***Winter Break Reading Suggestions by Faculty & Students**

- **Rebecca Mark:** *The Invisible Bridge* by Julie Orringer
- **Scott Oldenburg:** *The Ballad of Jamie Allan* by Tom Pickard
- **Michelle Kohler:** *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* by Robert Richardson
- **Joel Dinerstein:** *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna
- **Tom Albrecht:** *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen
- **Dan Miller (student):** *Life and Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee
- **Sophia Unterman (student):** *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffrey Eugenides

**Chair's News**

I have very little space, much good news and many people to thank, so I have to give up any pretense to literary style in favor of all-too abbreviated lists here. First, we've reached another milestone in our department's growth. Pierce Butler Professor Ed White, an exceptional early American scholar and acclaimed teacher, has accepted our offer to become the department's next Pierce Butler Chair. I want to thank Professor Barry Ahearn (see interview above) for his outstanding service during his tenure as the Pierce Butler Professor, including chairing the committee to find our permanent chair.

We are extremely fortunate to welcome Dr. Jennie Lightweis-Goff, who won the highly competitive two-year Mellon Fellowship, and our two new visiting assistant professors, Dr. Michael Rubenstein and Dr. Ashley Bender. This December, we have to say goodbye to senior postdoctoral fellow Cat Gubernatis Dannon, who will take up a full-time position at Alabama State University: congratulations, Cat! Dr. Richard Godden will arrive in January as our newest postdoctoral fellow. Ashlie Sponenberg will become interim Director of Freshman Writing while T.R. Johnson is on leave this spring.

Peter Cooley won a prestigious ATLAS award that gives him funding to research and write a new book of poetry this year. Even though he has been on leave, Peter has been generous with his time to the department: he and Zach Lazar (see interview above) have been marvelous hosts this fall to our literary guests,

Sherman Alexie and Naomi Nye.

Rebecca Mark continues her dedicated and successful work with the POSSE group in its second year, and she has also shepherded the new peer-reviewed online journal, *Second Line: an undergraduate journal of literary conversation*, into its second issue, due out in spring. We also welcomed Adam McKeown and Margit Longbrake's daughter Jane Ray in September. There are too many other achievements to list here, so please take a moment to read about the accomplishments of the postdoctoral fellows and the faculty.

Please note our alumni and student spotlights: Derrick Touns and Samantha Bruner are involved in fascinating adventures. And enjoy the essays of our freshman Boyette Prize winners. As you can see, we are fortunate to have talented undergraduates interviewing and writing for the newsletter. Thanks to Brekke McDowell and Annie Ogburn, and thanks to Michelle Kohler for supervising and coordinating the newsletter as well as Barb Ryan and Daniel Sanchez for editorial and production support.

We are especially grateful to those of you who have sent your news and who have become friends of the department. Your support makes it possible for us to fund students to conferences as well as to support undergraduate and graduate research. ♦

Here's wishing you all a joyous holiday season.

Molly Anne Rothenberg, Chair

Click here to see the latest awards and achievements of our post-doctoral fellows



Click here to see what our alumni are doing

Were you a Tulane English Major? Send us your news!

**Our thanks to:**

Brekke McDowell - Lazar Interview  
Annie Ogburn - Ahearn Interview  
Daniel Sanchez - Design/Production  
Michelle Kohler - Publications  
Coordinator  
Michelle Kohler - Faculty Advisor  
Barbara Ryan - Distribution

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