



Penn
English

NEWSLETTER



WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR



I am proud to serve as Chair of Penn's amazing English department and excited to welcome you to another year of teaching and learning.

This past summer, in a bland airport bookstore, I came across Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, read it in two sittings, realized I had somehow never read *The Remains of the Day* or any of Ishiguro's other incredible novels, and started making my way through them all. That thrill of meeting an author who speaks to you and of knowing you can read much more of their work is something I hope never leaves you. I think we need it now. As we are rapidly surrounded by AI-generated prose, competent but generic and derivative, the importance of precise, honest, and new ways of speaking, writing, and thinking only becomes clearer.

We may be immersed in social media fueled by our basest emotions, but we can find hope in grappling with the big questions posed by *King Lear* and *Paradise Lost*, by *Invisible Man* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, by [insert your favorite work of art here]. Understanding our world, our languages, our cultures more carefully feels urgent to me: this is the work we try to do with our students every day, and train our graduate students to do someday with theirs. I feel privileged to lead this department, and I would love to hear about your own time in Fisher-Bennett Hall, about how it has mattered to you and your world. May you continue to find authors who thrill you.

Zachary Lesser, Chair and Edward W. Kane Professor of English
University of Pennsylvania

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NEW FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Lilith Todd

Lilith Todd studies 17th- and 18th-century British, American, and Caribbean literature, care work in the past and present, and poetics across literary forms.

Her articles cover topics such as the poetic meter of an eighteenth-century washerwoman, the bad and boring feelings elicited from skimming colonial natural histories, and birth control devices, like IUDs, as reading technologies. Her book in progress traces nursing as a set of highly generative material and literary practices in the long eighteenth century. During the eighteenth century, “nursing” referred to a wide range of activities from breastfeeding a child, to washing soiled sheets, to watching over someone confined in a hospital: what we would today call care work. How authors wrote about the variety and complexity of nursing in the past can help us, she believes, make sense of the complex social meanings of care today.



Before coming to the University of Pennsylvania, she taught “Literature Humanities” in Columbia’s Core Curriculum and served as managing editor of *Synopsis: A Health Humanities Journal*. She received her PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University and B.A. in History and in English (with honors) from Brown University.

RETIREMENTS

Since our last newsletter, four renowned Professors of English have retired. **Rita Barnard** taught courses in African literature, global modernism, and American literature, and she has also served as director of Comparative Literature and Gender and Women’s Studies. Most recently, she edited the *Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, as well as translating and preparing for publication a history of the Boer War by her father. **Toni Bowers** is a scholar of eighteenth-century literature, on which she published several important studies on gender, sexuality, and marriage, and she taught beloved courses on Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. She has also published on Charlie Chaplin, vaudeville, and dance, and she is currently editing two unpublished memoirs by colleagues of Chaplin. The dynamic duo of **Suvir Kaul** and **Ania Loomba** came to Penn together in 2003 and retired together last year. Kaul always retained his love of eighteenth-century poetry but also taught many courses on contemporary South Asian poetry and the literature of partition, and he has published important monographs in both areas. He served as Chair of English (2007–10) and helped to revitalize Penn’s chapter of the AAUP. Loomba taught courses in Shakespeare and early modern literature, postcolonial, feminist, and critical race studies. Several of her books are standard references in the field, and her work has been translated into Italian, Turkish, Japanese, Indonesian, Swedish, and Polish.

Of course, there is so much more to say about each of these colleagues who shaped our department and our English major for generations. And they continue to contribute to the intellectual life of Fisher-Bennett Hall. If you have memories of any of these professors that you would like to share, we would love to hear from you! Please email info@english.upenn.edu.

- Zachary Lesser, Chair of English

SPECIAL EVENTS, PROJECTS, AND CLASSES

Professors Zachary Lesser and Whitney Trettien on Shakespearean ‘Archival Discovery’ in Penn Libraries

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

In a sealed glass case behind a locked paneled door in the historic Henry Lea Library at Penn is a burned 17th-century Shakespeare Folio, the blackened paper creating a ring around scorched pages with a few readable sentences.

Part of the Penn Libraries collection, the charred Folio belonged to Edwin Forrest, the great Shakespearean actor and Philadelphia native, in the 1800s. The relic is described in an essay about “archival discovery,” published in the fall issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, written by Penn School of Arts & Sciences faculty Zachary Lesser, the Edward W. Kane Professor of English and associate chair of the English Department, and Whitney Trettien, associate professor of English and faculty director of the Price Lab for Digital Humanities.



[Continue reading this Penn Today coverage.](#)



From the Archives: Photograph of Penn’s first female law graduate

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

In the sepia-toned photograph, a woman stands slightly apart from the crowd atop the stairs in front of the massive wooden doors of College Hall. Looking at the camera, she is turned slightly to the side, her head bare, dark hair parted down the middle and pulled tightly back, a brooch clasp at her throat. She is the only woman among the 43 posing for the image. The others are all men, dressed in dark suits with white shirts, wearing or holding top hats, bowlers, and skimmers, some also with canes.

The photograph, measuring 10x13 inches, was a recent gift of Peter Conn, retired professor of English and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. “We have had the photo in its handsome frame for decades. I do not recall where I picked it up, but I assume at a thrift shop, or perhaps even an antique dealer, of which there used to be many in Philadelphia,” Conn wrote in an email. “The College Hall steps confirmed that it was obviously a Penn picture. I was delighted to learn from Jim Duffin how significant the picture proved to be.”

[Coverage about Professor Peter Conn’s Gift to Penn Libraries continues in this Penn Today article.](#)

Patti Smith as a Kelly Writers House Fellow

BY LOUISA SHEPARD

The singer, songwriter, poet, author, and musician Patti Smith was in residence at Penn's Kelly Writers House for two days, telling stories about the people in her life throughout the decades, reading passages from her books, and performing her songs.

Smith, who rose to fame in the 1970s through the New York City punk rock movement, gave two public appearances to capacity audiences but most important was meeting with the 22 undergraduate students in the unique Kelly Writers House Fellows course, now in its 27th year and taught by Al Filreis, Writers House faculty director.

"Joy. Joy, and the future," Smith said about her Writers House experience, noting the "sense of curiosity and community. We're all different ages sitting here, but I got to talk to young students. Everyone that was here was either thinking, working, writing, and then, of course, making food. All the things that people were doing here, every moment has been great."

[*Read the full article on Patti Smith at the Kelly Writers House in this feature from Penn Today.*](#)



Through Literature of Care course, a curriculum of compassion

BY BRANDON BAKER

Literature of Care is taught by Senior Lecturer of English and History of Art Dr. Aaron Levy, who weaves in storytelling from the Penn Medicine Listening Lab and dozens of essays and artwork highlighted by Rx/Museum—both of which are humanistic representations of the practice of medicine and the patient experience. The class also collaborates with the Health Ecologies Lab, a group of scholars who research environmental and social influences on health and well-being; that lab is housed at Public Trust in partnership with the School of Social Policy & Practice (SP2). Class sessions begin by listening to a story from the Listening Lab.

The idea: to emphasize listening as an act integral to healing and repair.

[*Find out more about Levy's popular seminar in this Penn Today profile.*](#)

Processing the Past

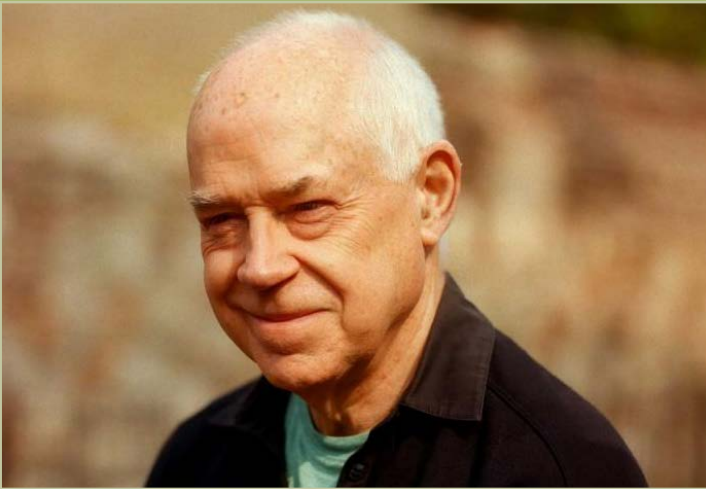
BY JUDY HILL

A hands-on graduate-level internship course co-taught by Zita Nunes, Associate Professor of English, and Holly Mengel, Head of Archives and Manuscripts Processing at Penn Libraries, reveals the complex world of academic archiving.

The idea for the course came about, explains Nunes, when she was graduate chair of the English department and saw how students' career goals were changing. While some PhD students still aimed for tenure track positions, others sought alternate avenues. The course she developed with Mengel equips students with skills in archival processing and introduces them to professional archiving as a possible career path.



[*Find out more about Professor Nunes's course in this OMNIA feature.*](#)



The Wallace Tales

BY SUSAN AHLBORN

It seems like a typical summer day for David Wallace, Judith Rodin Professor of English, whose interests range far beyond the medieval literature on which he is a renowned expert. An hour-long conversation with him touches on cathedrals and horses, on Geoffrey Chaucer, the Enigma code breakers, steam trains, free-range parenting, Marxism and Catholicism in East Germany, the climate crisis, the Olympics, Longfellow, the British royal family, and the new British PM.

Suggest that he's a Renaissance man and Wallace laughs. "No, I'm not a Renaissance man, I'm a medieval man. It's because I'm well-informed by all my contributors. I look for a hundred smart people to tell me the things I need to know, and then I seem smarter than I really am."

Wallace is being modest, but he really is working with 100 smart people (and counting) on his latest project, a book and website on national epics. It's the most recent chapter in a tale that spans decades and genres, encompassing 10 books, multiple teaching awards, and a move to the U.S. to be with his future wife. He has traveled to learn more about the medieval literature that is his life's work, the world in which he lives, and how the two connect. Like Chaucer—Wallace's first literary love and his scholarly focus for decades—he is authoring a story that interweaves duty and delight.

[*Learn more about Professor Wallace and his research in this special profile in OMNIA magazine.*](#)

Students of the Occult

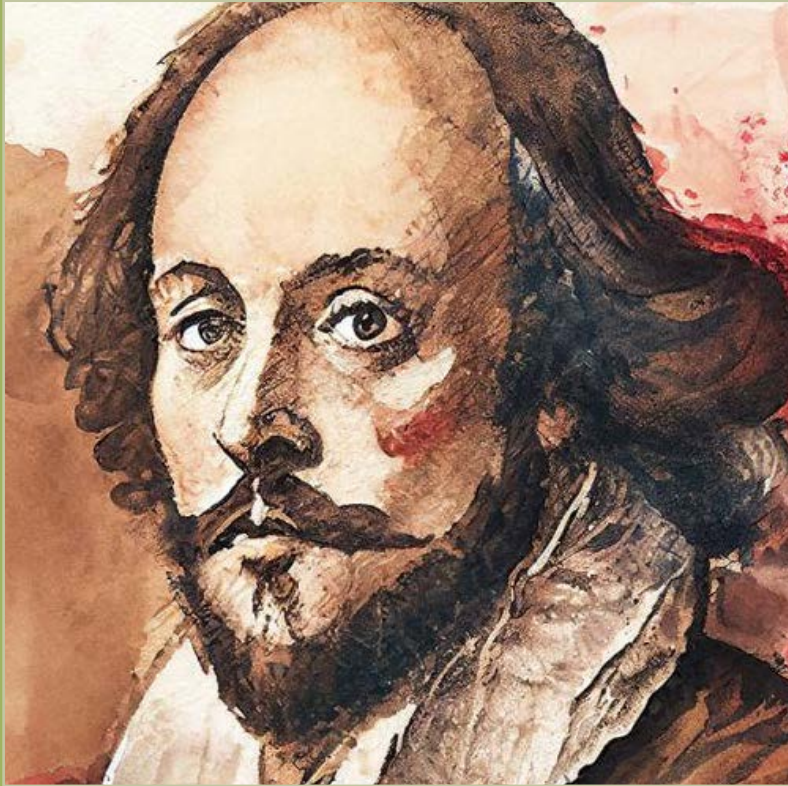
BY BLAKE COLE

Three mottled crones stirring a frothing cauldron—it’s a near-unanimous mental evocation when the word “witch” dare be uttered. But the trope made famous by Shakespeare, says Dr. Becky Friedman, only scratches the surface of something ancient and storied that cuts across time and geography and is mired in violence, and, eventually, comes to epitomize how society molds taboo subjects into entertainment.

The lore behind the witch archetype is inextricably tied to the development and distribution of the printed word and is enmeshed in all manner of fraught topics, according to Friedman, Associate Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of English. In her class, *Witchcraft and the Occult*, students examine said texts, mostly of European origin, that document firsthand historical accounts of witchcraft and demonic possession, giving them an eerie, intimate window into how accusations of occult practices resulted in all-too-real legal proceedings and executions.



[*Read all about Dr. Becky Friedman’s popular undergraduate course, *Witchcraft and the Occult*, in this OMNIA profile..*](#)



The Play(book)’s the Thing

BY JUDY HILL

Was Shakespeare the most famous dramatist of his day? Zachary Lesser, Edward W. Kane Professor of English, often poses this question to students in his Introduction to Shakespeare class. One way to generate an answer is to consult the Database of Early English Playbooks (DEEP), which Lesser co-created more than 20 years ago.

An interactive catalogue of every printed play produced in England, Scotland, and Ireland from the time when printing first began through 1660, DEEP—which first went online in 2007—has recently been revised and relaunched as DEEP 2.0, with support from Penn’s Price Lab for Digital Humanities.

[*Learn more about DEEP in this Penn Today feature.*](#)

PENN IN LONDON

Spending the Semester Abroad

The Penn English Program in London (PEPL) offers students the chance to study abroad in one of the most diverse and exciting urban centers in the world. Living at King’s College in the heart of the UK capital, English majors and minors also travel around the country together and attend world-class performances (weekly!) in London’s theater district. Because PEPL boasts a Penn Faculty Director—an English professor who joins the group—and a budget for travel, the program dramatically enhances the typical study-abroad experience, building expeditions into its infrastructure, all organized and sponsored by Penn. In Fall 2025, Jed Esty, Vartan Gregorian Professor of English, is leading PEPL.



We are sad to report that the long-running and beloved Penn English Program in London has been canceled for next year and the foreseeable future due to budget cuts at Penn Abroad. We do hope we can restart the program in the future if funding should become available. Read the coverage of this news in a recent [Daily Pennsylvanian article](#).

The Summer Abroad Experience

As one of the Penn Summer Abroad centerpiece programs for over 30 years, the London Summer Abroad program offers students the chance to study literature, theater, art, and culture at King’s while traveling inside and outside of London with a Penn English faculty member.



UNDERGRADUATE INTERNSHIPS

Penn English recently launched an internship program specifically for current majors and minors. We partnered with our very own alums to place undergrads into unique professional positions across the United States. We look forward to expanding on these summer opportunities in future years and [welcome our alumni to reach out](#) should they be interested in recruiting current students for these roles. The Department wishes, on behalf of our students, to thank our alumni for the generosity of their vision.

Chloe Chang, Summer 2025 Intern at the Penn Medicine Listening Lab



Chloe Chang ('26) spent the summer interning with the Penn Medicine Listening Lab, a storytelling initiative that amplifies the voices of patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals to foster empathy and connection within the healthcare community. During her internship, Chloe transcribed and edited recorded narratives and helped co-facilitate listening sessions alongside Professor Aaron Levy. She was deeply honored to meet and learn from so many of the remarkable individuals who comprise the Penn Medicine community, and to help shape the stories they entrusted to the Lab. One of the most meaningful moments of her experience was playing the final story for a storyteller and witnessing their gratitude and emotion in hearing their story told—an experience that reaffirmed her belief, as an aspiring physician, in the power of listening and narrative to heal.

Lauren Cho, Summer 2025 Intern at Trinity Repertory Company



Lauren Cho ('26) interned with Trinity Repertory Company, the State Theater of Rhode Island, which creates bold and original productions, serves as a public cultural community hub, offers critical arts education to students, and partners with upcoming artists through Brown University. She rotated through the administrative departments of the non-profit, working in fundraising and development, finance/HR, education, culture, community engagement, marketing, and shadowing Trinity's Executive Director, Katie Liberman, a Penn English alumna. Trinity is at a thrilling moment: Lauren was grateful to have a front-row seat to the mechanics of the theatre's ongoing extensive expansion and renovation project and search for a new artistic director. She had the opportunity to support Trinity's book club run in a partnership with the Providence Public Library, staff-wide events, the devising of a new original youth play, and an opening night and the annual Pell Awards gala honoring Kelli O'Hara and Tina Fey. She's grateful to the Trinity family for making the experience one she looks back on with deep joy.

Luiza Louback Fontes, Summer 2025 Intern at Zeta Charter Schools



Luiza Louback Fontes ('26) spent this past summer interning at Zeta Charter Schools, founded by Penn alumna Emily Kim, in Uptown Manhattan. As an Academics Intern, Luiza worked on projects related to High School Design Research and High-Quality Curriculum to support Zeta's launch of its first high school. Her responsibilities included creating curriculum materials, conducting research, and developing data visualizations to inform innovative instructional design. Her favorite part of the experience was getting to know the Zeta community—meeting students, engaging directly with material that impacts children's education, and building relationships with the dedicated team members working to shape Zeta's future. By contributing to projects that directly shaped Zeta's academic programming, Luiza gained valuable experience in educational innovation and curriculum development.

Clarissa Han, Summer 2025 Intern at Hikma Collective



Clarissa Han ('26) spent the summer interning as a digital storytelling coordinator for Hikma Collective, a company dedicated to bridging the gap between humanists and entrepreneurs, giving voice to academics and freelancers. Hikma brings together writers, researchers, and creatives to foster dialogue and launch businesses. Throughout the summer, she created social media graphics for Hikma's brand campaigns on Instagram and LinkedIn, and helped coordinate the organization's week-long Find Your Inner Founder asynchronous online lessons. She also drafted blogs and designed worksheets, collaborating with the team to cultivate a strong and engaged community of humanists.

Jackson Zuercher, Summer 2025 Intern at MRC Entertainment



Jackson Zuercher (C'27) spent the summer interning at MRC Entertainment in Los Angeles, California. MRC is a leading entertainment studio that develops, produces, and finances many iconic TV series and films—*Knives Out*, *Saltburn*, *Ozark*, and countless others. Jackson rotated between the television and film teams, and had the incredible opportunity to learn the inner workings of the entertainment industry by organizing talent spreadsheets and discussing them in meetings with executives, reading dozens of scripts and providing thoughtful coverage, reviewing travel documents and schedules for ongoing foreign productions, overseeing film and TV Business/Legal Affairs talent contracts, researching IP for upcoming projects, and more. Over the course of the summer, the interns worked in teams to put together mock pitch decks for various projects on MRC's slate, and then presented them skillfully to a packed room of company executives. His favorite part about the experience was building relationships with the amazing MRC community and learning so much more about the world of entertainment.

GRADUATION FESTIVITIES

Undergraduate English Program Celebrations

On May 1, 2025, Professor Nancy Bentley, Undergraduate Chair, announced the Department of English Undergraduate Award Winners to students, faculty, and staff assembled in Fisher-Bennett Hall's Judith Rodin Undergraduate English Lounge. See below for a complete list of 2025 departmental undergraduate award winners, recognized for outstanding work in their courses and excellence in essay writing.

COLLEGE ALUMNI SOCIETY HENRY REED PRIZE, for the best essay written by an undergraduate on the literature of the English Renaissance

Winner: Nysa Dharan, "Retelling: From Christine de Pizan to Margaret Atwood"

DIANE HUNTER FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH PRIZE, for outstanding work in an English course by a first-year student

Co-Winners:

Sarah Currie

Willow Dunn

Nyla Gershfeld

Stephanie Hernandez

Jo Kelly

Daria Knurenko

Christine Oh

Sam St. John Sebastian

Carlos Serrano

Madeleine Stokes

DOSORETZ FAMILY PRIZE, for the best essay written by a graduating senior English major

Winner: Weike Li, "'That Day We Read No More': Textual Mediation and the Border of Language in *Inferno 5*"

Honorable Mentions:

Daphne Glatter, "Reckoning with the 75,810: Power and Political Violence in the Book of Esther"

William Stewart, "Reverberant Recomposition of *Ulysses* in John Cage's *Muoyce II: An Architectural Acoustics of Procedural Writing*"

L. BARRY PICK AND HANEY PRIZES, awarded for the best thesis assembled by a student in the English Honors Program

Winner: Ning Ning (Jenny) Fu, *The Flows of Informal Empire: Reading "The Malay" as a Lascar Sailor in Thomas De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

Honorable Mention: Alex Yim, "Modernization, Genre, and the Time Being"

NANCY RAFETTO LEACH SWEETEN PRIZE, for the best undergraduate essay on American literature

Co-Winner: Keira Feng, "Un/Remarkable: Racial Inscrutability and the Corporate Ladder in *Personal Days*"

Co-Winner: Isabella (Izzy) Welsh, "'Dignity in Prolonged Mourning': Hannah Griffiths and the Art of Elegy"

Honorable Mention: Will Kelly, "Insights into Ted Kooser's Poetry from *Lights on a Ground of Darkness*"

PHILLIP E. GOLDFEIN CLASS OF 1934 SHAKESPEARE PRIZE, for the best undergraduate essay on Shakespeare

Winner: Liana Seale, "All as Hungry as the Sea: Doomed Love and Greed in Shakespeare"

RITTENBERG PRIZE AND FLAG BEARER, for overall excellence and achievement by a Senior English Major

Winner: Ning Ning (Jenny) Fu

BEST UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SERVICE AWARD, for outstanding performance of student services in the English Department

Co-Winners:

Grace Chen

Francesca DeCurtis

Nicholas Maharaj



Graduate Program Celebrations

Ph.D. Program

In 2024–2025, the graduate program in the Department of English celebrated 9 Ph.D. students rising to the ranks of “Dr.” Their dissertations contribute to the progress of scholarship in their respective fields.

Estevan Alemán

Arresting Scenes: The Cultural Vocabulary of Police in Early Modern English Drama

Jonah Max Greebel

Poverty and Protest: Representations of Revolt in Early Modern Drama

Arianna Qianru James

A Sense of AfroAsia: Blackness, Asianness, and the Speculative

Sasha Dilan Krugman

Visual Inheritance: Gender, Nationhood and Soldier-Heroes

Jacob Myers

Noxious Life: Figuring Vermin in the Natural Histories of the Anglophone Caribbean

Nat Rivkin

Trans Metamorphoses: Gender, Race, and Classical Receptions

Sam H. Samore

Teens on TV: School, Work, and the Failed Revolution

Bethany Swann

The Spatial Logics of Lyric Torsion

Molly Young

Desiring the Everyday in Victorian Literature

M.A. Program

Additionally, the Department marked the graduation of six M.A. students. Those with asterisks participated in the Submatriculation Program, having worked toward the B.A. and M.A. degree in English at the same time.

Sophie Michi
Armie Chardiet*
Sabrina Cho*
Jude Ferrigno*
Paola Naughton*



FACULTY IN THE NEWS

Senior Lecturer Lorene Cary reflects on researching the slave ship *Zong*, whose crew, in 1781, drowned 122 people taken captive in Africa. Ten more people jumped from the ship, and the survivors were later sold upon when the ship eventually arrived in Jamaica. Cary traveled to London to examine materials that record these events and the documentation that reveals the owners' follow-up actions: seeking compensation for the price of the people their crew had murdered. [Read her blog post here.](#)



Professor Emerita of English Phyllis Rackin discussed Shakespeare and women with Sebastian Michael, author of *The Sonneteer* and several other plays and books, in a special podcast episode of "SONNETCAST – William Shakespeare's Sonnets Recited, Revealed, Relived." [Listen to the podcast on Spotify.](#)



Professor of English and Comparative Literature Michael Gamer was featured in a podcast for the AHRC-sponsored 'Ann Radcliffe, Then and Now' project. [Listen to the episode's discussion about Radcliffe's fame and her final novel, *The Italian*](#), which Professor Gamer recently edited for the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ann Radcliffe*.



Kerouac's Road: The Beat of a Nation (NBC Universal), in theaters now, features Penn English's own **Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature Jean-Christophe Cloutier**. [Learn more about the Ebs Burnough documentary, which explores how the legacy of Jack Kerouac's iconic novel *On the Road* reflects in today's America, here.](#)



Richard L. Fisher Professor of English David L. Eng spoke with C.S. Soong about his new book, *Reparations and the Human*, for "Against the Grain," which airs three days a week on listener-sponsored KPFA 94.1 FM in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. [Listen here.](#) Also, [read this article in the *New Yorker*](#) for more references to Professor Eng's work.



Senior Lecturer Taije Silverman's translation of Giovanni Pascoli's "Il Transito" was recently the Poem of the Week in the Guardian newspaper. [Read the poem and an analysis of it here.](#)



ALUMNI NEWS

Professor Herman Beavers has been selected by the Alumni Programming Committee as the 2025 Penn Alumni Faculty Award of Merit honoree. This award recognizes a faculty member who has made outstanding contributions to alumni lifelong learning and engagement at Penn. [You can learn more about the award and past recipients here.](#)



Dr. Alicia Meyer (GR'22) was profiled in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for her research on a pair of gloves said to belong to Shakespeare. A fellow at Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington before joining the Kislak Center, Meyer broke out the gloves in April to show the students of Penn professor and Shakespearean scholar Zachary Lesser. Afterwards, she began digging, reconnecting the threads that brought the gloves to Philadelphia and Penn in the first place. [See this story as it originally appeared on *The Philadelphia Inquirer* website.](#)



Penn English Alum Sarah Pipkin (C'14) found a book once owned by Oscar Wilde! The Picture of Dorian Gray author amassed a collection of more than 2,000 books in his lifetime but had to sell them off to help pay off legal debts he had incurred in 1895. Only about 40 books in his collection have since been identified with the rest remaining lost to the nation. But thanks to the detective work of a librarian at University College London, three more have been shown to have been owned by Wilde, one of Britain's most famous gay writers. Pipkin, Outreach and Exhibitions Coordinator in UCL Special Collections, noticed a handwritten note in all three copies from the buyer, which confirmed they were bought at the Wilde book auction. The books, discovered in the library or archives at UCL, are said to provide an invaluable insight into his Asian influences and Britain's LGBTQ+ history at the turn of the 20th Century. [Read more about Pipkin's find in this article from *The Standard*.](#)



MAKE A GIFT TO PENN ENGLISH

Please consider supporting the work that we do in the Department of English. Your gift can honor a beloved professor or a particularly meaningful class or program from your days in Fisher-Bennett Hall. All gifts will go toward enhancing the experience of future English majors and minors. Thank you for your support.

With best wishes,
Zachary Lesser, English Department Chair

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