

# Wordplay

**T** ENGLISH

## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

### Urmila Seshagiri

#### MODERNISM AND THE PRESENT



“One of the great things about being a professor of Modernism during the pandemic is that you no longer have to work to convince your students that historical breaks are real,” UT English Professor **Urmila Seshagiri** said.

By “breaks,” she means pivotal moments in history after which the world is never the same as it was before. For the Modernists, including British writer Virginia Woolf, the essential historical break was the first world war and the 1918 influenza pandemic that followed it, unprecedented modern horrors that for writers of the time fueled a dramatic pivot from the literary tradition they inherited. Such a world suddenly feels more familiar to those who have lived through COVID.

“All of our students come into classrooms now having grappled with the possibility of their own death in a way most nineteen-year-olds don’t,” Seshagiri said.

Seshagiri first fell in love with Virginia Woolf when she was a student herself. As a scholar she later returned to Woolf while writing her first book, *Race and the Modernist Imagination*. Now Seshagiri is revisiting Woolf in an even

more intimate way, as she prepares and publishes new editions of three of the author’s most important works. This past October saw the release of a new edition of *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf’s third novel, introduced and annotated by Seshagiri (published by Oxford University Press). Still forthcoming are editions of Woolf’s unfinished memoir, *Sketch of the Past* (Cornell University Press) and *To the Lighthouse* (Norton), perhaps her most famous novel.

Scholarly editions such as these are laborious undertakings, requiring repeated and extensive visits to archives, which in the case of Woolf are spread across the US and England. For Seshagiri, the time and expense of the travel and onsite research necessary for her editions would have been impossible without generous funding from the English Department and the College of Arts and Sciences. In the archives, Seshagiri is able to study Woolf’s original manuscripts, some fully handwritten, others marked with the author’s own corrections, insertions, and deletions. She still feels a thrill at getting to hold in her own hands irreplaceable pieces of art once touched by her favorite author.

For Seshagiri, what makes Woolf endure is the beauty and humor of her writing, as well as Woolf’s boldness, even among other Modernists, in confronting “the fact of mortality and refusing to bow down before it,” a characteristic of newly increased relevance.

“I’ve never been more grateful to be trained in this field as I was during the pandemic. I was able to teach the literature of crisis in a time of the most extreme crisis any of us in the first world has ever lived through.”



**MISTY ANDERSON**  
Professor and Head  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

## MESSAGE FROM THE DEPARTMENT HEAD

It's been an exciting time on Rocky Top. Somehow, we managed to teach first-year composition to the largest incoming class in UT's history. Our thumbs and eyes are still tired from grading all those papers, but we did it, thanks to all the dedicated lecturers and graduate teachers who took on extra students to get UT through this push.

Scott and Jennifer Rose's timing couldn't have been better in establishing the new David Hambricht Graduate Teaching Award, which was given this fall to Madeline Crozier, a PhD candidate in medieval literature. David Hambricht was teaching as a PhD candidate in 1977 when an 18-year-old Scott walked into his first-year composition class. Neither one knew then that the class would be a life-changing experience, starting a friendship that was built on a love of literature. The student-instructor interaction is an important one. When those of us in the English department discover that you, our former students, found a class, a conversation, or a poem important over the years, it's always delightful to receive a message that begins with the words: "You probably don't remember me, but..." We do remember you, and hearing from you gives our shared histories a happy glow, even in hard times.

We have new plans afoot to help our students, including our first-ever Careers for English Majors one-credit course, now full of juniors and seniors who will benefit from the opportunity to explore careers they might not have seen as English-major territory. Starting next fall, we're also adding a director of student engagement to help with recruiting and supporting current students, as well as a director of career development to help graduating students with that crucial first job search. Both positions come with a paid student internship for a current English major, funded by your generous gifts during the Big Orange Campaign.

We continue publishing on a wide range of subjects, teaching the greats, and developing new courses, such as Law and Literature. We have new pathways to help the best prepared students move more quickly into sophomore courses. We are also proud of our new website and hope to communicate more effectively with you through it. You can find news posts on the front page, including the snapshot of recent publications we call "News and Views." Expect to see many more features coming on alumni, profiles of new professorial faculty, and stories on our wonderful lecturers, such as Erin Elizabeth Smith, CEO of Sundress Academy, and our Community Fellow, Anne Langendorfer. Thank you for supporting us in this work. Please keep in touch.

Sincerely,  
Misty G. Anderson

## OUTREACH SPOTLIGHT

# Literary Knoxville

Several years ago, as **Bill Hardwig** was wandering around Salem, Massachusetts, taking in all the tributes to Nathaniel Hawthorne, he wondered why there wasn't a similar author celebration in Knoxville. After all, Knoxville claims three authors who have received Pulitzer Prizes for fiction (James Agee, Alex Haley, and Cormac McCarthy), one of the nation's most celebrated contemporary poets (Nikki Giovanni), and British novelist and playwright Frances Hodgson Burnett, who moved to the area as a child. So, when Cormac McCarthy's childhood home in South Knoxville burned to the ground in 2009 after years of neglect, Hardwig decided to play a role in recognizing the city's rich literary history.

He started by organizing walking tours of Knoxville literary sites, leading interested community members, students, and book clubs around to local sites relevant to Knoxville's literary scene: James Agee Park in Fort Sanders, the Alex Haley sculpture in East Knoxville, sites in Fort Sanders and downtown associated with Agee's *A Death in the Family* and McCarthy's *Suttree*, and the East Knoxville neighborhood where many Giovanni poems are set.

Building on the popularity of these walks, Hardwig decided to develop a website documenting this history, and in 2017, Literary Knox ([literaryknox.com](http://literaryknox.com)) was born. Working with graphic designer Jill Knight, English graduate student John Nichols, and undergraduate student Anna V. Davis, Hardwig created a virtual walking tour on the site featuring information about the writers and quotes from their

work. In 2020, the website expanded, incorporating an interactive exploration of Swiss photojournalist Annemarie Schwarzenbach's travel writing about, and photography of, 1930s Knoxville and McCarthy's novel *Suttree*. This portion of the site arose from a joint research project between Hardwig and Professor Stefanie Ohnesorg of the UT Department of World Languages and Cultures (formerly known as Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures).

Hardwig has worked to bring Knoxville's literary past to the larger community through community talks and McCarthyFest, a two-day celebration of the work of Cormac McCarthy, which culminated in a concert based on McCarthy's writing at the historic Bijou Theater in downtown Knoxville. Hardwig has also recently appeared twice on the international podcast "Reading McCarthy" to talk about the role of McCarthy as a regional and local writer.

Hardwig truly enjoys these opportunities to connect with the larger community that surrounds and includes UT.

"I feel a special appreciation for all the archival work that went into the development of these projects when I see Knoxville residents excited by the city's literary history," Hardwig said. "While Knoxville may never develop a literary museum compound, as Salem has for Nathaniel Hawthorne, I am glad to see a continued and growing interest in writers that have connection to and an affection for the city and the greater Appalachian region."



# Chris Hall

For attorney **Christopher A. Hall**, practicing law is often a matter of character analysis.

“There’s an adversary. Someone who wants to best me. I’m looking at his or her clients, I’m trying to find out what motivates them—pressure points, areas of vulnerability they might have,” Hall said. “I don’t know how to play poker, but I make my living reading people.”

His love of reading developed when he was young. Growing up in St. Louis, he would drive with his father to the Goodwill in search of books by local legend Mark Twain. His father, who himself had little formal education, would read to him at bedtime.

“I have to credit this man, with no degree at all, but a lot of natural curiosity,” Hall said.

Curiosity is vital to Hall. “To me, just having an interest in the arts in general—and certainly literature and theater in particular—it expands my perspective on life and law practice and what clients pay me to look at. It also gives me insights into the world. The arts speak to the human condition.”

As a lawyer, Hall’s main areas of practice include business and taxation. But even in these specialties, seemingly far removed from the liberal arts, he sees critical thinking and a breadth of knowledge as what give him an edge. English classes, Hall believes, “teach you how to think” rather than “what to think.” He specifically credits his English degree with preparing him for the intensive reading and textual analysis that would become central to his legal education.

Hall himself is a UT alum. He graduated with a BA degree in English in 1979, before obtaining his Juris Doctor at Memphis State and a Master of Laws in Taxation at the University of Florida.

He still speaks passionately about his time as a Vol. He remembers the professors who encouraged and inspired him. In addition to providing him the skills that would lead to such a successful legal career, his English degree left him with a lifelong passion for writers such as the Beats and the modernists, in particular Ernest Hemingway.



Hall is an avid sports fan too. He’s devoted to UT football and basketball. He has season’s tickets for the Tennessee Smokies. He loves auto racing.

“Although it’s fun and exciting after a big win at Neyland Stadium or Thompson Boling. . . . It’s not that glow I get when I’m leaving a play in the Clarence Brown Theater,” he said. “Both entertain, but one speaks to the soul.”

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**Jamal-Jared Alexander** joined our department this year as an assistant professor in technical communications. Before arriving in Knoxville, he earned his PhD in technical communication and rhetoric at Utah State University.

Alexander’s research uses technical communication to help marginalized communities navigate disciplinary institutions in industrial and educational settings. One trajectory of this work evaluates graduate program application materials and campus support initiatives in order to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion recruitment and retention practices in higher education at predominately white institutions.

A second trajectory identifies barriers to medical care for marginalized communities and the communication strategies they employ to navigate those barriers. His 2021 co-authored article in *Technical Communications Quarterly* on this subject—“Health and Wellness as Resistance: Tactical Folk Medicine”—received the Article of the Year Award from the Association for Rhetoric of Science, Technology, and Medicine (ARSTM). In the words of the award committee, “The article’s call to ‘become accomplices’ for marginalized communities by understanding motivations behind ‘noncompliant behaviors’ is the kind of call-to-action that has the potential to spark change and growth.”

In addition to working with our graduate students, Alexander will teach undergraduate courses in technical and professional writing, document design, and global communication for science and technology.

# Careers for English Majors

After graduating from college, English majors go into a variety of interesting and satisfying careers. This spring the English department piloted a one-credit online course, *Careers for English Majors*, designed to help them navigate this transition. Developed by Senior Lecturer Daniel Wallace, this fully-online course includes the basics: putting together resumes, writing cover letters, interviewing successfully, and creating a LinkedIn profile page. But it also addresses how one translates an English degree into a range of employment opportunities.

“The skills that English teaches—understanding other people, expressing your own ideas, assimilating research, and producing writing in a timely fashion—are in demand everywhere,” Wallace said.

Drawing on his own experience developing a successful email newsletter and hosting online events, he talks about how students can build their reputations by reaching out to other people and sharing relevant ideas with an audience.

The life he wants them to envision for themselves is one where they find, create, and move between exciting careers and their own projects as employment opportunities change and emerge.

“Because there are so many new tools and platforms that handle the tech side of things for you, it’s a fascinating time to be a good writer—someone who is able to express themselves well in a personal way that makes people feel comfortable and willing to keep reading.”





## GRADUATE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

# Reading Eve

The story of Adam, Eve, and the Fall from Eden is a foundational narrative of the Abrahamic religious traditions. So central is this story to an understanding of why suffering exists in the world that John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* to justify God's hand in it. The Fall and its consequences were also of interest to medieval writers and theologians, most notably the authors of a group of popular texts from the fourteenth century referred to collectively as *The Lives of Adam and Eve*.

**Harley Campbell**, a doctoral student who specializes in medieval literature, has long been interested in the role of religion in that period's literature and culture. Her dissertation focuses on medieval retellings of the Eden narrative and the particularly human dimension these apocryphal accounts provide.

"It's quite different from what you get in the Bible," she said. "It's similar to a lot of other medieval and early Christian texts for laypeople: trying to explain the things that weren't very well explained in the original Biblical text."

One of the questions these accounts emphasize, she argues, is what it means to live in a frail, imperfect human body in the world that exists after the Fall from Eden. In the words of *The Mirror of Human Salvation*, a popular theological work from the early 1300s, "The world promises [Adam] lasting health, but introduces the body and soul to perpetual infirmity."

Positioning her dissertation in the expanding field of feminist medieval studies, Harley is particularly interested in the figure of Eve. Condemned to bear children in pain and suffering, she expresses her agony, fear, and loneliness when giving birth in the *Lives*. Harley sees a connection between this concern with women's bodies in medieval theology and contemporary issues of women's rights, such as the decree in Iran that women's heads must be covered in public.

"I'm trying to understand how medieval people use these spinoffs of the Bible to reconcile the religious view of the body with the everyday experience of living in a human body."

Harley's accomplishments and promise as a scholar have earned her one of the university's prestigious YATES Dissertation Fellowships and the Anne Marie Van Hook Travel Fellowship from the university's Marco Institute. Marco and UT's other interdisciplinary resources in medieval studies are two of the things that attracted Harley to the English doctoral program after completing her MA at the University of South Florida. The department's supportive environment is another.

"I consider myself very fortunate to be able to teach and research and learn and do all the things that we're able to do here." As she deepens her study of the Fall from Eden, in other words, Harley can't imagine a better place to do it.

## UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

# Creative Sci-Fi

If you were to ask **John Anderson** to pick two classes to complement each other in an ideal semester's schedule, here's the kind of answer you'd likely get: Comparative Vertebrate Biology and British Culture to 1660. Last spring, he took them both, pairing coursework in ecology and evolutionary biology with a literature class focused on medieval perceptions of animals. Phylogenetics on the one hand, medieval bestiaries on the other. For a student with John's unique interests, it was a fortuitous convergence.

"I was able to see just how our knowledge changes over time, from taking an English class alongside this science class," he said.

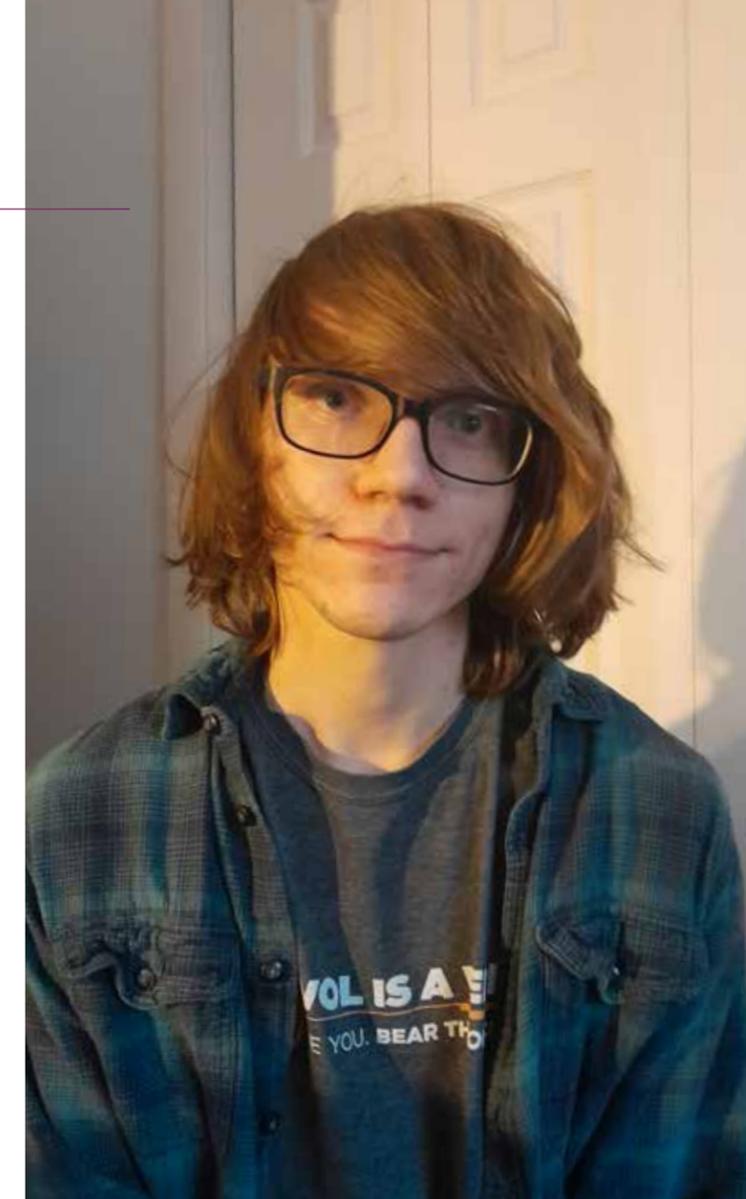
John's final project for the English class? What medieval Scandinavian fishing records might tell us about historical whale migration patterns.

"It's really useful for long-term ecological studies," said John, who would know. He's currently earning a double major in English and biology. Next year he plans to begin his master's degree in biological oceanography, on his way to a PhD in either that or astrobiology.

First, however, there's his proposal to the National Sciences Foundation. Part of his NSF project involves using machine learning to create a model for identifying biominerals, which could ultimately be useful in searching for extraterrestrial chemical life signatures.

The other part of his NSF project? Creative writing, of course. For John, it all makes perfect sense. He came to UT loving to write and analyze texts. He knew he wanted to be an English major. The harder part was narrowing down which science he would combine it with. During his freshman year he discovered Stephen Jay Gould's popular science writing about evolutionary biology. Ever since John's been hooked, both on siphonophores ("a relative of jellyfish and corals," he explains) and on Gould's ability to communicate complex scientific ideas.

Not surprisingly, John's creative writing is influenced by science fiction. Among the creative projects he's completed at UT is a haunting, atmospheric novella-length work about a researcher specializing in extraterrestrial media studies.



For the creative writing portion of his NSF proposal, John wants to share what he's learned in fiction classes at UT, applying collaborative workshop pedagogy to help other scientists make their work more accessible and more effectively communicate their research. He also hopes to inspire more STEM students to find possibilities in combining science and art.

"Having that kind of peer-review environment with people from a range of disciplines could really help people gauge whether they are explaining their field clearly, and if they're writing fiction, whether the story works, and whether readers understand what they're doing."

He sees it as a kind of creative writing club for scientists. Something John Anderson, as the saying goes, was bred in a lab to lead.

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