

JMH

James Merrill

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

JAMES MERRILL'S WORLD DRAWS A CROWD

THE GOAL WAS AMBITIOUS: To create an exhibit for the Merrill House Visitors Center based on the “fantastical” bat wallpaper that hung in the sitting room of 107 Water Street, and thereby develop a prototype for showcasing the Merrill Apartment and its rich collections. The Visitors Center opened in June 2022 to make the Merrill House and its programs more accessible to visitors year-round. Conservation ConneCTion generously awarded the James Merrill House a \$4,000 Museum Makeover grant to support the exhibition. The space was compact—but the Merrill House Collections team rose to the challenge.

A traveling curator, Maggie Dimock, worked with the Merrill House Collections Co-Chairs, Jenny Dixon and Sibby Lynch, the Visitors Center head, Cynthia Elliott, and the Merrill House Director, Kim Hughes. Merrill House Committee Members Laura Mathews and David Schulz provided editorial and graphic design services for the exhibit brochure. Research on the bat wallpaper had been carried out by former Condé Nast editor Dee Aldrich for an article in the Fall 2022 Merrill House newsletter, and architectural historian Rachel Carley had researched the history of the Merrill Apartment for the National Historic Landmark application.

With helpful cues from Maggie Dimock the team was able to focus on the ways in which the symbolism represented in the wallpaper images resonated with Merrill’s poetry, and reflected his unique world view.

Dimock also offered advice on wall texts that explain the exhibit and the exhibition furniture.

Both the design and manufacturing of the vitrine were donated by Sam Morse of Southside Design & Building, whose grandparents had been close friends of James Merrill. The Morse family also kindly loaned Isabel Morse’s bat fountain for our window display.

The success of this project has greatly elevated the Visitor Center experience, providing a locus for education about James Merrill and his

surroundings, in addition to being a place where sightseers and locals browse and purchase books signed by current writers-in-residence. By creating a story-telling center, the Merrill House has taken an important step engaging in dialogue with visitors and resident fellows—including, through collaboration with the Stonington Free Library, a special children’s bat-making art project that coincided with the exhibition’s opening on Halloween.



ON SEPTEMBER 28, at La Grua Center, Annual Merrill Lecturer Sir Jonathan Bate delved into the poetry of Rachel Carson’s “Sea Trilogy” and the watery environmentalism of poets Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and James Merrill. Bate is Foundation Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University and a Senior Research Fellow in English Literature at Oxford University.





Kim Hughes

New Director of the James Merrill House

Kim Hughes has joined the Merrill House Staff as Director. After working in education and healthcare, Hughes is excited to be immersed in the non-profit sector. As a writer and content coordinator for local print magazine *Mystic Neighbors*—spotlighting notable individuals and businesses in the Mystic-Groton community—she brings with her a strong ability for storytelling and building community relations. She'll be responsible for overseeing functions of the subcommittees that make up the Merrill House governance, and optimizing communications between them. With an emphasis on maintaining the quality of the Writer-in-Residence program and enhancing the organization's development efforts, she's eager to strengthen the voice of the JMHC both within Stonington and the writing community at large.

by the James Merrill House Committee as the center for the internationally renowned Writer-in-Residence Program, with a blended use of space for commercial tenants. Significantly, the building and Merrill's apartment on the 3rd and 4th floors were designated a National Historic Landmark in 2016. The JMHC is pleased to welcome new member Meg Lyons, a prominent architect who specializes in historic building restoration. Meg will help guide the Building



Meg Lyons

sub-Committee through this important long-term restoration process.

Not surprisingly, the biggest challenge is water management.

Poor site drainage on the east side of the building has resulted in a rotted sill plate. Repairs will include excavation, installation of a waterproofing membrane, and temporary staging to shore up the building while the sill plate is replaced. The gutters and leaders on the building need further analysis to ensure they are sufficient to handle the amount of downfall during heavy rains. A redesign of the drainage system may be required. There are priorities for interior spaces in the building as well to address damage to finishes. Cracked plaster, an area of delaminating ceiling, and the presence of asbestos-containing materials all need attention. The Building Committee is currently confirming priorities and making a long-range plan for funding needed repairs.

James Merrill House Committee

Chair

Kathryn Nason Burchenal

Vice-Chair

Penny Duckham

Ted Beck

Deb Blanchard

Jenny Dixon

Denise Easton

Cynthia Elliott

Bill Fowler

John Groton

Sibby Lynch

Meg Lyons

Laura Mathews

Janet McClendon

Scott Muller

Annie Philbrick

Ruth Saunders

David Schulz

Joanna Scott

Willard Spiegelman

Advisory Committee

Rachel Carley

Deborah Garrison

Margaret Gibson

Daniel Hall

Langdon Hammer

Chip Kidd

David Leeming

Robin Magowan

Paul Merrill

Lorrie Moore

Carl Phillips

Ivy Pochoda

Kate Rushin

Bruce Snider

Stephen Yenser

James Merrill House Director

Kim Hughes

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Programs and Outreach Consultant

Bergin O'Malley

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

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Conservation Matters

Through support from the State Historic Preservation Office of the Department of Economic and Community Development, the James Merrill House Committee (JMHC) has taken an important step towards preserving our building at 107 Water Street. The Building sub-Committee has engaged the services of Lothrop Associates Architects to thoroughly document existing conditions and propose a plan for recommended restoration.

Built in 1906, the eclectically styled, shingle-clad building at 107 Water Street originally contained street-level retail space, second-floor clubrooms, and third-floor living quarters. In 1956, James Merrill purchased the property with his partner David Noyes Jackson, affectionately dubbing it "The Old Eyesore." They used the third floor as their private living and guest space. Adding an attic studio and rooftop deck, the men transformed their quarters with a distinctively quirky décor that remains largely intact. In 1995, Merrill bequeathed the building to the Stonington Village Improvement Association (SVIA). The building is maintained



DESCENDING A SPIRAL STAIRCASE

By Langdon Hammer

IN HIS MEMOIR *A Different Person*, from 1993, James Merrill reflects: “As in the classic account of Sarah Bernhardt descending a spiral staircase—she stood still and it revolved around her—my good fortune was to stay in one place while the closet simply disintegrated.” The allusion to the Divine Sarah is amusing—and instructive. Gay identity for Merrill, before people were calling it “gay identity,” involved cross-gender identification and self-conscious theatricality, wit and style. Eventually, when less stigma and shame attached to homosexuality (less, never none), Merrill could be seen for, and openly declare, who he was and always had been.

But the closet never “simply disintegrated.” It was gradually dismantled by decades of determined political protest. The long arc of postwar LGBTQ+ history is the background—the revolving staircase—of Merrill’s queer life-story. The sexual experimentation of American men and women both in the service and on the home front during World War Two; McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare; the Stonewall riots in 1969; Gay Liberation; AIDS and the ACT UP protests of the 1980s and 1990s—these were the revolutions going on while Merrill stayed “in one place.”

For Merrill, homosexuality involved sex, yes, but also the discovery of alternatives to family life and the invention of alternative families. Merrill found David Jackson’s wedding ring sexy when they met in 1953. It was a nice cover for a queer couple and perhaps something of a joke between the two of them. But it was also the symbol of a genuine and lasting attachment. David loved his wife Sewelly—Doris Sewell Jackson—and so did Jimmy. (“Sewelly is heaven!” he wrote in his notebook when he met her.) Sewelly was homosexual too, and she and David would remain married for the rest of their lives. She is buried in the Stonington Cemetery, close to David and Jimmy.

That was not the only unusual social unit Merrill and Jackson were part of. With their Stonington friends the Morses and the Stones, they met over Bridge, gossiped intensively, and cooked holiday dinners together. Isabel Morse was a painter and an heiress who suffered from crippling arthritis, while her husband Robert was a wit, sometime poet, and secret homosexual. Grace Stone and her daughter Eleanor Perényi, writers, world travelers, and authorities on all matters cultural, were devoted to each other and known to quarrel.



James Merrill flanked by his partner David Jackson and Sewelly Jackson

Once Merrill brought his friend Louise Fitzhugh to their house for dinner (Fitzhugh was the lesbian author of the *Harriet the Spy* books, with whom Jimmy had had a brief affair). Always mischievous, Merrill neglected to tell her the Stones were mother and daughter. Back on the street after dinner, she turned to him and exclaimed, “How long have they been together!” Or so the rich, probably apocryphal story goes.

Distinguished gay and lesbian writers signed the guest book at 107 Water Street: Yukio Mishima, Edmund White, and Elizabeth Bishop, among many others. Unrecorded were the visits of high school teens who climbed the stairs to play board games with David and Jimmy, look at dirty magazines, and drink beer. One local boy would remain Merrill’s occasional lover for more than twenty years and become a character in a few of his poems. But sexual adventures like these were a risk for anyone living in the middle of Stonington, albeit three stories above Water Street. Recall that “sodomy” (not to mention sex with minors) was illegal in the United States. By the 1960s, Merrill and Jackson were spending long stretches of every year in Athens. Greece was still a traditional society where, by an interesting paradox, it was comparatively easy to explore same-sex relationships, at least for these well-to-do Americans. Merrill and Jackson experienced the Swinging Sixties and Gay Liberation primarily in Greece.

The AIDS-era that followed was harrowing. Merrill divided his time between Water Street, Key West, and his grandmother’s apartment on the Upper East Side. His closest friends, David Kalstone and Tony Parigory, died of AIDS. After 1986, Merrill too was

living with AIDS and with increasingly severe, debilitating symptoms. For gay men, stigma and shame were back in full force via Kaposi’s sarcoma, telltale weight loss, and tabloid frenzies capitalizing on the suffering of anyone with AIDS who was famous and wealthy.

Merrill’s decision to remain silent—publicly—about his diagnosis, while ACT UP insisted “Silence=Death,” needs to be seen in that context. In a way, he was now right back at the top of the staircase, back in the closet. But in fact his public silence about his condition allowed him to live and write as he wished, and virtually all of his late, great poetry has something to do with the experience of living with AIDS. However you judge it, Merrill found a virtue—and creative empowerment—in staying “in one place.”

This article is excerpted from a lecture given this past September by Langdon Hammer, author of *James Merrill: Life and Art*, hosted by the Stonington Historical Society and the James Merrill House in coordination with the traveling exhibition “A Brief History of Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ Community.”

**PLEASE SUPPORT
OUR WORK.**



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AUTUMN FERN by Henri Cole

I hope you won't mind a fern on your grave.
 Standing on the shovel to dig a deep hole,
 I'm a year younger than you are now.
 I've written a will and reread the Old Masters.
 Swimming out to the breakwater, maybe
 a part of me is you touching buoy 328
 before turning back to the borough beach.
 Maybe my hairy body is like a drone's:
 eating pollen grains from a thousand flowers,
 spreading nectar across the comb in darkness,
 then flapping my wings to dry up the water
 and hasten the creation of viscous honey.
 If the lane to the dead is generative, as you said,
 let this hole be a point of light.

This poem first appeared in the December 11, 2023 issue of The New Yorker. Henri Cole was writer-in-residence at the Merrill House in September 2021.



Belfast-based poet Paul Maddern (November 2023 Fellow) led a discussion at the James Merrill House Visitors Center, chatting about Irish poets and the Donegal landscape.



The Merrill House's 10th annual "Poetry on the Porch" event featured August 2023 Fellow, poet, and critic Maureen McLane, who read from her new collection *What You Want* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).



National Book Award-winning author and former fellow Sigrid Nunez (Dec 2018-Jan 2019) was joined by Merrill House Committee member Willard Spiegelman for a lively conversation about Nunez's latest novel, *The Vulnerables*, hosted by Bank Square Books.

What's New?

Catching up with past Merrill Fellows

MOIRA EGAN (Spring 2015) I received the 2023 Raiziss/De Palchi Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets for my translation of *Letters of Black Fire* by Italian poet Giorgiomaria Cornelio. This \$25,000 prize is given for the translation into English of a significant work of modern Italian poetry.

PETER FILKINS (Spring 2012) My essay commemorating the 50th anniversary of Ingeborg Bachmann's death appeared in an October issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*. In addition, I had two poems set to music by Thomas Parente in his extended composition *Island Elegy and Aubade*, which was performed at the Montclair Unitarian Church and the Boston Conservatory of Music this past January and February.

CAOLINN HUGHES (December 2016-January 2017) I have big news: a Cullman Center Fellowship at New York Public Library this fall and a new novel in spring 2024 with Riverhead. Perhaps a bit soon to start the NYC apartment hunt—but can't wait. My love to the JMHC crew.

WALT HUNTER (September 2020) *The American House Poem, 1945-2021* is out from Oxford University Press. I am happy to come to any firesides to chat about it...

ADAM GIANELLI (Spring 2016) I had a poem in *The Atlantic* this past April entitled "AAAAadam"!

KELLE GROOM (Spring 2014) *How to Live: A Memoir in Essays* (Tupelo Press) came out in October and explores the idea of home and how to live a creative life.

NICHOLAS BOGGS WINS NONFICTION GRANT

Congratulations to Merrill Fellow Nicholas Boggs (December 2020-January 2021) on receiving a \$40,000 Whiting Foundation Creative Nonfiction Grant, for *James Baldwin: A Love Story* (forthcoming from Farrar, Straus and Giroux) "which draws on extensive archival material newly brought to light by the author to tell the overlapping stories of Baldwin's most sustaining intimate and artistic relationships."



KAMRAN JAVADIZADEH (February-March 2022) My newest things are three pieces for *The New Yorker* on writers Maggie Millner, Megan Fernandes, and Ben Lerner. I also had an essay in *The Yale Review* on poetry and mourning. My podcast is on a little hiatus but will pick up again soon!

NATE KLUG (September 2016) My most recent publication is *Beautiful Meteor* (Economy Press), a booklet of nine poems about care and freedom, set among the changing seasons of a New England town. My full-length collection *Hosts and Guests* came out from Princeton University Press and includes a few poems that were written in Stonington.

MAUREEN MCLANE (August 2023) It was a magical time at the James Merrill House in August—truly restorative, special, and inspiring. I had two readings, both wonderfully arranged events: one at the Stonington Historical Society, coordinated with themes of queer life/CT, the other part of the "Poetry on the Porch" series. My first book of poems, *What You Want*, came out this past spring from FSG. I'm now finishing up a book of prose, *My Poetics*, coming in Spring 2024 from the University of Chicago Press.

MATT MINICUCCI (December 2019-January 2020) My latest collection of poems, *Dual*, was released in October. It's the first collection I've done an audiobook for. I am looking forward to visiting Stonington over the holidays.

ANNA NOYES (November 2014) I wanted to share that my debut novel, *The Blue Maiden*, is forthcoming from Grove Atlantic in May 2024.

DAN O'BRIEN (June 2013) I have a new book of poems, *Survivor's Notebook*, coming from Acre Books, as well as a memoir, *From Scarsdale: A Childhood*, and a drama, *True Story: A Trilogy*—both from Dalkey Archive Press. Also I have personal essays upcoming in the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Poetry London*, and *Literary Hub*.

TERESE SVOBODA (November 2015) *The Long Swim*, a collection of stories that won the Juniper Prize, will be published in March 2024 by University of Massachusetts Press. I've started to collect bookings for *Roxy and Coco*, a speculative fiction described as "The sweet spot between Rachel Ingalls' Mrs. Caliban, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, and James Purdy's *I Am Elijah Thrush*."



"My last day in residence at the Merrill House last year, I was asked to type up a poem on J.D. McClatchy's wonderfully big thumping typewriter as a keepsake for the Stonington Library. I did, and the poem found a second Connecticut home at *The Yale Review*."
—Laura Kolbe

GREG WRENN (April-May 2021) The book I worked on at the JMHC, *Mothership: A Memoir of Wonder and Crisis*, now has a cover. Here's the publisher's synopsis: "A dazzling, evidence-based account of one man's quest to heal from complex PTSD by turning to endangered coral reefs and psychedelic plants after traditional therapies failed—and his awakening to the need for us to heal the planet as well." It will be released on March 26, 2024.

James Merrill House
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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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



“The Connecticut poet James Merrill wrote a 560-page epic poem using a Ouija board. Even stranger? The poem was a work of genius that won him nearly every major literary prize...”
 So observes cartoonist Will Dowd, whose comic strip capturing Merrill’s nightly séances with his partner David Jackson recently appeared in The Boston Globe Ideas section. Dowd holds an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU, where he was a national Jacob K. Javits Fellow, and a Master of Science from MIT. His writing and artwork have appeared in The Rialto, Post Road Magazine, and NPR.org.

Calendar of Events

ADRIENNE RAPHEL

January 13, 5-6pm virtual reading
 January 17, 5:30-6:30 workshop

LISA KO

February 24, 5-6pm virtual reading

JUDITH DUPRÉ

May 18, 5-6pm virtual reading

TOCHUKWU OKAFOR

August 24, 5-6pm virtual reading

Readings accessible via James Merrill House
 Facebook and Youtube

To learn more about these and future Merrill House events sign up for email announcements at www.jamesmerrillhouse.org or follow us on Facebook, and Instagram

The first writers in residence came to the James Merrill House shortly after Merrill’s death, in 1995. Over 100 writers have visited since, staying in his home and reading his books. Thanks to his legacy, the house now belongs to the Stonington Village Improvement Association, and is an ongoing inspiration for writers and poets.