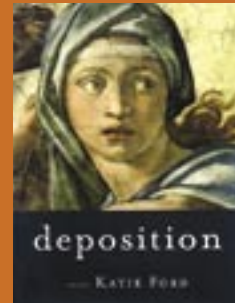


## Alumni



Katie Ford, '97

### “Confessional Lyric Poet”



“Being inside of the book, being in the middle of it, is the satisfying part of writing.”

Like hundreds of writers and artists before her, Katie Ford, '97, creates out of necessity.

“I write what I am compelled to write,” said Ford. “I never know if it’s of consequence to anyone else.”

But clearly Ford’s writing *is* of consequence. While she was studying for her master of divinity degree at Harvard, the university commissioned her to write a sequence of poems for a Stations of the Cross liturgical service. Those poems became the foundation for her first book of poetry, *Deposition*, which was published this past fall by Graywolf Press.

“At the time, I was in a flurry of urgent writing that I didn’t expect to have a solution,” said Ford. “*Deposition* is now being read as a theological book, which makes sense considering my concern at the time with religion and its abusive manifestations.”

Ford is a self-described “confessional lyric poet,” and *Deposition* is the sediment from the “interrogation of my consciousness . . . by the concept of truth.” The roots of the book dig deeply into Ford’s involvement with a small religious community at Whitman. The questions Ford raised about the community’s “truths” compelled her to enroll in divinity school.

“People tend to flock to answers that are very clear. You feel like something has been solved. But the truth about the mysteriousness of reality can overcome that kind of anxious certainty,” said Ford. “I wanted to find a way of religious thinking that was ethically sound instead of allowing religious commitment to trump ethical obligation, which can have a harmful end.”

Ford, who currently studies poetry and teaches creative writing at The University of Iowa, first explored the world of poetry with instructor Ben Mitchell and visiting professor Tess Gallagher at Whitman. After graduating magna cum laude with her English degree and honors in her major study, Ford enrolled at Harvard’s divinity school and began

studying theology and poetry. She received her master of divinity degree in 2001 and will complete a master of fine arts in poetry degree from The University of Iowa in May of 2003.

“At Whitman I was learning the craft of poetry, but I never really knew what my subject was,” said Ford. “At Harvard, things seemed to be aligned in terms of finding a form to articulate a subject. Somehow the timing of it all came together. I had a subject to write about, one I could finally articulate.”

Under the guidance of poet and Harvard professor Jorie Graham, Ford wrote and compiled a collection of poems based on her Stations of the Cross commission for Harvard and submitted the book for publication. Although some of Ford’s writing had already been printed in journals such as *Ploughshares*, *Colorado Review*, and the *Partisan Review*, the November 2002 book release generated a fresh batch of interest in her work. *Poets and Writers* magazine featured Ford in its November/December 2002 issue and the University of Minnesota invited Ford to read at its prestigious First Book Conference in December of 2002. She will read next fall at the University of St. Thomas’ Sacred Arts Festival and was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Ford is also scheduled to read at Whitman on April 23 as part of the Visiting Writers Reading Series.

The publication of *Deposition* has created a temporary lull in Ford’s “interrogation.” But the process is ongoing. “Things haven’t been solved, but they have been spoken,” she said. She is looking forward to immersing herself completely in another flurry of writing although she doesn’t know when that might occur. “Getting published is not more lasting than the process of writing,” said Ford. “Being inside of the book, being in the middle of it, is the satisfying part of writing.”

— Valarie Hamm, '01

# events

## *Weekend College 2003 - June 27-29*

**The History of Rock and Roll.** Join professor of sociology Keith Farrington and professor of history David Schmitz for a weekend of examining the development and significance of the musical genre known as “rock ’n’ roll.” These popular professors will explore the rural and urban roots of blues, jazz, and folk music; the development of the Cold War culture in the post-World War II years; the political and social upheavals of the 1960s; and the culture and political fragmentation of American society in the past three decades. The weekend begins Friday evening with a wine reception and opening lectures and ends with Sunday brunch.

## *Summer College 2003 - June 15-21*

Join professor of history David Schmitz on the topic of war; historian Junius Rochester, ’57, discussing Lewis and Clark; professor of music Susan Pickett in recital; and Carl Schmitt, ’56, on the history of the automobile. Also hear words of wisdom from physics professor Craig Gunsul and other presenters for a week of intellectual engagement and enjoyment as part of Summer College 2003.

## *Environmental Studies at Whitman in the Woods - August 15-17*

Join alumni, parents, families, friends and Whitman faculty for a weekend trip to IslandWood, a new environmental learning center on Bainbridge Island. Share this learning experience with some of the current “stars” of the Whitman faculty, and see how a variety of disciplines converge in the field of environmental studies. Explore various environmental issues from the liberal arts perspective.

The weekend will include thought-provoking lectures and discussions and plenty of outdoor time. Children age seven and up will take part in a nature program. The faculty includes U. J. Sofia, astronomy; John Winter, geology; Julia Davis, philosophy; Tom Davis, philosophy; Heidi Sofia, biology research associate; Deborah Winter, psychology.

Participants also will learn about the sustainable construction and maintenance elements of this facility, including reused materials, solar-powered hot water, an artificial wetland — and much more. Guests will be housed in modern lodges. Meals, lectures, and lodging are included.

## *On Campus*

**Commencement Weekend, May 22-25.** 50th Reunion of the class of 1953.

**June 12-15.** 50+ Reunion of the classes of 1952 and earlier.

## *Whitman Clubs*

**Portland, April 13.** Student panel and reception hosted by Tom Cronin.

**Walla Walla, April 14.** History of rock ’n’ roll lecture with professor of history David Schmitz.

**Seattle, April 15.** Reception hosted by Tom Cronin with physics professor Craig Gunsul on “Thirty-four Years of Teaching at Whitman.”

**Seattle/Tacoma/Portland, May 3.** Talks and tour of Mima Mounds with geology professor Bob Carson and ethnecologist Linda Storm, ’84.

**Seattle/Tacoma, August 31.** Seattle Mariners game with athletic director Travis Feezell.

## *Trips and Tours*

**August 8-10. Oregon Shakespeare Festival** with Ed Foster, professor of English. See *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Wild Oats*. Lectures, lodging, plays, and Saturday luncheon are included.

**August 15-17. Whitman at IslandWood.** Details at left.

## *For the Love of Teaching*

**For novelist Craig Lesley, '67, teaching Whitman students is an “invigorating” break from writing.**

**A**ward-winning novelist Craig Lesley has savored his share of success as a writer, but that doesn't mean his heart has ever strayed far from the joy he finds in teaching. Lesley, '67, is back on campus this academic year as a sabbatical replacement in the English department, teaching classes that bounce from composition to creative writing to Native American literature.

“I'm loving every minute,” Lesley says. “The students here are wonderful. They remind me a great deal of my own college-age daughters. They work hard and take their studies seriously, but they also enjoy what they're doing. They are happy. It's invigorating to work with such great young people.”

Lesley has juggled teaching and writing for more than three decades. After earning a master's degree in English at the University of Kansas in 1970, he settled in the Portland area to teach English and creative writing at Clackamas Community College for the next 25 years. More recently, Lesley served a three-year appointment as the Hallie Ford Professor of English and Writer in Residence at Willamette University. He also was at Lewis & Clark College for one year as a visiting fiction writer and writer in residence.

“Teaching is where I started, and it's something I love to do,” Lesley says. “The day-to-day interaction with students, the give and take, is something I enjoy tremendously.”

For all its rewards, writing lacks the communal nature of teaching, Lesley says. “Writing is something that came to me a little later in life, and it can be kind of lonely. You sit in a room,

writing, trying to create a fictional world. There are times when you feel very isolated. It can be a struggle.”

Those struggles notwithstanding, Lesley's writing career began to blossom after he received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which financed a year of studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. That led to his completion of a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at Amherst in 1980.

His first novel, *Winterkill*, was published in 1984 by Houghton Mifflin. Set in central Oregon, it tells the story of Danny Kachiah, a contemporary Native American rodeo rider, and his struggles to regain both his teenage son and a sense of his Nez Perce heritage. The book drew immediate praise, winning book-of-the-year honors from the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association and the Western Writers of America.

*River Song*, a sequel to his first book, drew more praise and honors in 1989 and was followed in 1995 by *The Sky Fisherman*, which focuses on the coming-of-age of a young boy in a small Northwest river town, set against the backdrop of a tenuous coexistence between whites and Indians. *Sky Fisherman* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, captured Lesley's third award from Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association, and was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award.

“Of my books, *Sky Fisherman* is probably my favorite,” Lesley says. “If I'm giving someone a gift, it's the one I give. One of the central characters in the book was based on my uncle, a

Craig Lesley, '67, right, with two of his students, is teaching composition, creative writing and Native American literature this year as a visiting professor in the English department.



legendary fishing guide on the Deschutes River. The character and the setting mean a lot to me.”

Lesley’s fourth novel, *Storm Riders*, published in 2000, won the Oregon Book Award and attracted a second Pulitzer nomination, but it also exacted a more personal toll on the author. The story revolves around an Oregon professor’s attempts to help a young Indian boy damaged by fetal alcohol syndrome and abandoned by his parents. It draws heavily on Lesley’s real-life experiences with just such a child, the nephew of his first wife. It was 30 years ago when Lesley assumed guardianship of the boy, who was four at the time.

“*Storm Riders* was by far my toughest book to write because it was so personal,” Lesley says. “The challenges and rewards of raising a damaged child were monumental, and they were just as difficult to write about.”

In addition to his four novels, Lesley has edited two anthologies of short stories, *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories* (1991), and *Dreamers and Desperadoes: Contemporary Short Fiction of the American West* (1993). In 1997, he toured France with a group of authors to promote their works on the American West and Native American cultures.

Over the years, Lesley has stayed in close contact with Whitman, faithfully attending his reunions and giving any number of writing workshops and literary readings, both for students and alumni. He accepted an honorary degree at Commencement in the spring of 1991.

“I’ve always wanted to come back to Whitman to teach,” Lesley says. “The timing in this case worked out perfectly. I was finishing my three-year appointment at Willamette when the sabbatical position opened here at Whitman.”

While Lesley is no stranger to college campuses, he gives the highest possible marks to the students he’s encountered thus far at Whitman. “The students here are very bright, open, and independent,” he says. “I remember when I was a freshman at Whitman, wearing white socks and a bad haircut. I didn’t have a clue about a lot of things. Now, the first-year students are very astute, very intelligent, and very willing to participate in class.”

Lesley, who served as Whitman’s student body president as a senior, likens today’s student activism on behalf of the environment to the battles his generation waged for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. “I’m also impressed with the extent to which today’s students involve themselves in the surrounding community,” he says. “Some are working on local environmental issues, but many others are helping with reading programs in local schools and with other projects.”

One aspect of Whitman that hasn’t changed over the years is the enthusiasm of its faculty, Lesley says. “My professors at Whitman were wonderful teachers. That’s what I remember most about my days as a student, and that part of Whitman hasn’t changed at all. Today’s faculty brings the same sense of joy to its teaching.”

— David Holden

## Alumni

### Willis Taylor, '44

Willis Taylor, '44, a radiation oncologist with Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle and a former national president of the American Cancer Society, died October 30 in Seattle. He was 80.

Taylor received a Whitman College Alumnus of Merit Award in 1983.

After earning his medical degree at the University of Oregon, Taylor practiced medicine in Kennewick, Washington, and during the Korean War served as a senior medical officer in the Navy. In 1954 he began a distinguished 40-year career with Virginia Mason. He became director of the hospital's cancer program and served on the board of trustees of the hospital and research center. He was also a clinical professor of radiology at the University of Washington Medical School.

Taylor is survived by his wife of 56 years, Elizabeth Tertsagian Taylor, '44, sons Greg and Eric, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, sister, and brother Lowell Taylor, '50. Memorial gifts may be made to Whitman College.

### Russell McNeill, '34



Russell McNeill, '34, died at his home in Bellevue on February 11. He was 91.

Born in Spokane in 1911, McNeill was a banker, employed by First National Bank in Oregon from 1937 to 1967, as president of Old National Bank in Spokane from 1967 to 1972, and finally as president of BID, a

venture financing firm in Bellevue.

He served Whitman College as a member of the board of overseers from 1961 to 1972. He was a trustee of the College from 1972 to 1977, when he resigned to serve as special assistant to President Robert Allen Skotheim. He was a member of the steering committee of the Campaign for Whitman in the 1980s.

In 1994, McNeill received the Gordon Scribner Award for Distinguished Service to the College.

His wife, Margaret Gibbs McNeill, '35, died in 1976. He is survived by son Don McNeill, daughter Janet Aldrich, and four grandchildren.

### Why is your gift important to Whitman?

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- A high level of alumni participation distinguishes Whitman among the nation's elite colleges. For 19 years more than 50 percent of Whitman alumni have given their support annually.
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"It's the right thing to do." (Class of 1990)

"I support a number of organizations of which I have been a part and which I respect." (Class of 1963)

"Enhancing the quality of Whitman today also enhances the prestige of my own degree." (Class of 1982)

"Whitman College fundamentally contributed to the course of my life. My commitment to Whitman reflects the debt I owe it." (Class of 2001)

"The debt I owe to Dr. Charles Howard, one of my teachers, and Dr. S. B. L. Penrose, who encouraged me, and to Professor Santler for his consideration in all things. . . . Dr. Howard said to me, 'Johnny, get your priorities in order.' He then followed through and did countless things to see that I did." (Class of 1940)

*These quotes are from a recent alumni survey.*

## The Whitman Collection



### Ann Ronald, '61,

longtime English department faculty member

and administrator at the University of Nevada, is the author of *GhostWest: Reflections Past and Present*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2002. The book covers historic sites in 17 western states, and through these settings and the metaphor of "hauntings," reflects on why we find such places so compelling.

David Troxel, '78, Santa Barbara, California, has published his third book, *A Dignified Life: The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimers Care*, through Health Communications Press, famous for their *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series.