

## PICK OF THE SYLLABUS



ANN DUCILLE

Professor of English and African American Studies, and Kenan Professor of the Humanities, selects

***Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States.***

Picking a single text from among the novels, short stories, essays, and poems I regularly teach is a little like trying to select a favorite relation from among my large extended family. But for as long as I have been teaching (which is now more than 30 years), I have particularly enjoyed introducing students to Williams Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. Although *Clotel* is generally held to be the first complete novel by an African American, few students are aware of the book or its significance to American literary history. The novel was originally published in London, where Brown, a runaway slave and abolitionist, was effectively trapped by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

Brown later published three other versions of the novel, each with a different title and slightly altered plot, but perhaps because they appeared in the United States, none of these later editions is as politically daring as *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*. The president is none other than Thomas Jefferson; the president's daughter is a 16-year-old quadroon named Clotel, who at the

## REIMAGINING HISTORY IN THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

start of the novel is sold at auction for \$1,500 to Horatio Green, a Virginia gentleman, who makes her his concubine and with whom she has a daughter, Mary. Although they play house comfortably for a number of years, the couple's happily-ever-after is derailed when Green attempts to further his political career by marrying the daughter of a wealthy white associate.

True to its sentimental form, the novel takes numerous twists and turns as it follows the reversals of fortune and heroic exploits of Clotel and her daughter. Sold down the river into the Deep South at Mrs. Green's insistence, Clotel twice escapes and heads back to Richmond, intent on rescuing Mary, who has been made a slave in her father's house. Mary ultimately will be liberated by love and marriage; Clotel is not so lucky. When slave catchers corner her on a bridge (symbolically near the White House once occupied by her father), she throws herself into the Potomac River, preferring a watery grave to slavery. "Thus died Clotel," Brown writes, "the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, a president of the United States."

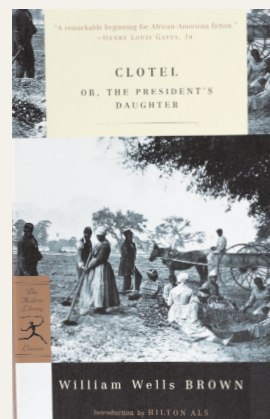
In making his heroine the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, Brown took poetic license with the popular rumor that the third president had fathered children by a slave named Sally Hemings. Hemings, or "Dashing Sal," as she was known around Monticello, was not only Jefferson's slave, she was also his wife's half sister, part of the chattel Jefferson inherited from his father-in-law, John Wayles, who had fathered Sally and five other children by his long-time mistress, Elizabeth Hemings. Wayles's daughter

ter Martha, whom Jefferson married in 1772, was several years dead and buried when her husband allegedly began bedding her 15-year-old colored half sister in the gay Paris of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI.

The story of Jefferson's all-in-the-family values made sizable waves during his presidency, inspiring poems, ballads, newspaper articles, and even a mock impeachment trial. But in those days there was no special prosecutor to out presidential peccadillos. For 200 years, the intimate master-slave relationship that Brown fictionalized in *Clotel* remained little more than a rumor, soundly debunked by most historians, even as Sally Hemings's descendants insisted on their Jeffersonian lineage. In 1998, a team of geneticists used DNA testing to establish a strong probability that Jefferson fathered at least one of Hemings's children, her youngest son, Eston. The founding father really was a founding father, it seems, with as many as 100,000 black and white descendants living today, according to some estimates.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson described black women as the preferred mates of orangutans and called upon genetic science to prove black inferiority. It's ironic that his own preference for black women (or at

least one black woman) should be exposed by that very science. I have found in teaching *Clotel* since 1998 that students are fascinated by this scientific exposé. They want to believe that the novel really is about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, and it's not easy to help them see that, while truth may be stranger than fiction, fiction is not truth.



in the first place. Not to facilitate gossip, but to bring up important issues that will be discussed around breakfast at the Campus Center. My column raised issues that often are not talked about, such as cocaine use or eating disorders.

And it was a lot of fun. Until, of course, I received criticism.

A student wrote a letter to the *Argus* tearing my column apart. She said that my "highly subjective reporting" fails to "accurately portray social culture at this school." At first, I was outraged. I thought that she was dead wrong and wanted to debate her point-by-point. I wanted to tell her and the whole campus, "I go to Mocon to interview freshmen!"

But I couldn't do that. Instead, I pulled myself together and tried to take it as professionally as I could. After her letter, I heard more criticism. On the one hand, this kind of difficult feedback makes me a better journalist. When I interview people, I listen carefully so I don't misrepresent them. When I write, I stress that my aim is not to convince my readers that my opinions are right, but to start discussion. I show that I am speaking for myself, not for my generation.

But criticism isn't easy to take, especially when it comes from my friends. I feel guilty. Did I unintentionally hurt their feelings? Am I too focused on my own experiences? Is everyone mad at me? It killed me that I was upsetting the very people I loved, so I called some Wesleyan alumni who are journalists and sought advice. The next week I wrote about how columnists strive to balance between writing with honesty and not hurting others.

As I attempt to begin a career in journalism, I'm sure that I will have to deal with more unhappy readers and challenging ethical questions. Since I just graduated, I still have a lot to learn. But I know I can always seek guidance. Maybe I'll put those alumni on speed-dial.

## BOOKS

# Hooked on Corpses

*Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003) by Mary Roach '81 became a *New York Times* national best-seller shortly after it was published last spring. The author talks about the genesis of her informative, entertaining, and often witty new book.

When you write a book about dead bodies, you are in line for some explaining. It's all well and good to write a magazine piece about cadavers, but an entire book plants a red flag on your character. *We always knew Mary was quirky, but now we're wondering if she's, you know, okay.* At every reading I've done, the first or second question is invariably, "How did you get interested in cadavers?" The question always unnerves me, because it assumes some sort of ongoing fascination with corpses, and there's a word for that (and, in some states, a fine). So let me state for the record that it was not—is not—a lifelong interest. I've got the attention span of a corn flake; outside of sleep and dessert, I have no lifelong interests.

Here's how it happened: I was on a flight to the Midwest, about three years ago. When I fly, I always ask the people next to me about their work. I'm trawling for ideas, hoping to stumble onto the topic of my next article. For the most part, I am not rewarded for my efforts. I wind up hearing about the design and upkeep of the modern landfill or the marketing of sinus medication.

Every now and then, it pays off. Some years back, I met a man who worked in the crash test dummy business. He told me that in the early days of auto safety research, cadavers and even live human beings rode the crash sleds. Science needed to know the limits of the human body—how much of a jolt from a steering wheel the human torso can endure without damaging the

soft, wet things inside. Without knowing what a body can and can't take, the forces registered on the dummies were meaningless. He talked about other uses of cadavers that I hadn't known about: testing body armor, practicing surgical maneuvers, training ER personnel. I began to realize that there was this whole behind-the-scenes work force of donated dead people, being put through their paces in labs and universities. Like any new and foreign world, it was fascinating to me. I wrote several pieces on these topics for the online magazine Salon.com, for which I was writing a biweekly column at the time.

The hit rates for these columns were impressive. Clearly I wasn't the only person who was "interested in cadavers." So high were the hits that the editor and I joked about doing a regular column on the subject; we'd call it "The Dead Beat." Salon being Salon, the joke became reality. I began researching topics, making calls. Alas, Salon's funding was cut, and "The Dead Beat" went the way of its subject matter. But around this time, I'd been e-mailing with an agent who'd seen my column. I mentioned the topics I'd been planning to write about, and we began talking about a book.

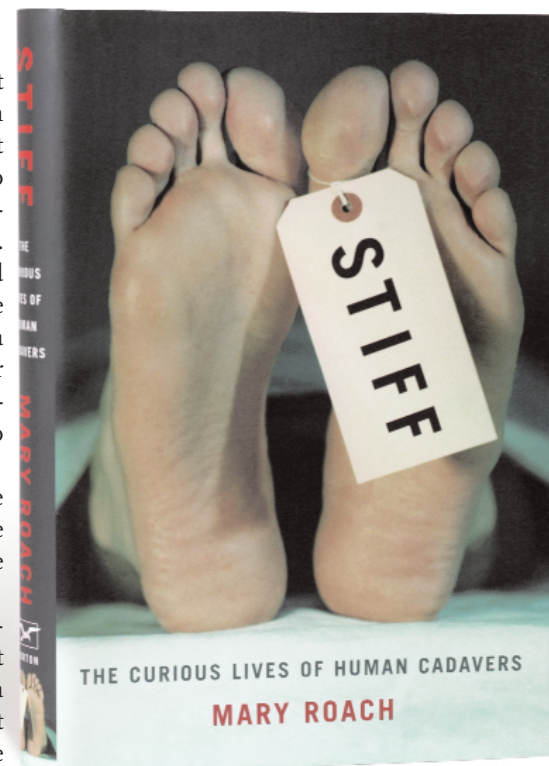
Now came the tricky part: Trying to convince, say, a group of plastic surgeons that they should let a writer come visit their facelift seminar. If you were about to set out 40 severed human heads on tables in a lab, would you want a journalist there? You would not. I begged, I wheedled, I called in favors. My gig at Salon.com


made the situation worse. At one point, I contacted an automotive safety engineer at the University of Michigan to see if I could observe a cadaver impact test for the book. The man asked me how I'd become interested in the subject, and I said I'd done a little research on the topic for a Salon article. You don't figure engineers log on to Salon.com.

"Salon!" he said. "I hope you're not the one who wrote that flippant, irresponsible piece a couple months ago."

"Flippant" and "irresponsible" sounded about right, but my piece had run well over a year prior. I replied that it must have been someone else. Then he began describing the piece, which was, in fact, my piece. I said, "I have to go now," and I got off and called a different lab. I became so paranoid about potential sources running a Google search on me and finding my Salon columns that I'd sign off on my e-mails as Maria Roach. (Later I realized that my messages arrive with "Mary Roach" in the "From" heading.) The man whose impact lab I eventually visited had seen the Salon column too, but he let me watch anyway. To this day I think of him as a kind of saint.

The other thing people always ask is whether working on a book like this has changed me. I used to say no. Then one day my editor called to tell me that



I'd gotten a star next to my review in something called the *Kirkus Reviews*, a publishing industry magazine with which I wasn't familiar. What I heard coming out of the phone that day was: "Mary, you got a great write-up in *The Carcass Reviews*!" I would say that when the idea of a magazine called *The Carcass Reviews* seems normal to you, this is a sign that perhaps your cadaver book has changed you just a little bit. 

Mary Roach is a contributing editor at *Discover* and has also written for *Outside*, *Wired*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and Salon.com. She lives in San Francisco with her husband, Ed. To read more about her book, log on to [www.stiffthebook.com](http://www.stiffthebook.com).

*"If you were about to set out 40 severed human heads on tables in a lab, would you want a journalist there?"*



# Summer 2003 Books

Our seasonal roundup of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

## FICTION AND POETRY:

**A.S. MAULUCCI, MALS '89, *The Rosselli Cantata: A Brief Family Chronicle*** (Lorenzo Press, 2002)

**JOYCE SIDMAN '78 AND DOUG MINDELL (PHOTOGRAPHS), *The World According to Dog: Poems and Teen Voices*** Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003)

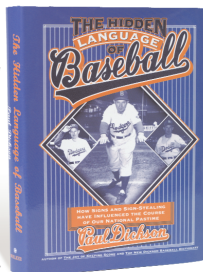
**ELIZABETH WILLIS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, *Turneresque*** (Burning Deck Press, 2003)

## NONFICTION:

**ALAN A. ALTSHULER AND DAVID LUBEROFF '80, *Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment*** (The Brookings Institution Press, 2003)

**JAMES CAWSE '67, EDITOR, *Experimental Design for Combinatorial and High Throughput Materials Development*** (Wiley-Interscience, 2002)

**PAUL DICKSON '61, *The Hidden Language of Baseball: How Signs and Sign-Stealing Have Influenced the Course of Our National Pastime*** (Walker & Company, 2003)



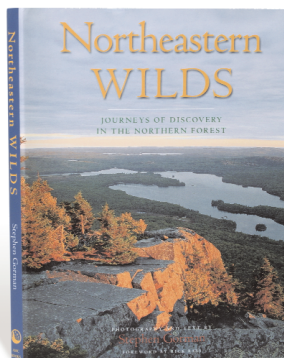
**GEORGE DUPAUL '79 AND GARY STONER, *ADHD in the Schools: Assessment and Intervention Strategies*** (Guilford Press, 2003)

**RONALD EBRECHT, UNIVERSITY ORGANIST, EDITOR, *Maurice Duruflé 1902–1986: The Last Impressionist*** (Scarecrow Press, 2002)

**HENRY FIELDING AND W.B. COLEY, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH EMERITUS, EDITOR, *Henry Fielding: Contributions to the Champion and Related Writings*** (Oxford University Press, 2003)

**STEPHEN GORMAN '82, *Northeastern Wilds: Journeys of Discovery in the Northern Forest*** (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2002)

In this collection of striking photographs and thoughtful essays, Gorman celebrates the beauty and singular character of the Northern Forest, the last remaining wild forest in the eastern United States, which spans 26 million acres across New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Much of the forest's heritage, geography,



and culture remain largely unfamiliar to those living outside its boundaries. Gorman guides us through its untamed landscapes and investigates the threats to the region's survival. The book includes insights from various members of the diverse communities who live and work in the forest, including writers E. Annie Proulx and Bill McKibben, as well as Abenaki tribespeople, paper company executives, and longtime residents. —David Low '76

**ELLEN L. FLEISCHMANN '77, *The Nation and Its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement 1920–1948*** (University of California Press, 2003)

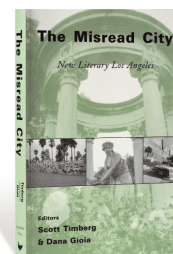
**CHARLES LANDESMAN '54, *Skepticism: The Central Issues*** (Blackwell Publishers, 2002)

**CARRIE MANNING '86, *The Politics of Peace in Mozambique: Post-Conflict Democratization, 1992–2000*** (Praeger, 2002)

**PEG O'CONNOR '87, *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*** (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002)

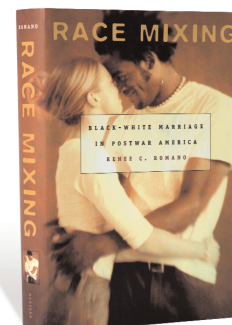
**JOSEPH ROUSE, PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY, *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism*** (University of Chicago Press, 2003)

**SCOTT TIMBERG '91 AND DANA GIOIA, CO-EDITORS, *The Misread City: New Literary Los Angeles, An Anthology*** (Red Hen Press, 2003)



**RENEE C. ROMANO, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*** (Harvard University Press, 2003)

This compelling study represents the first narrative and cultural history of black-white marriages in the United States since World War II. Professor Romano provides a variety of opinions for and against interracial marriages among black and white Americans over the last 60 years. Her exten-



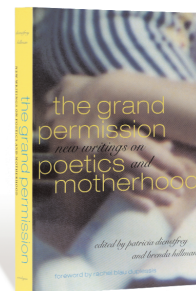
**SUSAN WABUDA '80 MA, *Preaching During the English Reformation*** (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

## OF NOTE:

In the spring Professor of Art History Joseph Siry was awarded one of the Society of Architectural Historians' highest honors, the Alice Davis Hitchcock Book Award, for ***The Chicago Auditorium Building, Adler and Sullivan's Architecture and the City*** (University of Chicago Press, 2002). The award recognized Siry's book as "the most distinguished work of scholarship in the history of architecture published by a North American scholar during the previous two years."

## NEW FROM WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS:

**PATRICIA DIENSTFREY AND BRENDA HILLMAN, EDITORS, *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood***



**ELLYN KESTNBAUM '83, *Culture on Ice: Figure Skating and Cultural Meaning***

sive research and interviews reveal that despite the opposition of many black and white citizens to interracial marriage, larger historical forces have lessened overt racism and contributed to developing a new consciousness of mixed marriages and families. She discusses the ways interracial marriage has intersected with other highly charged issues and events over the decades. Though she finds that today black-white marriages face a greater acceptance in this country than ever before, she warns that this trend does not mean that racism no longer exists. —DL