

James Merrill

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Fall 2015

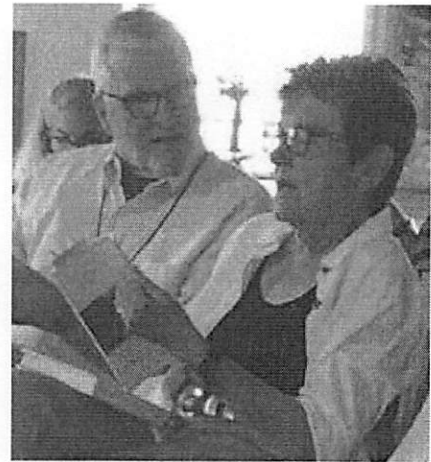
Readings by 2015 Merrill Fellow, Kay Ryan

“...SMALL AND GEM-LIKE ON THE page, until one realizes the faceted gem can be a grenade” And so Sandy McClatchy referred to past Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prizewinner Kay Ryan’s poetry in his introduction of her to a full house at the La Grua Center in July. Reading from works both new and old — a new book of poems, *Erratic Facts*, will be published this fall — Ryan proved the aptness of this description with the surprisingly enlightening ways in which she writes of the magical turns of nature, relationships and ordinary domestic things.

Ryan’s two weeks as 2015’s Invited Merrill Fellow in July was only the second writer residency she’d chosen to participate in, and she reflected on its compelling aspects at La Grua: *I so admire the way you at the Merrill House*

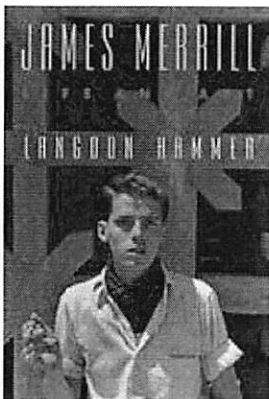
are doing things — allowing a really inspired kind of permeability to exist between the Merrill estate — his actual rooms and possessions — and the writers and thinkers you invite to occupy these rooms and live actively among his things. You clearly understand that this is not a steady state — that precious objects will be shifted, books rearranged, an ongoing conversation between the powerful sensory presence of James Merrill and a parade of lively interlocutors. What I’m trying to get at is that you clearly respect most deeply the live core of this estate, which is the literary estate, which can only ever be alive and in the process of being something we never before imagined.

On November 2 Ryan read from her work at the Noguchi Museum in a joint presentation with the James Merrill House.



James Merrill: Life and Art Garnering Glowing Reviews

LANGDON HAMMER’S magisterial 800 page biography, *James Merrill: Life and Art*, published by Knopf in April this year, was feted in Stonington at the La Grua Center in May. Hammer, Professor of English & American Studies and Chair of the English



Department at Yale, met with an enthusiastic reception as he spoke eloquently about Merrill’s work and life to an overflowing, standing-room-only crowd.

Glowing reviews in

over two dozen leading newspapers and journals including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Economist*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *The Paris Review* have acclaimed Hammer’s work. “Beautifully written and reasoned,” writes Hilton Als in *The New Yorker*, “Ham-

mer’s book possesses all the qualities Merrill prized in his own work, and life: humor, narrative energy, acute observation and analysis that is profound because it is true.” Poet and publisher Jonathan Galassi adds that the biography “shows how Merrill’s exquisite feeling for the word merged with his lust for living in an idiosyncratic artistic heroism that produced some of the great lyric poetry of the late 20th century”.

In his foreword, Hammer introduces 107 Water Street, Merrill’s soon-to-be-landmarked residence: “[Hidden] in plain sight in the

center of town, [Merrill] and Jackson created a miniature pleasure palace filled with curios, paintings by friends, and souvenirs from their travels. Local types and ‘summer people’ orbited around them. The atmosphere mixed Jane Austen and E. F. Benson (the author of classic camp novels about characters named Lucia and Mapp) — the comedy, intrigues, and epiphanies of daily life set down in Merrill’s chatty, fluent letters, and sometimes worked into poems ...” Likewise, Hammer’s biography is a “pleasure palace” replete with human insight and fine-tuned literary perception.

Merrill House Considered for Designation as a National Historic Landmark

TWO YEARS AGO the Merrill House was admitted to the National Register of Historic Places, a program of the National Parks Service (NPS). In the spring of this year, the NPS asked the Merrill Committee to apply to have the Merrill House designated as a National Historic Landmark — a conspicuously higher distinction. According to the NPS, this

program recognizes “nationally significant properties that illustrate or commemorate the history and prehistory of the United States”. Merrill’s stature as a major American writer of the second half of the 20th century, and his long and close association with 107 Water Street forms the basis of the application, which

continued on page 4

Newsletter No. 8
November 2015

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The James Merrill House is a
committee of the Stonington Village
Improvement Association

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Lorrie Moore: 2016 Invited Merrill Fellow

"THERE ARE WRITERS, people tell you, you must read before you shuffle off this mortal coil. They are often great, old or dead white men. Hemingway often comes up; Orwell, too, in this internet age. But Lorrie Moore is alive, as are the people she writes about: dark and funny, in the language of the everyday, elevated to high art." Bim Adewunmi, *Crush of the Week* in *The Guardian*, 10/17/15

Novelist and short story writer Lorrie Moore is the next Invited Merrill Fellow; she will spend two weeks in the Merrill House in July 2016. The author of three novels — *Anagrams* (1986), *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital* (1994) and *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009) — and four collections of stories as well as the editor of several anthologies, Moore has received many honors for her work, among them the Irish Times International Prize for Literature, the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award for her achievement in the short story. Her most recent novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, was shortlisted for the 2010 Orange Prize and for the PEN/Faulkner. Her most recent collection, *Bark*, was shortlisted for The Story Prize and the Frank O'Connor Prize for the Short Story. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001 and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2005. She is currently the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University.

Washington University Celebrates James Merrill

ON OCTOBER 22 AND 23, 2015, Washington University Libraries' Department of Special Collections held a symposium celebrating the writing and the life of James Merrill. Dr. Langdon Hammer, professor of English at Yale University and author of the new biography *James Merrill: Life and Art* as well as a past Merrill Fellow, delivered the keynote address. Other speakers included poets Mary Jo Bang, J.D. McClatchy, and Carl Phillips. Merrill House advisors Stephen Yenser, a co-executor of Merrill's literary estate and Joe Loewenstein, Professor of English at Washington University, participated in panels at the Symposium, as did Merrill House Committee member Randy Bean.

The Department of Special Collections houses the James Merrill Papers, one of the Libraries' first acquisitions for its Modern Literature Collection (MLC), which was founded in 1964. Merrill, who died in 1995, consistently donated journals, photographs, manuscripts, correspondence, and other materials to the MLC, and it's now the largest archive in the world devoted to his life and work. Selections from the papers are available online via the James Merrill Digital Archive, a digital exhibit launched in 2013 that features transcripts of the poet's famous Ouija board sessions.

New Merrill House Website Recognized with Two Awards

JAMESMERRILLHOUSE.ORG and its designers, Julia Balfour, LLC, have won a 2015 Excellence Award from the Connecticut Art Directors' Club (CADC) in the "Cultural & Educational Websites" category, and an American Website Award from Graphic Design USA.

The awards recognize the website as best in class for 2015, demonstrating best practices globally as well as in its particular niche. Mobile-ready and design responsive, the site's new content management system also makes it much easier for us to update and showcase current events and news from current and former writers in residence. Since its April launch, we've seen a 40% increase in the number of visitors.



Amy Bloom Wows at New Merrill House Author Series

AWARD WINNING NOVELIST Amy Bloom, the debut speaker for the Merrill House Author Series, brought a touch of Hollywood glam to her reading at La Grua, on October 3.

First, her friend and fellow novelist Julie Glass (current writer-in-residence at JM), gave a wonderful introduction, sharing her favorite Bloom title (*Where the God of Love*



Hangs Out) and Bloom's smart comment in an interview when she was asked about writing stories for kids (she's published one: *Little Sweet Potato*, 2012) versus adults (a slew, starting with *Come to Me: Stories*, 1993): "The idea of creating incident is very different for a children's book," Bloom (the mother of four) observed, "in that all I had to create was a thunderstorm and some mean carrots ..."

Facing a packed audience, Bloom read selections from her latest novel, *Lucky Us*, a tale of motherless half-sisters who attempt to swap small-town lives for movie stardom at the height of the Great Depression. Naturally, they run into some snags — including a rather racy, all-female soiree at a Hollywood manse, that sets a young starlet up for blackmail by a famous gossip columnist. "I didn't have to do much imagining there. It's very well documented," said Bloom, who started her career as an academic, taught at Yale for a decade, and is now Wesleyan University's Distinguished Writer in Residence.

A fiend for research, she answered questions about her plotting strategy, and why she prefers a swift, lean narrative — albeit one filled with Dickensian twists, shifting scenery, and characters that keep reinventing themselves while revealing or confiding their truest selves to the reader. For her next project, Bloom has been immersing herself in the correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt with female cousins and friends. "You get the picard," she said.

No pub date yet on that one, but you could sense keen anticipation for fans who lined up to meet Bloom at the book-signing following her talk — *Lucky Us!*



Poetry on the Porch with Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner Ansel Elkins

IN JUNE, the Merrill House held its third annual Poetry on the Porch, featuring 2014 Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner Ansel Elkins. Elkins read from her debut collection of poetry, *Blue Yodel*, of which Vijay Seshadri, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *3 Sections: Poems* says, "Ansel Elkins's writing is spare, musical, and sophisticated, and it anchors her powerful imagination, her phantasmagoric landscapes and stories, her wild figurations, her Southernism, and her moral ardor." Dorothy and Declan Doogan once again generously hosted this event on their covered porch, which over 70 people attended.

A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship, an American Antiquarian Society Fellowship, and the "Discovery"/*Boston Review* Poetry Prize, Elkins' poems have appeared in *AGNI*, *The Believer*, *Best New Poets 2011*, *Ecotone*, *Guernica*, *Gulf Coast*, the *North American Review*, the *Southern Review*, and others. She holds degrees from Sarah Lawrence College and University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Born in rural Alabama, she now lives in North Carolina. Elkins is the third Yale prizewinner to have been a Merrill Fellow since the partnership with Yale was established in 2012.

Update on Conservation: The Surly Temple

"THE SURLY TEMPLE" is how the artist Robert Morse dubbed his portrait of James Merrill and David Jackson's closest circle of Stonington friends. His group portrait depicts the six intimates, including Merrill and Jackson, Morse and his wife Isabelle, the writer and gardener Eleanor Perenyi and novelist Grace Zaring Stone. The exclusive coterie played bridge and the piano together, regaled itself with cocktails and dinner parties and shared transatlantic voyages and other holidays. Merrill and Jackson were comfortably "out" to the Surly Temple as they did not feel permitted to be to Stonington society at large.

The painting occupies the place in Merrill's fourth floor studio where a Larry Rivers' of the same size — now displayed in the entry of the Lyman Allyn Museum — once hung. As with some of the other artworks in the Merrill apartment, sunlight and fluctuations in temperature have caused fading, discoloration and numerous areas of fragile, flaking paint on the work's surface.

The Merrill Committee is evaluating quotes from several New England conservators for undertaking the conservation treatment needed to restore the painting to include consolidating tented and cupping paint, filling in the areas of loss and in-painting with conservation materials. The painting will then be framed using appropriate conservation materials to further protect the presently unvarnished painting from further environmental damage.



Surly Temple Group, Oil on canvas, unframed, 48" x 72"
From left: Eleanor Perenyi, Robert Morse, David Jackson, Grace Zaring Stone, Isabelle Morse, James Merrill. Photo: Sarah Dove

James Merrill

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM & MUSEUM

James Merrill House
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT 06378

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Calendar of Events

OCTOBER 24

Julia Glass, October Merrill Fellow, reads from her work.
La Grua Center, 5 p.m.

NOVEMBER 2

Kay Ryan, 2015 Invited Merrill Fellow, reads from her work in a joint presentation between the Merrill House and the reading's venue:
Noguchi Museum, 9-01 33rd Road, Long Island City, NY, 6.30-8 p.m.

NOVEMBER 21

Terese Svoboda, November Merrill Fellow, reads from her work.
Stonington Free Library, 5 p.m.

JANUARY 14

Geri Doran, December/January Merrill Fellow reads from her work.
Stonington Free Library, 5 p.m.

APRIL 10

Adam Giannelli, Spring Merrill Fellow, reads from his work.
Stonington Free Library, 5 p.m.

Flowers and Mariachi on the Deck

SEVERAL

FORMER Merrill fellows joined over 100 people — and a mass of colorful, handmade paper flowers supplied by our creative volunteers — at the annual Merrill Deck Party held on August 1. This year's theme, "Night at the Fiesta," reflected creative liberty taken with *Night at the Fiestas*, the title of Kirstin Valdez Quade's

recently published collection of short stories. Quade spent some time at the Merrill House when her partner, Lydia Conklin, was a Merrill Fellow in 2012. Between sets by a lively Mariachi band and spicy hors d'oeuvres, guests listened to Quade's reading of James Merrill's "Dead Center". In addition to Quade and Lydia Conklin, past Merrill fellows Brittany Perham and Ansel Elkins also attended the event.



Designation

continued from page 1

will be considered in Washington DC in November and, we hope, made formal in 2016. www.nps.gov/nhl/news/fall2015mtg.html

While the National Register of Historic Places contains around 90,000 sites of local and community interest, the 2,500 National Historic Landmarks are considered to be important to the history of the entire nation. Other local Landmarks include the Charles W. Morgan in Mystic and the Captain Nathaniel Palmer House in Stonington. The application rests on Merrill's reputation as one of the great poets of his generation, and is being fast tracked by the NPS under their LGBTQ initiative.

What impact will this have? Primarily, it helps achieve a higher profile and wider recognition for the Merrill House. You'll see a larger bronze plaque outside 107 Water Street, for example. The Merrill House will continue to be open to the public several times a year and by appointment. As always, please check on our website for open weekends, or contact the Committee if you wish to arrange a visit.