Correspondence

Dear students,

Wherever you find yourselves, scattered as you are now across the country and the globe, in different time zones and in different states of mind, I hope you and your loved ones are healthy and finding ways large and small to make the best of this difficult situation. You are—we all are—experiencing and living through the current pandemic differently. Some of you may be sitting at home feeling bored or stir-crazy, eager to get back to some semblance of normalcy and a familiar routine; others of you may be dealing with personal situations that make your days even more difficult, uncertain, and stressful than what others are experiencing. We may be apart now, but we are still very much a part of this together.

I’m writing on behalf of all your English professors when I say we miss your voices and faces in the classroom, we miss our conversations with you during office hours, in the narrow hallways of Mears between classes, hellos on and off campus, the usual suspects at the usual spots, like Burling, Spencer Grill, Saint’s Rest, HSSC atrium, and oh dear, even the Bear, and we miss gathering together at department and campus events like Writers@Grinnell—these present absences are deeply felt by us. We wish you the very best in finding courage, solace, and energy as you make your way through—and ultimately out of—these challenging days. And we are still here for you, albeit from a safe distance and virtually so.

To help us stay connected in this new reality and beyond it, Grinnell English is launching what you are now reading, Annotations, a department newsletter from professors for students. The idea for this publication germinated in that chaotic week, which feels long ago now, when
the College took extraordinary and necessary measures in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the English department gathered together and continued to discuss, amidst the rapidly-changing situation, how best to say goodbye, how to honor and celebrate our graduating seniors especially, and how to preserve community in a safe and inclusive way. Eventually, after some quality quarantine time, an old-fashioned newsletter presented itself as an appropriate response—a humble newsletter to appear semi-regularly, weekly, monthly, or semesterly, depending on the time, circumstance, and personnel, to simply share news and notes on all things literary.

At first, I thought we’d call it “A Newsletter of the Plague Semester,” with a nod to Daniel Defoe’s fictional plague diary from 1722, but the vision of resurfacing again in community spaces beyond the virtual called for a different name, a different spirit. Hence, “Annotations.” It’s what we do, after all. When we annotate, we take note, comment and clarify, adding our voices to the voices of others, and reading between and behind the lines, we become part of an intellectual and creative community, an ongoing conversation. So, let this be that kind of space: to create community and compassion; to connect Grinnell English majors past, present, and future; to converse about why literature matters. For this inaugural issue, we are keeping it simple, starting with the basics, by which I mean the essentials: a poem, keywords, quotations, and reading recommendations. We are also, in our own way, trying to record our responses to the present and ongoing pandemic.

Meanwhile, all around us, spring is doing its thing. “By the road to the contagious hospital,” as the good doctor and poet William Carlos Williams writes in Spring and All, with the Great War barely in the background and the fatal flu pandemic still in the foreground, “Lifeless in appearance, sluggish / dazed spring approaches—” (1923). Late March now, it’s the beginning of spring in Iowa, which means green is becoming more general, four seasons might pass in one week, glazed buds appearing out of nowhere will one morning erupt into a riot of color, and the trees are still leafless, but not loveless. I live in Iowa City, and on breaks from my daily quarantine, I’m grateful I can go on long, socially distant walks. I’m trying something different: a new day, a new direction. Often, I end up walking next to the river, its quicksilver and moody surface reminding me that the only constant is change. The birds streaming up above my head gather and travel in groups, making a ruckus quite social. Each day I give thanks to the solitary songsters singing atop distant trees and on electrical lines, turning new variations on ancient tunes. I am closely monitoring the crocuses, daffodils, and tulip sprouts. I have a magnolia I need to check in on. Spring seems indifferent to our plight, maybe even a little relieved, momentarily released from our destructive plundering; or, maybe not—for these days spring has given this human some consolation, brightening company, and no small amount of inspiration to persevere, to rebegin. In the spirit of spring, let’s try to begin again.

Let’s stay in touch. Good luck with classes. Take care of yourself and others.

All my best,

Hai-Dang Phan
**A Poem**

As department chair, I used to send newsletter-like e-mails with poems attached to them. At some point I stopped; let me re-start that practice here. This one is by the late great W.S. Merwin, a beloved poet who I discovered on my own reconnaissance in college. Like an old friend I’ve lost contact with, I’ve been returning to his poems with frequency recently. This one appears in *The Essential W.S. Merwin* (Copper Canyon, 2017), which I share below with gratitude. –H-DP

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**LIVING WITH THE NEWS**

Can I get used to it day after day  
a little at a time while the tide keeps  
coming in faster the waves get bigger  
building on each other breaking records  
this is not the world that I remember  
then comes the day when I open the box  
that I remember packing with such care  
and there is the face that I had known well  
in little pieces staring up at me  
it is not mentioned on the front pages  
but somewhere back near the real estate  
among the things that happen every day  
to someone who now happens to be me  
and what can I do and who can tell me  
then there is what the doctor comes to say  
endless patience will never be enough  
our only hope is to be the daylight

—W. S. MERWIN

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Shelf Life
What your professors are reading…

I hope this message finds you and your loved ones well. I recently began a 2010 historical novel called *al-Nabati (The Nabataeans)* by the scholar Youssef Ziedan. It centers on a Coptic woman, Mariyyah, who desires/dreads marriage. She's 18 and everyone's freaking out. Thirty pages in and she's about to wed an Arab; he and his retinue visit her as I write. All this takes place on the eve of Islam.

I'm also reading *Ugly Feelings* by Sianne Ngai and *Black Metaphors* by Cord Whitaker. Two fitting studies that speak to the times.

—SHERIF ABDELKARIM

I'm sort of between books right now. But I'm excited to start Emily St. John Mandel's new novel, *The Glass Hotel*. I loved (and frequently teach) *Station Eleven* (her previous novel about a traveling group of Shakespearean actors in a world changed forever by a global flu pandemic). This new novel seeks to unravel the mystery of a woman who has disappeared in the wake of a global Ponzi scheme. I find St. John Mandel's novels to be great escapes, even if flu viruses and financial crimes are very much the stuff of real world plagues.

—JOHN GARRISON

I have started about 25 books and have had trouble concentrating on any one of them. At the moment I'm making the most progress on Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series (a young-adult series from the 60s/70s). I'm also finding some traction with *Loving Day* by Mat Johnson (a satirical novel about being biracial in America). Other than that, I'm finding mysteries to be most helpful: the forward momentum of the plots keeps me focused and the sense that there is a solution to every problem is a balm right now. (For the same reason, I'm finding jigsaw puzzles helpful: Look! Things are fitting into place! Confusion is resolving into order!)

—CAROLYN JACOBSON

I finished reading Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* a couple of weeks ago and it seems really pertinent to understanding that the natural world is so much larger than human beings whose impulse has always been to destroy it. Trees rule the novel and are a world unto themselves complete with the ability to communicate. Here’s a passage about the botanist Pat Westerford’s dedication to a particular tree:

“Patricia gives herself to Douglas-firs. Arrow-straight, untapering, soaring up a hundred feet before the first branch. They’re an ecosystem unto themselves, hosting more than a thousand species of invertebrates. Framer of cities, king of industrial trees, the tree
without which America would have been a very different proposition. Her favorite
individuals stand scattered near the station. She can find them by headlamp. The largest of
them must be six centuries old. He’s so tall, so near the upper limits imposed by gravity,
that it takes a day and a half for him to lift water from his roots to the highest of his sixty-
five million needles. And every branch smells of deliverance” (142).

Pandemic related: I’ve developed a morbid interest in learning about the late 19th century
global bubonic plague. In 1899-1903, it came to the Indian state of Punjab, especially two
districts where it wiped out the greater part of the population. My great-grandparents on my
father’s side were both killed leaving a 6 month-old infant who miraculously survived. This
was my grandfather and I’ve been wondering what it must have been like to live in the
aftermath.

For a guilty pleasure and escape, both necessary to my mental health before the day winds
down, I read detective fiction. Most recently, I’ve been reading the Shetland Island series by
Ann Cleeves.

—SHUCHI KAPILA

Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower is certainly having a moment right now. I’m actually in an
Octavia Butler book club on Facebook and they chose this for the first read; talk about
hardcore. The book is haunting and not for everyone right now because anxiety and
depression are real, but she does end the book on a hopeful note!

—MAKEBA LAVAN

I am, to a fault, a graze-reader, with too many books in slow progress at any one time. Right
now, I’m just getting to the end of Emily Wilson’s translation of The Odyssey and Octavia
Butler’s Parable of the Sower. I started the Parable before the pandemic, and I love it, but I’ve had
trouble going back to finish it when its dystopian world seems so terribly plausible. I’ll get
there soon. I’m also reading William Irvine’s A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic
Joy, which interests me both for its present-day applications—it was recommended by friends
experiencing profound losses who found it comforting—and because Stoicism was an
important influence for some of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women
writers I study. And I’m in the middle of Matthew Desmond’s Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the
American City. For class, I’m about to read Frankenstein for the zillionth time and very much
looking forward to it.

—ERIK SIMPSON

My habit is to keep a trio of books at hand—a work of fiction, one of nonfiction, and one in
Spanish, which always takes longest to finish. The current stack includes Toi Derricotte’s The
Black Notebooks, Gabriel García Marquez’ Cien Años de Soledad, and Phillip Pullman’s The Secret

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Commonwealth (second volume in The Book of Dust trilogy), soon to be followed by Kate Weinberg’s debut novel, The Truants.

—PAULA SMITH

Oddly enough, I started reading Roland Barthes Discourse on Love. Recently, conversations about social distancing, the push and pull between what would “feel celebratory” or be safe have me thinking about what connection, community, even love really mean.

—SEJAL SUTARIA

Keywords


Blackboard

“You must read, you must persevere”

—Giovanni Boccaccio, Genealogy of the Pagan Gods (1360)

“The face of London was now indeed strangely altered.”

—Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year (1722)

“Don’t you love being alive?’ asked Miranda. ‘Don’t you love weather and the colors at different times of the day, and all the sounds and noises like children screaming in the next lot, and automobile horns and little bands playing in the street and the smell of food cooking?’”

—Katherine Anne Porter, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” (1939)
“I have no idea what’s awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing.”

—Albert Camus, The Plague (1947)

“It had to be a mad dream, one that would give her the courage she would need to discard the prejudices of a class that had not always been hers but had become hers more than anyone’s. It had to teach her to think of love as a state of grace: not the means to anything but the alpha and omega, an end in itself.”


“I’ve lived through such terrible times and there are people who live through much worse. But you see them living anyway. When they’re more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they’re burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children—they live. Death usually has to take life away. I don’t know if that’s just the animal. I don’t know if it’s not braver to die, but I recognize the habit; the addiction to being alive. So we live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that’s it, that’s the best I can do. It’s so much not enough. It’s so inadequate. But still bless me anyway. I want more life.”

—Tony Kushner, Angels in America (1991)

“All that you touch You Change. All that you Change Changes you.”

—Octavia E. Butler, Parable of the Sower (1993)

“We never see other people anyway, only the monsters we make of them.”

—Colson Whitehead, Zone One (2012)

“Memories beget memories. Shen fever being a disease of remembering, the fevered are trapped indefinitely in their memories. But what is the difference between the fevered and us? Because I remember too, I remember perfectly. My memories replay, unprompted, on repeat. And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop.”

—Ling Ma, Severance (2018)

**Deadlines & Important Dates**

- **Monday, April 6, 4 p.m.:** Deadline for English Department Writing Awards.
- **Friday, April 10, 11:59 pm.:** Deadline for S/D/F grade option and course withdrawal.
- **April 13-23:** Open registration period for Fall 2020 courses.
Forthcoming

- Makeba Lavan on Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993)
- Elizabeth Dobbs on *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75)
- Letters and postcards from your professors and Grinnell English majors
- More reading recommendations and micro-reviews
- Dispatches from the virtual classroom
- Quarantine journal of an English professor, major, or alum
- Advice, tips, and wisdom

We are taking submissions!

How are you living through the current pandemic? What writers and literary works have given you comfort, clarity, and courage in this time of Coronavirus? What might you say to graduating and current English majors?

We would love to hear from you and potentially feature your response in a future newsletter. Please e-mail your submission and queries to Hai-Dang Phan at phanhai@grinnell.edu.

Grinnell College English Department

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