Little Else Than a Memory

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This book reflects a unique classroom collaboration. In fall 2013 I was asked to teach the inaugural offering of “Interdisciplinary Approaches to Writing” for Purdue’s new Honors College. As I thought about the many learning outcomes for the class (analytical and argumentative writing skills, information literacy), it seemed to be especially important to immerse the students in original research and to encourage them to make original arguments. I have found no better way of engaging students in the acts of research and writing than by equipping them to make discoveries for themselves rather than asking them only to reconstruct or refine those of others. But it is a challenge to find a way for undergraduates in an introductory class to perform independent research, especially
in my fields of literary studies and American studies. Unlike my colleagues in science or technology, I do not have a lab in which students can apprentice by taking charge of a part of a larger research question I have already identified. Archival research is ideal for the goal of original work, especially in local archives, since such collections often go unexamined by scholars interested in broader contexts or better known historical figures.

And so I turned to the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections as the ground of our work together in the class. As we talked about the structure of introductions or the best ways to cite sources, the students also completed exercises such as a library “scavenger hunt” in which they tracked down obscure sources of information in the periodical stacks, online databases, special collections, or book holdings. For the midterm assignment, I constructed an “object analysis” in which students spent time with scrapbooks produced by Purdue students from the turn of the twentieth century, chose a postcard, photo, advertisement, or other “scrap,” researched it, and wrote a mock grant proposal based on their early research results.

After such preliminaries, we turned the rest of the semester over to the main project of the course: to select, research, and critically examine the life story of a member of Purdue’s class of 1904. To do so, students
had to immerse themselves in the Purdue Libraries Archives and Special Collections. They consulted genealogy sources, wrote to descendants, and combed scholarly databases for contextual studies to help make sense of the details of the lives they uncovered. Most importantly, they had to answer the ever difficult “so what” question: for readers who are not descendants of the subject or who may not care about Purdue, why is the life story of Lyla Vivian Marshall Harcoff, Hugo Berthold, or Frederic Henry Miller significant?
Ten of the resulting essays have been collected for this book. The research and writing process was by turns exciting and frustrating, and the students’ responses to the question of significance are, I believe, good ones. Yet few if any of the authors consider their research complete. Most of the students were in their first years (and first semesters) at Purdue when they took the class. Most have suggested to me since that they hope to return to the project and expand on these findings, either through independent study, in intermediate undergraduate research supported by one of Purdue’s grant programs, or as part of their senior theses. In short, I am sure that as we follow up on this initial research, we will uncover more information, discover mistakes, and revise our initial understanding of the experiences of the class of 1904.

When the class began, we had no intention of publishing these pieces. My syllabus indicated that we would present our research to a wider public in some way, but we were imagining a small exhibition or a series of talks. However, about midway through the term Charles Watkinson, head of Purdue Libraries’ Scholarly Publishing Services, and Catherine Fraser Riehle, associate professor of library science, contacted me about their Honors College class, a “Publishing Bootcamp.” Their class is designed to introduce Purdue
undergraduates to the scholarly publishing industry, not only to open new career options, but also to help them develop as the academic authors of the future. A significant feature of the course is to give students the hands-on experience of editing and producing a book. As we talked, we realized that a partnership between the two classes would be an excellent fit and would support Purdue’s larger goals of supporting undergraduate research across the University. My class has been especially enthusiastic about sharing these early results of their findings with a wider readership. Moreover, although I am not an instructor for the publishing class, it seems clear that the students in that course have gained much from their firsthand experience about the joys and frustrations of taking written drafts to polished completion. All in all, I can say that this classroom experiment has been a wonderful experience, one that we hope to reprise in the future.

Classroom innovations such as this one are rarely solo endeavors. I owe thanks to many at Purdue for helping to make it possible. Thanks go especially to the Honors College for initiating and supporting both courses, and to the English Department for releasing me from me from one of my regular courses. Collaborating with Charles Watkinson and Catherine Fraser Riehle, the instructors of record for the publishing course, as well as
with Katherine Purple, Purdue University Press’s managing editor, has been a delight. Thanks also to Kelley Kimm, production editor; Jennifer Lynch, editorial assistant; and Teresa Brown, photographer in the Libraries.

The student members of the publishing class have been professional, enthusiastic, and unbelievably fast as they worked on drafts and proofs. Neither the class nor the book would have been possible without the support of Purdue Libraries Archives and Special Collections. My thanks to Sammie Morris, associate professor and University archivist, and her staff as a whole for allowing us space, access, and research assistance. My deep appreciation goes to digital archivist Neal Harmeyer, who seemed to wave a magic wand and create electronic copies of key archival sources, and who mentored the student researchers, especially in the final crucial weeks of the course. As the students thought about the genre of biography and considered how they could best represent their subjects, they benefited greatly from a panel of experts who shared their experiences in life writing. Our thanks to Professor Thomas Broden, Professor Susan Curtis, and especially to Purdue alumni Elizabeth Hudson (class of 2012) and Angie Klink (class of 1981). These alumni authors were especially important models for our class. Both have published their research out of Purdue’s archives and offered firsthand knowledge of the
Riches of Purdue’s history and special collections as well as the challenges of wrestling it into shape for readers.

Two individuals merit special thanks. Archivist Elizabeth Wilkinson was my team-teacher in all but name, collaborating with me on the construction of the syllabus, attending every class to offer her expertise, and offering advice and support to the students as they tackled this ambitious project. Her enthusiasm and excitement for our research experiment helped them—and me—get over the rough spots. Finally, I want to offer my gratitude once again to my colleague and friend Susan Curtis. We began thinking about ways to use local archives and special collections in our classes over a decade ago, and we have since team-taught several graduate seminars using West Lafayette and Purdue materials. My philosophy and approach to this class have been shaped by that partnership. When we considered the contents for this volume, I knew that it would be best completed with her reflection on our work. I am grateful for her deep knowledge, rigor, and especially for the generosity she brings to us as a historian of the period our subjects knew as the “naughty naughts.”

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