

Literature for Life: One UW English Major's Odyssey

By *Emily Auerbach '76*
(UW Professor of English 1984-present)

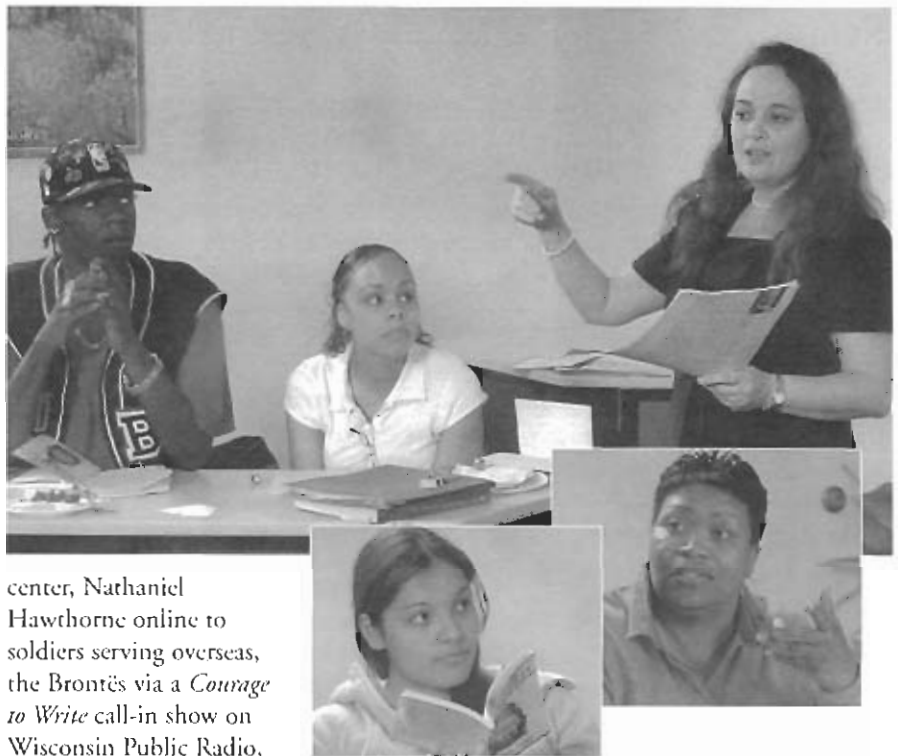
Although I've been a professor of English at the UW for twenty years now, I still find myself remembering my undergraduate days every time I open the door to Helen C. White Hall and take the unreliable elevator to the top floor. Little did I suspect as a college freshman what a colorful and rewarding job I would have today.

I started, you see, as a music major, attending UW-Madison on a four-year, tuition-free oboe scholarship and heading toward a career as a symphony performer.

Then came English 207. In my tiny dorm room in Witte Hall, I read Keats, Dickens, Browning, Dickinson, Conrad and others. I looked forward to class discussions of literature more than to ear-training exercises in music theory. Only through literature could I become the opposite sex and go to jail with Henry David Thoreau or head down the Mississippi River with Mark Twain. Soon I had added English as a second major and decided to pursue graduate work in English in Seattle. My thesis was entitled "Maestros, Dilettantes, and Philistines: The Musician in Victorian Literature."

Two children and a PhD later, I returned home to Madison and took what I thought would be a dead-end, temporary job as a professor of English in outreach and continuing studies. My mission was to extend the boundaries of the UW English Department, I was told. Like Pip in *Great Expectations*, I approached my nontraditional outreach students with a "gallon of condescension."

What I found surprised me. Whether teaching Emily Dickinson in a men's prison, Edith Wharton to women in their nineties and older at a retirement



center, Nathaniel Hawthorne online to soldiers serving overseas, the Brontës via a *Courage to Write* call-in show on Wisconsin Public Radio, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to a group of police officers, or Jane Austen in a small-town library, I discovered brilliant adults hungry to learn.

Two decades later, with a tenured joint appointment in the Departments of English (L&S) and Liberal Studies and the Arts (Continuing Studies) and a weekly educational show featuring my English Department colleagues and others on Wisconsin Public Radio (see page 7), I wake up every morning feeling profoundly lucky to have my job. My most recent outreach venture, the UW Odyssey Project, has taken me back to my reasons for becoming an English major in the first place. "Reading Shakespeare and Plato, I feel like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon and see the world with a whole new pair of eyes," writes Denise, a cook and single mother who escaped a childhood of abuse and hunger in Chicago's housing projects. Denise cried on the very first night of our class as she identified with the children in Blake's chimney sweeper poems.

In partnership with the Integrated Liberal Studies program and funded by five outside grants and private donations, the Odyssey Project brings

Emily Auerbach reaches out to nontraditional students in the UW Odyssey Project.

college-level work in the humanities free of charge to adults at or near the federal poverty level. Every Wednesday evening from September through May, more than two dozen men and women eagerly gather around tables in the south Madison community center to discuss Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson, Aristotle, Michelangelo or Toni Morrison. Twenty are African-American, six spoke Spanish or Arabic before learning English, and three are white students who will become the first in their families to go past high school.

"That's my life he's describing," notes Joe, an African-American father of five, when we read Langston Hughes's "Little Lyric," a two-line poem stating, "I wish the rent / Were heaven sent." Our discussions of literature cut to the core of what it means to be human, reminding me of why in my little dorm room in Witte Hall or around a seminar table in Helen C. White, I decided to make English my lifelong career. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams, "I cannot live without books." ■

Shakespeare course and been entranced by his lectures. As my dad was a Renaissance scholar, the material was not new, but because I so admired Professor Presson, I signed up for his Chaucer class. I never regretted it and never stopped reading Chaucer — in fact, I now offer a seminar on Chaucer myself, a pale shadow of Professor Presson's. It's a toss-up, though: I was in one of the last classes Helen White taught, and since then, John Donne has been Chaucer's equal when it comes to providing pleasure and provoking thought."

For the full letters of English Department alumni on What Literary Text Are You Gladdest You Read, see the Department Web site at www.english.wisc.edu.

We want to hear from you for our next issue! Please send us a short paragraph — even just a few sentences — in response to this question: *What aspects of your English major have been most valuable to you in your life since graduation?* Please e-mail Professor David Zimmerman at dazimmerman@wisc.edu, or address a letter to 7185 Helen C. White, 600 N. Park Street, Madison, WI 53706.

We'll post your response on our Web site or include it in our next issue, if you give us permission.

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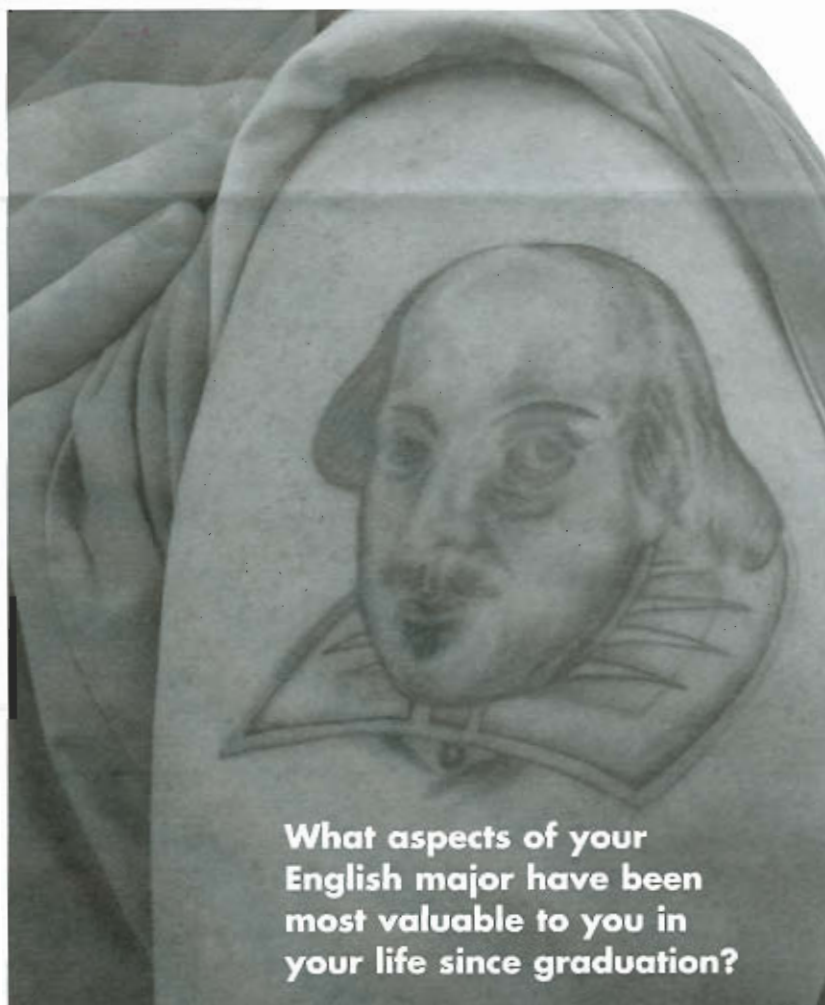
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Thank you!



What aspects of your English major have been most valuable to you in your life since graduation?

Proving that the effects of being an English major will last a lifetime, a UW student shows off his new Shakespeare tattoo.