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Faculty Book Launch Celebrates Works of Plath, Theune

Jan. 19, 2018

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University [English](#) faculty members James Plath and Michael Theune each wrote a book published in 2017: *Everything Shapes Itself to the Sea* (by Plath) and *We Need to Talk: A New Method For Evaluating Poetry* (by Theune).

A faculty book launch celebrating the works of Plath and Theune was held Jan. 17 in the Merwin Gallery of the Joyce G. Eichhorn Ames School of Art Building.

Inspired by his time living and working in the Caribbean for a semester in 1995, [Everything Shapes Itself to the Sea](#) is a collection of poems that recounts Plath's experience. A Visiting Fulbright Scholar, Plath taught American literature courses at the University of the West Indies-Cave Hill Campus in Barbados. In addition to spending time with his wife on an "extended honeymoon," Plath met with literary publishers and journalists from the island's two newspapers and invested in a rumshop to help a friend he met on the island prevent the business from foreclosure.

"Our time in Barbados was such a visceral experience that I absolutely had to write about it, and poetry seemed to best fit the rhythms of the island," Plath said, noting that the poems were written over the years, from the time he was on the island to last year. "I hope that I was able to capture both the atmosphere and some of the contradictions of living in 'paradise.'"



James Plath discusses his book "Everything Shapes Itself to the Sea " during a faculty book launch .



Michael Theune and Bob Broad discuss their book "We Need to Talk: A New Method for Evaluating Poetry" during a faculty book launch.

Plath has taught creative writing, journalism, American literature, and film at Illinois Wesleyan for the past 30 years. A previous feature writer for a Milwaukee newspaper, Plath worked as editor-publisher of the award-winning arts journal *Clockwatch Review* and was a member of the literature panel of the Illinois Arts Council. Plath currently serves as president of The John Updike Society, which organized in May 2009 at the American Literature Association conference in Boston.

Proposing a new method for evaluating poetry, Theune's book [We Need to Talk: A New Method for Evaluating Poetry](#) , is co-authored by Bob Broad, a professor of English at Illinois State University. The book aims to answer the question of how people judge the success of poetic verse and suggests why and how people who care about poetry should communally explore and document their shared and conflicting values.

“People often think of what they value as something stable and certain, and they believe they can sort out their values by thinking more deeply about them,” Theune said. “However, values rarely behave this way. Rather, they're quirky, even quark-like--sometimes particles, sometimes waves. And, so, to get a better sense of what one really values, one needs a new method.”

Broad and Theune’s method, Poetry Dynamic Criteria Mapping (PDCM), focuses on first, listening in on real-world arguments about poetic values which occur in editorial meetings, on judges panels, and in poetry workshops, and then analyzing these values and ultimately sharing them. In this way, “we can discover with much greater accuracy what we really value in poetry,” Theune said.

The first book to provide the background and theory, as well as a practical, working model, for the evaluation of creative writing, Theune said the PDCM method was influenced by Broad’s work in rhetoric and composition.

“Bob’s an expert in the evaluation of writing, so it was a professional pleasure to work with him,” Theune said. “While this book took a great deal of work, it was a deep joy to make and convey our discoveries with my friend.”

A professor of English, Theune is also Director of the Writing Program at Illinois Wesleyan. He co-curated Voltage Poetry, and is a founding editor of the Keats Letter Project. In addition to publishing a number of poems, essays and reviews, Theune is currently co-editing Keat’s Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives.

Having taught graduate courses in writing assessment, pedagogy, writing studies and research methods, Broad has additionally published numerous articles and chapters. He is also the author of What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing, published in 2003.

By Vi Kakares '20