English Aggies: Where Are They Now? Featuring Stephen O’Shea

New University Studies Concentration: Health Humanities

Thinking about an internship? Here’s some advice
Just a couple of days ago, our former English Aggie, Stephen O’Shea, crossed the Panama Canal. Just two and a half months in, he is currently on an expedition to circumnavigate South America with a Navy veteran friend, Taylor Griegor. Inspired by the experiences from men and women who have served, O’Shea also has a book on the market, *From the Land of the Genesis*. “It’s a short story cycle about veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars—namely, their experiences integrating back into civilian life and the struggles they’re forced to overcome after returning home,” he added. With our greatest communication tool, the most useful wifi, we asked him to share some insights about how personal experience influenced his writing.
What inspired the plot?
I participated in the Glasscock Summer Research Scholars program under Dr. Marian Eide in a project called “After Combat.” The objective was to investigate the effect that moral injury has on soldiers of post-millennial conflicts. I signed up. I’d my own naïve, but natural, fascination with war at that time. However, I quickly found myself overwhelmed by the experiences of men and women who served – most of them my peers – and was dismayed by my own ignorance to what they’d been forced to overcome. Seeing this division of understanding between civilian and military populations, I decided to try and bridge that gap so that veterans didn’t feel so isolated by their experiences, and so civilians understood better what our men and women at war have faced and will continue to face if these conflicts endure.

How did the writing process come about?
Well, I’d usually find my best inspiration reviewing the interviews I conducted. Over the course of five years (and with the help of Dr. Eide and the “After Combat” research team), I was able to accumulate some 24 interviews with various enlisted and commissioned personnel. Then reading, of course. If I ever got stuck with a story, I’d pull out a good book. I find inspiration and solutions in all forms of great writing.

Are there any personal experiences that helped shape the book?
Studying for my PhD in Scotland. I’m not sure if it’s the physical distance that provided a certain clarity, or the faculty at the University of Strathclyde, or the British soldiers I interviewed (or all of the above!), but my book took a dramatic turn when I decided to write exclusively about soldiers in civilian contexts, rather than soldiers at war. The sensationalist melodrama of my early stories evolved into a more subtle, complex depiction of the everyday soldier returning home to find themselves, ultimately, alone.

Why choose literary war fiction for a genre?
For about six years I studied war literature almost exclusively. Tim O’Brien was probably my heaviest influence, but there was also Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Caputo, Ben Fountain, Joseph Heller – the list just goes on. That being said, I’m a sucker for great literature centered around authentic characterization, and I spent my time in Scotland immersed in the likes of Jennifer Egan, Elizabeth Strout, Junot Diaz, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan and Pat Conroy (again, it goes).

“I was told by a number of [people] that “being a writer” wasn’t a career option. ...A test told me that I should become a Park Ranger. I thought, ‘Sure, I could do that one day.’ In the meantime, though, I was going to pursue my passion.”

How has the world around you influenced your writing?
Well, without it I wouldn’t have much to write about! In all seriousness, though, I treat the settings of my stories as another kind of main character. Having travelled as much as I have, and immersed myself in so many different cultures, I have a rich variety of places and memories that I can call on to create a strong sense of place. While I hate the old maxim, “Write what you know,” I have to admit that my experience travelling and putting myself out into the world has been invaluable to the kind of writing that I’ve chosen to pursue.

When you get an idea in the middle of something, anything, what do you do?
I immediately stop whatever I’m doing and write it down. A lot of times what I’ll do is text it to myself. I’m so paranoid with erasing things from my phone/computer and/or losing journals that I’ll sometimes text myself whole paragraphs – with dialogue and everything – so that I don’t lose it! If it’s a full story outline or a project I intend to spend much time on, I’ll sit down and make a morning or afternoon of it. But there have been many instances where I’ve come full stop in the middle of a crowded pathway, just to pull out my phone and tap away.

Are there any spoilers you could possibly spill?
I’m not sure about spoilers, but I can tell you that a certain thread of characters/themes/places are woven throughout the stories, so that a character who was mentioned in one might appear later on, or vice versa. I also took special care to fairly represent the demographics of the military, while most of my stories focus on the average grunt foot-soldier, I do include two stories about female characters (a physician and a medevac helicopter pilot), and another about a journalist who embedded for part of the Iraq War.

What can the audience expect from it?
They can expect strong primary characters, and an honest depiction of soldiers as human beings. It certainly isn’t a book that glorifies war and it’s warriors – but it doesn’t condemn them, either.
Learn about and participate in a growing, cross-disciplinary field that studies the lived experience of health and illness. Health Humanities is based on the idea that our experience of health and illness is never only biological or ‘cultural,’ but always both. This concentration is relevant for students interested in cross-disciplinary scholarship, especially the interface between biosciences and the arts and humanities.

For more information, contact Dr. Apostolos Vasilakis (vasilakis@tamu.edu) or Brianna Doucet (bdoucet@tamu.edu).
“The field is inherently cross-disciplinary and collaborative: as just one example, scholars of literature may partner with health scientists, using narrative to better understand the experiences of aging and dementia.”

Here’s the thing about being an English major, you can do just about everything. From science to literature, there’s always a job for writers. Oh but it doesn’t stop there! You’re in luck, Ags! A new university studies concentration has arrived.

In 2015, Associate Professor of English and Convenor of the Health Humanities Laboratory, Dr. Jessica Howell, began developing Health Humanities initiatives at Texas A&M University with the Glasscock Health Humanities Laboratory, Working Group. With collaborators from other disciplines and departments on campus, Dr. Howell turned the Working Group into the Health Humanities Laboratory. “[We] have launched a B.S. concentration in University Studies, through the College of Liberal Arts, as well as the concentration in English,” Dr. Howell said.

This one of a kind concentration offers students the opportunity to take courses that examine a variety of genres and time periods, all which share a focus on health and illness in literature and culture. These courses will be taught by different faculty members.

The first course that counts for this concentration will be offered in Spring 2018 with Dr. Susan Stabile, according to Howell.

“During Fall 2018 and Spring 2019, planned courses include ‘Introduction to Literature and Medicine’ and ‘Disability and Nineteenth-century British Literature.’ Future courses will address such topics as ‘Graphic Medicine,’ ‘The Rhetoric of Gender and Health,’ and ‘Epidemics in Literature,’” Howell said.

The Health Humanities Laboratory will feature key guest speakers every year. This year, the group will host a one-day symposium on “The Future of Healthcare,” April 20th, 2018, in Glasscock Room 311. The speakers will include Dr. Kirsten Ostherr (English, Rice University) and Dr. Ruth Bergren (UT San Antonio Health).

“Students may pursue a graduate education in English, with a focus on Literature and Medicine and/or the Rhetoric of Health; they may pursue higher degrees in a growing number of Medical Humanities graduate programs... Students may become creative writers, science journalists, or editors. If pursuing a professional degree, [they] may decide to go into Law and health, healthcare administration (including patient advocacy), or medicine, nursing, and allied health fields,” she added.

The Health Humanities is a growing, cross-disciplinary field that uses methods of analysis from the Humanities to better understand cultural practices and products related to health and illness. Because English is such a flexible pathway, students might analyze patients’ narratives of their own illness, read comics drawn by nurses and doctors, write their own illness memoirs, examine how the history of epidemics has influenced fiction, or discuss how race and gender intersect with experiences of health and illness in different literary genres or historical periods.

We look forward to the doors this new Health Humanities concentration will open for you, Ags!

For more information, or to attend future events, visit the Laboratory website: (http://healthhumanities.sites.tamu.edu/).
When I thought about interning for a magazine, I’d imagined myself as Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada* or Hilary Duff in *Beauty and The Briefcase*. I thought my life would consist of morning coffee runs and fancy charity galas. Instead what had happened was: being an assistant, conducting interviews with well-known local people, free food and concerts, and the best part: getting published. Yeah, I definitely could live with that. And I did.

**Tip #1: Research**
I come from a small city that mainly focuses on the food industry. In my experience, finding a magazine to intern for was challenging but definitely not impossible. The thing was finding the one that fit my writing style. I sent out about 5 emails to 5 different magazines. I got one response. One, a popular amongst the people and tourists, DeLaredo Mag. I wondered why people wouldn’t want a person working for them for free. Oh well, it happens. Don’t get discouraged though! That doesn’t mean you’re not good enough for the position, that just means the right one is waiting for you.

**Tip #2: Just go for it**
You might think you’re not qualified or don’t have enough experience, but you’ll never know unless you apply. People notice you by the quality of your work. As someone who is naturally shy, I let my work do the talking. If you’ve got interesting ideas for features or some suggestions, pitch them in. Teamwork makes the dream work. They want to see what you’re made of. Let your skills shine!

**Tip #3: Take a deep breath**
Some of the tasks you’re asked to do might seem overwhelming or a little out of your comfort zone. For example, I had to set up appointments for clothing samples for the cover and be the stylist for the day (that’s a lot of pressure) and get in touch with people for interviews. Don’t overthink it and think quick on your feet. Just PREPARE what you have to say, take a deep breath and pick up the phone. You will see that with every call you will gain confidence and realize it’s not too scary after all. The more confident you are in your own abilities, the more people will trust you with increasingly important jobs. Being hard-working is an essential quality for an intern and for anyone who wants to work in magazines.

**Tip #4: Don’t be afraid to ask questions**
When I got interviewed for the position, I let them know I wanted to learn everything there was to learn about how the magazine is created; from concept to printing and distribution, as well as what each department does. I made sure to spend some time with each department and just talk to them and possibly learn a new thing each time. Your team will be excited to show you the ways of everything and talk to you about what it’s like to do their role.

**Tip #5: Listen and learn**
My goal is be an editor and that job comes with respect and advice provided by others. It’s important to accept constructive criticism, even if that’s not what you want to hear. It’s a learning experience. Wherever you go, you’ll find that by offering their opinion on your work people are honestly trying to help you progress.

**Tip #6: Enjoy it!**
I didn’t know I was going to be writing my first day of my internship. I was just scheduled to be an observer for the first month. By the end of the month and the ones after that, I was being published with more than one article. If, like me, you’ve always dreamed of working at any magazine then enjoy your time there! I promise you you’ll wake up eager to get to work each morning. Pat yourself on the back and put all your positive energy into it!
Wishing you had more opportunities to use those excellent essays, creative fiction, and poetry that are languishing on your hard drive or in the back of your mind?

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