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The ultimate collaboration

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The ultimate collaboration

World-class researchers come in pa

When Philip Nel and Karin Westman married in 1997, they created a fusion of their respective fields — his in children’s literature, hers in 20th century and contemporary British literature. It was also in 1997 that British author J.K. Rowling did the same thing, but in a much bigger way. It was called Harry Potter.

The couple pored over the books together, ordering the U.K versions off the Internet, because they were not available yet in the United States.

“I read the first book to us. We read them all aloud,” said Nel, professor of English and director of the children’s literature graduate program. “It’s fun: you get to do accents.”

“And Phil is pretty good at doing the accents,” added Westman, associate professor and head of the department of English.

They are Kansas State University’s own Harry Potter experts and have been since Nel created one of the most in-demand classes on campus, “Harry Potter’s Library: J.K. Rowling, Texts and Contexts” in 2002. His book, “J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Novels: A Reader’s Guide,” was published in 2001.

As the class and series grew, Westman also began teaching it, as did Naomi Wood, another associate professor of English. The course has become a collaborative effort and is responsible for drawing a diverse group of students to the university’s English department, regarded as one of the top departments in the nation for children’s literature.

“Both the fans and the students who haven’t had much experience with Harry Potter leave with an increased appreciation for the complexity of the series,” Westman said. “And the fans who know the books well are able to hear other perspectives because the class attracts students from across the university. The conversations we have are fun and interesting because of those different points of view.”

The class delves far beyond the compelling tale of a boy wizard and his loyal companions as they prepare to fight the ultimate battle between good and evil. Nel and Westman examine influences on Rowling’s series, analyze its cultural subtexts, and study the rabid, worldwide “fan-demonium” that has exploded since Harry Potter first appeared on the scene.

Nothing is childish about the way the pair and their students care about Harry Potter. The series’ power lies in its ability to captivate audiences of all ages.

“Books that become classics are those that are embraced by adults as well as children,” Nel said. “Harry Potter is a classic because it’s a fantasy, but it’s also very steeped in realism, and it’s a mystery. It alters the genre, and not that this combination hasn’t been done before, but Rowling was able to do that in a way that felt new and changed the game.”

Westman is putting the finishing touches on her book, “J.K. Rowling’s Library: Harry Potter in Context,” which examines Rowling’s favorite authors and influences, from Jane Austen to Roddy Doyle. Westman began offering an additional Harry Potter class, a graduate seminar, called “Harry Potter and Literary History” in fall 2010.

It’s important, they both agree, to consider the series as much more than children’s literature. The fact that millions of people — adults and children alike — have been swept away by Rowling’s vivid world is a testament to her storytelling ability.

“The power of literature is to create something that’s so believable,” Westman said. “Rowling herself has said that the power to imagine and sympathize with others is one of the most important qualities of human experience.”

Philip Nel and Karin Westman



on airs



Harald Prins and Bunny McBride

Harald Prins and Bunny McBride met because of Arctic Inuit, bonded over learning about Kalahari Bushmen and moved in together because of Mi'kmaq Indians. For more than 30 years, their love story has been defined by their studies in cultural anthropology.

Prins, a university distinguished professor of anthropology, and McBride, a writer and adjunct lecturer of anthropology, have found great success in their careers. But it wasn't always like that.

Rewind to 1981. McBride, living in Maine, heard about a position to conduct native rights research for an impoverished landless Mi'kmaq community near the Canadian border. She passed the news on to Prins, a Dutchman who had just completed fieldwork in the Argentine pampas. Until then, the couple had commuted great distances to see each other.

"Either she would have to move to Europe or I would have to live in North America," said Prins, who had returned to his homeland at the time. "We couldn't live in the middle of the ocean."

So they shared the position. For \$80 each per week they drove four hours to and from their 18th-century home to work part time at the Indian headquarters in an old schoolhouse. At night, they'd collapse on a foam mattress on top of a desk. But it was worth it, McBride explained, because they got to make a difference: Their research resulted in a

federal law that granted the tribe health, housing and education benefits, plus 5,000 acres of their ancestral lands.

"I only came to Maine for Bunny," Prins recalled. "It was hardly a career move. The belt tightened enormously, but that was the price we paid for our love relationship to deepen."

Because McBride came from art and journalism and Prins was a foreign scholar, they occasionally butted heads about research and writing styles but eventually came to realize that they could learn a lot from each other.

"We agreed that I would teach Harald everything I knew about writing and he would help me with anthropology," McBride said. "We've become pretty darn good at taking criticism from each other, although it's not 100 percent of the time."

While in Maine, McBride continued freelancing, frequently traveling to Africa. Picking up various teaching jobs at places such as Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, Prins realized he missed the career he had left behind in Europe — and that if he wanted to re-enter academia in a new country, he needed to focus on getting published. So he wrote nonstop, giving up most of his normal social life.

"It wasn't fun," Prins said. "There were 1,001 nights in our marriage where Bunny went to bed without me because I was plowing through."

Since 1990, when Prins accepted a position at Kansas State University, the duo has made their home nestled in the hills next to Tuttle Creek Lake.

"He moved across the ocean for me, so it was my turn to move to the Plains for him," McBride said.

They're currently working on several projects together, including constant revisions of their textbook — the most widely used one in their discipline — and various museum exhibits.

Their next book, "From Indian Island to Omaha Beach: The Story of Charles Shay, Penobscot Indian War Hero," is due out this fall. Shay, a tribesman they befriended in Maine, survived D-Day, a German POW camp, the Korean War and a stint in the Pacific where atomic bombs were tested. In 2007 he was knighted into the Legion of Honour by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the country's highest decoration for foreigners.

This book is an example of the couple finally perfecting their technique after decades of working together.

"Bunny takes the lead on some chapters, I take the lead on other chapters, and ultimately, when you read it, it's going to be hard to figure out whose voice is whose," Prins said. "We lose track over who did what, when and where because this book is a true collaboration."

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Afterwords



For **Elizabeth Dodd**, writing comes naturally — literally.

Dodd, a university distinguished professor of English and director of Kansas State University's creative writing program, examines human relationships with the natural world. This summer she co-led an interdisciplinary study-abroad trip to Brazil with Marcellus Caldas, assistant professor of geography, and Martha Smith Caldas, instructor of biology. There the students combined studies in geology, biology and creative writing to explore environmental

sustainability in the heart of one of the world's most diverse ecosystems.

"They get to use their whole minds. Creative use of language and artistic self-expression are points of emphasis, but in their essays they'll also be exploring the academic work that they do in geology and biology," Dodd said before the trip.

Since joining the Kansas State University faculty in 1989, she has proudly watched the creative writing program expand. One area in particular has really taken off: creative nonfiction.

"It's a popular genre. In our workshop, I've had graduate students from other departments alongside our own English majors and master's students," Dodd said. "Creative nonfiction is a terrific course to teach because of the breadth of interest and experience the students bring to the classroom."

Dodd spoke at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment's June conference at Indiana University in Bloomington. Her book, "In the Mind's Eye: Essays across the Animate World," won the association's Best Creative Book Award in 2009. She is also spending the summer putting the finishing touches on her next book of creative nonfiction, due out in 2012.



David Littrell's passion for music is infectious, whether talking about the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein or describing a recent performing tour of Ireland.

It is because of this passion that Littrell, university distinguished professor of music, was named the 2007 Kansas Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. And it is this passion for music that keeps him educating students of all ages.

Littrell just finished teaching four summer camps in June. Littrell is conductor of the Kansas State University orchestra and led the group on a 10-day tour of Ireland during spring break.

Earlier this year the Kansas State University Orchestra performed with the rock group Kansas on campus to the thrill of many orchestra members and their parents, Littrell said. The orchestra accompanied the band on a number of arrangements, including big hits such as "Dust in the Wind" and "Carry on Wayward Son."

"Kansas knows its stuff," Littrell said. "They are great musicians who are well-trained and fluent in the craftsmanship of the music."

Additionally, Littrell's Gold Orchestra was one of eight orchestras selected to perform for the Midwest Clinic, an international band and orchestra conference in Chicago in December 2010. The orchestra will travel to Memphis and Nashville, Tenn., in June 2012 to perform and visit music attractions in the area.