

Jennie Baker: Inspiring and Inspired

By Natalie Higashiyama



While most Bear Creek juniors can recall their exact SAT score and the number of times they took the exam to earn that coveted score, Jennie Baker, '02, remembers being so taken by a particular poem that she could barely answer the questions about it on the exam. Today, she still has memorized Matthew Arnold's "To Marguerite: Continued," which confirmed an early passion for poetry that eventually lead to a profession of poetry as a Ph.D.

candidate at University of St. Andrews, Scotland's first and the third oldest university in the English-speaking world.

Jennie's Bear Creek learning began in seventh grade, along with 15 classmates, who studied in the supply closets, changing rooms, and portables located on church grounds. She completed her senior year at a more spacious location, the brand-new Redmond Campus. But far more poignant than the stark changes she underwent in her learning environment are Jennie's fond memories of former teachers Phil Dow and Curt Brannan, along with current biology teacher Donna Dunn and Judy Loudonback, choir director. She compares her Bear Creek education with that of a university because learning was highly collaborative. While her work load outside of the class involved much reading, her time inside the classroom encouraged questions and clarified learning. Jennie reflects on the impact of the "informal learning" like singing in Latin outdoors on a sunny day or visiting a religious place of worship on a field trip. Such experiences etched into her mind that learning at Bear Creek meant "following an interest, researching it, and fitting it into one's learning agenda."

While Jennie remembers wanting to be a writer and to live in Europe, Bear Creek faculty fostered her early love of language. Once she discovered Shakespeare, she never wanted to read anyone else. Jorunn Grobey, a former English teacher, encouraged her to pursue English in college. A potential hire who guest-lectured on Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants* "blew my mind. I never realized that literature could be taken apart that way."

Undecided as to a major, Jennie entered the University of California, Berkeley, to take general requirements. Working on the Berkeley Fiction Review and Berkeley Poetry Review clarified her literary goals. In fact, a class called "The End of the Poem" ended up being her thesis topic. Her third year of undergraduate study took her to King's College London to study comparative literary theory, early modern history, and the history of the British Empire, all while working in a beauty salon and living in a flat in Clapham. After returning to Berkeley, she specialized in contemporary literature and completed an undergraduate dissertation on metapoetic symbology across the works of W.B. Yeats.

A post-graduation goal of working in London's publishing world turned into a disappointing job of long days, forty-five minute commutes to the city center, meetings with clients, and expensive rent and travel. Trading her modern flat in London for a cottage in rural Ireland with



Wheeler Hall at UC Berkeley, where most of Jennie's classes were held.

no internet, phone, mobile phone signal, TV, or proper shower, Jennie thought, "I'd made a huge mistake. I didn't know anyone, didn't have my driver's license, and didn't have a job." For three years in Ireland, Jennie almost forgot her dream of becoming a lecturer and writer as she worked as a dishwasher, a corporate trainer for an international sports broadcaster, and an image research assistant for the Titanic museum in Belfast. During this time she wrote her first novel, half of a second novel, started a literary arts group, married, traveled, and earned a teaching certificate which allowed her to teach English, drama, media studies, and religion at the secondary school level.

Jennie's routine of secondary teaching and occasional writing did not ultimately fulfill her desires for a career that could offer progression and shifting goals for the future. She surprised herself when a friend asked, "What do you want to do?" and with speed and certainty she replied, "Go back to school."

After taking the Graduate Record Exam and completing twenty-six applications, Jennie attended the Contemporary British and Irish Poetry conference where she began to imagine herself as a lecturer. But how would she achieve this goal? "At the time I was 27, and I'd set my sights very high in terms of the universities and programmes I applied to. There were no safety schools, and nothing in my application that made me (or anyone else) think I'd be accepted anywhere, at all. I was hugely under-qualified in a very small and competitive field, and the enormity of the task was, at times, overwhelming." Wandering into a panel discussion at the poetry conference, Jennie recognized the lines of a quoted poem with no reference to the author or title. But Jennie knew the line and the poem: Matthew Arnold's "To Marguerite: Continued." She had so many questions for these two famous poets, but they were rushed by a large crowd after their talk, leaving a disappointed Jennie sipping a cup of tea in another lecture room awaiting the next presenter.

Terror filled Jennie as she realized the famous presenter she had just heard had entered her room. She resisted the urge to leave and courageously faced her golden opportunity. He smiled and closed his

laptop as she brought up “To Marguerite” and his quote. What followed was “the best discussion on poetry I’d had to that point: people started to filter in, drawn to the discussion we were having and we realized after a while that we had a bit of a crowd.” Eventually, an off-hand remark about a panel member revealed he taught at University of St. Andrews which lead Jennie to research their program even more and to apply. The first acceptance arrived from Scotland, and “I surprised everyone, including myself, by choosing St. Andrews—I still think I made the right choice.”

After graduating with a master’s with distinction, Jennie wrote several short collections of poems and decided to stay on at University of St. Andrews to earn her Ph.D. The Ph.D, and the autumn of the first year in particular, were “equally inspiring and terrifying, but always exciting. From the second I was accepted, I’ve never doubted that this is what I wanted to do—doing anything else now seems inconceivable, and everything that came before this feels like preparation or waiting for this opportunity.”

Jennie is starting the second year of a three-year Ph.D. program in English literature in the field of contemporary poetry and poetics. Her current research is concerned with poetic closure (the end of a poem) as space, process, and moment. She is exploring how reading and re-reading changes the experience of the poem’s ending as well as how the existential crisis of a poem’s ending can be interrogated using developments in cognitive poetics, reading psychology, pragmatics, and linguistics. Her thesis, aimed partially at proving her closural shift theory will be about 80,000 words without appendices.

To confront her many writing and research demands, Jennie mixes common sense with others’ sage advice. “I think half of writing, like postgrad study, is knowing when to go for a walk. A change of task also sometimes works for me, so if I feel like writing, I’ll write until it feels ‘forced,’ and then I’ll read, or edit or hit the stacks.” Her mentor is always telling her to “write the poem I’m writing, and stop trying to write the one I sat down to write, or want to write. I think there is something to that.” Her ideal day consists of eight to ten hours of uninterrupted concentration. Rather than trying

Ox-Bow Lake

I know what you are, and what you aren’t.

You are a river that’s trying to be a lake.

At your heart, you desire an island and who

Is to stop you, when you reach a low-lying plain,
From meandering widely? One day, it will happen—

You will choose the direct route, and there will be
Three days of hard rain.

You wish you were still a river, but you are now a lake.

You no longer look for oceans, but try to content yourself
With standing still—with fresh water, moving slow, going

Nowhere. To think, you once found yourself across
This grassy hollow. And the plain you crossed
Is now the bottom of your lake.



Kennedy Hall, where Jennie teaches at University of St. Andrews.

to find the perfect schedule or find ways of combating distractions, Jennie goes nocturnal before major deadlines. Literally. “I start my day at 2:30 in the afternoon—coffee, gym or a run, see my friends, housework, and food shopping, then head to my office to start work at 5:00 or 6:00. I work in my office until 8:30 or 9:00 the following morning. I sleep from 9:00 until 2:30, and it all starts again.”

Both resolve and talent reflect in Jennie’s first year review with good recommendations and a big thumbs up from her department. After the Ph.D., she would like to teach contemporary poetry and poetics and the practice of poetry (known otherwise as literary arts or creative writing) at both undergraduate and graduate levels. She has also been in talks with her supervisor about publishing a longer version of her thesis which could be used as a textbook in the rapidly growing number of creative writing and poetics programs. (The only full-length book on poetic closure was a landmark study done in 1968.)

To live out fully what God intends in life produces extraordinary results and Jennie is no exception. While she vacations in Ireland and returns to hunker down in her Scottish flat to study, she believes she has discovered her “productive potentiality” while working and living in a university setting. Contemplatively, she regards her Ph.D. as not a program but a lifestyle choice and sign of her commitment.

Courageous resolution and unswerving dedication mark a life that has found a way to harmonize contradiction. “It will probably take me most of my life to achieve the things I want to with my intellectual interests, and my art—and I may never ‘make it’ in the ways I hope to now—success in this field is difficult to achieve, often fleeting, and by no means certain, always dependent on continuing to produce—they say a writer is only as good as their last book. But most people who do this do it for the love of it, and I think I’d rather ‘fail’ doing something I love than succeed at something else.” Ironically, Jennie has found “strange comfort in having a big, mad impossible dream” where she doesn’t “worry about minor set-backs, and measures her progress in decades, not months or years.” Jennie says, “There are days it feels like a burden, and other days it feels like a gift, but overall I’m much happier, and better off, with than without it. I feel lucky every day that I get to spend doing something I love. I hope I never take that for granted.”

Leadership Committee, continued

engagement in the community. We must have forgiveness, learning from each other's mistakes, and faith that the Lord will guide our path.

As Bear Creek enters its 25th year, we as alumni are primed to build on the excellent foundation established during our years at Bear Creek. We have the tools and the ability to serve and strengthen our school community well into the future. We as the Alumni Leadership Team have developed the *25 for 25 Campaign* and are inviting all of our alumni to join us in celebrating the school's 25th anniversary by making a \$25 gift to The Bear Creek School Endowment Fund. I plan to be the first to donate when the campaign officially kicks off in October; I hope you will join me!

Funds contributed to the endowment are permanently set aside and invested for the long-term support of the school. A small percentage of the investment earnings (never the endowment principal) is used annually, but the principal continues to grow each year. The bigger the principal, the higher the earnings, and the more valuable the endowment becomes to the school's long-term success.

We have the potential to visibly grow the Endowment Fund, and with the *25 for 25 Campaign* you can make a difference by supporting the community. Gifts to the endowment really are an investment in the future of Bear Creek and in all our graduates to come. The endowment is the legacy of the past and will help launch the school into the next twenty-five years.

To build our community now, get connected! The alumni committee has built a LinkedIn group, we also have a Facebook and a Twitter (@BearCreek_Alum) page, and we have our own page on the Bear Creek website (tbcs.org/alumni); follow us! Update your contact information to get connected and to help strengthen our community. Look for more information on ways you can participate in alumni activities during this celebratory year.

Tyler Kowal '04
and the Alumni Leadership Committee

CLASS NOTES

Class of 2004

Geoff Baker

Geoff began medical school at Pacific Northwest University (an osteopathic school) last August and life has been an incredible whirlwind since then. "I have been blessed with having met an amazing, godly woman, Allie Davis, who is also a medical student in my same class. We got to know each other well throughout the year, and God used our trials in school to bring us closer together. School has been an amazing opportunity for us, and we love the challenge that the Lord has placed upon our table in order to serve Him. We truly feel fulfilled and blessed. This past summer, I asked Allie to marry me while we were traveling in Europe at Blarney Castle in Cork, Ireland. As we both prepare to enter our second year of school, we look to God to guide us along the road ahead and to help us overcome any obstacles before us to fulfill His purpose in our lives."



Class of 2005

Jessica Linnenkohl

Jessica and her husband welcomed their new daughter, Meike Sequoia, born February 2, 2013; she is healthy and beaming. Jessica describes her family life as "growing together, loving the time together, milking our goat together, making cheeses, learning new German vocabulary with the starting of preschool/kindergarten, at peace with myself, so happy."

Class of 2006

Heather Nelson

Heather recently married John Tutuska at Chapel of the Cross of the Reformed Anglican Church on June 22. Her husband John has a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Dallas and will be teaching philosophy at Founder's Academy, a classical charter school start-up in Dallas next year. Heather continues to manage social media for University of Dallas.



Inness Pryor

Inness turned 25 in May and celebrated with a picnic in the park and her first tattoo, which reads, "More than yesterday, less than tomorrow," which she thinks of as a promise to grow a little more each day. She traveled to Iceland this summer to pursue an extremely ambitious itinerary, which may include going platinum.

Class of 2007

Katherine Ross

After graduating from the University of Southern California with a double major in psychology and neuroscience, Katherine has moved to San Francisco. She enjoys the beautiful Bay Area and works as a Kaplan MCAT instructor while applying to medical school for the fall of 2014. She continues to salsa dance, hike, and make trips to both Los Angeles and Seattle as often as possible.