

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2005 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 to be eligible.

(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Jean C. Meurink Dept. Communications & Journalism
Course Number and Name CS/JWMS 317 Semester completed Fall 2005
Title of Nominated Work The Two Books

Pick one-
CATEGORY:

Sampson:
 Undergraduate Research Paper
 Undergraduate Project
 Graduate

See
 Olson
 Kessler
 Turell
 Belter

(The judges retain the right to reassign categories for all nominated works.)

STUDENT INFORMATION:

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 13, 2006.

February 8, 2006

To: Women's Studies Offices

From: Jean Geurink, Assistant Professor
Communication and Journalism Department, HHH 163
jgeurink@uwec.edu

Re: Nomination of Bill Verthein's story for the Tillie Olsen Award

It is a pleasure to highly recommend the work of Bill Verthein, "The Two Books," which is a captivating and highly creative work of fiction that explores progressive gender relationships. "Two Books" is a story that follows the reflections and interactions of John, a man who is on his death bed, and his feelings about religion and God while he recalls important life events with loved ones. His memories of the time spent with his mother, sister, and first boyfriend, Brian, are meaningful reflections of his life.

While it may not be explicit in the latter half of the story, the ending is a subtle commentary on the issue of homosexuality and how religion, which John rejected earlier in his life, pulls at his consciousness and although he would like not to care, he does. Verthein's portrayal of the main character John is captivating, especially the portrayal of his dying days. John is homosexual and had homosexual relations in the past. He built a true animosity toward religion, but recognized it as a Catch-22. He struggled with wanting to lead a good life to get into heaven, but felt he would not get into heaven because he was homosexual. Yet despite of this conflict he continues to have faith.

The Two Books

by Bill Verthein

I'm so tired. I can barely keep my eyes open. I'm in no pain, which is good. I always worried that this would be painful, but it's not too bad. I can hear my brother and sister whispering in the next room. Damn them for keeping secrets from me.

I really hate this room. The only window is covered by the dresser, so no light can enter. That tapestry hanging on the wall is ugly. It's too green and I hate the god-damned pattern on it. I knew I should have put something else there.

There is a bed stand next to me and I can almost feel the red glow of the digital clock on my face. It's 2:13 p.m. I should be up by now. On my bed stand is my glass of water and two books stacked on top of each other. I can't make out what they are.

"Can't one of you turn on my lights?" I yell with no success of being heard.

My bed is very warm. I feel so secure under my red down blanket. Just as I begin to fully appreciate the comfort and warmth of my bed and blanket, I hear my bedroom door slowly open and I see a dark shadow in the doorway.

"Mom, is that you?" I ask.

The shadow walks towards me and puts its ear down in front of my mouth.

"Mom, is that you?" I ask again.

"No, John. It's me, Danny. You know that Mom died twenty eight years ago," he responds, putting his hand on my forehead. "Do you need anything?"

"Just turn on the lights. Also, I'm thirsty."

Danny, my brother, turns on the lights. I glance at the two books sitting on the stand. On the bottom of the stack is the Bible, and on top is Catch-22.

Danny grabs my glass of water and sets the straw in my mouth so I can drink. I carefully study my brother's aging face. I never noticed how soft his face really is. He always seems relaxed, even in the most stressful situations. It is so comforting to see...except for his eyes. When we were young, he had the most brilliant blue eyes. Now they look so worn and tired. There is no life in his eyes anymore. Maybe I should be the one taking care of him.

Danny and I were never really close. With me being ten years younger than him, I guess it makes sense. He was always out with his friends while he was in high school, and before I knew it, he had gone to college. After he graduated, I never really saw much of him. Rarely did I speak to him and half of the time, I wasn't even sure where he was living. Danny was in the Army at the time and was always traveling around the world. It isn't until about a week ago that he came to my home upon hearing the bad news. He's now fifty two. I wish I could have seen him during happier times.

"Is there anything else you need?" Danny asks.

"Yes, hand me that bible," I reply. "And I need to be left alone for awhile."

The leather cover is cold and so smooth. I slowly run my fingers along all the edges and up and down the spine. With all my might, I grab the placeholder along the bottom of the book and slip it open. I can't seem to focus my eyes on the words. All I can make out is "Job," "trials," "God," and "Adversary." It's useless, but I was never a religious man anyway.

Now, as I look back at my life, I realize it wasn't too bad. I grew up in a good family, I got a good education, and I have loved and lost.

My family was great.

The first nice day of spring. All the snow has melted and the grass is bright green. I jump on the couch and climb over the back to look out the window into the front yard. The tire swing hanging on the single tree in the middle of the yard calls to me. I jump off the couch to throw on my brown boots and light blue wind-breaker.

“Mom, I’m going outside to play.”

“Take your sister with you.” Mom replies. Her chubby, red cheeks almost cover her eyes as she smiles at me.

I run out the door and my sister Julia follows me, not far behind. I jump into the tire swing and my sister lets out a loud giggle. The wind gently blows through my hair as I swing on the tire. I can feel my sister tugging on my pants. I can’t hear what she is saying, but I know. I jump off the swing, she climbs in and I give her a hard push.

My mom is watching us from the window. I turn, smiling, and excitedly wave to her. She waves back, her cheeks covering her eyes. I turn back to Julia and gently push her in the middle of her back. She is still giggling and letting out amused shrieks of joy.

Looking down the street, I see all the yards and houses lined up perfectly. I bend down and slowly run my hands along the damp blades of grass and press them onto my face. The light moisture is soothing on my cheeks. I can smell the sweet, cool air of spring. And the grass! The grass is so green. The grass couldn’t get any greener.

Then, one day, it was all taken away. It happened so fast. It was all gone. Our house, the yard, the tire swing, my mother, it was all taken away.

Bells are ringing! Is this it? Is it all over now? I hear Julia yelling outside of my door.

“Danny, telephone! It’s the doctor.”

She quietly opens my door and peeks in. Without saying anything, she sits on the side of my bed and softly runs her hands through my hair. Her touch is so gentle. I can feel the heat from her hand on my head. Her beautiful, straight, long blonde hair slowly sways back and forth. She leans over me, partially blocking the light hanging from the ceiling; the light creates a halo glow around her head. Her pure, beautiful figure lightly kisses me on the forehead.

Julia and I have always been close. She is four years younger than me, and I’ve looked out for her all of my life. Ever since Mother died of breast cancer and our grandparents took us in, we stayed together and supported each other, since Danny was never around. Even after we both graduated from college and were living on our own, we would call each other every day.

“Julia, I can’t seem to find my bible,” I shout, but she still had to get close to hear what I was saying.

“Honey, it’s clutched in your hands,” she replies.

I run my hands on the leather cover of the book.

“Would you like me to read you something?” she asks.

I glance down at the book. I once again try to read it on my own, but I still can’t focus on the words. I still can only read the words “Job,” “trials,” “God,” and “Adversary.”

“No,” I finally reply. “I was never a religious man.”

“All right. I’m going to let you rest then. I love you, John,” she says, and leaves shutting off the lights.

I remember when I first got accepted into college. Mother would have been so proud.

I excitedly run out to the mailbox every day in anticipation of a response about the college applications I sent out a couple months back. I open the mailbox and grab all of its contents. Quickly, I sort through all of the junk mail, and finally, it’s there. The letter I’ve been waiting for.

I tear the letter open and quickly read the very first line.

“We are pleased to inform you that your application to Western Washington has been accepted...”

Throwing the letter to the ground, I quickly run to Julia’s room. I burst open her door.

“I was accepted!” I yell, grabbing her and hugging her as tight as I can.

“John...you’re...crushing me,” Julia manages to say. I quickly release her from my grip. “Congratulations!” She adds.

The day to move away for college came fast. It’s such a bittersweet day. When I pack all my belongings into the car, there was nothing left to do but to say goodbye. I gently wipe away a single tear falling down Julia’s cheek. Our embrace seems to last for hours. I get into the car and begin to drive away. I raise my hand out the window to wave. I look in the rear-view mirror to see my sister waving back at me with a smile so big that her cheeks seem to cover her eyes.

Three people are standing over me. All they're doing is staring at me. I try to open my eyes as wide as I can, but my eyelids feel so heavy. I still feel so tired. Slowly, my eyes adjust to see that it's Danny and Julia standing over me. I don't recognize the third person.

"I think he's awake."

"Who is that?" I ask. "What is going on?"

No one seems to hear me. The stranger approaches my bed. I feel something very cold placed on my chest. My hand slowly grabs for object, but I grab the stranger's hand instead. He pulls away and puts a stethoscope around his neck.

"Is he in pain, doctor?" Danny asks.

"I don't believe so. He seems very peaceful," the doctor responds.

"How can you be sure? John has been battling lung cancer for such a long time. He is so weak and can barely speak," Danny says.

"You guys can ask me. I'm right here," I shout. Still, no one acknowledges me.

"I can give him some morphine just in case, but I really don't think it'll be necessary."

The doctor looks at me for a long period of time. He then bends down in front of my face and asks, "John, are you in any pain? If you are, let me know. I can give you something."

"No," I say. "No."

The doctor places his hand on top of my head and nods. He leaves the room with Julia and Danny following. I can hear them whispering in the other room, but I cannot make out their words. Damn them for keeping secrets from me.

Why did I have to develop this cancer? I shouldn't have smoked throughout my life and I should have eaten better. It couldn't have hurt if I had exercised some more. Well, it doesn't really matter now.

I struggle to bring the Bible in my hands up to my chest. I can't open it now. That's ok, though. I was never a religious man.

I remember my first relationship. Not only was it my first relationship, it was the first time I had sex. I remember that his name was Brian.

About halfway through the first semester of my freshman year in college, Brian approached me for help with his English homework. I had a crush on Brian for a long time, so of course I accepted.

We both met in the library where I helped him write his reflection paper on "Civil Disobedience," by Henry David Thoreau. Really, we didn't get much work done. As Thoreau lays on the table in front of us, Brian and I just talked about music, politics and religion, and about how we were going to make the world a better place to live in. Finally, it all started.

"John, would you like to go out to dinner with me sometime?" Brian asked with great ease.

I sat motionless, in shock. Never did I think this moment would actually happen.

"Of course," I responded.

That weekend, we went out to dinner and went back to his dorm room to watch a couple of movies while cuddling on his couch. Both of us didn't know what movie was on, and we didn't care. I looked deep into his lively green eyes and he slowly ran his hand through my hair as his other hand pulled me closer. Before I knew it, both of our shirts were on the floor of his room. I could feel the heat from his body against mine. I felt so secure under his warmth. I ran my hand up and down his spine. We slowly lay down beside each other.

The night was glorious, and this relationship continued. We were together all four years of college and we loved each other very much.

Then, one day after someone's graduation party, it was all taken away. I knew I shouldn't have let him get into the car. The driver was too drunk. If only I could have convinced him not to get in the car. Our love, your warmth, my Brian, it was all taken away.

God, I hate you.

"God, I hate you."

"John, are you saying something? What is it that you just said?" Danny asks, scrambling to get closer to my face.

There are three people standing over me again. I just want to be left alone now. Just leave me alone.

"John, we brought a priest here to see you. His name is Father Harrington," Danny says.

“Hello, John. It’s very nice to see you. Danny and Julia have told me a lot about you. Do you mind if we all say a quick prayer?” Father Harrington asks.

“I have a quick request, Father,” Danny blurts out. “As you know, John is gay, and I’d like to say a prayer to seek forgiveness for that.”

Fuck you, Danny.

“No, Danny. That wouldn’t be appropriate at this time,” Father Harrington says. “John, is it alright if we lead you in prayer?”

“No,” I say. “I was never a religious man, Father.”

Father Harrington silently nods at me and smiles. He solemnly walks to a corner of the room and bows his head, obviously in silent prayer. All is silent.

No, I was never a religious man. I always considered myself to be an atheist.

The room is so dark. I wish someone would turn on a light. My bed is so warm and comfortable. I feel so tired.

“Someone, get some light in here,” I say.

“What did you say?” Julia bends down and asks.

“I want you to move that dresser. Move it away from the window.”

Julia and Danny both slide the dresser away from the window. Light floods the bedroom. Julia comes back to my bedside and bends down in front of my face.

Her angelic figure bends over me and softly kisses me on the forehead. When she returns to looking at me, I see a single tear falling down her cheek. With all of my strength, I gently wipe the tear away with my hand. I slowly look down at my leather bible. Julia grabs it and opens it to where the placeholder is and sets it down near my

face. I can only make out two words, "God" and "Adversary." I was never a religious man.

I have always considered myself to be an atheist, but sometimes, I still pray to God. I look at the two words before me. I can feel the warmth of the light on my back. The light has filled my bedroom. I am so tired. I look up at my bed stand to see the book Catch 22.

"I can see," I say slowly. "I can finally see."

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.