

Newnham Newsletter

Issue 9 ~ March 2009

THREE STUDENTS REQUEST YOUR VOTE ON THEIR US TRAVEL PLANS

This year, three Newnham students have been chosen by Newnham as finalists for the Newnham US Committee Travel Bursary Award of \$4,000 (two runner-up prizes of \$150 each). Please enter the NewnhaminAmerica.org website (user ID: sidgwick, password: peile), read their proposals and vote! Remember the passwords use no capital letters. Deadline for voting is April 3rd, 5pm. Your votes will decide which of the three will be able to travel here this summer.

*** There was an error in the printed newsletter. The photos of Naomi Miles and Lisa O'Dea were switched. The photos below are correct.



Naomi Miles



Lisa O'Dea



Laura F. O'Reilly

Naomi Miles is a British second year undergraduate reading Law. She would like to intern for three months, most likely in the southern USA, with Capital Defense Attorneys working to redress inadequate representation of poor defendants on Death Row. Her internship would be provided through Amicus, an established legal charity in the UK which focuses on providing help and resources for capital cases in the US that may lead to the death penalty.

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Lisa O'Dea is an Irish fifth year medical student with a special interest in pediatric surgery who wishes to spend seven weeks attending lectures, participating in patient care and performing a special research project at the Children's Hospital in Boston, the pediatric hospital affiliated with Harvard Medical School.

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Laura F. O'Reilly is an Australian second-year, undergraduate historian. She has a deep interest in Crazy Horse and the rights of indigenous peoples in the USA and Australia. She would like to spend two months obtaining information in Washington D.C., South Dakota and Boston for her third year (approved) dissertation.

A NEW PLAY ABOUT NEWNHAMITE ROSALIND FRANKLIN

(Excerpted from ScientificAmerican.com)

The Fountain Theatre in Hollywood, California will begin running "Photograph 51", a play by Anna Ziegler about the human drama driving the discovery of DNA's double helix structure. The play focuses on the role of British biophysicist Rosalind Franklin in the discovery. Many argue that her contribution, which went largely unnoticed, was so crucial that she deserved to share the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for uncovering it that instead went to geneticist James Watson and biophysicists Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins.

"Photograph 51" begins in 1951 when Franklin first arrives at King's College in London from the Laboratoire Central des Services Chimiques de l'Etat in Paris to study the structure of biological molecules. It's right around the time that Watson and Crick are trying to construct a model of DNA at Cambridge University, says director Simon Levy. Franklin's character, Levy says, is "very self-assertive and determined, a work-ethic driven woman trying to establish herself in what was then a very male-dominated world". She works alongside Maurice Wilkins, Levy says, "a brilliant scientist but sort of socially inept (who) has difficulty dealing with her strength and her spirit".

The play traces the string of events leading up to the 1953 discovery of the DNA double helix, including the key moment when Wilkins - without Franklin's knowledge or permission - shows Watson the famous "photograph 51", an image of DNA that Franklin had captured using a technique called x-ray diffraction (To the average person, "photograph 51" looks somewhat like a striped letter "X", but to Watson's trained eye, it revealed the molecule's twisted ladder shape.)

According to Levy, Wilkins's character does this because he's impressed with Franklin's work. Watson, longing to be the one who discovers the "secret of life", shows the image to Crick and together they construct their Nobel Prize-winning DNA model based on it, eventually becoming superstars in the scientific community and giving Franklin little credit for her contributions. The play concludes in 1958 with Franklin's death at age 37 from ovarian cancer. She never married or had kids and would receive little recognition for her contribution to the DNA model for which Watson, Crick and Wilkins would share a Nobel four years later.

"Photograph 51" won the 2008 STAGE International Script Competition, an award given by The Professional Artists Lab and the California NanoSystems Institute at the University of California at Santa Barbara to plays that deal with science. The judges of the competition include not only Pulitzer-Prize winning playwrights but Nobel laureate scientists (Watson, 80, was not one of them!).

The play runs from March 21 through May 3 at the Fountain Theatre, Los Angeles.



Alashiya Gordes

STUDYING ENGLISH AT NEWNHAM by Alashiya Gordes

“Shakespeare’s sister ... lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die...”

Eighty years after Virginia Woolf gave her paper on “Women and Fiction” at Newnham, the words she spoke are still an empowerment. Many great writers have passed through Newnham – whether we, her current students, aspire to become authors or not, whether we realize our aspirations or not, we all are part of that heritage of women in whom the spirit of poetry lives. There is this thing, something slightly beyond the conscious mind and the expressible, which literature stirs. Call it “excitement” or “enthusiasm” – perhaps one might call it the joy of shared thought. It is in this that Shakespeare’s sister lives, and it is why I wanted to study English.

Studying English at Cambridge, tuition comes in various forms – lectures, faculty classes, college classes and, of course, supervisions, all differing in the kind of content addressed and individual attention asked and given. Newnham itself offers supplements to these normal course components, both in additional teaching, and the cultural environment it encourages.

One of the few colleges to “have” a Royal Literary Fund Fellow, any Newnhamite, reading any subject, can go to see him/her about her writing, whether work-related or creative. This year (2008-9), our RLF Fellow is Jean McNeil, author of *Hunting down Home and Private View*. The kind of guidance she offers encompasses “everything from the nuts and bolts of writing such as grammar and punctuation, to the larger, more indefinite elements such as argument, style and expression”. When asked about how she saw the RLF role, she said, “To be able to write well is so important at Cambridge, I feel the RLF Fellow can offer a very useful consultative service to students who are trying to master the essay

form, and also to improve their writing more generally". That was modest; we have the opportunity to ask professional authors for their advice on any aspect of our writing we would like, cost free – not only is it useful, it's rather wonderful, too.

Newnham English students are also very lucky to have a weekly class with Jenny Diski, author of *Stranger on a Train* and *Skating to Antarctica*. Mostly they are "reading workshops", for which Jenny selects a text or two for discussion. This builds up our critical skills in an environment less formal than Practical Criticism classes, and expands our overview of the literary landscape. If we want to, Jenny alternates these "reading workshops" with "writing ones". She sets a guideline or objective; we go away and write short pieces, circulate them to each other by email and discuss them when we meet again. Asked for her thoughts on giving these classes, Jenny simply answered: "It's a pleasure". We agree. They stretch critically and creatively – never otherwise would I have planted myself strategically in the buttery to tune in on a mundane lunch-time conversation, noting it down exactly as heard, then to create a second, less mundane, more literary version, closely conscious of my own artistic touches as I made them...

Newnham also engages in literary discussion that reaches beyond college bounds: whether through book-readings, speakers or debates, Newnham is well-established in the Cambridge literary scene. In November, four leading authors/academics, Dame Gillian Beer, Germaine Greer, Sadie Jones and Rebecca Stott engaged in a debate on whether literary prizes matter, chaired by Lindsay Duguid. The debate was highly interesting, especially in relation to the Orange Prize: do we need a literary prize for women only? Is it fair, in a level-playing-field-world? Ah, but is the world of literary prizes a level playing field?

Earlier this year, Newnham became host to a very special, very literary table. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes the sumptuous luncheon she partook of at Kings College, in Dadie Rylands' room. The rather more frugal meal she had at Newnham was all the worse for the comparison. Now, many years and a brand new buttery later, the Dadie Rylands table has come to Newnham, as both a memory and a celebration. The Arts Society Woolf addressed in her original talk disappeared over the years, but not for much longer. Eighty years after her original talk, the Arts Society is being reinstated to its rightful place: a new speaker series, aimed to begin in Lent 2009, will re-open its days of activity. A unique journal is in the making, too; inspired by Woolf's paper on *Women in Fiction*, its title will be *Women and Art*. The journal looks to include pieces by academics, professional authors and artists as well as students, from Cambridge and beyond.

Hints of Shakespeare's sister are to be found at every turn of the long corridor. She is a writer, an actress, a lover of words, a spring of ideas. In January, a group of Newnham English students will participate in a discussion for a BBC 4 documentary on Sylvia Plath. Last Lent, some Newnhamite "Englings" put on a

play about the lives of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes in Cambridge, composed of their journals, letters, poetry and prose to and about each other. And in March, a Newnham-led production of Cardenio will make its premiere. Cardenio is a lost Shakespeare play which has recently gained greater critical attention; this particular reconstruction was made by Bernard Richards, Fellow Emeritus of Brasenose College, Oxford. Shakespeare and his sister peek in together. In her opening speech to the Literary Prizes debate, the Principal said "Newnham is the place to be if you're interested in literature". I couldn't agree with her more.

THINKING OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN ENGLISH OR ENGLISH LITERATURE AT NEWNHAM?

The Master of Philosophy (MPhil) is a self-contained one year course providing experience in library study and training in academic research. MPhil courses are offered in American Literature, English Studies (with options of Eighteenth Century and Romantic Studies or Culture and Criticism), or Medieval and Romantic Literature. Applicants are expected to have a good 2:1 degree in English or English literature. They will be expected to provide a 500 word statement of their proposed dissertation topic and a 5,000-7,000 word example of their academic writing. There is also a part-time course leading to a Master of Studies degree after two years.

Students wanting to do a PhD in English or British Literature will normally have completed an MPhil or are expected to attend the relevant MPhil courses during their first year. At present PhD study in British Literature concentrates on literature post-1830. Candidates need to provide a 500 word proposal for their area of work and, as for MPhil applications, provide a 5,000-7,000 word example of their academic writing.



News snippet:

Shuyang Wang, our 2007 Travel Bursary runner-up, has moved to Washington DC for 2 years. She is doing her MA in International Relations at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Her concentrations are International Economics (compulsory for all SAIS students) and International Policy.



Sylvana Franco-Wolfe

Congratulations to US Newnham Committee member Heather Wolfe!

Baby Sylvana Franco-Wolfe was born on February 1 at 11:08pm, “healthy and huge (9 pounds, 1/2 ounce)!”
