

IWP visiting author searches for truth amid cloud of controversy

As a lifelong New Zealander, writer Lynley Hood heard all the folklore about the “baby farmer” Minnie Dean.

Dean was put to death by hanging in 1895 and remains the only New Zealand woman to have been hanged for murder. She was said to have taken unwanted babies into her home for money, only to kill them with hat pins and rusty nails before sticking those same pins into dolls. She also was accused of burying her victims along country roadsides beneath clumps of a certain wildflower known in Southland New Zealand as “Minnie Dean.”

A century later, seemingly rational people were retelling these stories, which inspired Hood to investigate whether the witch hunt of Dean had been warranted. The result was her third book, *Minnie Dean: Her Life and Crimes*, which was short-listed for the 1995 New Zealand Book Awards.

“Around the time of her arrest, there was a worldwide panic about baby farmers,” Hood said. “It suited New Zealand at the time to make a scapegoat out of somebody for the high infant mortality rate and the perceived decline in moral standards in a strictly Victorian community. Minnie Dean became a scapegoat for Victorian morality.”

Hood’s search for the truth continued at the University of Iowa, where she was one of 37 participants from 32 countries in the fall 2011 International Writing Program (IWP). The



IWP author Lynley Hood with her award-winning books outside of Shambaugh House.

IWP, which reports to the Graduate College, introduces talented international writers to American life, enables them to take part in American university life and provides them with time to produce literary work.

“Lynley is a precise, complex, and engaging writer—someone who can illuminate large issues by the sheer power of her storytelling,” said IWP Director Christopher Merrill.

Throughout her life, Hood, who turned 69 on Nov. 14, has never

shied away from rocking the boat of public opinion in her quest for the truth. After completing her book about Minnie Dean, she embarked on her most challenging project: getting to the bottom of the Christchurch Civic Creche case. Amid allegations of satanic ritual abuse in a New Zealand childcare center in 1992, one of the center’s staff members, Peter Ellis, was convicted of 16 counts of sexual offences involving children. He served almost seven years in prison.

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Postdoc helps Huntington's patients live with disease

Huntington's disease is a genetic disorder in which specific nerve cells in the brain degenerate. Symptoms include behavioral changes such as moodiness and irritability, cognitive changes such as impaired memory and executive function, and abnormal body movements.

There is no cure for Huntington's disease (HD), which affects about 30,000 people in the United States. People with the disease usually die within 15 to 20 years of onset of motor symptoms.

This harsh reality inspired Nancy Downing, a postdoctoral fellow in clinical genetics nursing research at the University of Iowa's College of Nursing, to reach out to these people in an attempt to help them function well for as long and as comfortably as possible.

"I can't cure HD, but I will do what I can to help people live with it or delay the disease's onset," Downing said. "If we can figure that out, then we can give people advice on how to live."

Downing's dissertation research focused on how couples cope with noticeable changes created by

Huntington's disease. One person in the couple has had a positive test for the Huntington disease gene, but has not yet been diagnosed—also known as prodromal HD.

In conversations with 23 couples, Downing concluded that the person with the Huntington gene used acceptance, emotional support, and planning most frequently, while companions used

acceptance, planning and active coping. Least frequently used coping strategies for each person were denial, behavioral disengagement, and substance abuse.

"Couples tend not to attribute the changes to Huntington's disease unless the changes are something distinctive," Downing said. "They attribute the changes to normal aging or their personality. Normalization can be a healthy response. You

can normalize life until it's not normal anymore. These are brave people who get tested and are participating in research."

This research, conducted by Downing and her UI colleagues, including her mentor, Professor Janet Williams, has been submitted for journal approval.

Downing has a two-year postdoctoral appointment and is funded by a T32 grant from the National Institutes of Health.



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Genetics professor discovers link between prickle gene and epilepsy

Since the 1930s, scientists have studied the prickle gene, known to be a contributing cause of human epilepsy. Meanwhile, other researchers have noted that flies carrying mutated prickle genes exhibit physical malformations, such as body bristles pointed in abnormal directions.

Until a Sunday morning two winters ago, no one had connected these two sets of research data.

John Manak, assistant professor of biology and pediatrics and faculty member in the Genetics Interdisciplinary Graduate Program at the University of Iowa, made the crucial connection, leading to his discovery that mutations of the prickle gene produce seizures in fruit flies. His finding was a key component in a research paper, published Feb. 11, 2011 in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*, showing that mutations in prickle genes are associated with seizures in humans, mice, and flies.

Manak was co-first author on the paper and spearheaded the work on the fruit flies, while his friend and UI colleague, Alexander Bassuk, senior author on the paper, showed that mutations in the gene result in seizures in mice. Bassuk had previously found that human orthologs (genes in different organisms that are direct evolutionary counterparts to genes found in humans) of prickle in flies are associated with human myoclonic epilepsy—featuring seizures that involve brief involuntary twitching in specific muscle groups, such as the face, trunk or limbs.

“It started after a conversation over coffee with Alex Bassuk, a pediatric neurologist who had identified mutations in human prickle genes as being causative for myoclonic epilepsy,” Manak said. “I had one of those ‘mad scientist’ moments where I told Alex I would obtain some prickle fly mutants from the fly stock

center we use and test whether they had epilepsy. One Sunday morning, they were jumping off the sides of the vial, flipping on their backs, acting in a hyper-excitably way. Remarkably, it was the vial containing the prickle mutant flies.”

According to Epilepsy.com, epilepsy affects over three million Americans—more than Multiple Sclerosis, Cerebral Palsy, Muscular Dystrophy, and Parkinson’s disease combined.

“We are very fortunate to have a situation only a handful of labs have—both an invertebrate model (fruit flies) and a vertebrate model (mouse) of a human disease,” Manak said.

The researchers showed they could make the prickle-associated seizures in flies more tolerable with the human anti-epileptic drug valproic acid, providing proof-of-principle that human anti-epileptic drugs can also work in flies and thus paving the way for screening novel compounds for anti-seizure properties. Manak

explains, “We can start to perform both genetic and drug screens in flies, which are more easily managed for these kinds of screens than in mice. Any drugs we identify that show anti-epileptic properties in flies, we can then elevate to our mouse model and, if effective there, we can eventually bring them to human trials.”

The American Hospital Formulary Service says valproic acid may cause serious damage to the human liver. Most anti-epileptic drugs have varying degrees of serious side effects, demonstrating the need for new drugs to be developed and increasing the importance of Manak’s work.

The next step is to identify the prickle genes’ specific role in the occurrence of myoclonic epilepsy. To understand other components of the epilepsy pathway, Manak and his colleagues also plan to conduct a genome-wide genetic screen to identify other genetic mutations that cause epilepsy in flies.



Students and faculty pictured at the 2011 Genetics Student Retreat, held Oct. 24 at the Iowa Memorial Union. (From left) Dan Eberl, director, Genetics Graduate Program; Tom Wassink, retreat co-chair; John Manak, retreat chair; Lily Paemka, genetics Ph.D. candidate; and Danielle Rudd, genetics Ph.D. candidate.

Hood seeks the truth

continued from cover

The case has always been controversial, dividing New Zealand—particularly the city of Christchurch—into two camps, one believing he is innocent, the other convinced of his guilt.

Hood said anyone who publicly questioned the outcome of the trial was branded as being pro child abuse.

That didn't stop Hood from spending seven years researching and writing *A City Possessed: The Christchurch Civic Creche Case*.

"I have always been the person who stands on the side of the road when people are waving placards and chanting," Hood said. "Here I was writing this book that ended up saying to everybody from the courts to the justice system to the police, 'You're wrong, wrong, wrong.'"

To her surprise, after naming names and expecting public backlash, Hood received tremendous praise for her book.

"For writers of my ilk, high-profile disputes are magnifying glasses through which we may bring into sharper focus matters which in the normal course of life remain blurry—matters of human nature, of right and wrong, of good and evil," Hood said.

Merrill is impressed by Hood's willingness and ability to write about controversial subject matter in the right away.

"These are incredibly difficult subjects to tackle, and the

recognition that Lynley has received is a testament to her ability to address significant issues with the level of nuance and complexity that they deserve," Merrill said.

For Hood, the Christchurch Civic Creche Case raised the same questions as the Minnie Dean saga. Most notably, how do you bring peace to a bitterly divided community?

Hood answered her own question after receiving an e-mail in 2008 from Scotsman Martin McCrae, who had discovered that his great grandmother was Minnie Dean's sister. Part of McCrae's genealogy work included providing headstones for ancestors who lay in unmarked graves.

Minnie Dean and her husband Charles are buried in the same plot in the Old Winton Cemetery in Winton, New Zealand. Hood assisted McCrae by researching the local regulations about marking a grave. She concluded that permission isn't needed to lay a headstone on a relative's grave.

On Feb. 10, 2009, another chapter was written in the Minnie Dean story when her headstone was marked 113 years after her death.

To hear more about the life of Minnie Dean, visit <http://tinyurl.com/MinnieDean>

Writing her way through vision loss

Lynley Hood is fearful that one day her world will go dark.

Hood, an award-winning author from New Zealand and participant in the International Writing Program (IWP) this fall at the University of Iowa, has no central vision in her left eye and damage to the nerves of the retina in her right eye, creating visual static when she reads.



"The fear of blindness kicks in. Throughout human history, people have been more afraid of going blind than anything else," said Hood, age 69. "Vision loss is the most difficult sensory impairment to cope with."

Hood has more questions than answers when it comes to her vision loss. In her left eye, the changes literally happened overnight.

"I was reading in bed one night and I thought, 'My eye has gone blurry. It must be time to put the light out,'" Hood said. "When I woke up in the morning, I was rather dismayed to discover that it was still blurry. It was irreversibly damaged."

The vision loss in her right eye has been diagnosed as a rare retinal disorder that goes by the acronym AZOOR (Acute Zonal Occult Outer Retinopathy), which is believed to be caused by a virus.

Hood compensates for her vision loss by reading more on a computer screen or her iPhone, where the print is larger. Participating in the IWP has helped her in the adjustment process.

"It gave me time out to really learn the most effective way to continue reading and writing with the vision loss I'm experiencing," Hood said. "I find now reading for pleasure is no longer a pleasure because reading is viscerally unpleasant, so I listen to audio books. I've discovered what a huge loss it is to not read from books."

In this economy, who ends up 'housebroke?'

UI planning professor Anthony uncovers surprising trends

In theory, older people and people with higher levels of education should be more financially stable and find it easier to afford their homes. New research from the University of Iowa suggests that's not the case.

Jerry Anthony, associate professor in the UI School of Urban and Regional Planning, examined data collected by the Consumer Bankruptcy Project at Harvard University of households from across the United States that filed for bankruptcy in 2007. He assessed the "housing-cost burden"—the ratio of housing costs to income—of families trying to save their homes from foreclosure, looking at factors such as age, income, race, and marital status to see who was hit hardest and why.

Since the late 1980s, financial experts have considered up to 30 percent of income an affordable housing-cost ratio; households that spend more on housing expenses are considered housing-cost burdened.

Anthony found that nearly half of the bankrupt homeowners had exceeded the 30 percent rule of thumb. Three-fourths experienced at least a 30-percent jump in housing-cost burden in the months before bankruptcy filing—often because they took on home-equity loans, missed payments, and ultimately watched the situation snowball into bankruptcy.

"Financial literacy in the U.S. was at an all-time low before 2007-08," Anthony said. "Banks and mortgage companies had been down playing the risk of borrowing too much, saying that the more

you borrow, the more prosperous you will be. They convinced people that their house was an ATM, and the equity in the house was for their spending pleasure. The public has got to be smarter than that."

Older homeowners hit harder

One might assume that older people would be less burdened by housing expenses. With their mortgage payment remaining unchanged while their income generally increased, the house should be paid off, or close to it. Anthony found evidence to the contrary. Homeowners 65 or older showed a higher chance of being "housebroke" than those 40 or younger.



"Banks and mortgage companies had been down playing the risk of borrowing too much, saying that the more you borrow, the more prosperous you will be. They convinced people that their house was an ATM, and the equity in the house was for their spending pleasure. The public has got to be smarter than that."

—Jerry Anthony

Anthony attributes the finding partly to a growing trend among middle-aged and older adults to be in more debt than previous generations. He also blames predatory lending — aggressive marketing by lenders to older people, who took out second mortgages and lacked the income to pay off home equity loans.

"During the run up to the housing crisis, in the early 2000s, mortgage companies targeted people with equity in their homes, enticing them to borrow with statements like, 'This is a great time to tap into your equity to buy that boat or take that around-the-world cruise you've always wanted to go on,'" Anthony said.

That person may have their house

paid off, but has limited income as a retiree — perhaps living off of a pension and Social Security checks. While the monthly payment on the equity loan might only run \$200, unexpected expenses like medical bills could throw things off. A couple of missed payments balloon due to late fees and interest charges, and the retirees are in deep financial trouble.

"For \$200 a month, they lost their home that they had paid on for 30 years," Anthony said. "It's tragic. They worked hard, they had solid jobs, and they achieved the American dream. But the American dream became the American nightmare."

Too smart for their own good

More education is usually associated with better financial outcomes, but Anthony found that households with less education were better off — at least in terms of keeping housing costs reasonable.

Comparing households with two or less years of college to those with four or more years, Anthony found that the group with less education was half as likely to exceed

the 30 percent ratio.

Anthony says homeowners with more education outsmart themselves. They consolidate other debt, like credit card balances, into the mortgage loan because the interest rate is lower, and the interest can be deducted on income tax returns.

The down side is that move increases their housing cost ratio.

"They put all of their eggs in one basket by securing all of their loans with their house," Anthony said. "They didn't think that if they miss a few credit card payments, the credit card company won't come after their house. But if they miss a few mortgage payments, the mortgage lender will," Anthony said.

Studying the histories of paper making across cultures

The Center for the Book hosted Chinese artisans and scholars on Sept. 27, 2011 thanks to Grinnell College. In fall 2011, Grinnell's Faulconer Gallery featured an exhibit titled *From the Book Forest: Commercial Publishing in Late Imperial China*, which focused on Chinese book culture during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

The exhibition, developed in partnership with Nanjing University, featured visiting master craftsmen and scholars from China: **Hou Guilin**—printer, bookbinder and successor of intangible cultural heritage on woodblock printing techniques of Yangzhou and master of arts and crafts of Yangzhou; **Rui Mingyang**—calligrapher and successor of intangible cultural heritage on woodblock printing technique of Jiangsu Province; **Shen Shuhua**—wood block carver and master of arts and crafts of Yangzhou; Professor **Xia Weizhong**—historian, Nanjing University; and **Cathy Zhang**—translator, Nanjing University.

The visitors toured the UI's paper making facilities to learn about Tim Barrett's paper making and paper analysis research. Barrett—research scientist and adjunct professor of paper making in the Center for the Book—has developed unique, nondestructive methods for analyzing paper that preserve the integrity of historical documents while revealing important data that shows why some paper lasts centuries, while other paper disintegrates more rapidly over time.



Tim Barrett (right) explains the operation of the hollander beater used to prepare pulp from cellulose fiber.



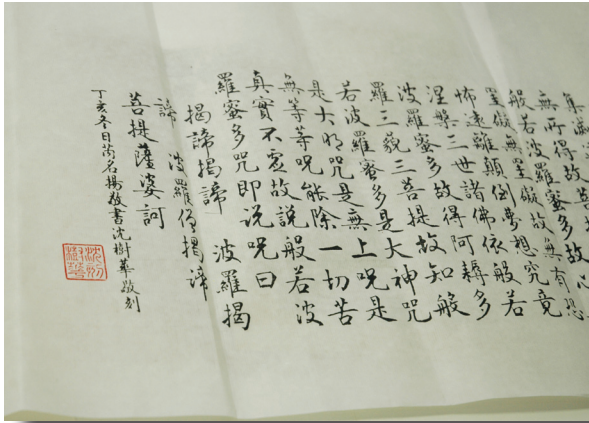
Rui Mingyang with sheets of drying handmade paper in the Center for the Book's Oakdale Paper Production and Research Facility.



(From left) Tim Barrett shows roots of a mulberry tree to Xia Weizhong and Hou Guilin. The Center for the Book cultivates mulberry and other plants near its research facility, harvesting the fibers for paper making.



Tim Barrett displays newly handmade Japanese paper.



Printed sutra on Chinese handmade paper presented as a gift to the Center for the Book by the Chinese visiting artisans in appreciation of the Sept. 27 tour.



Tim Barrett's research on paper made between the 14th & 19th centuries will be released in early 2012. The report will include data on the composition of 1,578 paper specimens.



Tim Barrett, director of the Oakdale Paper Production and Research Facility at the UI Center for the Book, examines a leaf printed in Italy in 1479.



UI graduate assistant Katharina Siedler (left) reveals Japanese handmade paper.

(From left) Rui Mingyang, Xia Weizhong, Shen Shuhua, and Cathy Zhang examine examples of Japanese- and Western-style handmade paper with Tim Barrett.



Writing a past and future identity

From a family of storytellers, writer Deborah Jackson-Taffa was raised in the four corners region of New Mexico. She is an enrolled member of the Fort Yuma Indian Nation (Kwatsan) and is proud to acknowledge a mixed heritage of Kwatsan, Laguna, and Chicana roots. She has backpacked, traveled, and lived among rural people in many lands, including Italy, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Indonesia, the Philippines, Mexico, and Alaska.

Taffa is a candidate for the MFA in nonfiction writing at Iowa, currently working on a series of linked, lyrical essays—a medium well-suited to her layered approach to her craft—and a series of cultural criticism essays. Writing about her travels, her cultural heritages, and her struggles with identity, Taffa's voice rises to meet the challenges of living inside multiculturalism. Her writing acknowledges the struggles of those seeking to fit in. Masking feelings and denying parts of one's heritage, she says, can lead to self-doubt, substance abuse, and higher suicide rates among Native Americans.

"I grew up in a region that has been on the civil rights watch list for hate crimes for a long time. The first hate crime convictions after the Matthew Shepherd law passed were a group of men who worked at McDonald's. They took home a mentally handicapped Navajo man, made a shape of a Swastika, and branded him with it. By the time I was 18, I had to get out."

Focus on the youth

Part of her motivation to write is rooted in her hope for future generations. "As we started having kids, I read a lot of books on education and I thought a lot about how to raise them in the world in a way that they would feel whole; diverse, but not subjected to the same sort of shame I felt as I was growing up." Through essays, Taffa finds positive perspectives on moving forward without dwelling on regrets about America's past. "This is our shared inheritance as Americans. I have no desire to blame or point or discuss history in a flat way that has nothing to do with the future."

Taffa credits fellow writers in Iowa's nonfiction program with helping her gain additional clarity. "I really value my harshest critics in the workshop because they help me see the other perspective. They help me see the regret everyone has that any of this happened. But we can't go back in time, so we're trying to move forward. Everything I write has to be with an eye toward improving things for youth."



Deborah Jackson-Taffa

Identity and invisibility

As a child, Taffa recalls searching her hometown library for books that could help her gain a sense of identity. "I wanted to read a book by a Native American that could contextualize my life for me, but no one was writing memoirs, because it's taboo to self-tell and to put yourself out as an individual before the clan. So I ended up reading Maya Angelou; I read Maxine Hong Kingston; I read authors from other marginalized groups, but not my own."

Today's cultural climate still leaves Native Americans frozen in a holding pattern, without ways to find meaningful identity. "Current thinking in multicultural studies points to a stereotype of a Native American woman who is faceless," Taffa says.

Taffa has written about the work of Erik Erikson (1902-1994), the Danish-German-American developmental psychologist who coined the phrase "identity crisis." After Erikson immigrated to the U.S., he searched for a culture that would best embody this notion of identity crisis. He based his study on the Lakota Indians. "He went to live with the Lakota and found that in this void of culture, when all history gets destroyed—when all the food ways and life ways and processes of that culture are gone—people are in a vacuum, and they have to reinvent themselves. There is difficulty knowing where to start."

Stereotypes' invisible effects

Finding identity is not easy. Many cultures encounter difficulties with stereotypes—both positive and negative—such as 'Asian kids are always great at math.' Taffa says, "These are horrible things that flatten out or make a monolithic image of a whole society. But for Native American women, it's just that there's no template. It's completely faceless. That invisibility is why I think people get upset and protective about what is being portrayed in the media, because it's so rare to be portrayed."

Taffa writes about media depictions of Native American culture. "It's cultural criticism that's not meant to blame anyone; it's turning back toward Native America and saying, 'How have we been brainwashed by media or by anthropology or by old notions that we have to be the standard-bearer for things that are too much weight for us? Our culture is always in recession. It's always receding in time, if what we consider our identity is a template that comes from the 1500s or 1600s.'"

The wonder of complexity

Instead, Taffa is committed to finding ways to embrace, adequately, complex and layered identities. Is Native America stuck venerating its past, sacrificing the potential to live fully in today's society? Or is it giving up its heritage,

disconnecting from cultural roots, in favor of embracing modernity? Taffa refutes the notion of single-dimension identity. “I use the image of the tree—the tensegrity of the branches reaching to the future, while the roots are the traditions. But it does have to grow both ways. When I use the word tensegrity, I’m talking about the tree’s integrity in its tensile strength—without one direction or the other, it’s not going to work.”

Through writing, Taffa hopes to inspire others to consider new ways to view identity. “The world I imagine on the page is a reflection of both my roots and my wings. I think one of the things that makes my work moving to people is that underneath the writing, I myself am still trying to figure things out. I myself am still grappling with the confusion. And that’s what the essay barter in, right? It barter in ‘on the other hand,’ where you’re seeing two perspectives on any given argument, and you don’t come to a place of resolution. Instead, you come to a place of wonder where there’s so much diversity and so much possibility. It’s not

something that gets tamped down in the end, like a novel or like some short stories, where you hit on a cathartic solution. There’s not a solution. It’s like the tree — there *is* the tensegrity. It’s the tension going in different directions that allows us the strength to grow.”

“I use the image of the tree— the tensegrity of the branches reaching to the future, while the roots are the traditions. It’s the tension going in different directions that allows us the strength to grow.”

—Deborah Jackson-Taffa

Taffa was awarded a fellowship to attend the New York State Writers Institute in summer 2011. In Dec. 2011, she presented a portion of her thesis at the Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3 in Bordeaux, France.

Her most recent publication can be found in Best Travel Writing 2011.

At Iowa, Taffa studies with John D’Agata and Robin Hemley and has also studied with ZZ Packer and David Hamilton, all faculty in UI Nonfiction Writing Program.

Of her experience at Iowa, Taffa says, “You cannot go wrong with the faculty in the writing programs here. They are all incredibly accomplished, very accessible, and kind. I am very thankful that I was offered the Dean’s Graduate Fellowship. All of these things give me confidence to keep working.”

Letter from the Dean

Associate Dean Dan Berkowitz and I are enjoying another fall semester co-leading a freshman seminar course titled “Grad School: Is it for You?”

The seminar is designed to help freshmen make informed decisions about planning for their graduate education. The students are encouraged to choose coursework and activities that will strengthen their graduate education.

Now in its third year, this seminar has become a one of my most rewarding experiences each academic year.

This fall, Dean Berkowitz and I have had the privilege of getting to know 17 motivated and engaged undergraduate students who are just beginning their UI college careers.

An impressive group, these students ask insightful questions and look for ways to find meaningful leadership and research opportunities, even at this early stage of their college experience.

Students participate fully in discussions, learning not only from their instructors and guest panelists, but also from each other.

These students come to the UI well-prepared and savvy about what lies ahead.

One student this fall said, “It’s not all about resume building. Admission folks see through students who just try to beef up their transcript. The way to really excel and make yourself stand apart is to engage in leadership and other research opportunities that really interest you. You want to do things for you, not for the admissions board.”

Undergraduate surveys indicate that over 80 percent of students attend Iowa because of the strengths and availability of graduate and professional degree programs.

As a Research I institution that has, as a significant part of its mission, a commitment to a broad range of quality graduate programs, the UI is well-positioned to serve the state of Iowa into the future.



John C. Keller
Associate Provost for Graduate
Education and Dean of the
Graduate College

This is especially true at a time when approximately four in ten college freshmen plan to pursue a master’s degree and two in ten plan to go on to doctoral studies.

I find it heartening to interact with these bright students, who will be the next generation of scholars and professionals.

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