

## **Proposal to Create the Department of Literary Arts**

Brown University  
August 25, 2010

Brian Evenson, Director of Literary Arts

We request approval to convert the Program in Literary Arts to the Department of Literary Arts, effective July 2011. This action was requested by the external committee who conducted our academic program review, and was encouraged as well by the APC.

For forty years, the Brown University Program in Literary Arts has been a creative and intellectual center for the U.S. literary avant-garde. Along with only a handful of other writing programs nationwide, Brown's Program in Literary Arts provides a home for innovative writers of fiction, poetry, digital writing, and mixed media.

The Literary Arts Program has rapidly become one of the largest concentrations at Brown University, offering degrees to almost 12% of the total graduates in the Humanities in 2009. We have the equivalent of 11 ½ full-time faculty members, a teaching staff that includes 11 TAs annually, one visiting lecturer, and a variable number of replacement faculty. The Literary Arts Program habitually offers nearly 70 courses a year, apart from independent studies and thesis courses, and provides approximately 740 undergraduate enrollments each year. The undergraduate program offers a concentration in Literary Arts with potential emphases in one of four genres: fiction, poetry, screenwriting and digital writing. In addition, we offer a very competitive MFA in Literary Arts. With almost a thousand applicants last year (1/7<sup>th</sup> of the total graduate applications to any graduate program at Brown) for eleven MFA student positions, we are the most competitive graduate program in the university and one of the most competitive creative writing MFA programs in the country.

Originally a program contained within the English department, the Literary Arts program separated from English administratively and governmentally in 2005. Since then we have functioned, for all intents and purposes like a department. Changing our status from Program in Literary Arts to Department of Literary Arts will ratify and acknowledge what is already the case. It will also allow us to standardize the titles of our faculty. (Currently some of our Faculty are still officially Professors of English, while others have been hired as or promoted to being Faculty of Literary Arts.)

### **Mission**

The chief thing that makes our program unique, apart from the strength and quality of our faculty, is our focus on innovation in all its forms. We are currently recognized as the foremost program in innovative writing, and our faculty are strongly committed to innovation in our own work. In addition, however, we are committed to helping graduate and undergraduate students develop their writing along a variety of lines, ranging from the innovative to the traditional.

Our program has long been identified with experimentalism. It is one of less than a handful in the country that can credibly carry this off. Without being programmatic or ideological about it, the faculty helps to foster

opportunities for the young writers to approach literature as the great adventure of their lives. Our courses also reflect this tendency, which is directly relevant to what has made Brown a coveted center for aspiring writers. We are not just another writing program where writers basically learn how to assimilate into the glutted career track, but a site for innovative, sustainable literary initiatives.

## Faculty

Our faculty currently consists of the following individuals:

### • Fiction

Ama Ata Aidoo, visiting professor (joint with Africana Studies, teaches one class per year for us)  
Robert Coover, visiting professor (also Digital Writing)  
Brian Evenson, full professor (also director)  
Thalia Field, associate professor (also Poetry)  
Renee Gladman, assistant professor (also Poetry)  
Joanna Howard, visiting lecturer  
George Lamming, visiting professor (joint appointment with Africana Studies, teaches one class per year for us)  
Carole Maso, half-time full professor  
Meredith Steinbach, full professor  
John Edgar Wideman, full professor (joint appointment with Africana Studies, teaches one class per year for us)

### • Poetry

Forrest Gander, full professor (25% in Comparative Literature)  
Michael Harper, full professor  
Gale Nelson, part-time lecturer (also assistant director, also multi-genre)  
Keith Waldrop, full professor (25% in Comparative Literature)  
C.D. Wright, full professor

### • Digital Writing

John Cayley, visiting professor (also Poetry)

### • Screenwriting / Dramatic Writing

Aishah Rahman, full professor

## Academic and Other Programs

We encourage our students to explore hybrid genres. There has always been a great degree of flexibility in both our graduate and undergraduate programs, and this flexibility is reflected in the kinds of honors and MFA theses that we allow our students to complete. These theses frequently cross lines between fiction and poetry, between prose and drama, between visual art and poetry, and so on.

In addition to clear tracks in poetry, fiction, and screenwriting, which probably require little or no explanation, we have several other important areas that we see as essential to our program. Many of our faculty work actively as literary translators (John Cayley, Brian Evenson, Forrest Gander, Joanna Howard, and Keith Waldrop), with several of these faculty already teaching classes on translation. We have begun informal discussions with Comparative Literature about a possible joint concentration and MA in Literary Translation.

The emergent field of electronic writing, now an integral part of the broader worldwide development of digital arts and new media studies, found its first institutional home at Brown University nearly twenty years ago. The program is run by two faculty members, Robert Coover (in a part-time teaching position) and (as of July 2007) John Cayley. In terms of academic placement, Graduates of the MFA digital writing program have been remarkably successful and are now on the faculties of such institutions as the University of California, Santa Cruz, the University of Colorado, the Art Institute of Chicago, UCLA, the Blekinge Institute of Technology in Stockholm. Strong relationships have been developed with RISD, as well as with universities across the U.S. and in London, Paris, Stockholm, Bergen, Seoul, Barcelona and others.

Screenwriting is currently one of our most popular classes, with sixty or more students applying to the undergraduate sections. We do not offer a graduate degree in screenwriting, but many of our graduates and undergraduates take advantage of these courses and they fit into our program's valuation of cross-genre initiatives.

In addition to our degree granting programs, the Literary Arts Program is the home for The International Writers Project (IWP). Designed in partnership between Brown's Program in Literary Arts and the Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies and partly funded through a grant from the William H. Donner Foundation, the IWP provides institutional, intellectual, artistic and social support to writers who face personal danger and threats to their livelihood in nations throughout the world. Deeply practical in nature and intention, the International Writers Fellowships will allow persecuted writers to establish a new environment in which to pursue their work.

### **Facilities**

Our graduate MFA program is essentially a studio arts degree. It offers a specific and rare circumstance of protected time and space for developing writers to concentrate on the particular skills their writing will demand of them over the course of their lives. Because of this and because of our long-term interest in innovation and our increasing emphasis on collaborative arts, digital arts and hybrid forms, we have a need for our MFA students to have the sort of studio space that is available to students in all the arts departments at Brown, except for Literary Arts. In this era of media convergence and the increasing integration of traditional Literary Arts practices with practices in the other arts—music, theater & performance, visual art, film and video production—such a space is increasingly essential. Our writers need a space where they have open access, where they can meet, work collaboratively, store equipment along with any 3D or installation-oriented work-in-progress, cameras and props, recording devices, etc.

### **Intellectual Connections with Other Departments**

Interdepartmental collaborations have become much more common and include disciplines such as Music, MEME (Multimedia and Electronic Music Experiments), Visual Art, Modern Culture and Media, Computer Science, German and Italian Studies, Theatre Arts and Performance Studies, and the University Libraries.