

First novel winner a study in determination

By Laurie Loewenstein

Margot Singer, the 2013 James Jones First Novel Fellow, is nothing if not tenacious. In 1985, she was the first woman business editor of *The Harvard Crimson*, a gold medalist at the British National Rowing Championships in 1986, and later left a successful 10-year career as a management consultant to become an academician and writer. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that she has spent 13 years on her novel-in-progress, *The Art of Fugue*.

"It's had a checkered history," she said with a laugh during a recent telephone interview. "I've had a number of false starts and was very near giving up. At various times, it had a different main character and a different point of view."

Although Singer has published a number of short stories and critical essays — and won awards for them — this piece, which she wasn't even sure was a novel, did not come easy. In fact, in 2012, Singer gave a paper titled "Novel Anxiety" at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference.

"I had hit a wall in 2005. Then I heard a story on NPR (National Public Radio) about the piano man; a man who had turned up soaking wet in England and only communicated by playing the piano. No one knew who he was. My romantic imagination took hold of this man coming out of the sea."

A prologue describing a stranger wandering in a town on the Isle of Sheppey on the North Sea, now opens *The Art of Fugue* and is braided throughout the rest of the work.

Even with this breakthrough, Singer did not feel she had hit her stride until she had "the gift of a whole year sabbatical" in 2011-12. She is the Dominick Consolo Associate Professor of English at Denison University in Granville, Ohio.

During a writing retreat at the Ucross Ranch in Wyoming, "it all clicked into the right groove. I started to narrate from Esther and multiple third person points of view. I started to write image patterns and come up with a very broad narrative arc."

Singer, who received the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction for "The Pale of Settlement," and has published more than 16 short stories, has found the novel's longer form to be difficult.

"When I write a story, I just have a couple of things to latch on to. I can hold a 20-page story in my head. The challenge of the novel was that I couldn't keep it all in my head and working full time and having children, it was hard to keep the momentum going," she said.

When asked to name the writers and works that she admires, Singer quickly mentions Michael Ondaatje's *Anvil's Ghost* (2000); Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987 Man Booker Prize winner) and Pat Barker's *Ghost Road* (1995 Booker).

Singer has a Ph.D. in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Utah, a Master of Philosophy from Oxford University and a B.A. from Harvard University, where she studied history and literature.

Singer's synopsis of *The Art of Fugue* follows:

Loosely based on the musical form of a fugue, the narrative interweaves the stories of an amnesiac musician; an old woman remembering her escape from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia; a university student evading daily life through urban exploration; a divorced doctor longing to know his teenage son; and a woman struggling to move beyond the death of her only child. An excerpt will be published in a future JJLS Journal.



Years later, while teaching at the University of Illinois and after Jones' death in 1977, Hendrick took a trip to Robinson in the mid '80s with a cousin who wanted to go to the local historical society and went through Marshall, IL, where he remembered that Jones had connections there with the Handy Writers Colony. That trip prompted him to write Gloria and ask her permission to do a book of Jones' letters.

With a sabbatical coming up and like the true scholar he is, Hendrick and his wife, Willene, who was also his frequent collaborator, traveled to the library archives of Sangamon State University, now the University of Illinois at Springfield, and the Jones material housed there, to begin researching the book.

The couple also traveled to Long Island to talk with Gloria and Kaylie and visited the libraries at Yale and Princeton before heading to the University of Texas in Austin where Hendrick had earned his Ph.D. in American literature. By this time, the methodical researcher had collected much of the content and written the introduction for the book, which was later titled *To Reach Eternity, The Letters of James Jones*.

But he still had no advance from a publishing house.

He contacted a former agent who suggested he put together some representative letters and the introduction and send it out to prospective publishers. Random House offered the best contract, and Bob Loomis edited the book. Loomis had been a college classmate of William Styron at Duke University and got his friend (who had also been a friend of Jones) to write the forward. The book was published in 1989.

A few years later, Hendrick learned that the original manuscript of *From Here To Eternity* was languishing in a bank vault in Marshall and helped secure it for the University of Illinois Library. Then, one of the Robinson-based Heath Candy Company family members secured a manuscript of *The Pistol* that Jones had given to Judy Garland when she was feeling down in the dumps. That manuscript also came to the library.

Throughout his career, Hendrick has been a tireless advocate for the work of James Jones, as well as an English professor who has worked with Ph.D. candidates, and has written or edited more than 20 books about other authors and issues, including Carl Sandburg, Katherine Anne Porter, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, racism and slavery, as well as more about James Jones, including *James Jones and the Handy Writers Colony* and *Writings From the Handy Colony*, both co-authored with Helen Howe and Don Sackrider.

Now well into his 80s and after losing his wife in 2010, Hendrick still rises at 4 a.m. and works daily on his trusted Remington typewriter on some piece of writing. He took Jones' unpublished first novel and worked it into a tightly edited book titled *To the End of the War*. He prepared the complete, uncensored edition of *From Here To Eternity* from the original manuscript and wrote a comprehensive afterword for the Dial Press Trade Edition published in 2012. In the true spirit of promoting the Jones legacy and continuation of his work, Hendrick donated the money from this edition to the endowment for the James Jones Chair in World War II Studies at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston.

Most recently, Hendrick has researched and written an article available on the James Jones Literary Society website about four generations of the James Jones family, most of whom are buried in Crawford County, IL. He's also secured copies of a number of poems, which Jones wrote during and shortly after the war, and is considering publishing them in a chap book. And he's gathered and edited for publication five of Jones' short stories written while he was stationed in Memphis where he went to the hospital after Guadalcanal and in the first months after he was discharged from the Army. The collection is tentatively titled *The True Taste of War*.

Now, before moving to Long Island, to live with his daughter Sarah and her family, Hendrick — in what he claims is his "last hurrah," — will be the keynote presenter at a Nov. 9 James Jones Literary Society conference in Robinson. The title for the address is "James Jones — His Literature and His Letters."

As a man who has done so much in the world of literature, Hendrick has few regrets. He would like to see a well-researched biography of Jones, like the one Lennon just completed on Norman Mailer.

"If I were five years younger, I would do it," Hendrick said. "But I can no longer travel to all the libraries necessary to do the job. So that will have to be done by a younger individual."

This year's James Jones First Novel Fellowship attracted 666 entries, almost 100 more than in 2012. The award is intended to honor the same spirit of unblinking honesty, determination and insight into modern culture exemplified by James Jones.

There were 28 finalists. This year's honorees are:

- Winner (\$10,000) — Margot Singer, Granville, OH. *The Art of Fugue*
- Runner-up (\$750) — Timothy Brandoff, NYC, NY. *Connie Sky*
- Runner-up (\$750) — Jennifer Davis, Baton Rouge, LA. *Reckonings*
- Honorable Mention — Tamara Titus, Charlotte, NC. *Lovely in the Eye*