

# James Merrill

## JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Summer 2021



### Through a Poet's House Virtually

**THANKS TO GENEROUS GRANTS** from the Edward and Mary Lord Foundation and CultureSECT, it's now possible to "visit" the Merrill Apartment without leaving home! The 107 Water Street building and James Merrill's apartment on the 3rd and 4th floors were designated a National Historic Landmark in 2016. The streetscape shops—whose proprietors knew Merrill as their landlord and

friend—and second-floor rental apartments maintain their late Victorian façade and floor plans. And the apartment remains much as Merrill left it and still conjures the poet's aura. Click on [jamesmerrillhouse.org/thehouse](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org/thehouse) for a self-guided tour of Merrill's hidden study, the art and objects he delighted in, and the "changing light" that inspired his most celebrated work.

### Happy Ghosts Prevail at the Annual Merrill Lecture

**IN EARLY MAY**, novelist Marlon James gave the 16th Annual Merrill House lecture. James is the author of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a saga about gang rivalry in his native Jamaica and the U.S., for which he won the 2015 Man Booker Prize, and *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, the first of a projected sci-fi trilogy, and winner of the L.A. Times Ray Bradbury Prize as well as finalist for the 2019 National Book Award for Fiction. James was introduced by Merrill House Committee co-chair Randy Bean, and spoke from his home in Minneapo-



lis, where he holds a professorship at Macalester College. Their conversation touched on James' first visit to the Merrill Apartment this past winter, which he likened to being in a room with "happy ghosts." Smitten by that experience, he applied for a Merrill fellowship and will be Writer in Residence this coming



October. In the meantime, tune in to his reading and talk via the James Merrill House YouTube and Facebook channels.

### Meet Our New Co-Chair

**WE ARE DELIGHTED** to welcome Kathryn Burchenal as new Co-Chair of the Merrill Committee. She was preceded by Cynthia Elliott, who's stepped into a new role as Development Chair for the Merrill House. Kathryn has a Ph.D. in molecular biology, and spent twenty years at the National Institutes of Health, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and the Pasteur Institute. She was founding Vice President of the Malaria Foundation International and has served as a Stonington Borough Burgess and on the Borough Planning & Zoning Commission.



### Celebrating James Merrill's Life & Letters

**ONE OF THE GREAT** letter writers of the 20th century, James Merrill made a habit of chronicling his activities for friends and family. To mark the publication of *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill* (Alfred A. Knopf), the Merrill House and Washington University in St. Louis co-sponsored a series of online programs led by the book's co-editors Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser. According to Joel Minor, Curator of the Modern Literature Collection at Washington University Libraries, where the bulk of Merrill's papers reside, Merrill wrote thousands of letters in his lifetime—starting with a childhood request to "Santa Clause"—and faithfully kept in touch with hundreds of correspondents. Throughout the three-part series, Hammer (Merrill's biographer), and Yenser (Merrill's friend and literary co-executor), were joined by scholars and curators from WashU and Yale's Beinecke Library, Knopf poetry editor Deb Garrison, and Merrill House Committee member and literary critic Willard Spiegelman, each of whom helped draw out the nuances of Merrill's ebullient banter with friends, lovers, and family. You can watch the series at [jamesmerrillhouse.org/archive](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org/archive).

## James Merrill House Committee

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bergin.jmh@gmail.com

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James Merrill House is a program of the  
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# Merrill House Fellows 2021-2022

**HENRI COLE** (September 2021) was born in Fukuoka, Japan. He has published ten



volumes of poetry, including *Middle Earth* (2003), finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and his most recent collection, *Blizzard* (2020). His memoir, *Orphic Paris*, was published in 2018. From 1982-1988, he was

executive director of the Academy of American Poets. He has received many awards for his work, including the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, the Lenore Marshall Award, and the Medal in Poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He currently teaches at Claremont McKenna College.

**MARLON JAMES** (October 2021) gave the 16th Annual Merrill Lecture in May.

He is the author of four novels, including *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, winner of the 2015 Man Booker Prize. His most recent book, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, was a National Book Award Fiction finalist.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1970, James divides his time between Minnesota and New York City.



**MICHAEL COLLIER** (November 2021) is author, most recently, of *The Missing Mountain: New and Selected Poems*, as well as a translation of Euripides' *Medea* and a volume of essays, *Make Us Wave Back*. Recipient of an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters among others, he served as Maryland Poet Laureate and is director emeritus of Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences. He lives in Vermont.



He is the author of four novels, including *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, winner of the 2015 Man Booker Prize. His most recent book, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, was a National Book Award Fiction finalist.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1970, James divides his time between Minnesota and New York City.

**JOHN COTTER** (January 2022) has written a memoir, *Losing Music*, forthcoming from Milkweed Editions, and is author of *Under the Small Lights*, winner of the Miami University Press novella contest. He's contributed essays, theater pieces, and fiction to *New England Review*, *Raritan*, *Georgia Review*, *Commonweal* and elsewhere. He teaches at Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver, Colorado.



**KAMRAN JAVADIZADEH** (February/March 2022) was born in Los Angeles, received his Ph.D. from Yale in 2008, and is an associate professor at Villanova University, where he works on the history of poetry and poetics. His first book, *Institutionalized Lyric: American Poetry at Midcentury*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. He's currently writing a book that braids poetry, family history, and the Iranian diaspora.



**MEHDI TAVANA OKASI** (April/May 2022) is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at SUNY/Purchase. His work has appeared in literary journals and anthologies, including *Best New American Voices 2009* and *Tremors: New Fiction from Iranian-American Writers*, among others. A 2016 National Endowment for the Arts Fiction Fellow, he is completing a novel, *May This Be Your Last Sorrow*.



**ROBERT WOOD LYNN** (June 2022) won the 2021 Yale Younger Poets Award for his debut collection, *Mothman Apologia*. A graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law, he is an MFA candidate in poetry at New York University, where he teaches creative writing in the undergraduate writing program and serves as Art Editor for the *Washington Square Review*.



**LAUREN SANDLER** (August 2022) is a journalist and nonfiction author whose work focuses on gender and inequality. Her most recent book is *This is All I Got: A New Mother's Search For Home*, a 2020 New York Times Notable Book. She has been on staff at *Salon* and NPR, a columnist at *HuffPost*, and has held a Poynter Journalism Fellowship at Yale and a Calderwood Journalism Fellowship at MacDowell.

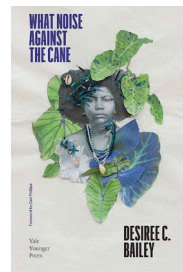


## Yale Younger Poet Desiree Bailey

**EACH YEAR**, the Merrill House invites the latest recipient of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize to spend the month of June at the Merrill Apartment. The YYP fellowship also pays homage to James Merrill, who served as judge for the series from 1983 to 1989. While in residence,



Desiree Bailey gave a virtual reading from her debut collection *What Noise Against the Cane* (Yale University Press)—the 115th volume of the series—"a lyric quest for belonging and freedom, weaving political resistance, Caribbean folklore, immigration, and the realities of Black life in America." She's currently pursuing an MFA in Poetry at New York University. Her reading and conversation with JMHC member Annie Philbrick can be accessed via the James Merrill House YouTube channel.





# Larry Rivers: James Merrill's Transgressive Muse

**IN HIS ESSAY** “With Larry Rivers & the Poets of Southampton,” published in the Fall 2014 edition of the literary quarterly *Salmagundi*, James Merrill’s nephew, the poet, translator, travel writer and critic Robin Magowan, recalls how visitors to his uncle’s house in Stonington, CT, were regularly stunned by a huge Larry Rivers painting “of a bucolic Water Mill scene mounted in the attic, which had been remodeled to accommodate it. The painting served as a *trompe l’oeil* wall in front of which, at five in the evening, the poet and his friends would assemble for cocktails and cigarettes.”

Entitled “Water Mill Prospect” (1953), Rivers’ magnificent oil painting no longer stuns visitors to the Merrill Apartment because James Merrill bequeathed it to New London’s Lyman Allyn Museum. However, as Magowan revealed in his *Salmagundi* essay, the painting holds an enduring key to understanding the development of Merrill’s oeuvre.

Measuring approximately 5 x 6 ½ feet, and executed on land Rivers had acquired in Water Mill, Long Island (assisted by Merrill’s gift of \$2500 for the down payment), the *en plein air* scene is unusual for the artist. Rivers, considered a pivotal figure in American Modernism, avoided working outdoors. (Apparently a neighbor’s cows surrounded him while he painted, sniffing at his shoes.) Rivers had been rigorously classically trained in drawing in Paris, and his ostensible subject, as Magowan describes it, is “a 19th century one, familiar perhaps from Corot: a central tree, a pair of huge cows on a meadow, a late summer’s day clouds and racing Long Island fog. But walking about in front of it—the painting compelled viewers to move in order to see—felt more like looking at a film than at a static tableau. Everything—the tree, the grass, the cows—had been half-erased, wiped with a rag, leaving only hints and indications, a dab of color or no color at all but the charcoal of an immensely self-assured preparatory under-drawing.”

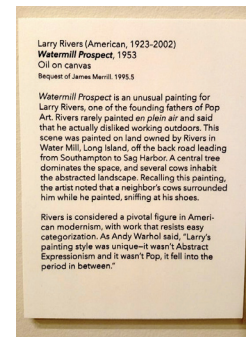
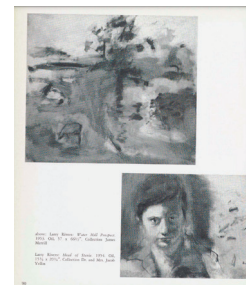
Magowan perceives that, “A work of such size and vivacity challenged what Merrill was himself about. The multi-layered set pieces of the neoclassical poets of the 1950s, such as Richard Wilbur’s ‘For the New Station in Rome,’ or Merrill’s ‘Hotel de l’Univers et Portugal,’ kept the reader at a formal distance with their deft metrics and metaphorical scaffolding; equivalents of the then fashionable four-button suit. Rivers’ painting, with its scumbled rubbings, its splotchy unfinished look, invited the viewer to participate in the impulsiveness of the artist’s rethinkings and improvisations.”

Merrill biographer Langdon Hammer notes in *James Merrill: Art and Life* (2015)



Clockwise from top: Larry Rivers’ “Water Mill Prospect” (1953), oil on canvas, bequest of James Merrill, 1995, courtesy of Lyman Allyn Museum; in 1956, Merrill lent the painting to the Museum of Modern Art “12 Americans” show (image courtesy MoMA); Merrill (right) and his partner David Jackson seated in front of the painting (photo: Rollic McKenna)

that in 1955, “Rivers made oil portraits of both [Merrill’s lover, David] Jackson and Merrill. In his, Jimmy looks like a junior Merrill Lynch executive in his glasses, button-down shirt, and striped tie.” Hammer adds that Magowan later recounted to him



that “Jimmy then longed to write the way Larry painted: loosely and casually, with confident self-display and colloquial exuberance. The big Water Mill landscape was a kind of aesthetic challenge to Merrill, daring him to loosen up.”

In Magowan’s essay, Peter Hooten—Merrill’s late-life love—recalls “the small ghost-like Rivers still life” in their Manhattan apartment, and

Merrill saying how much he’d once wanted to write the way Larry painted. And Magowan contends that “Merrill’s second novel, *The (Diblos) Notebook*, with its lists, diagrams and scratched-out paragraphs, its forefronting of the compositional dilemma, reads as a direct homage to Rivers’ Water Mill landscape, as do Merrill’s two breakthrough poems of the early 60’s, ‘Urban Convalescence’ and ‘The

*continued on page 5*

# To Our Donors:

**THANK YOU SO MUCH** for your contributions to the Merrill House in our 25th fiscal year that ended March 31, 2021. As the pandemic broke in March 2020, we were prepared for a 30 percent decline in contributions. However, we are grateful to report that the broad community of Merrill House supporters came through: We received a record number of gifts for a total of over \$50,000, enabling us to continue with no cuts to our programs. With your support, we maintained our Writer-in-Residence program, hosting nine writers across the past year, safely, in quarantine conditions. To spotlight their talents, we created a virtual presence through numerous webcast readings, the annual Merrill Lecture, and launched our Studio 107 series, gaining audiences far beyond Stonington.

With much appreciation,  
Randy Bean & Kathryn Burchenal  
Co-Chairs

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We sincerely hope we have accurately acknowledged all our donors and gifts. However, if you find any errors or discrepancies, please let us know by emailing [bergin.jmh@gmail.com](mailto:bergin.jmh@gmail.com)

## Donor Spotlight: Merrill Fellows Give Back

**IT'S HEARTENING** that so many of our past fellows support the Merrill House with an annual gift enclosed with a note about their own experience. Two recent dispatches:

"I donated to JMH because I feel passionately about supporting its mission to both preserve Merrill's home and legacy and create a space for poets and writers creating today. I personally benefited from a marvelous month there that enabled a major breakthrough with my James Baldwin biography in progress for which I will always be grateful." —*Nicholas Boggs*, December 2020-January 2021



"My months at the James Merrill House are among my most cherished memories of my writing career. I donate to the Merrill House so that others can enjoy this unique experience in a near mystical setting. But I also donate because of the community around the Merrill House which is composed of some of the most devoted and wonderful people whom I'm proud to count among my truest friends and who have cultivated a residency that stimulates the hearts and minds of its writers." —*Ivy Pochoda*, Spring 2009





# What's New?

## Catching up with past Merrill Fellows

**NICHOLAS T. BOGGS** (December 2020-January 2021) I have a bit of good news: I've been awarded a 2021-2022 NEH Long Term Fellowship at the Center for Research in the Humanities at the NYPL to continue work on my James Baldwin biography.

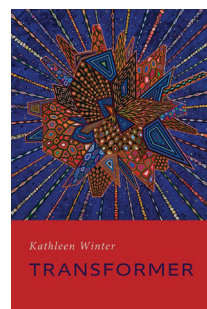
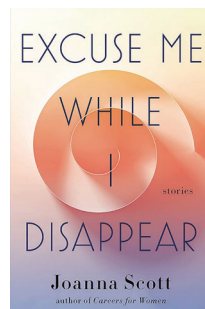
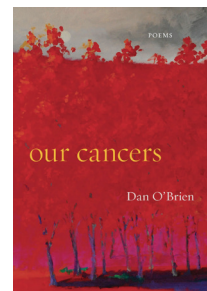
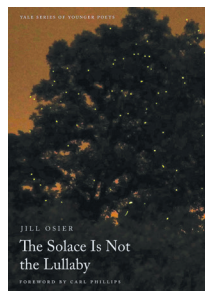
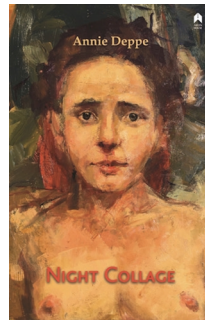
**ANNIE DEPPE** (1998-1999) My third book of poems, *Night Collage*, was published by Arlen House in Ireland this spring and will be available in paperback from Syracuse Press in September 2021.

**PETER FILKINS** (Spring 2012) My new book of poems, *Water / Music*, was published by Johns Hopkins University Press this April. I joined a nationwide virtual tour where I read along with others at a dozen different bookstores and venues.

**ADAM GIANNELLI** (Spring 2016) I was recently awarded a 2021-2022 Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and am currently Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Colby college in Maine.

**WALT HUNTER** (September 2020) *Some Flowers*, my debut collection of poems, is forthcoming in 2022; and my book *The American House Poem, 1945-2015*, is under contract with Oxford University Press.

**JAMES LONGENBACH** (Winter/Spring 2019) W.W. Norton published my poetry collection *Forever* in late June; in it are two poems about the Merrill apartment and Stonington, one entitled "In the Village" and the other entitled "School Street." "In the Village" will also appear in *The Best American Poetry 2021* (Scribner's), edited by Tracy Smith, in a few months.



**DAN O'BRIEN** (June 2013) This past year has been mostly about poems and essays, as the theatre has of course been dormant. My book of essays, *A Story That Happens: On Playwriting, Childhood, & Other Traumas*, launched in April. Excerpts ran in *The Guardian* and *American Theatre* magazine, and the Washington Post. My fourth poetry collection, *Our Cancers*, is due out in September from Acre Books (University of Cincinnati Press).

**JILL OSIER** (2019 Yale Younger Poet, future Merrill Fellow) I received *Ploughshares'* 2020 John C. Zacharis First Book Award for my collection, *The Solace Is Not the Lullaby* (Yale University Press, 2020).

**JOANNA SCOTT** (Winter/Spring 2019) My new story collection entitled, *Excuse Me While I Disappear*, is just out from Little, Brown & Co.

**TERESE SVOBODA** (November 2015) For the first time in my adult life, poetry stopped for six months at the beginning of the pandemic, being so reliant on the future, which had dimmed. My book *Theatrix* debuted in March, and I also

finished an opera for a Brit producer about the Harlem Renaissance. My second memoir, *Hitler and My Mother-in-Law*, is circulating.

**NOAH WARREN** (Yale Younger Poet, June 2016) My pertinent news is that my book, *The Complete Stories*, was published this May with Copper Canyon. Thanks for the Studio 107 interviews, which I've been enjoying; it's nice to savor, and to see various acquaintances experience the magic there.

**KATHLEEN WINTER** (December 2014-Jan 2015) I have short fiction forthcoming from *Five Points* and *Giant Sequins* in their next issues, and some poems were recently published by *Michigan Quarterly Review's* 60th Anniversary Issue, *Diode*, *Copper Nickel*, *Barrow Street* and *New Ohio Review*. My third collection, *Transformer*, won the Hilary Tham prize.

## Rivers

continued from page 5

Thousand and Second Night.' Like Rivers, Merrill employs pastiche as a way of saluting his sacred monsters; not Corot or Courbet, but Yeats and Eliot. Mockery is but another form of homage."

Magowan conjectures that "Pastiche suits a reality as up-for-grabs.... For Rivers and Merrill, and for many of their wartime generation, modern life exuded a post-Hiroshima impermanence: less a question of if, than when. And, as they composed, so they lived: always on the go, as if only a speed of footwork could avert the impending disaster." Magowan goes on to say that through its "vivid and improvised gestures and erasures... [the painting] was almost as though Rivers had foreseen the speed with which the car, and its dedicated weekenders, would transform the South Fork's cow pastures into acres and acres of mega-mansions."

Rivers' Water Mill landscape can still be readily viewed by visitors to the Merrill Apartment. The Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London is just 16 miles away (for hours visit [lymanallyn.org](http://lymanallyn.org)). And the "small ghost-like Rivers' still life" now resides in the Merrill Apartment. Generously donated by Robin Magowan, the oil and graphite on canvas study for Larry Rivers' larger painting, "The Family," executed in 1954-55, has recently been restored and hangs in James Merrill's bedroom, above his bed.

*Robin Magowan's essay will appear in a new edition of his autobiography, Memoirs of a Minotaur (Red Hen) later this year.*



**JUST YOUR TYPICAL DELIVERY:** 1052 lbs. of February-March 2021 fellow Kirstin Valdez Quade's debut novel *The Five Wounds* shipped to 107 Water Street for signing.

James Merrill

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## Calendar of Events

SEPTEMBER 25, 2021

Henri Cole

OCTOBER 23, 2021

Marlon James

NOVEMBER 20, 2021

Michael Collier

JANUARY 22, 2022

John Cotter

MARCH 26, 2022

Kamran Javadizadeh

For details visit [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org)

## Merrill House Memories

Have a personal anecdote to share about James Merrill or the early years of the Merrill House writing program? We'd love to hear from you! Email Bergin O'Malley at [Bergin.jmh@gmail.com](mailto:Bergin.jmh@gmail.com).

## Merrill House Launches Studio 107

**TO MARK THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY** of our Writer-in-Residence program, the James Merrill House launched a series of online interviews with former Merrill House Fellows. For each episode, the writers briefly discuss their writing habits and techniques, and describe their experience at the James Merrill House, before reading a brief excerpt from their newest published work. Watch the latest episode, or catch up with the entire series, on the James Merrill House YouTube channel at [jamesmerrillhouse.org/studio107](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org/studio107).



Dan Chiasson, Fall 2017 Merrill Fellow and longtime contributor to *The New Yorker*, read from his latest book *The Math Campers* (Alfred A. Knopf), much of which he drafted in the Merrill Apartment.