

Society of Early Americanists' Scholar of the Month

Hilary E. Wyss



1. How did you become interested in studying early American literature?

Honestly, I'm not quite sure any more what led me here, but I know that what has kept me in the field is the incredible community that the SEA has provided. I was at the very first SEA conference in 1999 and have not missed any of the biennials; that's when I catch up with old friends and learn about new work. I always find it both humbling and inspiring to hear about what people are working on, and I feel like early Americanists are an especially vibrant group. I find it especially exciting that interdisciplinarity defines us as a field, and we generally have incredibly fruitful collaborations that stretch us in many productive ways, in terms of chronology, of what we consider literature, and how we best approach our diverse materials.

2. Who is your favorite early American writer, or what is your favorite early American text, and why?

My favorite early American text is usually whatever I am teaching or writing about at any given moment. That means that right now I am all excited about the writing of early American women, and the line that resonates with me so much right now as a writer is Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to her Book," "Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain." It just seems to capture something especially complicated about authorship—that very parental mix of frustration and pride and anxiety about putting your ideas out into the world.

3. What are you currently working on?

My newest project is a book tentatively titled *Orphans and Others: George Whitefield, Samson Occom, Phillis Wheatley, and Accounts of Human Value* that examines three specific sites of charity work that are connected through the itinerant figure of George Whitefield: New England, London, and Savannah. I hope to bring together some ideas about race, identity, and education by focusing on Whitefield's Georgia Orphanage, Wheelock's Indian Charity School, and the Foundling Hospital in London.

4. What is something you are reading right now (EAL related or otherwise) that inspires you, either personally or professionally?

I am always humbled by the extraordinary quality of work that is emerging in early American studies, especially work in the intersecting fields of early American literature and Native American studies. I am eagerly awaiting the publication of Lisa Brooks's *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War*, and in the meantime, I am finding that Octavia Butler's *Kindred* has so much to teach us about history and memory—made all the more resonant with the new graphic novel version of the book by Damian Duffy and John Jennings.

5. Is there a scholar in the field who inspires you, and why?

There are so many scholars who have inspired me over the years that it would hard to pick just one. The longer I'm in the field the more I realize how many people affect you professionally without you ever knowing who they are—anonymous manuscript reviewers who say incredibly helpful things, or tenure and promotion letter-writers who read over all your materials and help your colleagues see your work in context. But if I had to name a single person who has inspired me in countless ways it would be David Shields, whose eclectic interests and incredible scholarly generosity has been a real gift to the profession more generally and to me personally. He has buoyed me up in difficult times and cheered for me when things are going well. And I don't think either of us could possibly keep track of how many letters he has written over the last twenty years for me in any number of contexts.

Hilary E. Wyss is Allan K. Smith and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of English at Trinity College in Hartford, CT.

To nominate an SEA member to be Scholar of the Month, please email Stacey Dearing at Stacey.Dearing@gmail.com