

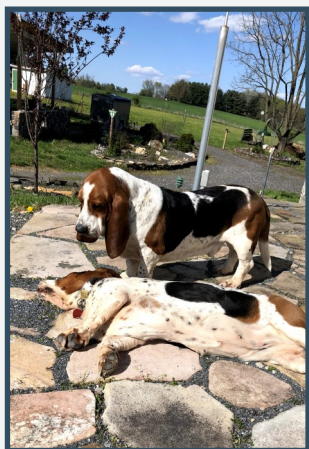
WORD!

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PRWR during a pandemic



PRWR faculty and Spring 2020 graduates met for a virtual celebration to cap off a semester disrupted by COVID-19. By row, starting in the top left: Dr. Lana Portolano, Matthew Lee, Rebecca Ritter, Dr. Sherita Roundtree, Dr. Halcyon Lawrence, Amy Myers, Professor Jeannie Vanasco, Daniel Baranowski, Professor Geoff Becker, and Director Michael Downs.

By Rebecca Ritter

No place was left unaffected by the coronavirus outbreak this spring. That includes the Professional Writing program here at Towson University, where classes were moved online after spring break in mid-March. Faculty, students, and staff had to quickly adapt to online learning, and alumni near and far saw change in their personal and professional lives. In this, our pandemic edition of *WORD!*, we check in with PRWR alumni to see how their

professional writing lives have been affected. You'll also get the chance to hear from Matthew Lee and Daniel Baranowski, two graduating PRWR students who won Graduate Student Research Awards while completing and defending their theses virtually. Finally, read about what it's like to take a writing retreat during a global pandemic.

From our PRWR family to yours, we hope you're staying safe and taking solace in words.

Checking in with PRWR Alumni

Carrie Wood ('18) began working from home in mid-March until her employer—Gemstone Publishing, a division of Diamond Comic Distributors—furloughed her as part of a general collapse of the comic book industry. Wood recovered quickly, picking up a job telewriting for a new publication out of New York City called Fastinform, which focuses on finance. Wood writes that it was “a pretty hard pivot away from comic books and video games—I like to think of it as focusing on the Bruce Waynes of the world rather than the Batmen.” She’ll continue working from home even after stay-at-

home orders are relaxed, so she’s learning new habits for home-office work, including negotiating her two “in-home supervisors,” Ganon, a white tabby, and Zelda, tortoise-colored, both pictured here. “They’ve been holding me to a high standard,” she says.



Amelia Gemeny West ('15) laughed through a live webinar about humor in children’s books hosted by Henry Winkler, known for playing the Fonz on the sitcom

Happy Days. Winkler has also written three dozen kids’ books with co-author Lin Oliver, and the pair hosted the webinar for members of the Society of Children’s Books Writers and Illustrators.

“His dogs were coming in and out and sitting on his lap,” writes West. “It was hysterical.” West also took a break from writing to help with a good cause. When she was twenty, her mother gave her a mid-19th century Japanese sewing machine as a gift, and West hauled it out to sew masks. Her work was part of a larger effort organized by the Daughters of the American Revolution; West is a member via the John Hanson Chapter of Calvert County. When

she reaches her goal for masks, she plans to revisit a creative nonfiction essay about closed doors, which she first drafted while in PRWR.

“Quarantine has added another layer to being behind a closed door,” she says. “I’m glad I waited.”



Alumni Stories (cont.)

Linda McLean ('10) works for Johns Hopkins as a communications and publications group manager, and she usually writes about subjects like rocket fuel testing. But because of COVID-19, engineers whom she works with have changed their focus. Over two weeks, they used a 3D printer and their knowledge of fluid dynamics to create a ventilator that will run for 24 hours on a single 12-volt battery.

The ventilator could help, McLean says, in dire situations when traditional ventilators can't be found. "It has been so much fun to write a positive news story over the past few weeks, in the midst of reading all the tragic news," she writes. "I'm so proud of them."



HOPKINS ENGINEERS DEVELOP A PROMISING NEW VENTILATOR

The pumpless alternative uses pressurized air lines already available in hospitals and can run for 24 hours on a single 12-volt battery

Linda McLean / © April 23

A team of Johns Hopkins engineers has developed a prototype for a pumpless ventilator that can run for 24 hours on a single 12-volt battery. Designed to operate on pressurized air and oxygen lines already available in hospitals or from simple pressurized air and gas sources in the field, the device has fewer moving parts than traditional ventilators and can be manufactured quickly and relatively inexpensively—factors especially crucial during the current COVID-19 pandemic.



Jeannie Gyr ('14) works for the Community College of Baltimore County and coordinates the Freshman Transition Program, which helps students find their way onto TU's campus through preparatory coursework at CCBC. CCBC wanted to show how its employees are getting by during the pandemic and created a video montage of their lives at home. Gyr included her children, Augustus and Veronica, in her segment to show that they help her stay on track.

Travis Madden ('19) set up two desks at home: one for his professional writing, and the other for the fiction he continues working on since he graduated from the PRWR creative writing track. Madden writes for Hunt A Killer, a Baltimore-area company that sends subscribers boxes full of clues to a mystery. "Pretty early on I found it to be important to not do Hunt A Killer work at the same spot where I do my own writing," he writes. "Otherwise it would all end up bleeding together." Madden also reports that the first box he helped write was ordered by Brie Larson, who starred as Captain Marvel in the 2019 film, "which is a completely wild thought!"



Alumni Stories (cont.)

Rachel Porto ('16) works as a contract writer/editor in public affairs for an organization concerned with defense against multiple threats, including chemical and biological ones. This spring, her job took on new importance with the organization's responses to COVID-19. Now, Porto maintains the group's COVID-19 wiki in addition to her usual work with press releases and organization-wide messaging. Here, she's pictured with her daughter



Ariana, a fourth grader with her own important work: her first-ever five-paragraph essay. This one is about Milton Hershey, the inventor of Hershey bars. "We have taken full advantage of that invention here in our office," Porto writes. "It's busy, but our office culture includes lots of cooperation and plenty of outside work time, and pants are optional."



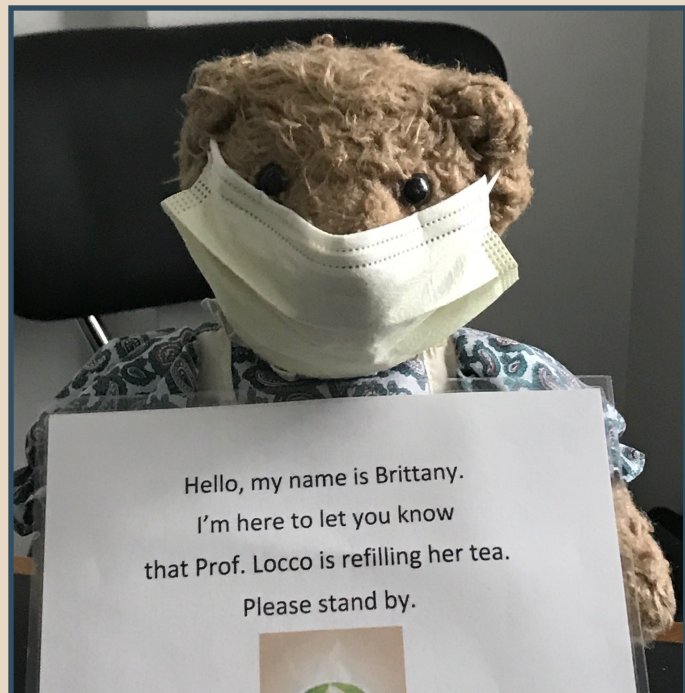
Jan-Ryder Hilton ('14) found himself continuing to go to work during the pandemic, as he is a lead sales associate for a cannabis boutique in Southern California. "People need their weed," he writes, especially during a pandemic. "My degree comes into play for sure," he adds. "Eloquence and vocabulary are important skills for this line of work."



Some PRWR alumni have played together while staying apart through Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, a social simulation video game.

PRWR avatars, from left: Julz Harvey ('19), Deanna Murphy ('18), Byron Lin ('16), Briana Rostkowski ('18), Rachel Jewell Porto ('16), and Alyssa Higham ('19).

Alumni Stories (cont.)



June Locco ('18) teaches Composition 1 for the Community College of Baltimore County. She says that Porter Square Books, one of her favorite bookstores in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has a stuffed animal called Bear who has been working from home. "When I learned this I decided to give Brittany, my very old bear, a job as my teaching assistant. Because I keep my WebEx open for several hours each day for students to drop in, I put her in charge of holding my away sign when needed. She doesn't know a lot about technology, but she did well."

Tyler New ('17) has shifted his work from an office in Aberdeen to his Baltimore home. As a technical writer for AAKSI Technology, a Department of Defense contractor, he usually doesn't work in sweatpants and a frisbee jersey. Now he does. He also explains that for this photo he needed to minimize his computer windows because, given DoD contracts, "my work can't always be public."



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PRWR Students Win Graduate Research Awards

By Clara Jeske

In the 2019–2020 academic year, PRWR students Daniel Baranowski and Matthew Lee each chose to pursue a thesis. Baranowski wrote a scholarly thesis focusing on the evolution and nuance of dystopian

literature, while Lee wrote a creative collection of short stories and flash fictions. This spring, both successfully defended their theses virtually.

Both students were awarded Graduate Student Research Awards from Towson University.

The awards are meant to honor “outstanding scholarly and creative works,” and they recognize only five theses or dissertations across all of Towson’s graduate programs. Each recipient earns \$200 for their work.

Diving deep into dystopia: A Q&A with Daniel Baranowski

By Clara Jeske

Daniel Baranowski graduated this spring from the Creative Writing track. He chose to complete a scholarly thesis, which he titled “The Literature of Thought Control: Examining the Enduring Significance of the Dystopian Genre.” He examines the evolution of literary dystopia using *1984*, *Catch-22*, and *A Brave New World* as his primary examples, and he argues that the genre is an invaluable tool for critiquing present-day societies.

The following is a Q&A with Baranowski.

What drew you to the dystopian genre?

The dystopian genre was one of the first that I fell in love with. Some of my favorite titles in it are *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Blade Runner*, and *Brave New World* for how they intertwine social critique with an already-exciting

novel. That’s only part of the reason, though, why I chose to write my thesis on the genre. During my undergraduate career, I took a course with Professor Jack Carneal—Writing the Short Story, I think it was called—where we read George Saunders’s short story “Escape from Spiderhead.” In short, the story uses a lot of the same aesthetic themes of psychopharmacology and manipulating the individual’s free will as does *A Clockwork Orange*. I asked Professor Carneal what he thought of my comparison after class one day, and he simply said: “That sounds like a thesis topic.” So, I agreed!

In your opening statement, you mentioned that young adult dystopian literature is watering down the genre. Why do you think that?

This was actually one of the very questions that my committee asked me during the defense



Baranowski graduated the PRWR program in the spring of 2020.

meeting! Basically, through my research of the well-known dystopian texts of Huxley, Orwell, and the others and by comparing them to what we today call “dystopian” fiction, at first glance there’s a huge gap. Series like *The Hunger Games* or *The Maze Runner* don’t appear to engage with that [\(continued\)](#)

Q&A with Baranowski (cont.)

same level of criticism as do *Brave New World* or *A Clockwork Orange*, but rather they use the imagery of dystopian fiction more like a vehicle to convey the common Young-Adult coming-of-age plotlines. However, by digging much deeper into those texts, a reader can find those same kinds of criticisms. Dystopia in today's YA fiction is like a double-edged sword: yes, it exposes the genre to a much wider audience at a much earlier age than it used to, but the meat of it is so buried I doubt that many of these new readers really understand the whole message of their favorite novels. When I was researching this, I found no author who explored the dystopian criticisms of YA fiction, and these are adults I'm talking about. The corrupt governments and environmental disasters of YA novels are so defamiliarized from their parallels in our real-world society—what chance does the average teenager have of comprehending the criticisms authors are making?

You mention that one of the purposes of dystopian literature is to predict possible futures given a society's current state of affairs; then, as you were writing and probably finishing this thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic broke and launched the world into an unpredictable state with a totally uncertain future. How did this reality affect your thoughts on dystopia and/or apocalypse?

Well, I'd like to start by saying I'm not sure dystopias "predict" futures.

They hyperbolize and exaggerate the author's perceptions of the anxieties and injustices of his or her society. The strength of dystopian literature is that it takes these fears to such extremes that the worlds in the novels shock the reading public's conscience into action. Otherwise, the warning goes, those fears will become realized in one form or another. At the opposite end, anti-dystopias take the publicly held idea of what a utopic society would be like, and then they show why that idea not only can't happen but *shouldn't* happen.

To answer your question about the current pandemic: it does feel like the world is in some kind of mini-dystopia because of COVID-19. Our country is effectively on lockdown, likely until the fall or even next year. I've seen videos online of other countries violently enforcing stay-at-home orders with riot squads, hazmat teams, and police dogs. On the news, I've heard a lot more blaming and controversy about the lack of progress than any meaningful discussion towards a permanent solution. If the pandemic had started even a month earlier, there'd probably be another page or three in my thesis about it! When I was writing the last section of my thesis, about the current dystopian aspects of the world and the YA issue you asked about earlier, I was always joking with my friends online about how I could just turn on the news if I needed any more material, how it's too freaky that

everything is going wrong right as I'm about to finish my thesis.

As for my thoughts on "apocalypse," I'm afraid I can only really give my unqualified opinion. To an extent, yes the pandemic is an apocalypse, ending or pausing our way of life as we know it, but I highly doubt it will be *the* apocalypse, or Armageddon, or the end of humanity. I believe that whatever is the end of the world, we won't know about it until it's too late. It'll be the one thing someone *didn't* write a dystopian novel about!

What was it like defending your thesis virtually?

Having my defense meeting take place over Webex was certainly an interesting experience, but it had its problems. For starters, one of my committee members had some tech trouble that largely kept her from participating at all. We didn't know the extent of her problems until she emailed me afterward, so she and I had a sort of second defense meeting where we went over her comments and questions about my thesis. Thankfully, we were able to have a successful meeting, but I can't keep from feeling like it would've been longer than the hour or so it took online, or at least different if it were in person. If I had the choice of my defense meeting taking place in-person or over a video call, I think would've chosen to have it in person. There's just something about the spirit of debating an academic work face to face that was lost over the internet.

“Better and faster and louder”: An excerpt from *A Discrete Set*

By Clara Jeske

Matthew Lee's thesis, *A Discrete Set*, is a collection of literary short stories and flash fictions that bring together horror, pulp fiction, pop culture and humor in original, startling ways. Inspired by bits of life Lee found in the pages of used books, the stories began as improvised sketches that he then refined and expanded. Lee says of his work, “The characters range from struggling artists to flesh-eating monsters, but they all share the same earthly concerns—love, death, and dreams.”

The following excerpt is from Lee's short story “Bloodmonster.”

Deli Meat was the best band in town. Harper sang and played guitar. Nylon on bass. Fudd, the drummer.

Harper and Nylon first met during freshman year at the all-girls Catholic prep where they wasted no time getting into trouble. During their tenure both were suspended, Harper for wearing a shirt with the slogan EAT THE RICH, Nylon for telling one of the nuns she had a face not even God could love.

Corrupted by the unholy trinity of Slayer, Bathory, and Mayhem, the girls decided to start making music around the time they turned eighteen, buying some secondhand gear from a pawnshop. After graduating they got jobs working the register at a local grease trap called Ham Basket, where the pair met Fudd, who manned the fryer. When

the two girls learned Fudd could drum, they enlisted him on the spot. Fudd suggested the name Deli Meat as a joke and it stuck.

At first they were lousy. None of them had any formal training. But they kept at it and got better and faster and louder. After a few months' practice they played their first gig at the Passage, a sports bar that smelled of burnt chicken wings dipped in days-old domestic beer. Their songs were simple and catchy and quick. Harper was stunned by the crowd's warm reception. Deli Meat ended with a cover of “Haunting the Chapel” and had the audience moshing with pure adolescent abandon. One boy, his nose bloody, leapt onto the stage and jumped off into the tangle of bodies, a canopy of hands shuttling him around the room. Word spread and soon Deli Meat started booking shows every weekend.

The three bandmates moved in together. Their home was a run-down rancher on the outskirts of Braddock near the asphalt plant where the air smelled of petroleum and the sky was often dark with smoke. Fudd's aunt was the owner, so she rented the place out to them on the cheap. The house doubled as practice space. Without neighbors the band played as loud as they wanted. After rehearsals the three friends sat on sun bleached lawn chairs in the overgrown backyard drinking Old Grand-Dad and talking shit about work. Fudd did uncanny impersonations of their boss Jerry—who sounded like a cross



Matthew Lee, a 2020 graduate of PRWR. Lee is a founding editor with the online literary journal *Ligeia*. (Photo by Emily Gude)

between Vincent Price and Daffy Duck.

One summer night after half a bottle, Nylon gave Harper a stick and poke tattoo on her thigh of a switchblade. Nylon wiped away the blood and appraised the swollen dagger. She unbuttoned her jeans and pulled them down halfway, “See? Now we match.”

This became their life. Day shifts at Ham Basket, playing music until their ears hummed, and hanging out at the Meat Locker, as Fudd called their place. They held house shows almost every weekend, cramming enough bodies into the basement to make a fire marshal wet his pants.

During one of these underground gigs Harper fell in love.

—By Matthew Lee

Retreating to Good Contrivance during COVID-19



The door to the converted barn, and the interior. Funded by anonymous donors, the Good Contrivance Farm Fellowship is awarded twice a year, offering a two-night writer's retreat to a PRWR student interested in creative writing. (Photos by Rebecca Ritter)

By Rebecca Ritter

In the fall of 2019, I applied for the Good Contrivance Fellowship to spend a long weekend of writing at a farm in Carroll County, west of Towson. I wrote my essay, applied, won, and booked the weekend long before the COVID-19 outbreak took hold in the United States. By spring break, classes were moved online, and I found out that I had most likely visited the Towson campus for the last time without knowing it—I would be graduating with my master's degree in Professional Writing into a global pandemic. The weekend at the farm had almost slipped my mind.

The strangest thing about this pandemic has been the not-knowing. We all feel both in and out of danger at any given moment. Depending on your situation, you can pretend as if nothing is amiss. Every time you turn on the television it sounds like a scripted set piece from the beginning of a horror movie, right before mass panic sets in. But if you change the channel, there's a *Law & Order* marathon on somewhere, and you can pretend like everything is normal. If you look to the streets for calamity, you won't see it. Everything looks almost the same as it always has, until it doesn't. A car passes by with a surgical mask hanging from the rearview mirror. Signs at the

grocery store limit households on loaves of bread, cases of water. Gas is down to a \$1.88.

This is, of course, not reality for all of us. I have a feeling that my next-door neighbor, the ER doctor whose husband is building an outdoor shower so she can decontaminate when she comes home, is experiencing a very different reality. My grandmother, who has COPD and hasn't left her apartment in 10 weeks, is experiencing a different one; my cousin with four children, another. The people I see on TV, driving to Annapolis to protest having to wear a mask—they are certainly in a world all their own.

Even now, as the state begins to open up again, the uncertainty is the thing that scares me the most. And it's certainly what was on my mind in mid-April, when the date I booked for my fellowship crept up on me.

I spent a long time looking at the weekend, marked on my calendar. I had been isolating as much as possible for weeks; I was (and still am) less afraid for myself, and more for the immunocompromised people I live with. I wrote to Ron, who owns the farm along with his wife Jill. He confirmed that I'd be just as alone there as I was at home, that the space was thoroughly cleaned and would be

[\(continued\)](#)

Good Contrivance (cont.)

cleaned after I left. But ultimately, the decision was up to me.

I thought about it carefully, and then I packed a Tupperware of leftovers, a can of SpaghettiOs, two S'mores Pop-Tarts, and a bag of spinach, and I went anyway.

When I arrived, I opened the gate to the driveway, careful not to let out the two brown and white basset hounds, as I had been warned. They chased after my car, howling, as I crept up the gravel driveway, rolling to a stop in front of the barn with the orange door. One of the first things I did after I brought my bags inside was sit on the leather sofa and take out my journal. (I did actually bring writing supplies, along with the spinach.)

"I've come to remember how to be a person," I wrote. Even with all the time stuck inside, I'd had a hard time putting pen to paper—easier to anxiously watch the news and scroll TikTok. I was hoping that the three days at the beautiful barn house would help settle me, help me focus on the writing.

The barn house is, indeed, beautiful. When I got up from the sofa, I took a few dozen photos of the vaulted ceilings, the pottery in the kitchen, the barn cats lying in the garden. It's about as idyllic a setting you could ask for.

And I did write. I spent as much time as possible at the desk on the second floor, under the window that looks out onto the farm. I pulled books off the bookcases, wrote found poems with an old *Reader's Digest*, journaled and started stories and sketched out ideas for essays. I felt pressure to make something out of the short time I had there, pressure to come out of my pandemic-induced paralysis. I made cups of tea on the gas range; I walked the property; I went out and sat on the warm ground and pulled one of the roly-poly dogs into my lap. I waved to Ron when I saw him ride by on his tractor. I avoided the television at all costs. And I wrote.

If I expected to put away all thoughts of the pandemic, to banish words like "quarantine" from my writing vocabulary—that's not what I got. Even though I wasn't watching the news, the thoughts were still there. Uncertainty, especially for a person

already prone to anxiety, can be a disease in and of itself. Unsurprisingly, the writing I did that weekend meditated on that.

I don't know if I expected the retreat to be an escape; somewhere to forget how the world had changed. It wasn't exactly that. But it was a small reprieve; a beautiful place where I got to write for a little while. And for that I'm glad.

at Good Contrivance Farm

sometimes what the soul needs
is to see two basset hounds,
each the size of a toddler,
run each other over
like the puppies they aren't,
and to see one
lying with the barn cat,
like old friends, which they are.

sometimes all the soul needs is that.

