

Humanities Series At the Half-Century

For 50 years, literary stars have glittered at the Heights

BY SEAN SMITH
CHRONICLE EDITOR

A small Catholic commuter college hosting lectures by the world’s leading literary figures? Back in the 1950s, the idea probably seemed as preposterous as the thought of men walking on the moon.

As it turned out, the moonwalk took a little longer to happen. Because 50 years ago, a determined Boston College priest and poet named Francis Sweeney, SJ, decided that the University should spotlight the prominence of arts and literature in its Jesuit education tradition.

Thus was born the Humanities Series, which in its first half-century has brought to campus the likes of Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney, Alec Guinness, Robert Penn Warren, Lilian Hellmann, Robert Lowell, Joyce Carol Oates, John Kenneth Galbraith, Margaret Mead, James Reston, Julian Bond

and Maya Angelou. [It came to be known as the Lowell Lectures Humanities Series after the Lowell Foundation began providing support in 1978.]

Five decades can bring a host of changes, and the Humanities Series — opening its fall schedule next week — was hardly unaffected. The most obvious and conspicuous was the transition in leadership: Fr. Sweeney stepped down as series director in 1998 — he died four years later — and was succeeded by Assoc. Prof. Paul Doherty (English).

Nor has the Humanities Series been immune to changes in Boston College — no longer a small commuter college — and in the literary world itself, and the various political, artistic and social trends percolating through American and world culture since 1957.

But the program’s many supporters say it continues to fulfill its mission — and that of BC — by offering a forum for an array of distinguished authors, artists, commentators and others in the humanities to discuss compelling subjects across the spectrum of art, politics and contemporary issues.

“The Humanities Series has never been as important as it is now,” says Rattigan Professor of English Emeritus John Mahoney, who in the series’ 50 years has filled roles as introducer, presenter and appreciative audience member.

“One expects a university with a Catholic, Jesuit dimension like ours to have a deep, strong commitment to the humanities. As that university, we have to keep our ties to the fine arts, because it

The Humanities Series has never been as important as it is now,” says Rattigan Professor of English Emeritus John Mahoney, who in the series’ 50-year history has been introducer, presenter and appreciative audience member. [Photo by Gary Gilbert]

is a point of stability in this crazy-quilt culture of ours. The Lowell Lectures Humanities Series underlines that commitment.”

Says Vice President and Special Assistant to the President William B. Keenan, SJ, “Fr. Sweeney started this all when Boston College was nowhere near being a national
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Series at 50

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Catholic university. It is a credit to him and Paul Doherty that the Humanities Series has grown right along with BC.”

Colleagues say Doherty has more than done the job of keeping the Humanists Series relevant and interesting. “Fr. Sweeney saw the series as very literary in nature, and he went for ‘big names,’ like Frost, Eliot, W.H. Auden and so on,” says Mahoney. “But consider how different the landscape is nowadays, how fields like poetry have changed — really, is there anybody who has the same presence as a Frost or Eliot?”

“You look at the speakers Paul invites — Naomi Klein, Sharon Olds, Grace Paley, Andrew Delbanco — and you can see that he has enlarged the conversation beyond traditional ideas of what constitutes ‘literary.’ He has widened the scope yet at the same time without losing the intensity.”

Mahoney adds that Doherty usually arranges a workshop-like session earlier in the day for students to meet with the Humanities Series speaker appearing that night.

Reflecting on his tenure as series director, Doherty expresses gratitude toward the administration for its longstanding support, and respect toward Fr. Sweeney and his legacy. “I’ve done pretty much what he did. Maybe I’ve expanded the scope in a few areas, but I certainly had no wish to change the underlying vision Fr. Sweeney brought to the series.

“The idea, I think, has always been to have people who will be of interest beyond their disciplines, who while they may be ‘celebrities’ are also likely to be of interest to an undergraduate or graduate student. We can’t neglect our educational and formative responsibilities.”

Linton Kwesi Johnson (left) and Robert Mankoff are among this fall’s Lowell Lecture Humanities Series speakers.

This fall’s Lowell Lectures Humanities Series slate begins next Wednesday, Sept. 26, at 7:30 p.m. with an appearance in Devlin 101 by Jamaican “dub poetry” pioneer Linton Kwesi Johnson — the second living, and first black, poet to have his work published in the Penguin Modern Classics series.

Other speakers this fall are: Robert Mankoff (Oct. 4), a popular New Yorker cartoonist; three decades Ralph James Savarese (Oct. 23), whose recent book describes the life of his autistic son, once thought to be retarded and now an honor roll student; Charles M. Payne Jr. (Nov. 1), a researcher and writer on urban education and school reform, social change and modern African American history.

Also featured this semester are Martin Espada (Nov. 8), whose six award-winning books of poetry draw mostly from his Puerto Rican heritage and work experiences ranging from bouncer to tenant lawyer, and David Reiff (Nov. 15), known for an non-ideological approach to human affairs, such as post-Iraq humanitarian intervention — the subject of his talk — and his aversion to easy solutions.

More information about Humanities Series events is available at www.bc.edu/offices/lowellhs/.
...and Frost Says, ‘Well, What Do You Think It Means?’

A sampling of memories and moments from the first 50 years of the Lowell Lectures Humanities Series.

Rattigan Professor of English Emeritus John Mahoney:

One of the traditions early on in the series was that the English Department chairman would introduce the speaker. Can you imagine being an English professor and being able to present Robert Lowell, Lillian Hellmann and W.H. Auden? I had that privilege.

One of my favorite Humanities Series moments came when Robert Frost spoke, in the old Roberts Center. As you can imagine, it was a packed house. All the students who were there tried to get him to explain the more cryptic parts of his poems.

A young man stood up and pressed Frost on a particular passage, and Frost finally asked, “Well, what do you think it means?”

The young man gave his theory, and Frost nodded and said, “Hmm, that sounds good. Yes, I think that is what I meant. I’ll have to remember to use that next time.”

Vice President and Assistant to the President William Neenan, SJ:

About 20 years ago, Calvin Trillin came to speak at the Humanities Series, and there was a huge blizzard that day which closed the airport. He had to take a train up, and John Connelly, the husband of my assistant Mary Lou Connelly, picked him up out on Route 128 and brought him to campus.

When we brought him to St. Ignatius Church, where he was speaking, we found that — despite the weather — 50 people had showed up. Some of them had come on skis.

Prof. Elizabeth Graver (English):

The writer and activist Grace Paley died this August, just before our semester started. How to describe her visit to Boston College on March 11, 1999?

I remember she drove down from Vermont in a beat-up car filled with her grandson’s toys and piles of her own mail. When a group of us gathered for an afternoon colloquium, she said her feet hurt, asked two students to help pull her boots off, then sat on the floor sock-footed, talking to the students, talking with them, direct and funny, strong-minded, quick and kind, and as present as you can imagine another person being.

Her work was brilliant and hilarious, sad and full of surprises. Subversive. Hopeful. “There is a long time in me,” she once said, “between the knowing and the telling.” That night in March, the podium was too tall for her. She and Paul Doherty laughed and fiddled and figured it out. She read, talked, read; we listened, rapt. When I dropped her off at her hotel, she gave me a brief bear hug, fierce and close. Would that we could have her back.

Assoc. Prof. Paul Doherty (English), series director since 1998:

Once in a while there is a speaker in the series who the students know about and feel strongly about from their own life experience, not necessarily from academic life.

Dave Eggers’s visit was particularly noteworthy. As the end of his reading, seated behind a table in the Gasson rotunda, he began signing copies of his book, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius. A long line formed, snaking around the statue of St. Michael crushing the Serpent. Eggers treated each person who came before him as a long lost friend; each conversation lasted several minutes.

At one point I broke in, to remind Eggers that dinner was waiting in the Admissions conference room, and to hand him a check for his reading.

Eggers stopped signing, stood up, and asked, “Any one of you folks planning to become a teacher?”

A voice from the back of the line, “I am.” I recognized the voice: a student in my Narrative and Interpretation class.

“Come up here,” said Eggers.

The student came forward, and Eggers endorsed the check and handed it over to him. “I want you to have this,” Eggers said for all to hear. “You will do good work and you will be underpaid for it for the rest of your life.” Then he went back to signing.

The next day in class, my student could not believe what had happened. I think he was only convinced when the check went through. And he did pursue his goal of becoming a teacher. After graduating from BC he entered graduate school and the Harvard University School of Education.