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Love Inspires Young Scholar's Research

Aug. 14, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Two years ago Nathan Douglas '15 (Monticello, Ill.) fell in love, but not with a person. While studying abroad in Barcelona, Douglas explored untouched alleyways and the Catalan language as he fell deeper into the discovery of what makes this city unique within the context of Spanish culture.

Douglas has just returned from his third trip to Barcelona, this time as a scholar investigating links between *Nada*, a novel set in 1940s Barcelona, and the Catalan region's current independence movement. A **Hispanic Studies** and **secondary education** double major at Illinois Wesleyan University, Douglas is a recipient of a Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's *Re-Centering the Humanities* grant for student scholars. The Mellon Scholars program allows students to conduct research with faculty members over the summer.

In his research, Douglas is taking stock of the Catalan region's centuries-long history of fighting central authority for greater autonomy. After the Spanish Civil War ended in 1939, long-held institutions were abolished and the official use of the Catalan language was banned for almost four decades.



Nathan Douglas

Carmen Laforet's novel *Nada* is the story of a young woman, Andrea, coming to Barcelona to live with relatives and begin university studies. The glittering, sophisticated Barcelona of her youth is gone, along with her family's wealth. Described by some as Spain's *The Catcher in the Rye* for its adolescent search for identity, *Nada* also reflects a hungry people in a post-war city of crumbling churches and dangerous streets.

Douglas said some historical scholars dismiss fiction as a legitimate source for a history. "I counter that argument," said Douglas, who is mentored by Professor of Hispanic Studies Carmela Ferradáns. "Even though *Nada* is a novel, the characters have to function in a society that was real, so there has to be some degree of truth in the characters and their reactions to the circumstances Barcelona endured after the war. Studying the novel from that angle gives us the opportunity to take some historical meaning from it, other than just bits of culture here and there."

He's discovered *Nada* has parallels with the Catalan independence movement, which is scheduled for a vote in November. In 1978 Catalonia regained rights lost under Franco, but these freedoms did not fully reflect the autonomy that the Catalans possessed until the 18th century.

"Like Andrea in *Nada*, this new chapter in Catalan history has failed to match up with memory," Douglas explained.

In addition to a written report, Douglas will display photographs to visually present his findings. "I wanted to make my work more accessible to people," Douglas said. "It was another way to do research for me as well."

Douglas said the Mellon program is a tremendous opportunity to indulge his self-confessed "crazy obsession with post-Civil War Spain."

"I think this project will help me so much in graduate school," said Douglas, who plans to apply to Ph.D. programs in Spain. "I plan to write my thesis dissertation within the realm of this topic, so I'm laying the groundwork for the future."

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