



College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English
4400 University Drive, MSN 3E4
Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-1160

George Mason University’s Creative Writing Program Launches New Center Devoted to Literary Presentation and Innovation

Watershed Lit Also Prepares Students for Diverse Careers

FAIRFAX, VA—Mason Creative Writing announces the creation of Watershed Lit: Center for Literary Engagement and Publishing Practice. The new center represents a commitment to the dynamic ways that literature connects people and to students’ professional development in a rapidly changing world.

“As an arts program, students come to Mason to push their craft and study with our excellent faculty,” said Gregg Wilhelm, Director of Mason Creative Writing. “But if students graduate from the program without being more thoroughly prepared for the job market, we think that’s a disservice. The many ways students can get involved with Watershed Lit make for unique experiential learning, resume building opportunities.”

Through the center, students can explore traditional publishing, digital publishing, literary arts festival management, how to present literature from international perspectives, the inner workings of nonprofit arts administration, marketing and social media for the arts, the evolving role of literary journals, and teaching creative writing to younger audiences.

Watershed Lit harnesses synergies from initiatives that have flowed from Mason Creative Writing since the establishment of its MFA program in 1980: Fall for the Book, a nationally prominent literary festival; Stillhouse Press, a literary imprint and “teaching press”; Cheuse Center for International Writers, which brings writers from around the globe to campus and supports students’ international research; *Poetry Daily*, an online anthology of contemporary poetry; the Northern Virginia Writing Project and its Writers in the Schools program; and two highly regarded literary journals, *So to Speak* and *phoebe*, which actually predates the MFA program. Each entity maintains its own focused mission, governance structure, and budget, but will benefit individually and collectively through more strategic collaboration.

The center’s name emerged from an engaged discussion with leadership and Mason creative writing students who kept returning to the importance of place and a connection to geography. The landscape in Northern Virginia is shaped by watersheds that direct water to various rivers and streams. A watershed also marks a pivotal event or moment. Watershed Lit reflects both senses of the word, as well as a sense of Mason’s creative writing community being on the forefront of trends in presenting and disseminating literature.

“The academic side of Mason Creative Writing and the professional development side of Watershed Lit will provide our students with truly transformational experiences,” Wilhelm said.

“Being at the helm of a 50-year-old journal feels momentous,” said Melissa Wade, a third-year MFA fiction student and editor-in-chief of *phoebe*, which was launched in 1971. “It’s amazing the careers we’ve been a small part of and the community we’ve built.”

Added BFA graduate Julija Pivo (’20): “My education at the program prepared me for the conversations and work I now do at Fall for the Book. It gave me confidence to pursue my ambitions and to trust myself.” Pivo has been part of the team transforming the 22-year-old book festival from a four-day in-person event to a semester-long virtual celebration of literature.

“As one of the first graduate professional assistants to come on staff at Stillhouse Press, I have had a hands-on opportunity to learn every aspect of small press publishing,” said Rebecca Burke, a third-year MFA fiction student who serves as submissions manager. “I have learned how to critically evaluate manuscripts for publication, how to develop manuscripts through editing to their fullest potential, how to copyedit, write cover copy, and develop a multifaceted marketing campaign to sell our finished products.” Burke is also the fiction editor for *So to Speak*, founded in 1993 as a space for intersectional feminist writing and art that advocates for the perspectives of marginalized individuals.

Other graduate professional assistants are assigned to *Poetry Daily* and the Cheuse Center, and Wilhelm foresees future students being assigned to Watershed Lit itself.

Chartered by George Mason University’s College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and residing within the English Department, Watershed Lit represents one of the university’s more public-facing centers.

“Watershed Lit will provide an overarching support structure for the Mason creative writing community’s many and varied public engagement initiatives,” said Dr. Ann Ardis, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. “It will be a hub of opportunity for Mason’s writers—both undergraduate and graduate—to explore the scholarship, the craft, and the business of the literary world. The establishment of this new center is an exciting new development in Mason’s distinguished history of accomplishments in this arena.”

“Watershed Lit provides a distinct opportunity for literary innovation,” said Dr. Debra Lattanzi Shutika, Chair of the English Department. “It will provide outstanding professional opportunities for students, but Watershed’s work also represents a major public humanities project, featuring prominent literary figures and events for the D.C. region.”

Watershed Lit’s leadership team consists of representatives of the English Department and the partner enterprises: Dr. Lattanzi Shutika, who will serve as the center’s inaugural director; Gregg Wilhelm, Director, Mason Creative Writing; Art Taylor, Assistant Director, Mason Creative Writing; Holly Mason, Graduate Admissions Coordinator; Jay Patel, Graduate Academic Coordinator; Mary Baldwin, Grants and Programs Coordinator; Kara Oakleaf, Director, Fall for the Book; Suzy Rigdon, Manager, Fall for the Book; Kate Lewis, Marketing Director, Fall for the Book; Scott Berg, Publisher, Stillhouse Press; Matt Davis, Director, Cheuse Center for International Writers; Sally Keith and Peter Streckfus, Co-Editorial Directors, *Poetry Daily*; Leslie Goetsch, Director, Northern Virginia Writing Project; and students representing the literary journals, currently third-year MFA students Melissa Wade, Editor-in-Chief, *phoebe*, and Kyra Kondis, Editor-in-Chief, *So to Speak*.

“Watershed Lit will distinguish Mason Creative Writing from all other programs, on both the graduate and undergraduate level,” said Wilhelm. “Artists will want to join this community to improve their writing, to study with highly accomplished professors, and to be part of this unique scene.”

The center will be located in Horizon Hall on the Fairfax campus. The search for an associate director who will serve as a development specialist is underway.

A temporary website has launched at watershedlit.gmu.edu.

Contacts:

Debra Lattanzi Shutika
Chair of the English Department
dshutika@gmu.edu

Gregg Wilhelm
Director, Mason Creative Writing
gwilhelm@gmu.edu