It’s decision time for the small staff of Boise State’s highly regarded literary journal, The Idaho Review. Does the story before them make the cut or get tossed?

“Show of hands,” said Mitch Wieland, the journal’s founding editor and director of the Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing. Seven arms rise for “no.” A single hand goes up for “yes.” “Protest vote,” the student concedes. The group moves on.

Gathered inside the aptly nicknamed “little red writing house” off University Drive, the eight students who comprise the MFA program’s fiction cohort have spent the past 30 minutes debating the story’s merits. Their conversation is lively, intellectual, at times intense. Everyone participates. Everyone is heard. “We get 3,000 stories each year and we publish only 12 or 14. It’s very competitive,” Wieland said. That The Idaho Review has had multiple stories reprinted in top prize anthologies such as The O. Henry Awards, The Best American Short Stories and New Stories from the South attests to its quality and the rigor of its editorial process.

“We may be small, but we’re competing with huge magazines like The New Yorker and The Atlantic Monthly for selection to these anthologies,” Wieland said. “We have a good track record.”

A Nationally Ranked Program

The opportunity for students to edit and publish a major literary journal is

michael wanzenried
M.A. Anthropology, University of Montana
Second-year MFA student, poetry

ON TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS AWARDED TO ALL MFA STUDENTS: “It’s great everyone is funded equally, it puts us on a level field. I’ve taught English Composition and also Introduction to Poetry. You don’t get that opportunity in a lot of MFA programs.”
A Small but Stellar MFA PROGRAM IN CREATIVE WRITING Garners National Attention

by Janelle Brown

Among the notable features that have propelled Boise State’s MFA program to national stature.

With more than 300 MFA creative writing programs across the country, Boise State is ranked among the top 50 by Poets & Writers, the nation’s largest nonprofit for creative writers. Its award-winning faculty have produced works that have received international attention, including fiction published in more than 20 languages and named to “Top Book of the Year” lists. Students and graduates have won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a National Magazine Award, a Whiting Award and been published by top presses.

The reasons behind the MFA program successes are manifold. It is small and highly selective, with close interaction between an impressive faculty and students enrolled in three-year fiction or poetry tracks. All students receive teaching fellowships, including the highly sought-after opportunity to teach creative writing. An MFA Reading Series brings internationally known poets and writers to campus each semester. Along with The Idaho Review, the program runs Ahsahta Press, which has published more than 100 volumes of poetry since 1974, is nationally recognized for the high quality of its list, and provides students opportunities for hands-on experience in the daily business of running a small press.

In addition, the Stephen R. Kustra Endowed Fellowship for the MFA in Creative Writing was...
established by President Bob and Kathy Kustra to honor the life of their son, an aspiring writer who died of cancer in 2009. It has played a significant role in enabling the program to enroll its top choices by providing funds for relocation and lodging during the student’s first semester.

A Record of Success

Tyler McMahon (MFA, ’07), whose second novel with St. Martin’s Press will be released in June, is among graduates who say their experience at Boise State was critical to their later success. His first novel, *How the Mistakes Were Made*, was conceived in a course taught by MFA faculty member Brady Udall, author of three critically acclaimed works of fiction, including the bestselling novels *The Secret Life of Edgar Mint* and *The Lonely Polygamist*.

“I wrote an outline and first chapter for an assignment, and a few years later, the book was published,” said McMahon, an associate professor of English at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. “You can’t ask for more than that out of a writing program.”

Cynthia Hand (MFA, ’03) has gained a national following for her Young Adult trilogy *Unearthly*, published by HarperCollins, and has a new YA novel coming out in Winter 2015.

She teaches creative writing at Pepperdine University.

“I like to say to my students that the MFA at Boise State is hard core in a good way,” she said. “There is so much earnest seriousness given to the endeavor of learning to write. It was just what I needed and I got such a solid, well-rounded education.”

Alan Heathcock (MFA, ’04), award-winning author of *VOLT*, a collection of linked short stories named to many “best book” lists, credits the MFA program with giving him the time and space to become “the best possible version” of himself.

“I’ve been around a lot of writing programs, and not many of them manage to have the standards Boise State has for its writers, and even fewer programs encourage quality while also creating an environment where everybody roots for everybody else to succeed,” Heathcock said. “That makes Boise State both rare and really special.”

A Vital Community Partner

The connections between Boise State’s MFA program and the larger literary community run the gamut from writers

**katie fuller**
M.A. English, University of Maine
Stephen R. Kustra Fellowship recipient
First-year MFA student, poetry

**ABOUT WHY FULLER, WHO IS FROM MAINE, LOVES BOISE:**
“There is this sort of seamless integration between the community and the university, with lots of literary events on campus and around town. It’s just a great place to study and live.”
to readings to conferences. For instance, acclaimed fiction writer Anthony Doerr, who lives in Boise and whose four books have garnered a raft of awards, has taught as a visiting writer in the MFA program. The MFA Reading Series, open to the public, brings some of the nation’s most respected poets and fiction writers to campus for readings. Literary events in the Boise area are enriched by the presence and participation of MFA students and faculty.

In April, the MFA program will host a major conference on the influential poet Ezra Pound, with presentations from leading Pound scholars from Oxford University in England, Stanford University, the University of Pennsylvania and other institutions. Titled “Pound: ID,” an allusion to both Pound’s Idaho roots (he was born in Hailey) and his controversial politics (he was an ardent supporter of Hitler and Mussolini), the conference is free and open to the public.

Dr. Martin Corless-Smith, a professor in the MFA program and the author of five poetry collections, is organizing the conference. He sees it as another stellar opportunity to delve into subject matter of deep relevance for MFA students, while at the same time enriching the intellectual life of the university and larger community.

“Pound is vital, and in many ways the most important poet since Wordsworth,”

ABOUT “WORKSHOP,” WHERE STUDENTS SUBMIT FICTION OR POETRY FOR A GROUP CRITIQUE: “It’s valuable, everyone brings forward their best work, and we hold each other accountable. It can be intense at times, but in a constructive way.”

scott anderson
M.A. Literature, New Mexico State University
Second-year MFA student, fiction

A University of STRENGTHS

“The MFA Program in Creative Writing has attained a level of excellence that places it among the university’s research strengths,” said Dr. Mark Rudin, vice president for research and economic development.

Creative activity is to the liberal arts and humanities what research is to the sciences and engineering, Rudin explained, and the program thus qualifies for the recognition.

Boise State’s research strengths also include Geosciences, Public Policy, Materials Science and Sensors. Additionally, the university has identified a number of emerging research strengths including Biomolecular Sciences, STEM Education, Computer Science, and Ecology and Evolutionary Processes.

Corless-Smith said.

As Boise State’s MFA program continues to make its mark, more conferences, readings, outreach and publications are on the horizon. From his teaching post in Hawaii, author and graduate Tyler McMahon continues to be impressed.

“I enrolled in the MFA program back in the pre-Fiesta Bowl era. I always felt like I was part of a new, underdog program,” McMahon said. “To see how it has grown – along with the campus, the department and Boise State’s national reputation – has been amazing to watch.”