From The Washington Post to Esquire magazine and all literary stops in between, graduates of Old Dominion University’s Creative Writing Program are taking the book world by storm. What’s more, as they further their careers, they are also advancing their alma mater’s reputation as a purveyor of top-notch creative writers.

One need look no farther than a bookshelf in Michael Pearson’s Batten Arts and Letters Building office lined with MFA students’ theses that have become books to see signs of the program’s success. As director of the Creative Writing Program since 1997, Pearson has helped hone the talents and creativity of these writers, but he is still amazed at the achievements they have made in just a short time. In the past year, graduates have published many articles, stories and at least three books, including:


- **Lenore Hart** - *Waterwoman*. The book, which is Hart’s 2001 thesis, was published last spring and chosen for Barnes and Noble’s Discover Great New Writers Series. “That’s sort of the equivalent of the bestseller list,” Pearson notes. “That’s enormous. She’s going to sell a lot of books because of that.”


“This is incredible recognition for such a young program,” says Janet Peery, associate professor of creative writing and English and herself the author of several acclaimed books. “This is only the beginning. In 10 years, Old Dominion University will really be heard from in the publishing world.”

That’s a pretty amazing prediction for an MFA program that will not observe its 10th anniversary until 2004, after getting off to a somewhat rocky start amidst budget cuts and personnel changes. Although Old Dominion’s Creative Writing Program has been around for nearly a quarter of a century, it was not until 1994 that the MFA was launched with only 12 students (selected from 15 applicants) and three creative writers. These days, the program is home to 37 students (including its first international student – a journalist from India) and six faculty members who are charged with helping them sharpen their skills in fiction, poetry, nonfiction and dramatic writing. Students concentrate on one genre, with fiction currently the most popular.

“We had 55 applicants last year,” Pearson points out. “But we couldn’t handle more than 45 students. It’s such concentrated work that faculty members give to the theses.”

The 54-hour MFA program typically takes three years to complete if students pursue it full time. Students often obtain assistantships in research, as tutors for Writing Tutorial Services and as teaching assistants. Students spend the last year working on the thesis manuscript, which is expected to be a work of publishable quality.
Exposure to Published Authors

Much of the program’s draw can be attributed to its faculty, all of whom have published highly acclaimed books. MFA faculty include nonfiction writers Michael Pearson and Luisa Carino Igloria, dramatist Brian Silberman, poets Tim Seibles and Igloria and fiction writers Janet Peery and Sheri Reynolds.

“That’s a solid foundation. We have stability,” Pearson notes. “People come here to study with certain writers.” To build on that foundation, the program plans to add a “big name” writer as an endowed chair this spring.

Students have already interacted with major writers through the Writer in Residence Program which faculty members say is invaluable. In the past, renowned poets and writers such as Margaret Gibson, Philip Girard, Holly Hughes, Robert Olmstead, Lee K. Abbott and Melissa Fay Greene have spent three weeks working one-on-one with creative writing students and giving readings and lectures. Faculty and students agree that it is essential for them to have this up-close contact with prominent writers from outside the University.

“Bringing in writers of national stature is invaluable to an MFA program,” Peery adds.

Beyond their status as published authors, faculty members are dedicated to ensuring that their students find success in creative writing. However, they are quick to remind the students that they will encounter failure, as well as success, in their quest to become published writers.

“Everything you write will not be published even if it’s good,” Reynolds emphasizes to her students. “Nothing is lost in a book that falls flat. It leads you where you need to go. Of the novels I’ve written that haven’t worked, I’ve learned something about a character or myself that led me to the next publishable book.”

The Art of Critique

Much of the faculty’s guidance comes through the workshop, which Pearson calls the heart of teaching creative writing. “You teach it through an editorial process, through trial and error,” he says. “The text (for the course) becomes the students’ writing. The heart of my course focuses on the students’ writing. It makes for a great class because it creates interchanges. Everybody has a responsibility. You have to be participatory.”

But workshops are not for the faint of heart. “Workshops can be terrible with sarcasm and power plays,” Pearson adds. “The teacher has to set the right tone.”

In his nonfiction workshops, Pearson stresses decorum by encouraging everyone to make a positive comment about the piece being discussed and to consider the feelings of others.

Peery also emphasizes protocol and decorum in her fiction workshops, which have guidelines that seek to avoid value-weighted and emotionally charged language. Students are also encouraged to refrain from directly addressing the student whose work is being critiqued. “In a charged situation, sometimes even a look can be perceived as personal criticism,” she notes.

Although she admits that it is difficult to manage the egos of 12 students who want more than anything to be writers, Peery loves teaching workshops. “Most of us as writers are always working out personal issues in fiction. There are things you run up against. Your heart gets broken, and you find a way to reframe that so that you’re not writing about yourself. It’s not just an examination of the writer’s story. It’s an examination of his own philosophy. Workshops have a lot of anger, passion, tears and laughter.”

“Discipline and Luck”

But even after the arduous workshop process and the year and a half spent preparing a thesis, students should not assume that they will walk away with both a degree and a book contract.

“The degree doesn’t ensure students are published,” Reynolds points out, adding that she tries to keep students from being so publishing minded that they lose their reason for writing. “It’s about discipline and luck. It’s a valuable and useful program, but it comes with no guarantees.”

Peery adds that an MFA program is not a career track school. “No one comes out of the MFA a made writer.”

What the Creative Writing Program does offer is a vital, energetic community of writers who encourage each other to express their creativity and become the best that they can be.

“Like-minded people can help you,” Pearson says. “It’s like hanging out with Picasso and all these painters. It has to improve your work to be around them.”
Michael Pearson has mentored countless would-be authors in the art of nonfiction and published four of his own nonfiction manuscripts, but writing his first novel put him back to square one.

“I’m the novice novelist in the department. A novel is something I’ve always wanted to do,” Pearson says. “This is where I thought I’d be when I was 18 or 19. I tried to write novels twice before and threw them away. But I knew I wanted to write fiction.”

Director of the Creative Writing Program and professor of English, Pearson has been an Old Dominion faculty member since 1988. His first book, Imagined Places: Journeys into Literary America, was published in 1991 and was named a Notable Book by The New York Times Book Review. His other books have included A Place That’s Known, a collection of essays published in 1994, and John McPhee, a scholarly, biographical, critical look at the American writer published in 1997. Pearson also received critical acclaim for his fourth book, Dreaming of Columbus: A Boyhood in the Bronx, which came out in 1999 and chronicled his youth in the Bronx during the 1950s and 1960s. The New York Times called it “a poignant and insightful account.”

Pearson returned to the Bronx for his first novel, Shohola Falls, a coming-of-age story with a unique twist. It offers two interracial love stories, a description of the explosive 1960s in the United States and a cross-country search for Mark Twain, the pen name of Samuel Clemens. The book will be published in the fall of 2003.

In Shohola Falls, Tommy, the 21-year-old narrator, looks back on what happened in his life between the ages of 16 and 18 after his mother’s death and his father’s abandonment. Tommy fends for himself in the Bronx and steals things, including books, one of which is Huckleberry Finn.

He is caught and sent to a boys’ home in upstate New York, where he meets a girl who is part black. After getting into trouble at the boys’ home, Tommy goes on the run and ends up at his great-grandfather’s homestead, where he finds a journal written by his great-great grandfather that chronicles a love triangle among the great-great grandfather, Sam Clemens and a young woman in Hannibal, Mo.

“The funny thing is I’ve said to people that to me this book gets much more to the source of who I am than a memoir, even though I’ve not been in an interracial relationship and have never been in a boys’ home,” Pearson says. “You can sort of disguise things in a memoir that you can’t in a novel. In my own experience as a writer, I’ve found that the kind of truth told in fiction is a harder, deeper, more probing truth than what’s told in nonfiction.”

Although his life has not paralleled that of the book’s main characters, Pearson does share a connection with Mark Twain, an author who has always fascinated him. At one time, Twain lived in the Bronx, about four miles from where Pearson later lived.

Pearson spent two and one-half years writing and revising the manuscript for Shohola Falls, and calls the endeavor the most profound experience he’s had as a writer. “I joined the locus of my imagination in the Bronx with the locus of his which is Hannibal, Mo. At the end of it, I felt as if I was in a place that’s much more exciting than anything I’ve ever written.”

“I’m the novice novelist in the department. A novel is something I’ve always wanted to do. This is where I thought I’d be when I was 18 or 19. I tried to write novels twice before and threw them away. But I knew I wanted to write fiction.”

— Michael Pearson
Although her writing career has officially spanned only 10 years, Janet Peery has nonetheless managed to collect some of the most prestigious literary awards in the country. And the associate professor of English and creative writing has also built a national reputation as a teacher, with her most recent laurel in the form of a 2002 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

Not bad for someone who did not start writing until the age of 40, after having a career as a speech pathologist. “I loved to be carried away by a story,” she says. Peery began her foray into writing by penning children’s books, none of which was published. “I didn’t know enough to revise stories and try again.”

But the writing bug had definitely struck, and Peery was determined to follow her dream, entering the master’s program in fiction at Wichita State University, where she received her MFA in 1992. While a student, she began writing short stories, which were published in literary journals, earning her the Pushcart Prize and the honor of one story appearing in *Best American Short Stories* of 1993. Hearing of her work, an editor asked Peery’s permission to publish the pieces as a short story collection. The resulting book, *Alligator Dance*, won Peery the Whiting Foundation Writers Award, which is given to writers of exceptional promise at the start of their careers. Peery also received the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Foundation Award, whose previous recipients have included John Updike and Toni Morrison.

Not content to rest on her laurels, Peery spent six years tackling her first novel, *The River Beyond the World*. Set on the Mexico-Texas border, the narrative spans nearly 50 years in the lives of a Virginia aristocrat and the Mexican girl who works as her maid. The novel won rave reviews, was one of five finalists for the 1996 National Book Award and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and for the Dublin Literary Award. In addition, Paramount Pictures optioned *The River Beyond the World* for a Showtime original movie.

“Second novels can be like the sophomore slump,” she says. “I’ve finished it three or four times. Each time it’s not been right, so I go at it again.”

On days when she has attempted in vain to revise the same passage over and over, or when she simply cannot sit at her computer any longer, Peery picks up a paintbrush and unleashes her creativity on her walls. Several rooms of her Norfolk home are adorned with coats of fresh paint in pumpkin, golden, brick and ultramarine shades, the byproduct of Peery’s sophomore slump.

Despite struggling with “writer’s block,” Peery maintains that writing brings joy to her life. “It’s a joy to make things up and lose yourself in a story of your own generation.”

“Her work has also led to fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Virginia Commission for the Arts. In 2000, Writer’s Digest Magazine named Peery as one of “25 Writers to Watch in the Next Decade,” a list of noted authors who the magazine believes have the potential to make a major impact on fiction in the coming decade.”

Peery’s impact could be made with the publication of her second novel, a book she has worked on for five years. It tells of a 1930s family that remains in Oklahoma in the midst of the Dust Bowl, but Peery says she has struggled with getting the book to “ring true.” Earlier in the year, she put it aside to work on short stories, but with the publisher’s deadline looming for the book’s completion, Peery spent the summer of 2002 trying to get it right.

“Second novels can be like the sophomore slump,” she says. “I’ve finished it three or four times. Each time it’s not been right, so I go at it again.”

Despite struggling with “writer’s block,” Peery maintains that writing brings joy to her life. “It’s a joy to make things up and lose yourself in a story of your own generation.”

“This is only the beginning. In 10 years, Old Dominion University will really be heard from in the publishing world.”

— Janet Peery

[2002 Outstanding Faculty Award — State Council of Higher Education for Virginia]
Although she has been featured in Oprah Winfrey’s book club, has made the bestseller lists and is preparing to publish her fourth book, Sheri Reynolds acknowledges that she didn’t set out to become a writer.

“I defaulted into writing,” she says. “I would change my mind about my major and what kind of job I wanted. At one point I wanted to be a surgeon, but I wasn’t a great science student because I was always busy thinking in stories. I decided to buy time for writing by going into grad school to study writing.” The decision to become a writer and teacher was rewarded in January with the 2003 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.


“A friend gave it to Oprah, and she liked it. When she called me, it was totally unexpected and completely life-changing.”

However, *The Rapture of Canaan* would not have been written, much less chosen for exposure on Winfrey’s talk show, if Reynolds’ literary agent had not rejected another book she had submitted. That book was about the funeral industry. The agent hated it and suggested the young author stick to things she knew about – like growing up on a tobacco farm in South Carolina.

“I told her, ‘You want me to write about what I know?’” Reynolds recalled. “That was the anger that fueled that.”

In *The Rapture of Canaan*, 14-year-old Ninah begins to question the faith of the rural religious community in which she lives. Reynolds, who was raised as a Southern Baptist, says that the book deals with religious themes, but it is not overtly autobiographical. The book is now taught in many 11th and 12th grade English classes, and Reynolds frequently receives letters from high school students about aspects of the novel.

“It was so unreal and otherworldly,” she says of her book’s climb to the perch atop The New York Times bestseller list. “My work is not to be public, not to be on a book tour. My work is to do my writing and to do my teaching.”

Reynolds’ third novel, *A Gracious Plenty*, about a woman who mediates between the dead and living, debuted in 1998 to critical acclaim. She is currently completing her fourth novel, *Orabelle’s Wheelbarrow*, which explores broken promises.

“I wrote it in the summer of 2001 and revised it in the summer of 2002,” she says. “I’m never able to write during the school year. It all happens during the summer or on breaks. Teaching is so encompassing.”

She adds that balancing the teaching and writing worlds is an art in itself. “The teaching world is so analytical. You’re asking questions of students and looking at texts. The creative process is one in which the same kind of thinking is most destructive. Nothing kills the imagination more than that type of thinking.”

Yet, even in the midst of grading papers and analyzing texts, her writing persona is never completely quelled. “I think of myself as a writer like I think of myself as a woman. It’s just a component. It’s very much intrinsic.”

“Nothing is lost in a book that falls flat. It leads you where you need to go. Of the novels I’ve written that haven’t worked, I’ve learned something about a character or myself that led me to the next publishable book.”

– Sheri Reynolds