

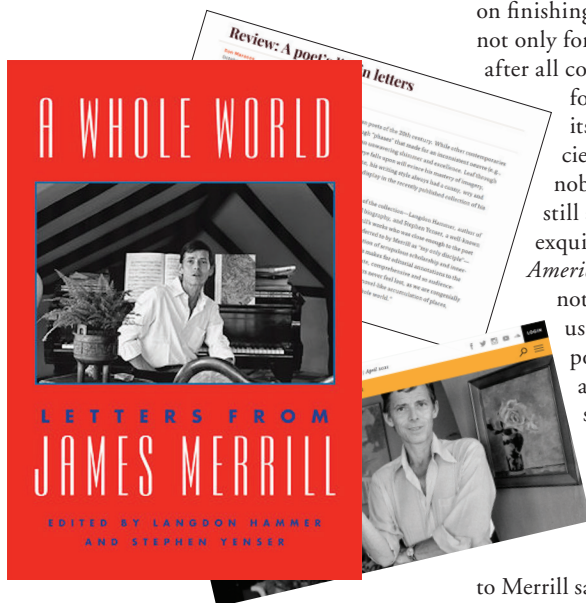
James Merrill

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Fall 2021

More Acclaim for Merrill's Letters

A WHOLE WORLD: *Letters From James Merrill* (Knopf), co-edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser, has been named a New York Times' Notable Book



of 2021. Not to be outdone, the Times Literary Supplement (UK) ranks *A Whole*

World among its favorite books of the year. And gratifying notices continue: Writing in *The Harvard Review* this October, poet Andrew DuBois observes that "One's mood on finishing *A Whole World* [is] elegiac, and not only for the loss of James Merrill, who after all comes alive in these pages. It is also for the death of correspondence itself. Given our digital tendencies and attention deficits, surely nobody, not even Merrill, were he still around, could ever write such exquisite letters again." Similarly, *America Magazine's* critic Ron Marasco notes that "as [Merrill's] letters carry us through all the requisite high points of his life and career, we are treated along the way to sweet surprises of humanity, grace and warmth. He includes in his letter about the hubbub surrounding his winning the Pulitzer Prize the mention of a local youngster whose congratulatory note to Merrill said, 'I write poetry too, but the scouts take a lot of my time.'" *A Whole World* is filled with "such sweetly common touches," Marasco adds, "And there's a reason for

them. For all of Merrill's world travels and international notoriety, he seemed always in search of a simple home: a refuge, a place where he could learn the art of belonging, a neighborhood in which he could stroll as one of the happy locals. And he found it." If you haven't seen the 3-part series about the making of *A Whole World* you can access it at jamesmerrillhouse.org/archive.

JMH Fellows Honored for Poetry & Prose

WE'RE DELIGHTED TO REPORT

that Kirstin Valdez Quade (February-March 2021) and Desiree Bailey (June 2021) received coveted honors this fall. Bailey's debut collection *What Noise Against the Cane* (Yale University Press), was a National Book Award Poetry finalist, praised by the judges as "epic in its sweep, yet intimately lyrical. Bursting with imagery and insight... So out of historical pain, a new music is made." Kirstin Valdez Quade's debut novel, *The Five Wounds* (W.W. Norton), won The Center for Fiction's



Desiree Bailey (top)
Kirstin Valdez Quade (bottom)

2021 First Novel Prize for its depiction of five generations of the Padilla family who converge on unemployed Amadeo Padilla in his New Mexico home, upending his life. Listen to both writers read excerpts from their work at jamesmerrillhouse.org/archive.

Season's Greetings from 107 Water

WE'RE SO GRATEFUL to our donors for the generous support shown to the



Merrill House. Your timely gifts enabled us to bring eight writers in residence to Stonington this year, and to make necessary improvements to the Merrill Apartment. We appreciate your engagement with JMH on-line programs—such as our 16th Annual Merrill Lecture with novelist Marlon James, and the launch of our new virtual tour of the Merrill Apartment. With your help we've been able to provide former fellows an opportunity to share their newest published work via Studio 107. We'll soon be welcoming the first of our 2022 writers in residence and look forward to introducing them to you.

July-August 2021 Fellow Armen Davoudian reads from his prize-winning chapbook *Swan Song* on the deck of the Merrill House

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bergin.jmh@gmail.com

107 Water Street, Stonington, CT 06378
Email: merrillhousefellowship@gmail.com

James Merrill House is a program of the
Stonington Village Improvement Association, a
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Thanks to graphic designer Susan Lindberg

Merrill Residency

Do you have something to write?
Do you need a quiet, inspiring
space to do so? Applications
now open for 2022-23 residen-
cies through January 9, 2022.
In recognition of James Merrill's
own contributions to Stonington,
and his longstanding generosity,
the fellowship provides living and
working space and a stipend to
a writer to complete a project of
literary or academic merit. Fellows
are also hosted by local communi-
ty members and organizations.

Writers About Town

AUTUMN BROUGHT THREE wonderful writers in residence to 107 Water Street: poet Henri Cole and novelist Marlon James (below), and poet/critic Michael Collier (see page 4). Along with exploring various Stonington Village attractions, each writer gave a reading broadcast from the Merrill Apartment. Watch them all on JMH YouTube at jamesmerrillhouse.org/archive.



The James Merrill House Foundation Launches

THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE began with just one gift: When the poet James Merrill died in 1995 he left his house at 107 Water Street to the Stonington Village Improvement Association. Thanks to the generosity of two Merrill family foundations and a number of individual supporters, the Merrill House is now building an endowment fund, to be held in a new nonprofit, the James Merrill House Foundation. The Foundation was designated

a 501(c)3 organization by the IRS this year and will manage the endowment for the benefit of Merrill House programs. After 2023, income from the JMHF will replace grants from the Merrill family foundations and supplement annual giving. Look for more about the Foundation and how you can be part of it on our website and in future newsletters, or email Bergin O'Malley, Director, Programs & Operations, at bergin.jmh@gmail.com.

Hats Off to Winners of Merrill House Creative Writing Prize

IN ADDITION TO our nationally known Writer-in-Residence program, the Merrill House is also delighted to be a long-time supporter of the creative writing program at nearby Stonington High School ("SHS"). Each year for the past twenty years, an SHS student has received the James Merrill House Prize for Creative Writing at the annual award ceremony. The prize, now worth \$500, goes to the student who, in the opinion of SHS staff, has excelled in creative writing classes that year. Former Merrill House chair Lynn Callahan credits another Stonington author, Cormac O'Malley, with originating the prize, then \$100, to boost the reputation of the Merrill House in its early days. Typically, Merrill House committee members have attended SHS's prize ceremony to present the Merrill House prize personally. Recent recipients include Claire Morehouse (2016), Athena Gutierrez (2017), Halle Anderson (2018), Jacob



Stonington High School Grads (Photo: Westerly Sun)

Whewell (2019), and Eva Dale (2020). The prize is, as Lynn noted, "a large enough award to be meaningful." Matthew Cheetham, the 2021 winner, is now in his first year at the University of Connecticut. Matthew expressed his gratitude for the prize, saying it would "help me go to UConn to study psychology, so that I can help people with mental illness." Our congratulations and best wishes to Matthew in his future endeavors.

Letters from a Friendship: James Merrill & Eleanor Perenyi

By Peter Perenyi

I RECENTLY READ decades of letters between James Merrill and Eleanor Perenyi (my “Ma,” whom I never called “Eleanor” as I do here). The two wrote to each other when they traveled or when Merrill (“Jimmy” to Eleanor), with his partner, David Jackson, were away from Stonington at their Athens house.

Eleanor’s lively in-person voice is recognizable in her published work and even more so in her letters. Jimmy’s were so entertaining that I, once again, realized how much I had missed in my more distant relationship with him, as the son of a friend. Their correspondence made the friendship more vivid than anything I could reproduce from memory. From



two writers who were obsessive revisers, they preserve the spontaneity (and sometimes looser punctuation) of first drafts.

Their friendship was part of a wider relationship between the two households. Eleanor and her mother, novelist Grace Stone (Nana to me), were, when together at their Stonington house, as much a social unit as Jimmy and David. Jimmy’s letters might begin “Eleanora Carissima,” “Dearest E” or, if addressed to both, perhaps “Dearest ones.” A “Dear Ladies” letter began, “Please do not squabble over this letter, it is for both of you.” Some of Eleanor’s letters were also addressed to David (“Dear Boys” or “Dearest J&D”).

The relationships between Jimmy and Eleanor and their respective others were embedded in a common milieu of mostly literary friends they shared world-wide. In Stonington in the late 1950s, Eleanor and Grace, Jimmy and David, and artists Robert and Isabel Morse were especially close. They became the “Surly Temple.” All were near neighbors in the village. Robert’s portrait of the group hangs in the Merrill House today. They shared a love of elaborate meals and ruthless games of croquet and bridge—before Grace, and later, Eleanor, lost most of their vision. When the writer and artist Pati Hill entered Stonington society, Eleanor reported that as “the big news,” in a letter to Jimmy and David. She added:

...but what is far more stunning, it develops that she plays bridge very well. ...Very likely she can cook too...

Jimmy and Eleanor wrote very little about the substance of their work, but they did celebrate each other’s achievements. When Jimmy won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1967 for *Nights and Days*, Eleanor wrote:

What a satisfaction! I have lived through those



In the late 1950s, author Eleanor Perenyi (left, in fur coat) and her mother, the novelist Grace Stone (right, with David Jackson and James Merrill aboard the Queen Mary), and local artists Robert and Isabel Morse (in group photo, above), dubbed themselves the “Surly Temple.” Robert Merrill’s recently restored portrait of the group now dwells in the Merrill Apartment.

ceremonies so many times in line of duty that it is a real grief not to be there (tonight, says the Paris Trib) when the heart is involved. I am longing to know if you flew to NY, spoke — oh, did you really follow Hubert Humphrey? The things that happen in life! But the real point of this is to tell you what a glow of pride and pleasure went through me when I read the news.

In 1967, Jimmy’s Ingram Merrill Foundation had provided a grant to support Eleanor’s writing, which involved extensive research, some of it requiring foreign travel. When Eleanor’s biography of Liszt was nearly done, Jimmy, wrote in a note to Grace and Eleanor:

And your book nearly done, dear E. Thank God. Might it be out next year? Mexico seems hardly enough of a reward for all that discipline...

Their discussions of the arts were not abstract or academic. They wrote about their personal reactions or those of wider audiences. In a “Dear Boys” letter, Eleanor reported:

Two concerts that included Elliot Carter pieces sent me up the wall — though I would never tell him so. How one lies to one’s avant-garde friends. Gazing at the huge, blank canvas, one murmurs, “fascinating!” and wanting to cover one’s ears at the atonal shrieks, one says, “Extraordinary, absolutely brilliant my dear Elliot.”

The letters, recounting the doings of mutual friends and acquaintances, were often gossipy. Typically, Jimmy would write and David would add a very short note. An exception, in which David took the lead and Jimmy wrote a postscript, is one of the funnier (and most uninhibited) letters. Eleanor had earlier mentioned seeing her friends Mary McCarthy and Pati Hill in Paris. This set off David’s recollection of another time in Paris, when he had just met, for the first time, an obviously tipsy, Gore Vidal:



[Gore]...used me as a listening post: “Yes, yes, Jimmy and I’ve divided the American literary scene between us.” And re a Bad review of one of his plays, where the reviewer demanded to know how GV dared criticize the USA, GV: “The fool didn’t understand that I’m bigger than the USA.” Cleaning women leaned on their mops, a haggard barman stared at us with his chin on the bar. “Barman! Another of these drinks!” I went down to the pisser, GV had just finished and was studying himself in the mirror, brushing back his wings of hair, “Am I the Eagle of American letters?” Then, incredulous voice, “Do I hear crow?!”

Jimmy took over the typewriter to finish the letter:

Allo, allo? C’est moi, pouppou. I’ll be brief, while DJ soaks in chamomile various affected areas ... Rome: what a mistake. It rained all six days. I caught cold twice. Had barely strength to totter out...

The tone of the letters in their long correspondence was not always frivolous. Eleanor suffered periodic episodes of gloom. She did not, as far as I know, treat them with medication, relying instead on what she called the “bath-bed-book defense system.” In some letters, she was quite open about her state of mind. After a party in New York, she confided to Jimmy and David:

I seem unable to meet anybody new here. The air is thick with stale friendships, lost love, and the very buildings scream “plus ça change...” I

continued on page 4



'Tis the Season

NOVEMBER WRITER in residence Michael Collier and his wife Katherine Branch admired the holiday decorations before the first annual Lobster Trap Tree Lighting at Stonington Town Docks. Local artist Cynthia Guild created a spectacular Merrill House buoy, one of five ornaments depicting local landmarks, each painted by a different artist and funded through a donation from the Stonington Village Improvement Association (SVIA).



Letters

continued from page 3

can't think why Stonington hasn't this effect, but it doesn't.

Place strongly influenced her moods. Both she and Jimmy loved to travel and found vicarious pleasure in reading accounts of one-another's journeys. Eleanor on reading of Jimmy's time in New Mexico:

How happy you must be! All that about the weather, sun, thunderstorms, and the waterfalls, the outdoors, strikes my memory of another, deeply loved life: Mexico and those mornings like the creation when I got up at 6 and went riding (can that have been me?) across a vast chaotic landscape just waking up, clouds rolling away toward the "hot country" — Indians, and smells of piñon burning in fireplaces, and all that weight of light and sky. It must be much the same in New Mexico. A mindless joy. But beware! A month too long and the typewriter begins to turn out gibberish — as above. Just thinking of it, you see.

Eleanor and Jimmy often spent Thanksgiving, and sometimes Christmas, together, but, when they were apart, they wrote about how their holidays had been. Jimmy, wrote "Dear Ladies," about his Athens Thanksgiving, using commas with abandon, to describe a stream of events:

We are having to have two turkeys — Chester Kallman is stuffing one à la Grecque with rice + raisons + pine-nuts, and creaming onions, and making a pumpkin pie; and I am stuffing one with corn bread + sausage and steaming choux de Bruxelles, and making Bloody Maries, and we shall be eight, or five, or three, it's been getting more complicated all day, ever since nine when the bell rang and a woman from next door began screaming at me about the hideous black soot that pours incessantly from our furnace onto her rooftop clothesline."



Eleanor Perenyi in her Stonington garden

Jimmy was sympathetic and resolved to fix the problem, but wondered

...how to convince her, meanwhile, that black sheets and underwear are in?... It is dusk, Lycabettos is outlined against a clear violet sky. In the unlit hall Maisie [his calico cat] jingles her identity necklace. She has smelled turkey giblets!

Eleanor lived to ninety-one. She outlived many friends, whose loss she felt deeply. Prominent among them was Jimmy. Although she was fortunate to continue meeting others who became close, she would sometimes say, "The best cocktail party in Stonington is in the graveyard."

Among those buried there are Eleanor and Grace, Jimmy and David. Their headstones, on a mossy ridge, are near neighbors.

With thanks to Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser, who helped me locate the Perenyi letters at Washington University in St. Louis. Special thanks also to Timothy Young and Michael Rush at the Yale Beinecke Library, where Merrill's letters are archived, and Joel Minor of Washington University. They provided the letters, despite COVID short staffing or archiving still underway. — Peter Perenyi

Pillow Talk

FOR YEARS, scuzzy orange shreds of a 1960s crocheted pillow were found stuck to the slipcover of the white wicker settee in Merrill's dining room. "We'd gather them up to patch bald spots on the aging pillows, until there was no way to hide the fact that the pillow was mortally disintegrating," recalls Sibby Lynch, who oversees the Merrill House collections and conservation team.

The pop-orange-red-yellow acrylic flower pillow made the already intensely orange room light up with an explosion of even brighter color. But acrylic yarn hardens and breaks over time. "We needed to find someone who could deconstruct the crumbling mess and fashion us a non-crumbling new one.



We were told that the perfect person lived in New London and might be interested. So in the depths of last Covid winter we passed off the wretched mess to Gale McGee." McGee was determined to figure out how to make a twin of the original pillow. It took months of trial and error, using long lasting vibrant wool ordered from Denmark.



Pièce de resistance among all the flower powered pillows on the settee

"By June Gale achieved the miraculous feat of cloning a 1960s homemade crocheted pillow," says Lynch. "We celebrated this contribution to the Merrill House Collection at a gathering of our donors this past summer, and presented Gale with an envelope containing a reward for her astonishing work. She even made a second pillow just in case!"

What's New?

Catching up with past Merrill Fellows

MOLLY ANDERS (September 2014) I am a Writing Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where I'll be until May working on my short story collection. If any of the Merrill team fancy a blustery walk in the dunes, look me up!

SALLY BALL (December 2012) This past May, I was in Paris the week the city reopened to itself, and gave a reading from my 2019 poetry collection *Hold Sway* (Barrow Street Press) at the Museum of Fine Arts. There will also be an exhibition at Arizona State University's Harry Wood Gallery from January 18 to February 10.

LYDIA CONKLIN (September 2012) My book *Rainbow, Rainbow: Stories* will be out on May 31, 2022. I'll be giving an online reading for the Pushcart Prize on January 17th at Literati Bookstore in Ann Arbor.

PETER FILKINS (Spring 2012) This October I read from my new book of poems, *Water / Music*, at KGB in New York City, as well as at the Brattleboro Literary Festival.

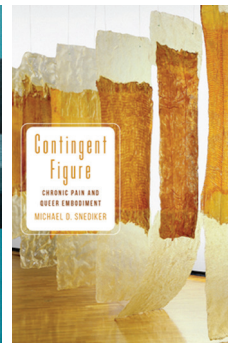
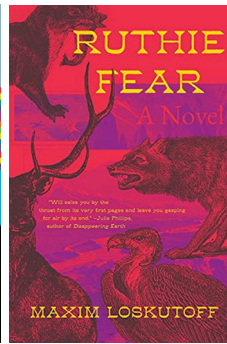
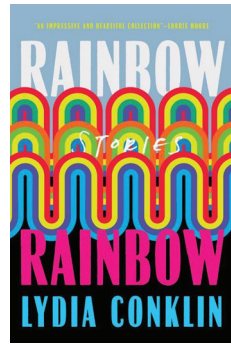
GABRIELLA GAGE (August 2019) I had an essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* about a baby found in a dumpster entitled "True Crime's Deceits: The Genrefication of Tragedy"; a story in the *Boston Globe* about connecting via ham radio during the pandemic, and a piece about a 17-year-old clairvoyant in 19th century Tuscany in *Truly*Adventurous*.

WALT HUNTER (September 2020) My poem "False Dawn" was published in *The Atlantic* this September. And a few sonnets—"The Swimmers"—Stonington-set, with cameos by some familiar faces, appeared in the *Hopkins Review*.

MAXIM LOSKUTOFF (November 2017) My novel *Ruthie Fear* (W.W. Norton) was just named the 2021 High Plains Book Award winner for fiction. Hope to see you all in Stonington one day soon.

SIGRID NUNEZ (December 2019-January 2019) *What Are You Going Through*, my latest novel, is now out in paperback. Also, I had a short story called "It Will Come Back to You" in November 4 issue of the *London Review of Books*.

DAN O'BRIEN (June 2013) I had two new books launched in mid-September: *Our Cancers: A Chronicle in Poems*, and *A Story That Happens: On Playwriting, Childhood, & Other Traumas*. I'm teaching for the semester in Goddard College's MFA program, and giving readings here and there, including a reading



at Poetry London's 100th issue celebration at the Royal Festival Hall.

WALTER PERRIE (August 2017) I have a new book of interviews—*Walter Perrie in Conversation with Scottish Writers*—just out this August.

MICHAEL SNEDIKER (Fall 2006) My monograph, *Contingent Figure: Chronic Pain & Queer Embodiment*, was published in early 2021. I was recently promoted to full professor at the University of Houston, and spent the first weeks of the summer at Yaddo, working

on a new poetry manuscript called *Meanderest*.

TERESE SVOBODA (November 2015) I have poems forthcoming in *Harvard Review*, *Glimpse*, *Plant-Human Quarterly*, and *Lana Turner Journal*, stories forthcoming in *Litro*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Taint Taint Taint*, and am in the process of closing contracts on three books of fiction!

MARK WUNDERLICH (Spring 2017) I received a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry for 2021, and my book *God of Nothingness* was published in January of this year.

A Poet's Full Circle

THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY 2021 features a long poem by James Longenbach written during his Spring 2019 residency at the Merrill Apartment and featured in his recent collection *Forever* (W.W. Norton). In a prefatory note, Jim tells how the poem came about:

As a teenager, I assembled a copy of a seventeenth-century Flemish harpsichord, the parts milled by Zuckermann Harpsichords in the seaside village of Stonington, Connecticut. I then read the poems of James Merrill, who lived in that village until his death in 1995... "In the Village" came to me while my wife, Joanna Scott, and I were unexpectedly living for a few months in Merrill's house in Stonington. We loved the dust of snow, which was fake, laid down for a movie being filmed there. We loved the people of the village, and every day we lived in James Merrill's library: here were the books of our youth, frozen in time, as nothing else was. Assembling this poem about the village, I found myself thinking about its people and, perhaps most of all, about those books, about how thrilling it was to touch them again.

An excerpt from "In the Village":

Ash-blond, tall, a sweater
Knotted by its sleeves around his neck,
A boy is leaning on a bicycle. Deftly when
she reaches him

A girl slips to the grass, one hand straightening her skirt,

The other tugging at the boy,
Who remains standing, to sit beside her.

Their heads are close
Enough to be touching;
Their lips are still—

A book is the future.
You dream
Of reading it, and once you've finished,
it's a miracle, you know the past.

The sky fills with stars. The sun
Climbs every morning
Over Watch Hill, dropping behind the
harbor at dusk.

Water Street runs past
Church and Wall,
Harmony and School,
Until it crosses Omega, by the sea.



James Longenbach occasionally strums a lute ("very badly — it was the harpsichord that pushed me to Stonington").

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

JANUARY 22, 2022

John Cotter

MARCH 26, 2022

Kamran Javadizadeh

MAY 7, 2022

Mehdi Tavana Okasi

JUNE 2, 2022

Annual Merrill Lecture:
Rosanna Warren

JUNE 11, 2022

Poetry on the Porch:
Yale Younger Poet Robert Wood Lynn

AUGUST 27, 2022

Lauren Sandler

For details visit jamesmerrillhouse.org



COMING SOON
Spring 2022

A Home for Writers — A Writer's Home

In a few months the James Merrill House Visitor's Center will be "popping up" in this space, creating a street-level presence for our programs and initiatives. Stay tuned!