



The Museletter

News from NEHS, National English Honor Society • Fall 2006

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Looking for a Few Good Words

As students and teachers for whom the study of English is an ever-opening, curiosity-arousing, mind-expanding experience, you're probably like me when it comes to an absolute fascination with words.

Yes, words are everywhere, day and night. We hear them, see them, think with them, and they even accompany our dream images. But in studying English, in writing polished prose and poetry, in investigating how, as well as what, a sentence means, we move beyond ordinary uses of language to those parts of it that capture our attention and engage our sense of wonder. As Pooh, that sage and perceptive observer of life, notes, "to the uneducated, an A is just three sticks."

But to the educated—well, an A is Aardvark, Adventure, Amadeus, Amazon, and Asteroid. And to the English-educated it's Alcott, allegory, *All's Well that Ends Well*, allusion, *Animal Farm*, Anne Frank, *Apocalypse Now*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, Austen, and Asimov. And who could forget "Anonymous!"

I am always on the lookout for those select good words, those bon mots that one often finds in the least-expected places. That partly explains my being a reader of virtually everything, from cereal boxes to billboards, newsletters to newspapers, "kiddy lit" to classical literature. No scrap goes unnoted; no note escapes perusal. That clever turn of

phrase, that elegantly balanced sentence, that line of poetry that captures perfectly the very essence of a feeling, even that inadvertent slip of the pen (or keyboard), engages my being. (What English-type, I wonder, would not smile upon finding the line in a job application that proclaimed: "I also have a degree in English which serves me well in editing text for poor grammer or typos.")

And so it is with this issue of *The Museletter* that we celebrate what brings and holds us together as members of NEHS—our delight in language. While some of us prefer reading to writing, poetry to prose, fiction to non-fiction, or language structure to language origins, we all share the experience of words well used. In our local chapters, in school readings, and in our personal lives, let us continue to look deeply, listen carefully, and enjoy fully, the word-experiences that not only bring the world in contact with us, but show us how we may best express those contacts to the world.

And remember, sometimes, even in good language usage, less can be more. To return to Pooh, consider his passing bit of wisdom: "it is more fun to talk with someone who doesn't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like 'What about lunch?'" Those are words I can sink my teeth into!

William C. Johnson,
Executive Director



Need Cash for College?

NEHS is offering more money than ever before! There are four Sigma Tau Delta scholarships of \$1,500 each being offered for those attending four-year colleges, and one Sigma Kappa Delta scholarship of \$500 for a student attending a two-year college. The applications and required support materials must be submitted no later than March 15. Scholarships will be awarded by May 1 of the same year. See www.NEHS.us for more information.

Chapter News

What's in a Name?

The Rita Dove Chapter is what South County students decided to name our chapter of the National English Honor Society. Why Rita Dove? Currently a Commonwealth English professor at the University of Virginia, Rita Dove was chosen to provide our chapter name because we wanted a person who could be an example for high school students and was still alive. Rita Dove was the poet laureate of the United States from 1993–1995. She was perfect! Some of the many awards she has received include NAACP Great American Artist award, Academy of American Poets's Lavan Younger Poets Award, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Not to offend any other literary figures, but some writers and poets have had troubled pasts that wouldn't have been great examples for teenagers, so we went with Rita Dove. Another reason we picked her name for our chapter was that she was in such close proximity to us. At this point, we are hoping the day will soon come when we get to meet this fabulous poet and get some tips on writing. So keep your fingers crossed for the Rita Dove Chapter at South County Secondary!

**Janae Sweeney writes to us from South County Secondary School in Lorton, Virginia.*

The Sarah Byrnes Society

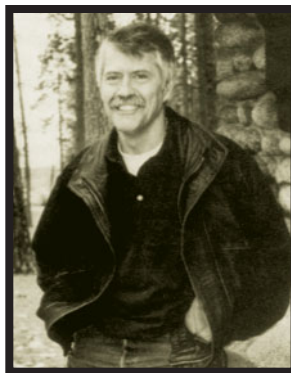
In Sept. 1995, students of Smithville High School in Smithville, Missouri, were formally introduced to the writings of Chris Crutcher. Their inclusion did not come without controversy. A parent was critical of the novel *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, its themes, and the decision to make it required reading. The English teacher agreed to give an alternative assignment, but this soon grew into the subject of meetings with the administration and eventually the Board of Education. As a result, the district and building administrators asked the teacher to stop teaching it due to its "objectionable language."

Crutcher's novels have remained popular choices for student independent reading and personal enrichment. After much reflection, the department agreed to name the chapter The Sarah Byrnes Society in recognition of the strength of character of Sarah Byrnes and as a reminder of academic excellence and intellectual freedom.

The newly formed chapter has excitedly begun the new year. Their first activity was to read the novel *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* by Chris Crutcher as the novel was the inspiration for the chapter name. Members and teachers read the book and then gathered for a breakfast book discussion. Lively discussion centered around the often challenged material of the book and censorship in general. The chapter is working hard to have Chris Crutcher as its guest of honor sometime this school year.

**Advisor Stephanie Robertson writes from Smithville High School in Smithville, Missouri.*

Chris Crutcher



Creative Chapter Names

Unlike many of societies, NEHS chapters get to pick their chapter names, and they haven't let the opportunity to be creative pass them by! Some have chosen to stick to their favorite authors, such as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ralph Ellison, and most memorably, Theodore "Dr. Seuss" Geisel. Others prefer to go by the moniker of their favorite character, such as Atticus Finch or Jay Gatsby. One chapter combined these ideas and goes by Harper Lee's Scouts.

There are a few chapters that picked the title of one work to represent them: *Treasure Island*, *Outsiders*, *Lyceum*, and *Divine Comedy*. That takes courage and conviction; I don't think I could ever pick just one favorite piece! Some chapters chose interesting names that evoke the subject of English, such as Quills, Lexicon, Golden Pen, Cyber Scholar, Unabridged, and my personal favorite, Super Comma. I envision the members of this chapter wearing capes, and saving unsuspecting students everywhere from misplacing commas.

Chapter News



Wit & Wisdom

Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of moonlight on broken glass.

—Anton Chekov

To write well, express yourself like the common people, but think like a wise man.

—Aristotle

What literature can and should do is change the people who teach the people who don't read books.

—A. S. Byatt

If you are in difficulties with a book, try the element of surprise: attack it at an hour when it isn't expecting it.

—H. G. Wells

Reach high, for stars lie hidden in your soul. Dream deep, for every dream precedes the goal.

—Ralph Vaull Starr

Speaker at Mt. St. Mary Academy

At first glance, Clay Chapman is not exactly a heart-throb. With his receding hairline, slightly nervous demeanor, and darting eyes, I immediately concluded that not only was this going to be the longest hour and a half of my life, and that I would be bored to tears. To my surprise, and to most of the student body at Mount Saint Mary Academy in Watchung, New Jersey, Chapman turned out to be—shockingly—cool. With his quick wit and zany humor, he soon won us over.

Chapman spent the afternoon sharing and discussing his recent works (including a book of short stories, *rest area*, and a novella, *miss corpus*, both published by Hyperion Books). The minute his performance began, I was entranced. Chapman had no inhibitions; whether embodying a romanced war nurse or a pre-pubescent

boy, he never missed a beat. He was a fantastic actor—that was only too obvious as he danced across the stage and skated through the aisles; but it is also obvious he loves each and every character he's ever created, and he wants his audience to feel the same.

I found Mr. Chapman's short stories to be delightfully unconventional. He tells of those living in the shadows—seemingly uninteresting people who have depth and layers. In his work, Chapman has chosen to explore a deeper side of human nature, guaranteeing an inimitable experience for his readers. His quirky, uncanny stories made for great entertainment, and probably the best assembly the Mount has ever experienced.

**Courtney Brownstein writes to us from Mt. St. Mary Academy in Watchung, New Jersey.*

Literary Revelry throughout the Season

Although the chilly weather will make you want to stay indoors and curl up with a good book, we hope you will occasionally resist the urge and take the opportunity to come together as a chapter. Reading doesn't have to be a solitary activity. Get together and plan some activities to keep you busy. Here's a list to get you started:

- Hold pumpkin carving contests with a twist: pumpkin faces that depict literary figures or characters.
- Throw a costume party in which everyone portrays a literary figure.
- Look up recipes mentioned in your favorite holiday stories and plan a literary holiday feast.
- Support your local theater groups and go out to see a show. You'll get a gold star if you read the play beforehand and hold a discussion afterward.
- Does your high school have a madrigals performance? See if your chapter can collaborate with the music department and arrange to perform readings of renaissance monologues.
- Pick seasonal books such as *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, or *A Christmas Memory* by Truman Capote (just to name a few possibilities). Read the book together and talk about the significance the season has in the story.
- Volunteer at an assisted living home and read to the elderly.

These are only a few of the fun things you can do. Write to us and tell us how your chapter keeps busy and interacts with your school or community. We'd love to hear about it.

Words, Words, Words



Words From Afar

This column highlights loanwords originating from a specific language or language family

“Old Norse” refers to the Norwegian language as written and spoken circa 100 to 1500 C.E., the most interesting phase of which is the infamous “Viking Norse” (700–1100). It was spoken by the invaders and colonizers of northern and eastern England circa 875–950.

Bait

verb: From *beita*: the verb originally referred to the medieval custom of setting dogs on some ferocious animal to bite and worry it; the figurative sense of “to persecute or harass one unable to escape the torment” is recorded earlier (circa 1200).

Anger

verb: From *angra* “to grieve, vex” (circa 1200).
noun: From *anгр* “distress, grief” (circa 1250).

Cake

noun: From *kake* “cake,” which came from Proto-Indo-European base *gag-*, *gog-* “something round, lump of something.” Originally (until circa 1420) “a flat, round loaf of bread” (circa 1230).

Reindeer

noun: From *hreindyri* “reindeer,” and from *dyr* “animal” + *hreinn*, the usual name for the animal (circa 1400).

Skirt

noun: From *skyrta* “shirt.” Sense development from “shirt” to “skirt” is possibly related to the long shirts of peasant garb (circa 1300).

Tang, Tangy

noun: From *tangi* “spit of land, pointed metal tool,” perhaps related to *tunga* “tongue” or “serpent’s tongue,” which was thought to be a stinging organ (circa 1350). The figurative sense of “a sharp taste” is first recorded 1440; that of “suggestion, trace” is from 1593.

Ugly

adjective: From *uggligr* “dreadful, fearful,” and from *uggr* “fear, apprehension, dread” (perhaps related to *agg* “strife, hate”) + *-ligr* “-like” (circa 1250). The meaning softened to “very unpleasant to look at” around 1375.

Like, the Vikings said it first!

Like, do you ever, OMG, wonder why, like, all the time, like, we hear the word “like”? Initially, people seem to think that the Valley Girls of California are to blame for this huge blot on the English language. Not so, though! The first “like” usage was really from afar. “Like” is thought to have originally been a Viking verbal habit of using *lic* at the end of what modern English language linguists call adverbs. While the word usage of “like” is like, so irritating, like, place the original blame where it really belongs, with those wild and ferocious Northmen.



Words, Words, Words

Creative Writing Prompts



Write a story or scene about:

- identical twins, who were separated at birth, and meet each other for the first time at Starbucks;
- a 16-year-old student who learns that he was kidnapped when he was three years old, and that the family he's lived with all his life aren't his real parents;
- an imaginative student council president who chases fairytales before getting married;
- a completely disorganized, Indonesian ballet dancer who pretends to know nothing about the murder you're investigating;
- an uncommonly talented, Brazilian singing sensation who scampers in and out of dangerous situations while planning to visit Africa;
- a painfully shy child prodigy who develops paranormal software and secretly longs to travel beyond the reaches of the universe;
- a theater usher who favors terribly outdated clothes who tries to join the basketball team.

Once Upon a Time

September 11, 1862

O. Henry, master of the surprise ending, is born in Greensboro, North Carolina.

September 18, 1917

Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) is hired as a schoolmaster at Eton, where he counts among his unruly students Eric Arthur Blair, who later became famous as George Orwell (*Animal Farm*).

October 3, 1849

During electioneering in Baltimore, Edgar Allan Poe is kept drunk by a political hacks who have him vote repeatedly at the polls. Poe dies four days later.

October 15, 1920

Mario Puzo (*The Godfather*) is born in New York City.

October 20, 1928

Reviewing A. A. Milne's *House on Pooh Corner* for her *Vanity Fair* column, "Constant Reader," Dorothy Parker writes: "Tonstant Weader fwowed up."



November 5, 1644

Samuel Pepys writes in his Diary that he has been to see *Macbeth*, "a pretty good play."

November 13, 1797

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is begun as a collaborative effort between Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.



November 29, 1989

C. S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia*) is born in Belfast, Ireland.

December 2, 1867

Charles Dickens gives his first reading in New York City. Before the box office opens people stand in two lines, almost a mile long, waiting for tickets.

December 20, 1871

In the *Chicago Tribune*, Mark Twain compares himself to George Washington: "I have a higher and greater standard of principle. Washington could not lie. I can lie but I won't."

The Trouble with the Word "Up"

Why does the word "up" have contradictory uses? Why does one open up a store in the morning and close it up at night? The answer lies in the past. The Proto-Indo-European (PIE) ancestor of up, *-uppo*, meant "up from below." As PIE developed into the Germanic languages of northern Europe, *-uppo* became up, and the "from below" meaning was dropped. Concurrently farther south, PIE developed into Greek, where *-uppo* became both *hypo* ("under") and *hyper* ("over"). When the Renaissance injected a healthy dose of classic influences into English, both of the old Greek uses found their way into the language.

Creative Corner



This I Believe...

A presidential election was held in Chile on Sunday, December 11, 2005. Among the candidates was Michelle Bachelet, a woman. Could it be possible that she would stand a chance as president in a country like a Chile, which from my experience there as a Chilean girl is the sole definition of sexism? “Negative,” I thought to myself. Well, to make a long story short, I was proved wrong. Bachelet won the election in a country where women are still viewed as inferior and are treated accordingly. She was able to take on not one, or two, but three men whom she was running against. To me, this was a clear indication of the beginning of a new life for all women in Chile.

I believe that women are equal to men. I believe we deserve the same opportunities that men are given, and that we are just as capable as any man to achieve whatever we set our minds to. There is nothing that upsets me more than the common belief that women simply are not as capable as men due to their physical aspects and the wide acceptance of this misconception. I have been doing karate for over ten years, and many times have competed with boys my age and even older. Never have I felt so much satisfaction in taking a second place trophy home than one time at a tournament in which I was competing with boys much older than myself. I remember a boy making a comment, as I walked up to the ring, about how bad he felt for me to be competing with them. He wasted a lot of time that day discouraging me and trying to convince me that I simply was not fit to compete against them. How I wish I could have taken a picture of his face as I carried that trophy home in my arms! He, on the other hand, went home with nothing but an expression of disbelief.

I believe that after all the effort I put into everything, including school and sports among other things, I deserve equality not only because it is just, but even more so due to the fact that I have earned it. I believe that women have the same rights as men and should not be paid less or shown any other sign of inferiority. The Hebrew Talmud says, “The woman came out of a man’s rib. Not from his feet to be walked on. Not from his head to be superior, but from the side to be equal.” This I believe.

**Maite Silva writes to us from Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart in Miami, Florida.*

How Reading Saved My Life

It is almost impossible to admit, even to myself, but reading saved my life. It started with an elementary school obsession to immerse myself in the world of Dr. Seuss and continues through my senior year in high school, though my tastes in books have changed. From reading I learned a variety of lessons, whether they were superficial or life-altering.

Growing up I was never alone, even though my mother worked late and my father was always out, I had my sisters, and my books. I read so many different types of books: fantasy, nonfiction, poetry, picture books, anything that seemed interesting I would try my hand at absorbing. Instead of going out constantly during my turbulent childhood, I stayed home and read books, which may seem like a dorky thing to do, but it saved my life.

As a kid, I had several chances to get involved with “bad people,” and by “bad people” I mean gangs, drug dealers, and criminals, because of the neighborhood I lived in. However, instead of getting involved with those people, I read books. I learned so much from reading, including vocabulary and a sense of identity.

This year I have tried my hardest to incorporate my love of reading into my life, which is hard considering the workload. I owe so much of my character and work ethic to the books I have read. When I read *Peter Rabbit*, in kindergarten, I learned not to lie and not to trespass, from the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series I learned to take things as they come and try to live life to the fullest, and from *The Joy Luck Club* I learned what family and love truly mean. All the lessons I have learned through books I have applied to my life and have made me a better person.

In the end, reading changed my life and took me away to other worlds where I could relate to a number of different personas. I built up my vocabulary, and my love of the written word. I am in debt to a number of men and women for helping me grow up: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Dr. Seuss, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens, and so many more. These people have raised me on a steady diet of diction, syntax, and symbolism, which has continued and will continue, to capture my attention.

**Thalia Tirado writes to us from South County Secondary School in Lorton, Virginia.*

Creative Corner



Disassembling Spirit

She sits silently,
Lying lazily,
Unmoving.
Through a stuffed up nose
And short sniffles,
She reflects upon unsettling memories.
Snapshots of innocence,
Creep into her imagination,
Rendering unfulfilled promises.
In the blink of an eye,
The weighty world has been hurled upon her—
Another witness of worldwide wrath,
That's encompassed by envy
And lingering lust.
Under the care of daylight,
Inescapable, fiery, green eyes of greed
Burn holes in her heart.
As she continues to indulge
In her superficial life,
She struts, head held high,
With pristine pride,
Concealing the sins
That only her shadows dare to whisper.

**Leeann Weiner writes to us from Secaucus High School
in Secaucus, New Jersey.*



And Me?

Excuses bloom straight from the ground
Like April's hyacinths
Around a thorny crown
Yet money still won't
Sprout among the coarse grainy leaves
For all the poor peddlers' needs
Greed buds among the cacti free
As a drought breaks through
Over a garden of generosity
Where do the pods of peace grow?
Are they not perennial?
While war runs rampant
Among swinging stalks of corn
And rows of lilies swaying in mourn
And with all this agriculture somehow
Starvation thrives the most
Swarming like strangling weeds suffocating
The unlively weak
Among all this
What does that leave me?

**Samantha Schlemm writes to us from Secaucus High
School in Secaucus, New Jersey.*



Creative Corner



Tree - You and I -

I am lost amid the multitude, yet your eyes look upon me.

At first, I assume you are fascinated with another, suppler specimen of Douglas fir, yet only illogic would conclude that your scrutiny is not narrowed in my direction with unhidden interest. I cannot help but wonder at the shade of your irises—does their vivid shade of emerald dim at all throughout the year? If not, then I have found a characteristic that we both share...

We are both evergreen.

My joy is short-lived, however, as you impassively tear your gaze away from my emaciated form and leave the area where I and my brethren have been amassed by your kind. I am saddened, I think, yet cannot deduce why.

After all... I have always been one among others.

Ah, but you—you are special, I know, but I cannot envy you for this. An identity would weigh much too heavily upon my soul, like a necklace of ivory would the stem of a seedling. So much pain comes with recognition... I do not believe I could bear it, yet I was flattered by your fascination with my modest allure. No, I am not like you: a ray of light passes through me without the slightest inhibition while it lingers within the leaves flowing from your crown like the trailing hands of a willow. You are so unique, my child, while I... I am content in my blandness, in my faceted and plain exterior.

I am a tree, and nothing more.

On the fourth morning after your departure, I awake to find myself abandoned—among only remnants now. The humans I had regarded as my overlords are gone and perhaps have forgotten about us forsaken few entirely. At last, I feel at peace, for this is the treatment I can understand. I do not despise your attentions, little one, yet...

Yet I am not one to be ambitious.

The wind sighs through my weakening bristles, tearing some from me without the slightest remorse. This hardly affects me... then I catch sight of your frail form stepping gingerly over the withered appendages of those who were taken and I am overcome by emotion. Those eyes! Once again, I am the target of their verdant enchantment.

One of your branches lifts—oh, how I have always craved such mobility—and indicates me with a smaller extension. The larger human behind you scowls, questioning, just as I did, why I was the one you selected.

“It’s a special tree.” You answer with a delicacy that mimes an infant bird. I am then taken from my wanton isle and to a home made of metal, made of cylinders, made of glass... placed within the center as you sang,

Oh, Christmas tree, my Christmas tree:

How lovely are you to me...

I am burdened with the knowledge that I do not deserve you...

Yet does that mean I cannot cherish you instead?

**Emily Rey writes to us from Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart in Miami, Florida.*

Creative Corner



Of Ships and Seas, Leaves and Trees

The armada is out at sea tonight
Braving the ferocious storm.
With every wave that hits,
I feel the splintering wood,
The men thrown overboard,
A ship engulfed by the unremitting sea
And cast into the dark depths,
Never to be found or raised.
But the storm always ends,
And the ships that emerge intact
Sail back home, fortunate to survive.

And it is in this fashion that the leaves die
And fall off of their branches,
Leaving the trees stark and naked
For months and months.
But spring comes and awakens
All of the sleeping trees,
And reminds them to sing their morning melodies:
To produce their flowers and greenery,
And live out their warm, sunny days
Until the fall, when the cold comes once again.

**Ryan Shea writes to us from Secaucus High School in Secaucus, New Jersey.*

On the Road Again

On the road again
My car becomes shrouded in shadows
People have gathered around me
Cheering, shouting, screaming
I can only make out one word
GO!

I reach for my keys
A series of shocks surges down my spine
Like a jolt from a high voltage cable
Fumbling to find the right one
My eyes start to blur
My clothes, my hands become drenched in sweat

I start to panic, dropping the keys
As they lay, one key stands out
I pick it up. It fits perfectly!
Slowly turning, the engine roars
There is a silence

The shadows start to move to the side
A ghostlike figure comes between the cars
Handkerchief raised she screams
Ready. Set. GO!

**Lamont Chen writes to us from Secaucus High School in Secaucus, New Jersey.*

