

James Merrill

THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE PROGRAM

James Merrill House Committee

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NEWSLETTER NO. 3
MARCH, 2011

Dear Friends,

After fifteen years I am happy to say that we are getting the routine down to science. Applicants, whose numbers increase each year, apply for the residency program and by the time this newsletter goes to press, we will have selected two new writers for the coming year (September and February), have the lecturer in place for the May Merrill Lecture, have scheduled workshops and open houses at the Merrill apartment and, our now famous Deck Party is on the calendar.

But familiarity only takes us so far. Over these past few years we have developed a respected program but we also realize that the program may have untapped potential. In order to explore the possibilities, this year the Merrill Committee undertook some strategic planning (see below). It's an important exercise for any organization and we are excited about some new endeavors. We are also excited about the first WIR reunion that will be held the first weekend in August. In trying to anticipate the needs of a growing program, we have also enlarged our committee.

As we undertake these new activities, we want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to dream. If we didn't have the support of the community, we couldn't look ahead. Local residents have been most welcoming to the writers and I can assure you that every writer comments on your warmth and friendliness. As important, financial support has grown both within and outside Stonington. That gives us the confidence to work a little harder and try new things with the hope that we will make a good program even better.

Sincerely,



Lynn Callahan

Having accomplished the goals of its first five year plan, the James Merrill House Committee spent several months this fall working on a second strategic plan. That plan, now completed, will be presented to the Stonington Village Improvement Association board. Their endorsement is an important part of the planning process as the SVIA is the umbrella organization under which the JMH Committee functions.

The first five plan (2005 - 2010) achieved its modest goals of 1) a small stipend for the writer-in-residence; 2) the establishment of an annual James Merrill Lecture and, 3) the creation of a James Merrill Poetry Award at Stonington High School. While it was not part of the plan, during this time period the committee worked aggressively to renovate the building at 107 Water Street so that the two second floor apartments could be rented and provide some income to help maintain the building. In 2008, the SVIA made an extraordinary commitment to the program by installing an energy efficient furnace in the building. In 2010, the JMH Committee renovated and furnished the 3rd floor Jackson apartment. The WIR now resides in the Jackson apartment and the Merrill apartment and its furnishings can be better preserved.

With renovations completed, the second five year plan looks more seriously at the JMH Program itself. During the coming five years, the Committee hopes to 1) develop the museum aspects of its program; cataloging the items in the apartment, preserving the furnishings, and opening the apartment to the public on a more frequent basis; 2) explore ways to expand the awareness of the Merrill Program beyond Stonington; 3) look for ways to secure the long term financial well being of the House and the Program; and 4) enlarge the committee and consider hiring a part time employee to oversee the day-to-day management of the program.

New members, Randy Bean, Bill Emberton, Leslie McGrath and David Clapp have been added to the James Merrill House Committee. The committee now stands at fifteen members. The SVIA by-laws stipulate that SVIA board members also sit on the Merrill House Committee. Callahan, Bean, Norman and Bowdler fill that requirement.

The governing arrangement was an outgrowth of Merrill's bequest which gave the building at 107 Water Street to the SVIA in 1995. Because of Merrill's interest in and generosity toward young writers and poets, the SVIA established the Writer-in-Residency Program to further his legacy. They later formed the Merrill House Committee to manage the program, guide its activities, and keep the SVIA apprised of the status of the program.



Jedediah Berry, pictured at left at the Meet and Greet gathering at Noah's on January 24, arrived in Stonington in mid-January to begin his spring residency in the James Merrill House. Berry received his BA from Bard College and his MFA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst where he has taught fiction writing.

Berry's novel, *The Manual of Detection*, was the winner of the William L. Crawford Award and the Dashiell Hammett Prize, and was a finalist for the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award. His work has appeared in numerous reviews, and in anthologies including *Chicago Review*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *PEN America*, *Best New American Voices* and *Best American Fantasy*. Berry is the 28th WIR.

In addition to teaching, Berry has worked as an editor at Small Beer Press. He has also done a residency at Yaddo, situated in Saratoga Springs, New York. Like Yaddo, the Merrill residency provides writers the time and the privacy necessary for creative work. While at the Merrill House, he will be working on a new novel, *The Something Tree*.

SUMMER RENTAL

THE JACKSON APARTMENT IS AVAILABLE FOR A SUMMER RENTAL IN 2011.

FOR DETAILS AND AVAILABILITY, INTERESTED PARTIES SHOULD VISIT:

WWW.VRBO.COM.

THE APARTMENT IS LISTING #293154. YOU MAY ALSO GO TO OUR WEBSITE AT

WWW.JAMESMERRILL.ORG

AND CLICK ON THE EVENTS PAGE.

It has been sixteen years since the WIR program began and twenty-eight writers, poets and scholars can now count themselves as Merrill Fellows. The Merrill House Committee has dreamed every year about a reunion of former fellows but as with any family reunion the big questions are when can we get everyone together? and what will we plan? In the spirit of spontaneity and improvisation, we have scheduled the first WIR reunion. The one certainty is the date - the first weekend in August - August 4th through the 8th.

Attendees can expect to see at least several writers and scholars, with a few old local friends around to join in the festivities. Now that the date is set, the Committee will put their collective heads together to plan the reunion schedule. You can be sure there will be readings, maybe music, and certainly a party. If it looks like the events might draw a crowd larger than the Merrill apartment can accommodate, we'll find a larger venue. Stay tuned for more information.

Jimmy Merrill's apartment, located just a block from Stonington Harbor, will be the site for a different kind of workshop this spring. Entitled "New England and the Sea: A Multigenre Workshop" it will feature local poet Leslie McGrath, renowned shipwright Bill Taylor, and the current Merrill writer-in-residence Jedediah Berry.

The afternoon workshop on April 9th will include a close read of a couple of James Merrill's poems, a look at some sea-oriented prose, and the insight of a shipwright who has restored classic wooden boats.

The workshop is planned in cooperation with Dzanc Books. Proceeds from the \$30 workshop fee helps to fund Dzanc's charitable endeavors, including the Dzanc Prize, which recognizes one writer annually for both literary excellence and service to the community, and the Dzanc Writer-in-Residence Program, which places professional writers into classrooms to provide creative writing instruction to public school students who could not otherwise afford the opportunity.

The workshop has limited enrollment. Those interested in participating should contact Leslie McGrath at mcgrath.leslie@gmail.com.



Productive, and magical are just a couple of the words that Josh Weil uses to describe his Merrill House residency. Weil, who is currently the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, came to

Stonington in September of 2010 to begin his four month residency. Along with finding a unique writing environment, he was also pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome from the Stonington community. Over wonderful meals and great wine he feels he developed real friendships.

As he hoped, the residency provided Weil with the time to do an extensive amount of work on his new novel *The Great Glass Sea* which is set in northern Russia and is about two brothers struggling with the pressures of the new Russian capitalism. In addition, Weil was able to rewrite two short stories - "No Flies, No Folly" and "Malvern Hill," and a novella, "Solarium." His primary focus, however, was on his novel, revising and readying it for publication.

Next fall Weil continues his writing trek as he journeys to Oxford, Mississippi, where he has a fellowship at the University of Mississippi as the John and Renee Grisham Emerging Southern Writer.



Noted biographer, novelist, memorist, and literary and social critic, Edmund V. White, will be the speaker at the 7th annual James Merrill Lecture on Sunday, May 15th at the LaGrua Center in Stonington, CT. His lecture, “A Story of a Friendship,” scheduled for 5:00 p.m., is free and open to the public. White knew James Merrill from Merrill’s earliest days as a poet as both were gaining a foothold in literary circles in New York City in the early 1950s.

Edmund White has written some twenty-five books. He is perhaps best known for his biography of French writer Jean Genet, for which he won the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is also the author of a trilogy of autobiographical novels—*A Boy’s Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony*. His novel, *The Married Man*, takes place in France, the United States and Morocco and deals with the intimate psychological repercussions of AIDS. He has written brief lives of Marcel Proust and Arthur Rimbaud and a book about unconventional Paris called *The Flaneur*. His most recent published works of fiction are *Chaos* and *Hotel de Dream* and his latest non-fiction is *City Boy*, a memoir about New York in the 1970s. He has just completed a novel, *Jack Holmes and His Friend*, about the friendship between a gay man and a straight man. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is an officer in the French Order of Arts and Letters. He teaches writing at Princeton University and lives in New York City.

THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE SELECTION COMMITTEE AWARDS FELLOWSHIPS FOR 2011 – 2012

Two poets have been selected for the Merrill WIR program for 2011 and 2012.

William Schutt arrives in September, 2011, and Peter Filkins will be in residence from January through May in 2012.

Schutt received his BA in English from Oberlin College in 2003 and an MFA in Creative Writing from Hollins University in 2009. He will come to Stonington from Bucknell University, where he has been a Stadler Fellow since 2009. The Stadler fellowship provides professional training in literary editing and arts administration. He has also taught and lectured at Bucknell as well as assisted in editing *West Branch*, a nationally distinguished literary magazine.



Schutt lived in Siena, Italy, for three years where he was editor-in-chief of *Verso*, a culture and arts magazine. Fluent in Italian and Spanish, he did extensive translation work in Italy and has recently worked as a foreign literature consultant for the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house.

Schutt published his first collection of poems, *The Constant Visitors*, in 2009 and in the last few years his poems have appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Faultline*, *FIELD*, *Linebreak*, *Salamander* and *The Southern Review*. He will work on his second poetry collection while in Stonington, as well continue his translation work of the Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti. He will be accompanied to Stonington by his wife, Tania Biancalani.

Peter Filkins comes to the Merrill House residency with an extensive background in writing, teaching and translating. Since 1988 he has had a full-time position in the Division of Languages and Literature at Bard College at Simon’s Rock. He received his BA from Williams College in



1980 and his MFA in poetry from Columbia in 1983. After graduate school he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of Vienna where he translated the poems of Ingeborg Bachmann. Over the years his work on Bachmann’s poetry has received recognition including the Outstanding Translation Award from the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) in 1995, a Berlin Prize from the American Academy in Berlin in 2005 and a Distinguished Translation Award from the Austrian Ministry for Art and Culture in 2007.

Filkins has also written several books of poetry; *What She Knew* (1998), *After Homer* (2002), and *Augustine’s Vision* (2010). In 2007 he received the Stover Award in Poetry from *Southwest Review*. He has completed work on his fourth volume of poems, *Marking Time*, which has been a finalist in six different contests. In addition to writing poetry and translating, Filkins has also published numerous reviews and essays in both *The N.Y. Times* and *L.A. Times Book Reviews*, *Partisan Review*, *The American Scholar*, and *Iowa Review*, just to name a few.

Residency programs are not new to Filkins as he was a fellow at the MacDowell Colony three times (1997, 2003 and 2008). He has also had fellowships at Yaddo (1989) and Millay (1993). He will begin his Merrill residency in January when he will start work on his fifth collection of poems.

“THE PROBLEM OF LIVING IN THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE WAS IMMEDIATELY CLEAR TO ME - I KNEW I WOULD NEVER LIVE SOMEWHERE SO SPLENDIDLY STRANGE AND SO SIMPLY SPLENDID AGAIN. “

IVY POCHODA, WIR 2009
FROM WRITER’S HOUSES .ORG

We want to thank all those listed below who have given to the James Merrill House Program during the current fiscal year. Those donors who are listed gave between April 1, 2010 and the publication of this newsletter. The fiscal year for the Merrill House Program ends on March 31, 2011 so there is still time - though limited - to help the Merrill Program during the current fiscal year. Prospective donors can send a check or go to jamesmerrillhouse.org and give on line.

Gifts to the Merrill Program are used primarily to fund the stipend for the WIR and underwrite the costs of workshops, the annual Merrill lecture and the James Merrill Writing Prize given annually to a local high school senior.

**James Merrill House
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James Merrill

THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE PROGRAM

I wish to add my name to the list of James Merrill House donors. Enclosed is my check for \$_____

Name _____

Address _____

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The James Merrill apartment on the third and fourth floor of the building at 107 Water Street was home to James Merrill for over forty years. Of the many places that influenced Merrill during his lifetime, Stonington was arguably one of the most important and was the place he returned to most frequently in his later years. The apartment, at the time of his death, contained thousands of books, a distinctive record library, and an art collection that was both valuable and personal. After Merrill's death, many of the books and paintings left the collection - given as bequests to friends, relatives, and to museums. A significant remainder of his New York and Stonington libraries were consolidated in the Water Street apartment. Most of the art and furniture remain as well.



This past summer the inheritors of the current library generously made plans for gifting the records and books to the Merrill House. The records had been inventoried in 2007 by Michael Snediker, now of Queens University in Ontario, and in the summer of 2010, an inventory of the books was undertaken by Richie Hofmann, a graduate student at Emory University. The cataloging work was funded by private donations in addition to Merrill House funds. Also, in August of 2010, Chris Fondulis, of New York and Stonington, photographed the artwork in the apartment. The task of identifying many of the artists and researching Merrill's relationship to them remains.

The books, the records, and the art are all part of the experience of the Merrill apartment, and they provide inspiration for all of our fellows. And now, for the first time since Merrill's death, the apartment no longer houses the WIR and is open for tours by appointment for scholars, writers, students, and the interested public. Of course, our Merrill House Fellows continue to have full use of Jimmy's apartment for study and work.

Write On . . .

Piotr Gwiadza's new poems and translations have recently appeared in *AGNI Online*, *Past Simple*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Otoliths*, *Colorado Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *With+Stand* (The Red Issue), and *Two Weeks: A Digital Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*. In 2010 he received a grant from the PEN America Center Translation Fund and is currently translating Polish writer Grzegorz Wroblewski's book of prose poems *Kopenhaga*.

Mathew Zapruder's new book *Come on All You Ghosts*, published by Copper Canyon, won the 2010 Goodreads Readers' Choice award for poetry and was selected as one of the top 5 poetry books of 2010 by *Publishers' Weekly* and as the 2010 Booklist Editors' Choice for poetry. Currently Zapruder is an editor for *Wave Books* and is a member of the core faculty of UCR-Palm Desert's Low Residency MFA in Creative Writing.

Bruce Snider's book of poems, *Paradise, Indiana* won the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize and will be coming out next April from Pleiades Press/LSU.



Over the years, the James Merrill Committee has struggled with ways to open up the apartment for the community. The Deck Party is a wonderful solution. The Party allows all who come a chance to enjoy the distinctive décor and ambience of Jimmy's apartment.

Deck Party

The third annual Deck Party will be held on Saturday, August 20. It is open to the public at a nominal charge.



The summer deck party was inaugurated two years ago when the MHC hosted a gathering on the fourth floor deck and adjacent salon where guests could enjoy views of the harbor, the bay and the ocean.



James Merrill

THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE PROGRAM

James Merrill House
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT 06378

Address Correction Requested

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE
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April 9 Dzanc Writer's
Workshop
April 17 Jedediah Berry
Stonington Free Library
5:00 pm
May 15 Edmund White
LaGrua Center
5:00 pm
Aug. 4-8 Writers-In-Residence
Reunion
Aug. 20 & 21
Open House
Merrill Apartment
107 Water Street
Aug. 20 Deck Party
Sept. 1 Arrival of Wm Schutt