

James Merrill

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Fall 2019

The Ideal Reader

WHAT AN HONOR it was to have Mary Jo Salter deliver the 14th annual Merrill lecture on September 28. Introducing her at La Grua, Merrill House committee member Willard Spiegelman described Salter as “an old-fashioned woman of letters,” who began her career as the assistant to the poetry editor of *The Atlantic*, where she was the first reader of poems that came over the transom and into the slush pile, and quickly progressed from discovering to nurturing new talent—which she continues to do as a professor in the writing seminars at Johns Hopkins and as co-editor of the Norton Anthology of Poetry. Salter, whose review of *Mirabell: Books of Number* appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1979, spoke warmly of Merrill’s generosity toward young poets (“I came to think of him as the ideal reader”), and recalled their mutual love of travel, Japanese forms of tanka and haiku, and wordplay in their writing: “His work makes me giddy even though he’s not telling a joke.” The day after her talk, Salter had a sit-down conversation with Willard Spiegelman taped live in the Merrill Apartment (seen in the photo, below), which will soon be posted

at www.jamesmerrillhouse.org. Thanks to all who came to listen; thanks to La Grua Center for hosting; and special thanks to Connecticut Humanities for funding the lecture. What would our world be without those who make and support art?

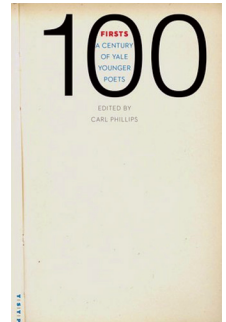
In my living room
Seven years after your death,
As a tape gave back

Your suave, funny-sad voice, I
Suddenly understood it.

“Toy tanker,” of course!
You’d pruned the tanka’s final
Syllables to five.

No one but you would have made
A bonsai of a bonsai.

—from “Tanker” by Mary Jo Salter,
inspired by James Merrill’s “Fort
Lauderdale”



Poet/editor Carl Phillips and novelist Marlon James will discuss their latest works

Upcoming Merrill Speakers

CARL PHILLIPS, a poet and professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis, will speak at the La Grua Center on April 4. Currently judge of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, celebrating its centennial this year, Phillips is editor of the anthology *First 100: A Century of Yale Younger Poets* (Yale University Press, 2019).

MARLON JAMES, who’ll speak at La Grua on May 20, is the author of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), a finalist for this year’s National Book Award in Fiction and the first in a fantasy epic trilogy he’s described as “an *African Game of Thrones*.” James’ previous novels include *John Crow’s Devil* (2005), *The Book of Night Women* (2009), and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* for which he received the 2015 Man Booker Prize. Both events are free and open to the public.



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James Merrill House is a program of the
Stonington Village Improvement Association, a
501(c)3 non-profit organization

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Shelf Life

State-of-the-Art Book Cleaning & Cataloging Project Underway at the Merrill House

TARA KENNEDY, who has served successfully as the Project Manager on several of the JMHC's conservation projects, working closely with JMHC member Sarah Dove, recently recruited Clancy-Cullen Moving & Storage to clean the James Merrill Book Collection using expert techniques. Clancy-Cullen has been responsible for cleaning Yale's General Library and Special Book Collections for years. They have the equipment and experience to clean valuable books rapidly and effectively, using specialized techniques to protect fragile covers.

One of the challenges with cleaning the Merrill Book Collection is the limited space to accommodate personnel and equipment. (The collection is stored in the Studio and Study of the Merrill Apartment, and in the Jackson Apartment.) However, Clancy supervisor Michael Colon is experienced with operating in tight quarters. It has also been helpful that the Merrill House has some spare tables in the Studio where cleaners Andrew Parent and Steve Oshen have worked in tandem, quickly and efficiently capturing years of dust and dirt with HEPA-filtered vacuums and dust-grabbing cloths. All six sides of the books were scoured with a round brush attachment, with special attention paid to the top edge of the book as that is where most of the dust settles over time. (Pro tip: The brush is placed at the spine of the book and then works its way out toward the fore

edge.) While the books were off the shelves, the surfaces of the shelves were wiped down with cloths so that the shelves were completely clean before the books were set back down on them. Areas around the bookshelves were also thoroughly vacuumed.

Amazingly, this team of three vacuumed more than 3,000 volumes and over 600 long-playing records in a matter of hours. While cleaning, the team straightened out and tidied the books to better situate them on the shelving. The JMHC purchased bookends to help keep the books upright, in preparation for the next phase: Wrapping individual volumes in clear covers to protect fragile bindings, enabling Merrill fellows to continue to have access to them during their residencies.

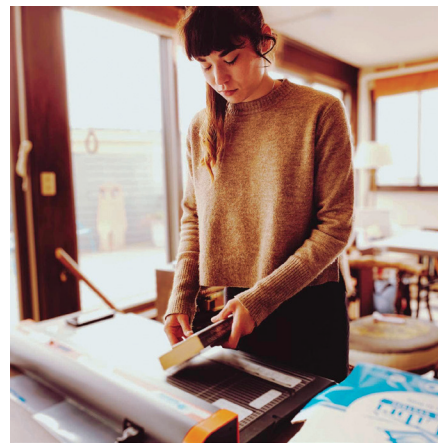


Writers of all genres live and work in James Merrill's historic Stonington home for 4-6 weeks. Could this be you or someone you know? Apply for one of our six 2020-2021 residencies at jamesmerrillhouse.submittable.com

Assisting the conservation team have been Eden McDowell and Forrest Joss, both recent art school graduates.

Kennedy, whose conservation degree is combined with a library degree, has been simultaneously supervising the twin projects of cataloging the entire Merrill Book & LP Collection. While the collection was cataloged previously by past Merrill fellow Michael Snediker (the LPs) and poet Richie Hoffman (the books), Tara is using LibraryThing, an application which will yield an online searchable catalog that will contain salient information about each item in the collection. The plan is to have each room in the Merrill and Jackson apartments organized by Library of Congress call number so books will be easy to find on shelves after they are located online. Uploading the catalog to LibraryThing requires the records to be updated to be usable and searchable. Lauren Landi from the Lyman Allyn Art Museum has taken on the task, including checking against national and international library catalogs to make sure that our records have complete information, and accurate call numbers.

Our thanks to the Hellen Ingram Plummer Foundation for supporting this important work, and to each member of the conservation team for doing such a careful job.



IT'S A WRAP

The team assembled by Project Manager Tara Kennedy and JMHC Curatorial Director Sarah Dove is cataloguing, cleaning, adding clear protective covers, and re-shelving James Merrill's book collection, enabling Merrill fellows to continue to have access to them during their residencies.

3



News from Our Fellows

MIKE ALBERTI (Winter 2017–2018) This past summer, I had a story called “The Woods” in *Mid-American Review* (August) and was a Scholar at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference.

MOLLY ANDERS (September 2014) This autumn I’m in residence at the Bethany Arts Community in Ossining, NY, working on my story collection-in-progress and beginning a new project: a one-woman show. On the publication front, I have a story forthcoming in *Joyland*.

SALLY BALL (December 2012) My book *Hold Sway* came out in April and was reviewed by *The New York Times*. Its central poem was made into an artist’s book by Czech printmaker Jan Vičar and will be



the centerpiece of his Prix de Gravure Mario Avati-winning solo show at the Académie Française in Paris. In December (I will go and read the poem at events there). I also received a 2019 Arizona Commission on the Arts Fellowship and started to teach in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. Fellow fellow Aire “Dee” Matthews (June 2017) taught there too in July.

LYDIA CONKLIN (September 2012) Earlier this year, I won an Elizabeth George Foundation grant. I am just starting as a Stegner Fellow at Stanford. One of my stories appeared in the Summer 2019 issue of *American Short Fiction* and another is forthcoming this winter in *Zyzzyva*.

TED DEPPE (1998–1999) My seventh book, *Riverlight* (Arlen House), was launched this September on the last day of the Clifden Arts Festival in County Galway, Ireland, where my wife, Anne Deppe, and

I moved in 2000, and where I currently coordinate residencies for University of Southern Maine’s Stonecoast in Ireland MFA program.

GERI DORAN (December 2015–January 2016) My third collection, *Epistle, Osprey* (Tupelo Press) was published in August. I was also a resident at Marble House Project, in Dorset, Vermont.

JORDAN JACKS (November–December 2018) My story “The Monkey” appeared in the spring issue of *Story*. A second story, “Nobody Knows,” is in the fall issue of *The Southern Indiana Review*.

PETER KLINE (December 2013) My second collection of poems, *Mirrorforms*, was published by Parlor Press/Free Verse Editions in November. This has extra significance as I was working on this collection while I was a Merrill House Fellow. Excited for it to come out into the world!

NATE KLUG (September 2016) I have an essay out in *Image Journal* about friendship that begins with a close reading of Merrill’s poem “A Tenancy.” My next book of poems, which I worked on at the JMH, is called *Hosts and Guests* and will be out with Princeton University Press in Fall 2020.

MAXIM LOSKUTOFF (November 2017) This past spring, Anna Noyes (November 2014), Nancy Reisman (Fall 2007), and I were all together at MacDowell. *Come West and See*, my debut collection of stories, was named a best book of 2018 by NPR and Amazon, and received the 2019 High Plains Book Award.

DAN O'BRIEN (June 2013) In June, the first act of my new play, about the Sandy Hook shooting, a co-commission from Oregon Shakespeare Festival and The Public Theater, was published in *Cincinnati Review*. In July, my play *The House in Scarsdale: A Memoir for the Stage* was published by Oberon Books in London and the US. In September, *The Paris Review* featured “The Drama of Conflict,” a lecture I delivered at Sewanee Writers’ Conference, and New England Review published an excerpt from my memoir-in-progress.

CATHERINE POND (October 2016) This year I was awarded the Crab Orchard First Book Prize in Poetry for my manuscript, *Fieldglass*, which will be published in Spring 2021 by Southern Illinois University Press.

SUZANNE RIVECCA (Spring 2018) My essay “Ugly and Bitter and Strong” is a notable in this year’s Best American Essays 2019. Thanks Robert Atwan, *Zyzzyva*, and everyone who contacted me to say this essay meant something to them.

BRUCE SNIDER (Spring 2010) I have a new poetry collection, *Fruit*, forthcoming from University of Wisconsin press in Spring 2020. I also co-edited an anthology, *The Poem’s Country: Place and Poetic Practice*, which was released this year by Pleiades Press. I’m currently a scholar-in-residence at NYU, and will be at the Bogliasco Foundation residency outside of Genoa, Italy this coming January.

TERESE SVOBODA (November 2015) This year I published *Great American Desert*, my 18th book and first cli-fi (climate fiction). Booklist and Kirkus starred it. I attended the International Poetry Festival in Havana, taught at San Miguel Poetry Week, published fifteen poems (one of them translated into Spanish), seven stories and seven essays. I have a new book of poetry, *Theatrix*, forthcoming in 2021.

KATHLEEN WINTER (December 2014) Maggie Smith recently selected my third poetry collection, *Transformer*, to be published by Word Works Press in 2020 for the Hilary Tham Collection. New poems are forthcoming in *Massachusetts Review*, *Blackbird* and *New American Writing*.

JOSH WEIL (Fall 2010) I’m recently back from a semester teaching abroad as The Picador Guest Professor in the department of American Studies at Leipzig University, in Germany. Just for kicks, here’s a picture of me giving a reading in the Old Senate Hall.



Photo: Andreas Lamm



ABOVE: Billy Collins, Poet Laureate of the United States (2001-03), visited with his wife, Suzanna Gilman, after giving a reading at the Mystic Arts Café in October.



LEFT AND ABOVE: Stonington High School students were introduced to the Merrill Apartment earlier this fall, and judging from reports were particularly entranced by Merrill's Ouija board and "Hidden Study." (Hmmm... Could there be a lesson in that?) Thank you to Merrill House Committee members Sibby Lynch and Tony Crane, along with Harriet Crane, for leading the tour.

BELOW: July-August Merrill Fellow Gabi Gage, who braved two flights of stairs into her ninth month of pregnancy, took a short break from working on her book-in-progress to graciously record a short podcast about her experience as JMH writer-in-residence.

Visitors

AS OUR WRITERS-IN-RESIDENCE are well aware, the Merrill Apartment is situated on the upper floors of 107 Water Street, accessible only by two steep flights of stairs. We deeply appreciate those who attend our annual Open House—judging by comments left in our visitor log, most find the view worth the ascent! To request a private tour, email merrillhousefellowship@gmail.com.

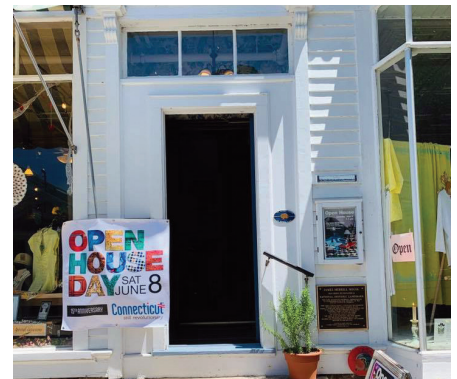


ABOVE: Poet Michael Snediker (Fall 2006) took a break from Texas, where he teaches courses in American Literature at the University of Houston, to spend the first half of July in the Jackson apartment as this year's Returning Merrill Fellow.



ABOVE: Current artists-in-residence at The Lighthouse Works boated across the sound from Fishers' Island with program director Nate Malinowski for an impromptu tour before heading to La Grua to hear Mary Jo Salter deliver this year's Merrill Lecture.

5



LEFT, ABOVE, BELOW: Open House Day — our first event coordinated with the Connecticut Office of Tourism — attracted a record number of visitors, who were greeted with a welcoming banner and the friendly manner of our volunteer docents, led by JMH program coordinator Bergin O'Malley.



James Merrill

HOUSE & WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

James Merrill House
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT 06378

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For more information about our programs, visit us
at jamesmerrillhouse.org and follow us on Facebook
and Instagram.

Calendar of Events

SATURDAY, JANUARY 25

Merrill House Fellow **Matthew Minicucci**
reads from his work,
Stonington Free Library, 5pm

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22

Merrill House Fellow **Lysley Tenorio** reads
from his work, Stonington Free Library, 5pm

SATURDAY, MARCH 28

Merrill House Fellow **Keith Wilson** reads from
his work, Stonington Free Library, 5pm

SATURDAY, APRIL 4

Merrill Lecture with poet **Carl Phillips**,
La Grua Center, 5 pm

SATURDAY, MAY 9

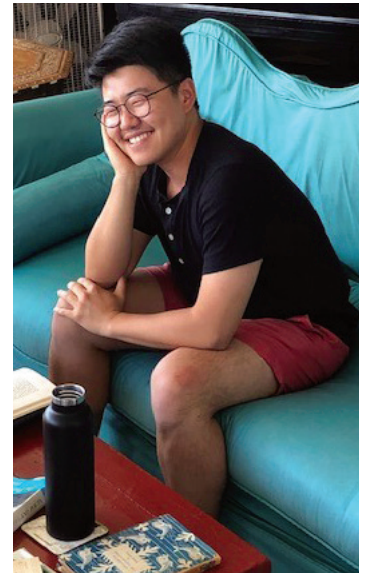
Merrill House Fellow **Nicholas Boggs** reads
from his work, Stonington Free Library, 5pm

WEDNESDAY, MAY 20

Merrill Lecture with novelist **Marlon James**,
La Grua Center, 5pm

Fingering the Spines

FOR YANYI, the 2018 Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner who was our June Fellow, it all started with a young adult novel called *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt, that he read when he was eight. As one might guess of the author of *The Year of Blue Water* (Yale University Press), Yanyi was the kid who takes out a stack of 20 books from the library and reads them in a weekend. Growing up in southern Illinois, born into a traditional Chinese American family, he discovered books were a helpmeet when he was without friends, or bullied at school for his differences. No surprise, then, that while in residence at 107 Water Street this past June he became captivated by Merrill's bookshelves—recognizing that they offered a record of the poet's coterie and mind. Here, a translation of the *Odyssey* by Robert Fagles, inscribed to Merrill. There, a first, rare volume of stories by Lydia Davis, one of 500 printed, again inscribed. Thanks to Yanyi, you can see for yourself—virtually—as we invited him to “hijack” the JMH Instagram account (@jamesmerrillhouse) during his stay, to share his discoveries. One great find was a typed introduction to a talk by Merrill in 1982, given by Frank Bidart, who last year won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. It's annotated “For Jimmy—with great admiration—love, Frank. 3/29/82.” Other than writing, Yanyi believes reading is the primary occupation of a poet. Though he'd found it a dangerous one for him during this residency. As he lamented one morning over breakfast at Noah's, before his appearance at this year's Poetry on the Porch event, “The more I read, the more there is to read. It's like trying to separate salt from sand!” And of course, between fingering spines and Instagram posts, he was writing: a two-hander verse play that came to him midway through his tenancy at 107 Water Street.



Yanyi posted inside James Merrill's studio