

# James Merrill

## JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Spring 2018

### Pulitzer-Winning Poet to Give 2018 Merrill Lecture

**WE ARE DELIGHTED** to announce that Jorie Graham will deliver this year's Annual Merrill Lecture at La Grua Center in Stonington on Friday, September 28. The event is free and open to the public.

Graham is the author of twelve collections of poetry including *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994* (1995), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, *Never* (2002), *Sea Change* (2008), *Place* (2012), winner of the Forward Poetry Prize for best collection, and *From the New World* (2015). Her latest collection, *Fast* (Ecco/HarperCollins) was published last year.

Daughter of a journalist and a sculptor, Graham was raised in Rome, Italy, and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris before attending New York University as an undergraduate, where she studied filmmaking. She received an MFA in poetry from the Univer-

sity of Iowa. Her many honors include a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship and the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1997 to 2003. She has taught at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and is currently the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, a chair first held by John Quincy Adams (for which she is the first woman to be appointed).

About Graham's work, James Longenbach wrote in *The New York Times*: "For 30 years Jorie Graham has engaged the whole human contraption—intellectual, global, domestic, apocalyptic—rather than the narrow emotional slice of it most often reserved for poems. She thinks of the poet not as a recorder but as a constructor of experience. Like

Rilke or Yeats, she imagines the hermetic poet as a public figure, someone who addresses the most urgent philosophical and political issues of the time simply by writing poems."

"I am living in the late season," Graham said during a recent interview with *The Guardian*, "but it has its songs, too. I have to find what they are."



Jorie Graham

DIDIER MOREL



Poet Kay Ryan was honored by one of America's most popular public literary programs—Poetry in Motion®—throughout New York City's mass transit system

### Poetry in Motion

**THIS SPRING**, New York City MTA passengers may have seen Kay Ryan's poem "Dew" accompanied by a vernal image of pea shoots, inscribed upon a wall of their subway car or bus, as well as on the back of their metro ticket. Some may have been amused to find themselves mirrored, like the

*continued on page 6*

### Meet the New JMHC Co-Chairs

**THE JMHC IS DELIGHTED TO ANNOUNCE** Cynthia Elliott and Ruth Saunders as new co-chairs, succeeding longtime committee members Bill Middleton and Sally Wood. Both bring a wealth of experience to their new positions, as well as passion for Merrill House's support of writers and its role in the community.

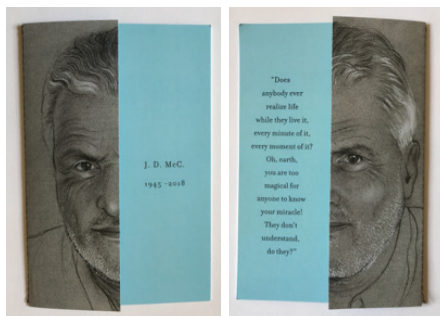


Ruth Saunders and Cynthia Elliott

New Media and Editorial Services at Sony Classical for six years. She has held numerous positions in other arts and non-profit organizations, specializing in fundraising and marketing.

Charlie Hatton, President of the Stonington Village Improvement Association (SVIA), said, "Ruth and Cynthia come to their new positions at an exciting time for the Merrill House, thanks to Bill and Sally's hard work and thoughtful leadership during their four years as co-chairs. Their experience and commitment ensure that the Merrill House will continue to serve an important role in the Stonington community as well as in the larger literary world." As Cynthia and Ruth wrote in a joint acceptance letter: "The Merrill House is an extraordinary place that offers support for diverse writers at different stages of their careers. We look forward to continuing what Sally and Bill and previous chair Lynn Callahan have made possible."

## In Memorium: J.D. McClatchy



The program designed by Sandy's husband Chip Kidd

**A TRIBUTE** to J.D. (Sandy) McClatchy, advisor and friend of Merrill House who died in April, was held on May 24th at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which he served as president from 2009 to 2010. The event included musical performances, speakers, and videos evoking his life and career.

Poet, librettist, translator, teacher, critic, Sandy was the longtime editor of the *Yale Review* and led the creative writing program at Yale for thirty years. His mentoring of young writers, and role in preserving James Merrill's legacy in Stonington will continue to inspire our own dedication to the Merrill House. A memorial in Stonington is planned for later this year.

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107 Water Street, Stonington, CT 06378  
www.JamesMerrillHouse.org  
A program of the SVIA

## Merrill House Fellows 2018–2019

**CHRISTA ROMANOSKY** (September–October 2018) is a native of northern Appalachia. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Virginia. She is a 2017–2018 Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center fellow in fiction, and is a recipient of a Barbara Deming grant in fiction. Her writing has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Missouri Review*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, *Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere. She currently teaches STEM and creative writing courses to K–4 students through Carnegie Mellon University's Gelfand Center summer series and other elementary arts programs. *Photo: Lydia Hicks*



**JORDAN JACKS** (November–December 2018) is a writer from Texas. His fiction has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Weekday*, *Territory*, and been featured on *The Organist* podcast from McSweeney's/KCRW. He has been awarded scholarships from Bread Loaf and the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and in 2016 won the Marianne C. Russo Emerging Writer Award from the Key West Literary Seminar, among others. A graduate of Yale University and the MFA program at Washington University in St. Louis, he lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where he is finishing his first novel and a collection of stories. *Photo: Curt Richter*



**SIGRID NUNEZ** (December 2018–January 2019) has published seven novels, including *A Feather on the Breath of God*, *The Last of Her Kind*, and, most recently, *The Friend*. She is also the author of *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*. Among the journals to which she has contributed are *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and *Harper's*. Her honors and awards include four Pushcart Prizes, a Whiting Award, a Berlin Prize Fellowship, the Rome Prize in Literature, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Foundation Award. She lives in New York City. *Photo: Marion Ettinger*



**JAMES LONGENBACH** (Spring 2019) is the author of five books of poems, most recently *Earthling*, a finalist for the 2017 National Book Critics Circle Award. His most recent book of criticism, *How Poems Get Made*, will be published this fall, and his poems and essays appear regularly in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. The recipient of awards from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he is currently the Joseph Henry Gilmore Professor of English at the University of Rochester and has also taught at the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. *Photo: Adam Fenster*



**JOANNA SCOTT** (Spring 2019) is the author of numerous works of fiction, including *The Manikin*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *Various Antidotes: Stories* and *Arrogance*, both finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Award; and the critically acclaimed *Make Believe*, *Tourmaline*, *Liberation*, and *Follow Me*. Her most recent novel, *Careers for Women*, reimagines the life of a 1950s female executive. A recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Lannan Award, she teaches at the University of Rochester as the Roswell Smith Burrows Professor of English. *Photo: Brandon Fick*



**YANYI** (June 2019) is a poet and critic based in Brooklyn. Winner of the 2018 Yale Series of Younger Poets competition, he is currently an Asian American Writers Workshop Margins Fellow and associate editor at Foundry. He formerly served as Director of Technology and Design at The Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, senior editor at *Nat. Brut*, and curatorial assistant at The Poetry Project, and was the recipient of a 2015 Emerging Poets Fellowship from Poets House. His work has appeared in *The Margins*, *Memorious*, and *Model View Culture*. Yale University Press will publish his manuscript *The Year of Blue Water* in April 2019. *Photo: Yanyi*





# Update on Conservation: Mystery Box Reveals Layers of Friendship

**VISITORS TO THE MERRILL** Apartment, including recent resident fellow Geri Doran, have been intrigued by an enigmatic miniature Victorian row house perched on a windowsill. The *trompe l'oeil* façade reveals through arched doorways oddly juxtaposed vistas of 19th century street and seaside scenes. The image is collaged onto the lid of an old cigar box that opens to reveal a yet more surreal interior that includes a top-hatted man and a young boy holding a starfish, shells, and a butterfly which beg yet more questions and riffs of the imagination from the viewer.

James Merrill  
House Conservation  
Committee chair  
Sarah Dove has undertaken a systematic examination of the assemblage which has suffered damage from sunlight beaming directly upon it over the years through the adjacent windows. This spring Sarah reached out to Debora Greger, the poet and artist who created the piece for James Merrill in the mid-1980s, for illumination on the origins of the assemblage and ideas on how best to restore it.

Greger and her husband, the poet and critic William Logan, met Merrill in the late 70s at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, where they were guests. “The poet Judy Moffett introduced us when James stopped to visit her,” Greger recalls. “I think he was on his way south from a trip to visit sites associated with Elizabeth Bishop in Nova Scotia. He was very droll about the famous tidal bore of the Bay of Fundy, I remember—indeed a ‘crashing bore.’ I had grown up in a small town in the desert of eastern Washington State. My parents had one of three subscriptions to *The New Yorker* there. The 50s and 60s were an amazing age of poetry in that magazine, which is where I first read Merrill’s work, when I was in high school. When I went to college, I found a library that had his books, so it was a thrill to meet him. He turned out to be very generous and supportive of younger poets, and great company. Later, when William and I first came to Cambridge, England, he had the Amy Lowell Traveling Poetry Scholarship. As his scholarship ran out, I was awarded it. With an unexpected gift from James—a grant from the Ingram Merrill Foundation—“we were able to eke out a life-changing stay here. Hence the gift of the box, made by way of small thanks for his [Merrill’s] much larger generosity to us. It was one of a number I made then, inspired by the raw materials I turned up, including old boxes and tins. My BA is in art, my MFA in poetry.”

Greger says that the Cadena cigar box used for the assemblage

“would have been bought at a Cambridge UK flea market... the window frames are old model-railroad parts, I think. Pickings at flea markets here were great for the collagist 30 years ago. One got a tiny taste of what [Joseph] Cornell would have taken for granted. Not anymore.” In response to Sarah’s query about a possibly missing element where two glue spots are visible, and whether housing the now frail collage box in a protective PlexiCase might be feasible, Greger thinks a case would be “a beautiful solution” and has a hunch the glue spots may correspond

to wing tips of a butterfly having come loose. “If they don’t match up, a possibility that rather appeals to me would be to let the butterflies fall to the bottom of the PlexiCase, or near it...as if they’d died.”

Overall Greger is not averse to the testament that time has worked on her art piece. “The paper the found materials were printed on that were used in the piece, and the white glue attaching them obviously weren’t archival—but I don’t mind the browning that has occurred.” Greger also created the vertical paper collage used on the jacket of *Recitative*, a collection of Merrill’s criticism and essays edited and introduced by J.D. McClatchy (published by North Point

“James was very generous and supportive of younger poets. Hence the gift of the box,” says Debora Greger, the poet and collage artist who created the piece



Press in 1986). “Is there a relation between my poetry and my art? Good question!” she says. “I come up with titles for the art under duress. The art is easier, because the page is less blank when you do collage. When I’m doing a piece for a book cover—for Merrill’s book or for William’s prose—I think about the book title and its associations, and whatever I know about the contents—and then let the collage [elements] tell me what they’re up to. William’s contribution to my art is to breeze into my studio when I have a piece laid out on the floor for contemplation—and set it aflutter, always improving the layout I’ve agonized over.”

For Geri Doran, the box, with its layerings, “was a reminder of the connections and layerings that happen in the poetry world.” She was introduced to James Merrill’s work by Logan and Greger, her then teachers, in the early 1990s. “When I arrived for the MH residency, I was aware of William and Debora’s connection to James and their affection for him. Seeing Debora’s box among the many art objects in the house was a lovely surprise. Sarah and I decided to open it together, as it appeared fragile; me purely to look, and Sarah to evaluate it for conservation. We marveled over the collage-box’s intricacies and making. In the photo I took, Sarah’s hands are cradling the box. Layers upon layers of affection.”



## What's New?

### Catching Up with Past Merrill Fellows

**STEPHEN YENSER** (Invited Fellow, July 2014): “My annotated, stand-alone edition of James Merrill’s *The Book of Ephraim* was published in April by Alfred A. Knopf, Merrill’s usual publisher.”

**CAOILINN HUGHES** (Winter 2016-2017): “My novel *Orchid & the Wasp* launches in the US in July. Besides that, I’ve received fellowships from the Bogliasco Foundation (Italy), the Centre Culturel Irlandais (France) and the Ireland Funds Monaco.”

**MOIRA EGAN & DAMIANO ABENI** (Spring 2015): “Damiano published his *from the dairy of jonas & job, inc., pigfarmers*, which he wrote in English and then translated into Italian. My book, *Synaesthesia*, won the 2017 New Criterion Poetry Prize. *Synaesthesia* is an entirely ekphrastic volume: Half is based on the artwork of Suzanne Valadon; the other half, *Olfactorium*, is inspired by perfume, and has just been published bilingually in English and Italian by PeQuod here in Italy. The cover should be familiar, thanks to JMHC for permission to use an image of the Merrill Apartment wallpaper!”

**MAXIM LOSKUTOFF** (November 2017): “My first book, a collection of stories called *Come West and See*, is out this month from W.W. Norton.”

**BRITTANY PERHAM** (December 2013): “My new book, *Double Portrait*, was selected by Claudia Rankine for the 2016 Barnard Women Poets Prize and published by W.W. Norton in August of 2017. I also received the inaugural University of Kentucky Residency at the Mill House, and will be in residence in Scottsville, Virginia this July.”

**JOSH WEIL** (Fall 2010): “My latest book, the story collection *The Age of Perpetual Light*, was published in September 2017.” From *The New York Times Book Review*: “For their breadth, intensity and audacity of ambition, the stories of *The Age of Perpetual Light* situate themselves as natural heirs to such masterpieces as Denis Johnson’s *Train Dreams* and James Joyce’s *The Dead*.”

**LORRIE MOORE** (Invited Fellow, July 2016): “I have a book coming, *See What Can Be Done* (Alfred A. Knopf), collected pieces, criticism, commentary, one of which I wrote in the Merrill house.”

## Wintering Over at Merrill House

### How writer-in-residence Mike Alberti survived this year’s big freeze

**I ARRIVED** at the Merrill House during the season’s first snowstorm, which descended on me somewhere in western Pennsylvania. I drove the final few hours to Connecticut white-knuckled. Every half-hour I passed a shoulder-stranded car, spun off the highway, waiting sadly for the tow truck. I arrived safely at the Merrill House, but I didn’t know whether the storm was a bad omen or just a fitting welcome for the Winter Fellow. Each afternoon, after I finished writing for the day, I’d take a head-clearing walk through the Borough, down past the Old Lighthouse Museum “closed for the season” to the Point, where I’d stand looking across the Sound to Fisher’s Island until the freezing wind bullied me back inland.

These walks were my introduction to Stonington’s rich and varied history. I came to the Merrill House to work on a historical novel, and it turned out to be the perfect place for that project, as I lived each day in a liminal space between present and past. Stonington wears its history proudly; the past confronts you as you walk the streets. My curiosity sparked by a visit to the Holy Ghost Society, I spent an evening reading about Stonington’s Portuguese roots. The plaques marking the former homes of whaling captains, merchants, and rope-makers around town prompted a visit to the Mystic Seaport, where I was graced with a solo tour of the whaleship Charles W. Morgan, all other visitors kept away by the cold. As I walked through the old cemeteries around town, I imagined the lives of the people buried there, and that imagining was a kind of writing, too.

The Merrill House itself seems haunted, both by Merrill himself and by the ghosts he invited in. Standing over his Ouija Board, I wondered if he, too, was taken by the present-ness of the past in Stonington. He could have chosen to make his life in New York City, of course, which hides its history, builds over it weekly. I like to think that he enjoyed, as I did, the temporal slippage in the Borough, the ragged border between living and dead.

After spending my days with the dead, I spent my evenings seeking out the living. Many nights, I had dinner in the homes of Stonington’s generous residents, and on the other nights I visited the warm, soft-lit interiors of Noah’s Restaurant and the Water Street Café. If I brought a book to keep me company, it was never long before someone asked what I was reading, and generally the book would stay closed after that, displaced by conversation. Although I seemed to be the only tourist there in that off-season, I was welcomed and included in the year-round community.

Towards the end of my stay at Merrill House, we had another storm. A historic storm, a “bomb cyclone,” which closed roads and blanketed the town in snow. I’d neglected to prepare and had no food in the apartment. I called the Big Y and learned that it was closed. I put on my coat and boots and walked out into the snow to see what was open. Noah’s was closed. Water Street Café was closed. Everything was closed. Snow fell so thickly that it shaded the streetlights. I started home, faced with the prospect of going without dinner, when I saw light coming from Tom’s. I tried the door hopefully, found it open, and found Tom sitting behind the counter, a welcome sight. I heeded Tom’s advice to stock up for a few days, and filled a bag with spaghetti, marinara sauce, an onion, and chocolate bars.

Later that night in the apartment, hunched gratefully over my meal, my mind swam back into the world of my novel. I began fashioning in my mind the scene I’d write the next morning: my protagonist, left hungry in the winter after the grasshopper plague of 1874 devastates his crops, visits a kindly grocer, who gives him some flour and bacon and coffee on credit. I had a name for this grocer, and I could see his face in my mind, plucked right out of the present.

*Mike Alberti (Merrill Fellow Winter 2017–2018) lives in Minneapolis, where he is at work on a novel.*





# To Our Donors...

**THANK YOU ALL** for your support of the James Merrill House, this wonderful literary treasure in our midst, now recognized as a National Historic Landmark. Your generous contributions allow us to provide residencies for and readings by as many as ten writers each year. All find the Merrill

House a uniquely inspiring place to live and work. Many thanks, too, to the committed volunteers on the Merrill Committee, whose involvement—from making the writers feel at home here, to helping conserve the contents of the rooms they work in and planning events—enable the Merrill House to achieve

its mission on a tight budget, and means that 100 percent of your contribution goes toward supporting our programs.

With much appreciation,  
Ruth Saunders & Cynthia Elliott  
*Co-Chairs*

## Donors to the James Merrill House

**WE WANT TO THANK** all those listed below who have given to the James Merrill House during the past fiscal year which began on April 1, 2017 and ended on March 31, 2018.

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James Merrill

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM & MUSEUM

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## Calendar of Events

### THURSDAY, JULY 12

**Caolinn Hughes**, 2017 Merrill Fellow, reads at Bank Square Books, 6:30 pm

### SATURDAY, AUGUST 4

**Annual Deck Party**, Merrill Apartment, 5-7 pm

### FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

13th Annual Merrill Lecture: **Jorie Graham** reads at the La Grua Center, 6 pm

### SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

**Merrill Apartment Open House**, 3-5 pm

### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20

September–October Merrill Fellow **Christa Romanosky** reads from her work.  
Stonington Free Library, 5 pm

### SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

November–December Merrill Fellow **Jordan Jacks** reads from his work.  
Stonington Free Library, 5 pm

## Poetry in Motion

*continued from page 1*

dew drops in Ryan's verse, sitting  
"As neatly as peas/in their green  
canoe,/as discreetly as beads/strung  
in a row..."

In 1995, Kay Ryan won an award from the Ingram Merrill Foundation, from 2008-2010 she was the sixteenth United States poet laureate, and other of many accolades include a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 2011, and a National Humanities Medal presented by President Barack Obama in 2013. However, Ryan's 2015 residency at the James Merrill House was only the second writer residency in which she had ever chosen to participate—and for which she expressed profound appreciation: "...you clearly respect most deeply the live core of this estate, which is the literary estate, which can only ever be alive and in the process of being something we never before imagined."

Kay read from her work to a full house at La Grua Center in July 2015, introduced by J.D. McClatchy, who, quoting from his 2003 anthology of contemporary American poetry in which Ryan's work is included, described her poems as intriguingly "compact, exhilarating, strange affairs, like Satie miniatures or Cornell boxes." MTA passengers had opportunity to mull over Ryan's elliptical verse while strap-hanging or sitting like peas in a pod in transit, after which they may have been provoked to pick up Ryan's most recent poetry collection, *Erratic Facts*, published by Grove Press in 2015, soon after her residency at Merrill House.

