

THE WORD

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A NEWSLETTER FROM THE MESSIAH UNIVERSITY ENGLISH PROGRAM

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NOTE FROM THE CHAIR by Kerry Hasler-Brooks

I spent much of the past month reading essays by Marilynne Robinson with a small group of first-year undergraduate students. By way of the essays in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, we talked about Moses, John Calvin, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson; we explored questions of character, virtue, beauty, community, and the soul; and we worked hard—very, very

hard at times—just to understand Robinson’s prose let alone to care about or enjoy her bold attachment for such long-dead and seemingly irrelevant things.

And yet, as Robinson says of her own early reading life, which was filled with books on Carthage, Constantinople, and the Cromwell revolution, “relevance was precisely not an issue”. Robinson describes reading as a way to roam meditatively and unassumingly through far-away stories, histories, experiences, and ideas, regardless of whether or not they were, in Robinson’s terms, “mine” or “not mine.” In fact, reading...

This excerpt was taken from “Seeking the Irrelevant.” You can read the whole piece at vocationmatters.com.

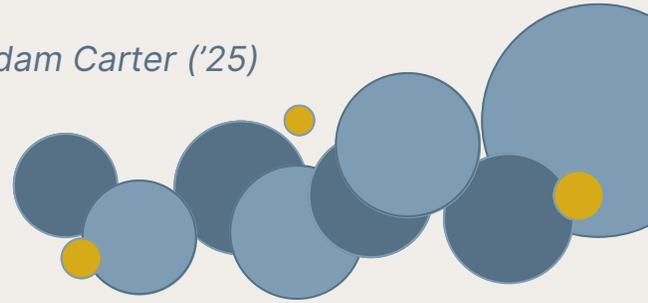
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TAKE HEART

"I HAVE SAID THESE THINGS TO YOU, THAT IN ME YOU MAY HAVE PEACE. IN THE WORLD YOU WILL HAVE TRIBULATION. BUT TAKE HEART; I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD." *John 16:33*

by Adam Carter ('25)



The start of a new semester always brings both highs and lows. For some, it brings a much needed taste of independence, comforting friends, and the pursuit of passions. For others, it brings anxiety about the future, homesickness, and long nights of studying. College is a beautifully confusing time full of both adventure and heartache. Even in all the beauty, I often find myself struggling to stay afloat, caught drowning in school, relationships, and extracurriculars, constantly deciding which area will suffer for the others to flourish.

During these seasons of treading, I've found Jesus's words in John 16:33 to be a much-needed life jacket, a reminder that Jesus is with us in our struggles. No matter how big or small the body of water in which we find ourselves stranded, we have the ability to "take heart," to hold onto God's promises and the work that Jesus has done on the cross.

This is much easier said than done though. It is easy to become distracted by the weight of this world and the ever-growing Canvas assignments column,

but I urge you in the stress of the semester and of life: take some time to reflect on Christ's love for you, reflect on His sacrifice, and reflect on His promises.

In the comfort and understanding of these things, you can find peace to take on the world. This doesn't mean God is going to remove your struggles or magically finish your 12-page research essay, but it does give you the joy and freedom to face these things head on.

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STUDENT LEADERS

MICAIAH SALDAÑA '24

English with Professional Writing | Public Relations Minor
Digital Marketing Certificate

Favorite Part of the Position:

“The people that I work with! In every position, I have the wonderful privilege of working with truly amazing people. They are so Christ-centered and have such servants’ hearts; there’s no one I’d rather work alongside!”

Favorite Part of the English Major:

“I firmly believe that stories have the power to change the world. It’s a privilege to be an English major because I get the joy of participating in the creation, study, and enjoyment of stories. There’s no other major where you get to read and write great stories and call it “homework!”



Head Tutor of the Writing Center



Editor-In-Chief of the Pulse

ETHAN REISLER '26

English with Creative Writing

Favorite Part of the Position:

“Having a hand in putting together all the stories on campus and packing them together in one magazine for our student body.”

Favorite Part of the English Major:

“The community. Having workshops with other students when creating stories, and having the opportunity to bounce ideas, perspectives, or beliefs off one another in the day-to-day is a valuable thing to me.”

STUDENT LEADERS

EVELYN KELLY '26

English with Creative Writing | Studio Art Minor



Culture and Arts Editor of the Pulse
Witmer RA

Favorite Part of the Position(s):
“As an RA, I love getting to support new students as they discover both the hardships and joys of the college years, as well as working closely alongside other RAs. As an editor for The Pulse, I enjoy getting to know members of the community I would have never otherwise met as I research and interview for articles.”

Favorite Part of the English Major:
“The creativity of craft, and the rich conversations!”

EVELYN JANSSEN '25

English with Creative Writing

Favorite Part of the Position:
“I love seeing students with all different majors and writing styles come together. The club is truly a place where anyone can show up and create something fun for themselves!”

Favorite Part of the English Major:
“There’s so many opportunities to explore what you’re passionate about. It’s wonderful being able to study reading and writing with others who care about it just as much as you do! Also, definitely not biased, but we have the best professors.”



Creative Writing Club Leader

LEAVING THE DREAMHOUSE BEHIND:

THE END OF ESCAPISM IN BLOCKBUSTER FILMS

by Adam Carter ('25)

Summer 2023 was a hallmark year for Hollywood. For weeks on end, blockbuster after blockbuster blew audiences away: Harrison Ford picked up the whip one last time in *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, Vin Diesel's *The Fast and The Furious* series hit double digits, and Marvel stepped back into the limelight with an epic conclusion to the *Guardians of the Galaxy* trilogy. Despite these three new installments to powerhouse franchises, the biggest of the blockbusters came in two very interesting packages--one covered in pink and the other in a mushroom cloud.

The “Barbenheimer” craze took the world by storm, calling moviegoers to put on their respective bright pink or dark gray and head out to the cinema. Social media platforms, like TikTok and Instagram, showed viewers choosing sides. “What’s your sign?” was replaced with “Barbie or Oppenheimer?” Many theaters even offered Barbenheimer double features, where moviegoers watched the films back-to-back, leaving with a unique array of clashing themes and questions.

Despite their vastly different fan bases and marketing ploys, I was struck by the interconnectedness of the films.

Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* and Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* are polar opposites, yet somehow they are still deeply related. They both feature remarkably talented casts, two of the best directors of the 21st century, and absurd budgets to back the hype, but their connectivity goes far deeper than production quality. It sounds strange to compare the story of a sentient children’s toy and the creator of the most destructive weapon known to man, yet both have interesting insight into human fragility and the post-Covid film world. *Barbie* tells the comedic story of Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) and her sudden feelings of discontent in the utopia of Barbieland. *Oppenheimer* tells the hyper-realistic story of Robert J. Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) and his acknowledgement of the horrific consequences of his creation. Both showcase dark and hidden facets of the American identity.

Barbie shows the daunting standards of perfection for women perpetuated by patriarchy and plastic, while Oppenheimer shows the evil and terror behind the military power in which we take such deep pride. Both show the dangers of unempathetic groupthink and the harm it causes to both those in and outside of power. Barbie offers the perspective of a woman who is victimized by power, and Oppenheimer offers the perspective of people with the access to terrifying power. Through this both directors showcase the collateral damage of abused ability. In Barbie, we hear a powerful monologue by Gloria (America Ferrara) on the weight of womanhood and motherhood in patriarchal America, alongside a hilarious but poignant presentation of a broken Ken (Ryan Gosling). Both show the repercussions of twisted patriarchy on both men and women and how true community is lost when hierarchy is created based on gender. In Oppenheimer, we see, through the lens of a split atom, that military leaders lose sight of humanity and people quickly become nothing but a means to victory. Though the perspective of those affected by the bomb is not overly touched on, shots showcasing the devastation of the weapon offer a horrific look into their side of the story. Oppenheimer's portrayal of the atomic bomb shows the danger of dehumanization in the face of intoxicating power. The post-Covid world has a perspective that cannot be ignored, and I think Barbenheimer is deeply reflective of this.

For as long as I can remember summer blockbusters have been defined by escapism: feel good, larger than life stories that take you out of this world and offer more entertainment than reality. Some notable escapist films that have owned the summer box office are Iron Man, Transformers, SuperBad, and many more. While I don't doubt there are many deep truths about reality in these films, they aren't quite as real as Barbenheimer.

**"BARBIE AND
OPPENHEIMER HAVE
REDEFINED THE IDEA OF
A BLOCKBUSTER IN THE
POST-COVID WORLD."**

In my opinion Barbie and Oppenheimer have redefined the idea of a blockbuster in the post-Covid world. A global pandemic forced our society to look beyond our rose-colored perspectives. We have seen loss, isolation, and tragedy. The American filmgoer doesn't just want to escape the world at the cinema. They want a place to walk through their questions in a captivating way. I believe that is the standard Barbenheimer has now set. It opened up a world where mass amounts of moviegoers want to be challenged by what they watch. Ultimately, the Barbenheimer craze changed the idea of a summer blockbuster, forcing its viewers to come face-to-face with their fears and shortcomings rather than offering them a simple escape.

YOUR WORK STUDY STUDENTS

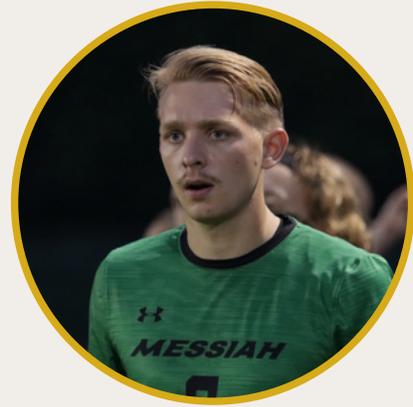
ADAM CARTER '25

Podcast | Newsletter

Favorite Study Spot: the Union

Favorite Lottie Meal: Power

Falcon Salad



EMMA BANE '25

Social Media | Newsletter Design

Favorite Study Spot: the Library

Favorite Lottie Meal: Caprese

Chicken



SERENA MCQUOID '24

Newsletter Content | Side Projects

Favorite Study Spot: My apartment

Favorite Lottie Meal: Popcorn

Chicken Bowl



**WANT TO KNOW MORE?
LISTEN TO US ON THE LATEST
EPISODE OF "WRITER TALKS"!**



AUTHOR ALERT!

If you know Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell – or have shared at least one encounter – you are most likely aware of two facts: she matches her Yeti cup to her outfit and research is her happy place. Her ears perk at the mention of research. Invitational rhetoric energizes her. And she stores theories like Halloween candy, ready to share them with her students, her son, or a friendly stranger at any applicable moment. These passions culminate in her book, “The Case for Community in Online Spaces: Taking Back Connection, which is fresh off the press. The English Program applauds Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell not only on this significant publication but also her eager commitment to research that betters society.

In an interview with Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell, she promoted her book with the following elevator pitch: “I have spent years listening to people talk about how technology is just kind of destroying our world. They're not entirely wrong. There's a lot of division. And I can't say that that doesn't exist.”

While she acknowledges these harmful realities, her research embraces an unexpected and controversial take on technology's benefits. She attests that “moments of deep connection are happening, and they're happening in online spaces, even by the most psychologically technical definitions of connection.

DR. DUNBAR-TREADWELL

by Serena McQuoid ('24)

So, my years of research have really looked at what's happening in these online spaces of connection that isn't happening in other online spaces” categorized by division and cruelty. She argues that authentic and altruistic community does exist in online spaces, but it is a choice.

Her fascination with online communication sparked in her Oral Communications class in 2013. After overhearing her students chat about the app Yik Yak, her inner voice whispered: “I'm a researcher and I need to know what this is.” This moment of intrigue was the beginning. “The students said Yik Yak is a cesspool, and some of that existed,” she admitted, “but I was really moved by the fact that, as I was digging through



Yik Yak, I also saw these moments of people supporting each other.” Two Messiah student populations that found belonging on Yik Yak were fellow veterans longing for someone to relate to and those facing mental health struggles.

This revelation sent Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell on a decade-long internet spiral until she eventually focused the bulk of her research on Reddit.

She argues that Reddit serves as a “case study to see what people are like when nobody is looking.” Displaying altruism through volunteer work evokes a high-five from the public, but good deeds anonymously committed online elicit zero praise. Many users, however, still support and bond with internet strangers, building connections based on shared humanity. This selflessness has sourced Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell’s fascination with online communication. On Yik Yak and Reddit threads, she noticed that “human beings saw the humanity in one another, and that’s really hard to do from the other side of the internet.” While she recognizes the spaces forged by shared hatred, she deems them unsatisfying for real human connection. This research – while not quite an island – is scarcely inhabited due to its intimidating ambiguity, but the presence of questions excites Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell. Despite her convincing case for online spaces, she welcomes her readers to ask more questions. Who exactly are these readers? This was a significant question for Dr. Dunbar-Treadwell to answer herself.

She revealed that choosing an audience was “the hardest part” of writing her book. Narrowing research to a specific audience is daunting “when you’re that attached to something,” Dunbar-Treadwell said. She confessed that “there’s some part of you that feels like, well, I have to share everything. I have this shot to put all of it out in the world.” Yet, when she asked herself who she wanted to reach, she determined that her “audience wound-up being people who are willing to objectively interrogate their own choices in online spaces and who want to learn about the scholarship in some way.” Therefore, she scaffolded her writing by partnering pop culture references with advanced concepts to invite a range of readers into the conversation.

In an era that feasts on shared hatred, there is solace in the online connection that Dunbar-Treadwell has uncovered. What once was just an acceptance letter from her publisher – that her mom proudly hung on her fridge – is now a book. You can pick up a copy of *The Case for Community in Online Spaces* today, stop by her office to chat, and do not forget to look for her matching Yeti cup along the way.

“IN AN ERA THAT FEASTS ON SHARED HATRED, THERE IS SOLACE IN THE ONLINE CONNECTION THAT DUNBAR-TREADWELL HAS UNCOVERED.”