

FALL/WINTER 2025

GIVE ME GOOD NEWS

The Department of English Newsletter

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 2

What's up with you?

Our English faculty share their latest updates and adventures!

Patrick Chura

Patrick Chura recently had fun writing the intros to two cool books by Albert Maltz. *The Eyewitness Report* came out in October and *Man on a Road and Other Stories* will be released on Jan. 6.

Lance Svehla

Lance Svehla has had an essay accepted for an edited collection on the rhetoric of President Biden. The essay is titled "What We've Got Here is Failure to Communicate: The Rhetorical Strategy of President Joe Biden."

Jon Miller

Professor Jon Miller toured the Akron area to promote his new book, edited with David Lieberth, *Akron at 200*. With The University of Akron Press, Jon gave a dozen talks, mainly at libraries, and tabled to sell and sign the book at an additional eight events. With 27 chapters by 26 different authors (including Jon Miller, Philathia Bolton, David Giffels, and UA English alum Christi Blythin), *Akron at 200* is an anthology of essays about Akron's history published for the city's bicentennial.

Bill Thelin

Bill is looking forward to the publication of the volume, *The Post-Truth Handbook: A Practical Guide toward Addressing Disingenuous Rhetorics*, which will contain a chapter authored by him concerning whataboutisms. He will also be speaking at the 2026 conference of the Rhetoric Society of America on the panel, "Writing for the Masses," and will probably make an appearance at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition. He is also excited to be welcoming in April his fourth grandchild into his family. Before that, he will be competing in the Ohio State USBC Open Championship in Columbus. Perhaps "competing" is too strong of a word, but Bill will at least be bowling in the tournament. :)

Mary Biddinger

In the fall 2025 semester, Mary Biddinger launched her novella-in-flash, *The Girl with the Black Lipstick*. With local readings and signings at Mac's Backs, The Learned Owl, The Rhizome House, and The Matinee, Mary was excited and slightly terrified to bring this project into the world and into the hands of readers. She sends gratitude to all of the writers who teamed up to help celebrate the release, including Lindsey Maple, Hilary Plum, and Catherine Wing, along with everyone who attended the events and offered support. There's nothing quite like reading to a standing-room-only crowd, especially if it happens more than once.

This semester, Mary had new work appear in *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Whale Road Review*, *Unbroken*, and *Pithead Chapel*, which nominated one of her prose poems for a Pushcart. Look for upcoming work in issues of *Rawhead* and *Moon City Review*, as Mary also puts final touches on her latest manuscript, a prose poem collection titled *Latchkey*. Over winter break, Mary looks forward to seeing *Hamnet* in the theater and spending extensive time reading on the couch with her new kitten, Finnegan.



Alan Ambrisco

Alan Ambrisco published several poems this past summer. The first, a poem entitled "Wintering the Beaver Marsh," appeared in *The Roads at Night Looked like Our Futures: A 40 Over 40 Poetry Anthology*. Two other poems appeared in Summit Metro Parks' new journal, *Verdant Wonders*. The poems are entitled "Crooked Cuyahoga" and "The Urban Beaver Speaks," and you can access them at [Publications - Summit Metro Parks](#). Ambrisco proudly notes that his daughter Elise also has a poem called "The Heron" in the same issue.



Read any good books lately?

Check out our faculty's recommended reads!

Bill Thelin

- *The Dead Circus* by John Kaye
- *Manhattan Beach* by Jennifer Egan
- *Maggie's Grave* by David Sodergren

Lance Svehla

- *You Are Here* by David Nicholls

Mary Biddinger

- *The Paris Express* by Emma Donoghue
- *Heart the Lover* by Lily King
- *The Antidote* by Karen Russell
- *Vera, or Faith* by Gary Shteyngart
- *Whiskey Tender* by Deborah Jackson Taffa

David Giffels

Recommended holiday reads (for those who could use a good laugh):

- *The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming: A Christmas Story* by Lemony Snicket
- *Santa Needs a New Butt* by Dawn McMillan
- *Holidays on Ice* by David Sedaris

Alan Ambrisco

- *We Are for the Dark: Six Ghost Stories* by Robert Aickman and Elizabeth Jane Howard

Lisa Rhoades

- *The Names* by Florence Knapp
- *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans
- *Between Shades of Grey* by Ruta Sepetys
- *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell* by Robert Dugoni

Alumni In Print

by Jon Miller



Christi Blythin (right) at a book signing for *Akron at 200*.

UA English alum Christi Blythin appeared at signings this fall for *Akron at 200*. She spoke about her chapter, "Akron's Servants, 1900 to 1940" at a Forgotten History Forum hosted by the Akron Bicentennial Commission at the Main branch of the Akron-Summit County Public Library on July 14, 2025. The panel discussion was recorded, edited, and broadcast by PBS Western Reserve in August. (It can be found online by searching for "Forgotten History Forum Series PBS Western Reserve.")

In November, Christi was one of about a dozen contributors who appeared at a Sunday book signing at the Summit Metro Parks' Nature Realm. Her chapter is part of a book that she is writing about the history of domestic service in Akron, to be published by The University of Akron Press.



CALLING ALL ALUMNI & GRADUATING SENIORS!

The UA English Department has created an alumni database to stay more engaged with our graduates, new and old. We'd love it if you provided updated contact information, including a (non-UA) email and a phone number. That way we can send you digital editions of future newsletters so you can hear what's happening with us and your fellow alumni. You'll also get invitations to readings and other special events on campus and in the community. You can update your info on the English Department's homepage (<https://www.uakron.edu/english/>) or simply use the QR code.

We look forward to hearing from you!



Alumni Spotlight

Katherine Christie, BA, 2018, MFA, 2025

Interview by Alan Ambrisico



If you've been around the English Department at all in recent years, you likely know Kate Christie. A fixture in the English Department's front office since being hired as Administrative Assistant in January 2021, Kate Christie (née Tasseff) is the eldest of six siblings, and she grew up in Massillon, OH, where her parents still live. When Kate enrolled in undergraduate classes at The University of Akron in Spring 2015, she followed in the footsteps of her mother, who was an English major at UA as well. After being homeschooled for grades K-12, Kate relished the intellectual communities she found in her English and French classes, and above all she loved her undergraduate writing workshops in fiction, creative non-fiction, and scriptwriting. In these workshops, she found peers who, like her, loved to write, and she joined with them in writing groups outside the classroom walls, too. When she graduated in Fall 2018, she did so with a BA in English and a minor in French.

Kate joined the English Department staff in 2021, and right away she began taking graduate-level classes part-time, officially enrolling in the NEOMFA program in Fall 2022. While balancing a full-time job and graduate coursework can be a difficult challenge, Kate excelled at both. Our office has never run more smoothly, and the whole department owes her a debt for her work ethic, her proficiency, and her unflappably kind and welcoming demeanor. She's often the first voice or face that greets our students, and our department is a friendlier place because she's part of it.

In August 2023, Kate married her husband Brock, and the two live in Macedonia. Well into her NEOMFA coursework by then, Kate credits her graduate courses with helping her develop the kind of discipline needed by writers who write purposefully and consistently, day after day. And she is disciplined. She graduates this December with her MFA in Creative Writing. Her thesis, already defended successfully, is a memoir entitled *Not Your Mother's Book*, and it's about growing up homeschooled in a Christian conservative subculture.

When asked what she values most from her time in our programs, Kate says she found herself in her English classes, which changed the trajectory of her life, first as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student. She's quick to point out that she'll "miss the safe place" she found herself in as a student in our hallways and a voice in our classes. She's grateful, too, for her time on the English Department staff, calling it a "rare gift" and "unique insight" to see the Department's inner workings. She's made real friends here, and we're honored to get to know her so well and in so many different capacities.

You might notice the past (or nearly so) tense here, as Kate is leaving her position when she graduates at the end of the Fall 2025 semester. She'll be missed, and not just because she's become a vital force in our department as a colleague and a student. She'll be missed because we've come to rely on her as a good-natured presence and a friend. As bookish types, we often lose ourselves in words and stories; Kate has helped remind us that there are good people behind both.

What's next for Kate? She'll start by spending some time with her memoir and shopping around for a publisher. Then she'll start looking for a job in editing or publishing, something that combines her love of words with her keen eye for detail. Good luck, and thanks for everything you've done for us, Kate. We won't say goodbye because we're hoping you keep in touch!



Word reSEARCH for Rekindling Joy

with Dr. Hillary Nunn and
Professor Lisa Rhoades



In the spring, we had the pleasure of attending a workshop offered by ITLA. Renowned author, educator, and public speaker Dr. James Lang led faculty and staff through a workshop centered on rekindling joy in the classroom. With an emphasis on his latest book, *Distracted*, Dr. Lang invited us to look closely at our ever-changing classrooms and students, challenging us to embrace new strategies for engaged teaching and learning.

This invigorating workshop was followed by a small group meeting hosted by Jenny Hebert, Director of ITLA, where we discussed the workshop, Lang's book(s), and our takeaways. We were then charged with the task of applying at least one idea to a class in the fall. We opted to work together (what isn't more fun with a partner, after all!) to design an assignment based on one of Dr. Lang's initiatives. We created a short video detailing our plans and put them into action in our fall classes. Students in Dr. Nunn's ENGL 300, Critical Reading and Writing, and Professor Rhoades's ENGL 315, Shakespeare's Early Plays, were the lucky guinea pigs for our project.

The assignment we titled "Word reSEARCH" asks students to identify unfamiliar, interesting words from the assigned text. They are then directed to the OED where they trace the etymology of the word and relate this in writing. They then consider the context of the word as it appears in the text and discuss their understanding of the passage based on their findings. Initially, our plan included a shared document where students from both classes could see the findings of others. We are still working to add this piece to the project, but the individual assignments have yielded great results.

Dr. Nunn's students used the assignment to enhance their understanding of Mark Haddon's novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. English Major Elly Robinson, when asked about her experience said, "Using the OED was fun, fast, and educational. I didn't know that a word like *caravan* could have so many definitions while seeming to carry the same constant theme of travel. I had a vague idea of what a caravan was, but I wanted an exact definition and how it is used today, so I looked it up in the OED. Overall, it was an interesting experience."

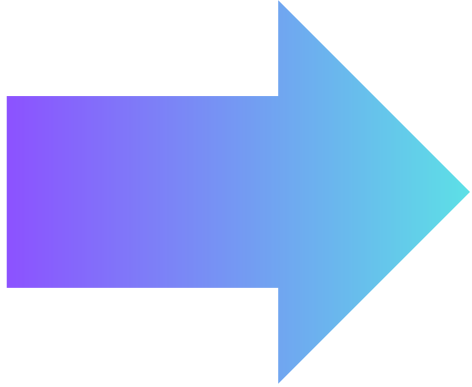
Researching Shakespeare's language brought about different challenges and rewards. Students in Professor Rhoades's Early Plays class were asked to complete an assignment for every play read. English Major Natalie Grubaugh said, "As someone who has always struggled with Shakespeare because of the somewhat difficult language, being given a chance to research and learn the true meaning and context of some words changed a lot for me while reading. This assignment has enhanced my understanding of Shakespeare's plays and language in general by providing me with not only the definition of words I didn't know from his plays, but also the origins of them and other examples of them being used in Shakespeare's time; that way I could get a real understanding of its usage in everyone's vocabulary during that era. It gave me much more than just a generic Google search answer that could be forgotten easily, and that was super helpful."



Natalie Grubaugh with her Shakespeare Anthology.

When asked about her favorite or most memorable word, Natalie replied, "I would say my favorite/most interesting word so far would be *choler* from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, because it had sort of a layered meaning that changed how I viewed Act 4, Scene 1. I no longer saw it as just an ordinary word that I didn't know. Instead, I learned it was key in Petruchio's language manipulation when attempting to control Kate. His usage of it was to make it sound like refusing her food is a medical necessity, when in reality it is part of his 'taming' strategy. My new interpretation of the scene saw Petruchio twisting scientific language to justify his behavior, while also poking fun at both his and Kate's hot tempers, something I never would've understood without this assignment."

While students don't always share their professors' geeky enthusiasm for new assignments and ways of learning, we think it is safe to say that this one is a keeper.



NOW THAT'S A GOOD

STORY!

Featuring Jim Wallace

So, we all remember those horrifying dreams we had as students where we were late for a final exam in a class we hadn't been to all semester or that we discovered we'd been enrolled in a course that we didn't know we were enrolled in and now, we're failing. Panic doesn't begin to describe our reaction, and those dreams didn't end once you weren't a student, at least not right away.

Fortunately, we outgrow that anxiety, right? Well, maybe...

This morning, a text arrived from Peggy Richards (2x UA graduate in English, and 25-year veteran in the composition program; she retired in 2013 and just passed a milestone birthday in September [decorum dictates I not reveal which milestone, but it was a big one; boy, was it a big one, the kind where you can't have an ice cream cake because the heat from the candles would melt it--yeah, that one]). Here's what she had to say:

"I had my Shakespeare-dream last night, again: I needed to finish a ten-page paper for Dr. Pierson's class by 10:00 am today, and I hadn't started it yet! I hadn't even read the play.

"On top of that, the Part-time Newsletter was due to be posted online today, but, for some reason, I needed to get the Provost to approve it first? I didn't even know who the Provost was! Sigh."

Okay, so maybe we don't outgrow that anxiety after all?

Enjoy your break.



***Assistant Chair Lisa Rhoades**

Hello friends,

I am fairly confident that I blinked twice and this semester was over. It has been a fantastic few months with loads of activity in the English Department. We welcomed twenty-three freshmen to the major and look forward to continued growth in the program. We say goodbye to graduating seniors, Rachel Ickes and Will Newenhisen, who will walk the stage in December. We wish them all the best as they close one chapter and begin the next.

We have again enjoyed puzzling in the front office this semester. After completing a fun collage of Michael Scott from *The Office*, we shamefully DNFd another *Office*-themed puzzle (we simply could not handle the monochromatic brown that lined the bottom quarter of the image). When Dr. Biddinger showed up with a shiny, colorful, book-themed jigsaw, we couldn't resist. It is taking shape beautifully and brings us great joy as we all look for those distractions and breaks we need from studying and working. Do stop by and place a piece or two.

As you head into break, make sure you have registered for Spring classes. We have some great offerings and you don't want to miss out on a class because you procrastinated (as if we English folks ever procrastinate). If you have any questions or want to review your DPR, please email me or stop by my office.

Enjoy the break. Read, relax, and recharge!

Kindly,

Lisa

Letters

FROM THE CHAIR

Dear English Department Colleagues, Students, and Friends,



I hope the semester is winding down as gently as possible, and a relaxing winter break is on the horizon. I was concerned that this fall was not going to be a good one for colorful leaves, considering that we had such a dry spell, but campus did not let us down. Not only did we witness a vibrant turning of leaves this semester, but Olin Hall early birds were also treated to a glorious rainbow in the distance in late October, as you will see displayed here from my office window.

A highlight of the semester was tabling for the NEOMFA program at this year's Literary Cleveland Inkubator conference and at the Lit Youngstown Fall Festival. It's always a joy to spread the word about our program and all that it has to offer, and I had the chance to speak with many community members, alums, and writers visiting from other parts of the Midwest. I often encounter

conference attendees who have no idea that an MFA creative writing program exists in our region, and I encourage our department community to keep spreading the word about our outstanding English programs.

Finally, as we look ahead to spring 2026, it's bittersweet thinking of our department without the wonderful Kate Christie, who will be wrapping up her work in the English Department in December. Please join me in thanking Kate for all that she has done for our department. In my four years as chair, Kate has been a bright, steadfast presence in our daily operations, and I have also appreciated being her professor and thesis reader in the NEOMFA program. If you haven't already done so, please pass along your congratulations to Kate on her upcoming graduation and next step in her career.

With very best wishes for the holiday season and new year ahead,

Sincerely,

Mary B.



DON'T FORGET

The spring semester kicks off
Monday, January 12th!



thanks for reading

SEE YOU NEXT TIME!



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