

James Merrill

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM & MUSEUM NEWSLETTER

Spring 2014

From “Eye Sore” to Treasure: James Merrill House Listed on the National Register of Historic Places



The James Merrill House is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

declined the building changed hands several times until, in 1954, James Merrill and David Jackson took up residence as renters. They became owners a year later.

The two men were charmed by the period details of the building and Burtch's apartment. Years of neglect had left the architecture largely intact. The corner turret had once borne a cap that probably blew off in the 1938 hurricane. With the exception of a fourth floor renovation that added

the studio and deck and some changes that provided for Merrill's "secret" study, they left things unchanged. The apartment and the village appear throughout Merrill's work.

1995 Writer-in-Residence Peter S. Hawkins, professor of religion and literature at Yale Divinity School, wrote to congratulate us on the National Register listing and thanked us again, saying "107 Water Street gave me *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*."



Plaque from the National Register of Historic Places.

IN THE *Book of Ephraim*, James Ingram Merrill jokingly refers to 107 Water Street as the "old eye sore," but in August 2013 the late-Victorian building received official recognition of its significance to Stonington Village and beyond with a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The honor imposes no restrictions on maintenance or use. Rather, it only confirms and publicizes the importance of Merrill and his home in our nation's literary history.

The listing is particularly gratifying because it was awarded, in large part, because this is where Merrill wrote his most important poems during his long residence in Stonington, because Merrill's apartment and its contents have been so carefully preserved, and because the Merrill House Committee has made continuous use of the space for our residency program. We are the appointed custodians of this place.

107 Water Street began life as a fancy corner drugstore built by the enterprising Francis Burtch during a period of prosperity here in the early 20th century. The building — known as the Burtch Block — housed the pharmacy and other retail spaces at street level and his 10-room apartment on the third floor. The second floor was leased to the Mistuxet Club — a men's social organization. When Burtch's fortunes

Another Poet's Library

Kelle Groom, Spring 2014 Merrill Writer-in-Residence

AS I DAILY MOVE between genres, the solitude JMH provides allows me to go deeply into each piece. While I have occasionally been a writer struck by inspiration who can write anywhere (as recently, when I had to write a poem in the parking lot of Mystic Market and again, in the aisle at CVS), in general, I need a good stretch of uninterrupted time. Connections are made from one piece to another because of the quiet that surrounds the making of each. It's like staying inside a dream, instead of trying to recall it upon waking.

I begin the day's writing by reading. James Merrill's library is a delight. In addition to offering a comprehensive collection of his own work, it has a wealth of first and early books by other writers. My first morning, I began reading Philip Levine's *Not This Pig* and James Galvin's *Elements*. Poems in both immediately sparked new work. This process always feels like a conversation with writers I



admire, who do the work I love.

The only poet's house I've ever lived in is my own. I've been traveling these past three years, teaching and writing, with my own 5,000 book library and 14 bookcases in storage. In James Merrill's library, I feel kindred. Of course poetry books are usually so much thinner than others, and when I

first saw all these shelves and shelves of narrow spines, I felt breathless. I still do.

Every day is a discovery. *The Lost Museum: Glimpses of Vanished Originals* led to several poems. *The Art of the Autochrome* was just what I was looking for on the birth of color photography. It led to a poem on Stieglitz's photograph of his daughter. Larry Levis' collection, *The Afterlife*, sparked my own poem, "Afterlife." Even postcards left in the desk inspired a prose piece, "James Merrill's Postcards." It's truly exciting, as each day, I discover something new, which leads me somewhere I've never been.

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

James Merrill House
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT 06378
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JAMES MERRILL'S PIANO

The piano was important to Merrill. As a child he took lessons and music theory at Lawrenceville where he studied with Carol Longone, who composed operalogues in the 40s and 50s. When Merrill moved to Stonington, he brought the piano from his West 10th Street apartment in New York City; it had to be lifted into the house by crane through the balcony.



James Merrill's piano.

Thanks to the generosity of our donors, Merrill's piano — a 1938 Steinway baby grand — will benefit from the installation of a humidity control system and additional adjustments.

Donors to the James Merrill House Program

WE WANT TO THANK all those listed below who have given to the James Merrill House Program during the just completed year which began on April 1, 2013 and ended March 31, 2014.

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*This list reflects gifts received from
April 1, 2013 through March 31,
2014. If anyone has been missed, we
sincerely apologize. If your name does
not appear or if you would like to
change the way your name appears,
please send an email to the Committee
at writer@jamesmerrillhouse.org*

**This year we acknowledge donors
who have contributed to the James
Merrill House for five years or more
with an asterisk.*

The James Merrill House Writer-In-Residence Program



MOLLY ANDERS (September) hails from Frankfort, Kentucky. She holds an MFA in fiction from Syracuse University and a BA in Middle East Studies and Creative Writing from Bard. Her fiction and prose have appeared in *Tin House*, *Salt Hill*, *Newsweek International* and *JO Magazine*. She's currently at work on a collection of short stories.



KATHLEEN WINTER (December) is the author of *Nostalgia for the Criminal Past*, winner of the Antivenom Poetry Award and the Texas Institute of Letters Bob Bush Memorial Award for a first book of poems. Raised in San Antonio, she teaches writing at Napa Valley College and is an assistant editor for the poetry journal *Volt*.



AHIMSIA TIMOTEO BODHRÁN (October) is the author of *Antes y después del Bronx: Lenapehoking* and *South Bronx Breathing Lessons*, and was editor of the International Queer Indigenous Issue of *Yellow Medicine Review* (Fall 2010). He is finishing *Yerbabuenal Mala yerba*, *All My Roots Need Rain: mixed-blood poetry & prose*.



DAMIANO ABENI and **MOIRA EGAN** (Spring 2015) are poets and translators. A practicing epidemiologist, Dr. Abeni has translated into Italian the work of Bidart, Bishop, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Simic, C.K. Williams and other contemporary American poets. Moira Egan's



ANNA NOYES (November) is a recent graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her stories have appeared in the women's fiction issue of *VICE*, *Five Chapters* and others. She has taught creative writing at The University of Iowa and throughout coastal Maine and is currently at work on her short story collection, *Goodnight, Beautiful Women*.

work has been featured in numerous journals and the *Best American Poetry* series; her collections include *Strange Botany/Botanica Arcana* (forthcoming), *Hot Flash Sonnets*, and *Spin*. In 2011, Abeni and Egan were awarded the "Premio di Poesia—La Torre dell'Orologio" for their Italian translation of Mark Strand.



ADAM WILSON (November/December) is the author of the novel *Flatscreen*, a National Jewish Book Award finalist. The title story from his new collection *What's Important Is Feeling* won the Terry Southern Prize for Humor in 2012. Recently named to *Brooklyn Magazine's* list of 50 Funniest People in Brooklyn, he teaches writing at Columbia and NYU.



ANSEL ELKINS (June 2015) is the winner of the 2014 Yale Younger Poets Prize for her manuscript *Blue Yodel*. She was a 2013 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and the 2012 Tennessee Williams Scholar at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, among other honors. Her poems recently appeared in *AGNI*, *Best New Poets 2011*, *Boston Review*, *The Southern Review*, and others. She lives in Greensboro, NC.

A Poet at Home: James Merrill in Stonington Village

DRAWING ON HER RESEARCH, writer and exhibition curator Rachel Carley will discuss the ways in which Merrill's deep connection to Stonington shaped his work. She will also touch on the history of the eccentric Victorian building where Merrill lived and worked, now one of Connecticut's great literary landmarks.

Saturday, May 17 at 5 pm at the La Grua Center. The event is free and open to the public. A reception will follow.

10th Annual James Merrill Lecture

BELIEVING THAT talented writers enrich the life of our community, each year the James Merrill House events include a lecture from a distinguished writer. We are thrilled to announce that the 10th Annual James Merrill Lecture will be given by award-winning novelist, Jeffrey Eugenides on Saturday, Sept. 13 at the La Grua Center.

Jeffrey Eugenides is the author of three novels. His first, *The Virgin Suicides*, is now considered a modern classic. *Middlesex*, his second novel, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the WELT-Literatur Preis, and the Santiago de Compostela Literary Prize from Spain. *Middlesex* was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and France's Prix

Médicis. His third novel, *The Marriage Plot*, became a National Book Critics' Circle Award finalist and was named as the best novel of 2011 by independent booksellers in the United States; it also won the Prix Fitzgerald and the Madame Figaro Literary Prize in France. Eugenides is



a professor of Creative Writing in the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. His work has been translated into 35 languages.

James Merrill

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM & MUSEUM

James Merrill House
107 Water Street
Stonington, CT 06378

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Calendar of Events

- MAY 17 Rachel Carley**, noted writer and exhibit curator
lectures on the Merrill House
La Grua Center, 5pm
- JUNE 7 Jonathan Post Reads** from his collection:
The Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht
Merrill Apartment, 5pm
- JUNE 9 Meet & Greet** for 2013 Yale Younger Poets
Prize Winner **Eryn Green**
Noah's, 5pm
- JUNE 21 Eryn Green Reads**
Details to come, 5pm
- AUG. 2 Annual Deck Party**
Merrill Apartment, 5–8pm
- AUG. 2-3 Summer Open House Days**
Merrill Apartment, 1–3pm
- AUG. 9 Josh Weil Reads**
Merrill Apartment, 5pm
- SEPT. 13 Jeffrey Eugenides** Annual James Merrill Lecture
La Grua Center, 5pm

Letter from Lynn Callahan

SO MUCH HAS HAPPENED since our inception in 2004 when we were formed by the Stonington Village Improvement Association to act as a semi-autonomous committee charged with caring for the James Merrill House and directing its programs. Now, through the hard work of many dedicated community members and with the help of our former fellows and others in the writing community, ours is a nationally recognized residency program with a list of alums that is too long for this newsletter. In addition, we are the curators of a unique house museum in a building that now proudly bears a plaque denoting our listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

With the support of generous donors, including Merrill and Magowan family members, and the Plummer Foundation, we are able to offer a comfortable living space plus a small stipend for our writers-in-residence; we have increased the number of fellowships offered annually, provided more programs to the community; and continue to care for Merrill's building and preserve the contents of his apartment.

Now we are realizing another of our goals: that of implementing new leadership. As the James Merrill House Committee chair and

sometime co-chair for 10 years, I am happy to share with you the exciting news that Sally Wood and Bill Middleton, who have already played key roles in our current success, are taking over as co-chairs.

I offer my thanks to all of you who have made my years as a leader rewarding. I look forward to continuing to help contribute to the program's ongoing success.

Sincerely, Lynn Callahan

Meet Bill Middleton and Sally Wood

IF YOU DON'T ALREADY KNOW our incoming co-chairs, we hope you will meet them soon.

Sally has been a member of the James Merrill House Committee for over ten years, most recently as Co-Chair of the Program Committee. She is the Chief Operating Officer of the Council for Economic Education, a NYC-based non-profit focused on improving financial and economic literacy for students in grades K-12. Prior to this position she worked for publishers Bertelsmann, Simon & Schuster and Pearson.

Bill is the President and Chief Investment Officer of Sound Portfolio Advisors, LLC, a Mystic-based registered investment advisor that provides portfolio management and financial planning services for individuals and

small businesses. He has been involved with a variety of non-profits over the years, including the James Merrill House (Co-Chair) and the Mystic Arts Center (past Treasurer). Bill lives in Mystic and is currently overseeing the renovation of the former Emporium Building on a volunteer basis for the Mystic Arts Center.

"We're very fortunate to have Bill and Sally, who both know and respect the Merrill House and its programs, to lead us at this time," said Lynn Callahan, who will continue to help on the JMHC and be part of the transition.

Bill and Sally are excited for their new roles. "We look forward to continuing to build on the strength and reputation of the Program that Lynn has worked so hard and successfully to create."