Council Announces

Stealing Buddha’s Dinner
Chosen for 2009-10 Great Michigan Read

The Michigan Humanities Council has selected Stealing Buddha’s Dinner, by Bich Minh Nguyen, for the 2009-10 Great Michigan Read. “It’s an honor to be chosen for a program like this,” said Nguyen. “I hope that residents all over the state enjoy the book and that it stimulates all kinds of important conversations.”

Stealing Buddha’s Dinner is a memoir chronicling the author’s migration from Vietnam in 1975 and her coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the 1980s. Along the way, she struggles to construct her own cultural identity from a menagerie of uniquely American influences. The book is appropriate for adult and high school readers.

With a statewide focus on a single book, The Great Michigan Read encourages Michiganders to learn more about their state, their history, and their society. The Council’s free supporting programming will focus on three themes: immigration stories, cultural understanding, and contemporary history.

“The book is a perfect springboard for exploring these important issues,” said Janice Fedewa, executive director of the Council. “It’s a great read featuring an honest, youthful voice.”

Copies of Stealing Buddha’s Dinner are available for purchase at all Meijer stores and other retail partners, along with free reader’s guides and bookmarks. “We’re grateful for Meijer’s support not only as a retail partner but as a major program sponsor,” said Fedewa.

Partner organizations can register online for free copies of additional materials and will be eligible for Council grants for supporting programming.

Readers of The Detroit Free Press will receive a free Great Michigan Read supplement, featuring a full chapter from the book, in the October 9, 2009 edition of the paper. Additional free copies of the supplement will be available to partner organizations and classrooms.

On October 13-17, 2009, the Council will feature Nguyen on a five-city author tour, with stops in Grand Rapids, Lansing, Metro Detroit, Midland, and Traverse City. All appearances are free and open to the public.

Other programs and resources, including a teacher’s guide, special media projects, and Facebook applications, will debut throughout the year. The 2009-10 Great Michigan Read will conclude with a Michigan Author Homecoming, scheduled for April 2010. The book was selected by a group of nearly 50 librarians, teachers, students, professors, authors, and others from all corners of the state. More than 75 Michigan-related titles were considered for the program.

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Michigan Humanities Council Executive Director Jan Fedewa interviewed Stealing Buddha’s Dinner author Bich Minh Nguyen for this newsletter. Below, find Nguyen’s thoughts about sharing her personal experiences for this memoir, her inspirations for writing, the struggles she faced with her own cultural identity, her immigration stories, as well as the role that food and popular culture played in her life.

Q: How old were you when you knew that someday you would pen a book? How long after your decision did you begin to write? Why did you decide to write a memoir?

A: Like most writers, I dreamed of writing because I loved reading. I loved going to the library. I loved falling into someone else’s imagined world and getting carried forward within his or her language and narrative. At first, wanting to write stemmed from wanting to emulate the writers I admired, such as Louisa May Alcott (Little Women) and Beverly Cleary (The Ramona Quimby books), and later, Dickens and Austen and Hardy and Steinbeck. Writing also felt like an enormous kind of freedom. In real life, I was so shy I sometimes couldn’t answer when someone asked me a question; in the imagined life, I could speak through writing. I could pretend to be not so afraid. I was also intensely interested in language. While I wasn’t conscious of it at the time, I’m sure that part of my obsession with reading, writing, spelling, and language was connected to my desire not only to learn English but to master it. It was my way of dealing with my self-consciousness as a “foreigner”—which is...
Six Join Council’s Board of Directors

The Michigan Humanities Council welcomes six civic leaders recently elected to its Board of Directors. The Council’s Board of Directors consists of 23 members whose responsibilities include program and proposal review, planning, fundraising, advocacy for the humanities, liaison to projects, and other representation of the Council at activities around the state. Five members of the Council are gubernatorial appointees while the Council Board elects 18. Each began their term on January 1, 2009. The new members are:

**John Berry** of Holland

John Berry is a consultant for Guyotene Global and has more than 35 years of professional design involvement and a public relations and communications expertise. He currently chairs Design West Michigan and has previous experience leading the IC Division of The Grange Mutual Insurance Company.

**Juanita Moore** of Detroit

Juanita Moore is currently the president and CEO of the Chucks II Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, a position she has held since September 2006. She previously served as the executive director of the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, as the executive director of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and as leadership strategist at the National African American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio.

**Marge Potter** of Grand Rapids

Margaret Byington Potter of Grand Rapids, PPS, is the director of the Detroit River Tunnel Corporation and the vice president of the Fort Jefferson Industrial Park in Detroit. She previously worked as president of Great Lakes Corporate Resources, as executive assistant to Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, and as chief deputy director of the Michigan Department of Commerce under Governor John Engler. She was elected to the Kent County Board of Commissioners from 1979-1988.

**Amy DeWys-VanHecke** of Grosse Pointe Farms

Amy DeWys-VanHecke of Grosse Pointe Farms is president of the Macomb County Historical Society, a position she has held since 2001. She is a board member of the Midland Area Historical Society, the Michigan Association for History, and was awarded several preservation and conservation grants. She has a Bachelor's degree in history and was awarded a Master's degree in environmental studies from the University of Wisconsin.

**Erik Nordberg** of Calumet

Erik Nordberg is a former executive director of the Michigan Humanities Council. He is a native of Detroit and has a Bachelor's degree in American Studies from the University of Iowa. Rick enjoyed his outdoor experiences in the restaurant industry before earning his PhD in American Studies at the University of Iowa. Rick enjoyed his outdoor experiences in the restaurant industry before earning his PhD in American Studies at the University of Iowa. He is a native of Detroit.

**Steven Brisson** of Cheboygan

Steven Brisson has served as the executive director of the Mackinac State Historic Parks since 2003 and has worked in the Park’s collection since 1996. He has presented at national museum association conferences, has published several works on Mackinac history, and was awarded several preservation and conservation grants. He also has previous experience as a curator at the Stonington Historical Society in Wisconsin.

I grew up in rural Kansas in a small town where there were no streetlights. The largest buildings in the town were the grain elevator and the Catholic Church. When I think back to that simple life, I realize how much small town values were so entrenched in our daily lives. But, like most teens, I became restless and longed to be part of a larger landscape, a community that offered opportunities to grow, to be creative, and to see my dreams both unknown and new from small town traditions and cultures.

Following high school graduation and without much planning, I picked my suitcase, purchased a bus ticket, and headed to the big city. I had one goal in mind and that was to find a job. I knew I wanted to eventually go to college, but I didn’t have the money or the encouragement from my parents.

I had never been to Topeka, but I knew it was the best place to begin my journey. Upon arrival, I was drawn to the State Capitol, which was near the bus stop. I remember being mesmerized by its vastness, architecture, and its historical significance, but my goal was far different from exploring its history.

While in the rotunda, I observed an older man, in a suit, walking toward me. I felt at ease and ensured him that the nurse was not going to talk to him about his duties to find work. However, I was immediately attracted to him because of his demeanor, self-assurance, and friendliness. He took a deep breath and approached me. He was very accommodating, inquired about my skills, and seemed to be interested. He invited me to join him in his office. He began to make telephone calls to arrange interviews. I was hired that day although I did not necessarily pass all the qualifications for the job. Even though he seemed that I wasn’t comfortable in this new setting, he later told me that he wanted to help me because of my unpretentious approach, his sincerity, and my desire to be part of a broader community.

For the 2009-2010 school year, I was Michigan resident drinking Stalin Budafok. Dinner by Rick Minn Nguyen, I know they too will discover moments in their lives when they have felt somewhat isolated within this complex world. In a very different way than Rick. I experienced that feeling of being an outsider when I made the transition from a rural life to an urban setting.

I encourage you to read Rick’s story and join the many conversations centered on his work. You may discover stories from your past that you will want to share — like I did — that reflect upon one of many threads woven into his masterpiece.

**Pat Waring** of Grand Rapids

Pat Waring has served as the central community relations director in the Office of the President at Grand Valley State University. She also served as the fund development officer for the Dow Corning Foundation and as an instructor at Davenport College, Metropolitan College (Chicago), and International College (Fort Wayne, Indiana).

**Jennifer Wise** of Traverse City

Jennifer Wise has served as the Council’s Program and Development Officer since 2006. She is also the Council’s Fiscal Officer, having served on the staff since 2003. Jennifer has served on the staff since 2003. She is a former executive director of the Michigan Humanities Council. She was elected to the Kent County Board of Commissioners from 1979-1988.

**Susanne M. Janis** of Traverse City

Susanne M. Janis is a former executive director of the Michigan Humanities Council. She was elected to the Kent County Board of Commissioners from 1979-1988.

**Scott Hirko** of Grand Rapids

Scott Hirko has served as the Fiscal Officer since 2003. He is also the Council’s Office of the President. He is a member of the Kent County Board of Commissioners from 1979-1988.

**John Hiner** of Auburn

John Hiner was recently named as executive director for the Flint Journal, Bay City Times, and the Saginaw News. He has served as the editor of the Times since 2006 and as its metro editor since 1994. His journalism career also includes work as a reporter and associate metro editor at the Jackson Citizen Patriot. He has received Associated Press news awards for investigative reporting, news, feature, columns, and editorials.

**John Berry** of Holland

John Berry died on March 31, 2009, at the age of 58. Rick served the Council from 1998-2002, previously directing Humanities Iowa. He was passionate about food and had an early career in the restaurant industry before earning his Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Iowa. Rick enjoyed his outdoor experiences in the American Midwest. Rick frequently shared his love and joy for his family, his wife Joyce Meier and his sons Franz (29) and Christopher (19). The Michigan Humanities Council Board of Directors and staff extend their condolences to the Knupfer family.
Bich Minh Nguyen (pronounced bit min yung) was born in Saigon in 1974. During the Fall of Saigon in 1975, she and her family fled Vietnam as refugees and eventually resettled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Bich and her family were part of the first significant wave of Vietnamese immigrants to the United States.

Bich spent her childhood in Grand Rapids and attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1996 and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 1998. Currently, she is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Purdue University.

Her first book, Stealing Buddha’s Dinner, won the PEN/Jerard Fund Award and received critical acclaim for its honest, convincing portrait of a young woman’s coming of age in a community whose dominant culture, appearance, and lifestyle had little resemblance to her own. Her forthcoming novel, Shanty Girls, will be released July 2009. Her writings have appeared in Gourmet Magazine, The Chicago Tribune, Dream Life Home Safety: Writers on Growing up in America, and Modernist Poetry and Prose. She has co-edited three anthologies including short stories and creative nonfiction.

Bich is married to novelist Porter Shreve and resides in Chicago and West Lafayette, Indiana.


Interview with Bich Minh Nguyen

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I often felt like even though I was eight months old when my family came to the United States, I could “be-American” straight through English. I didn’t set out to write a memoir, but the stories insisted on my attention. I found that I could write in the narration form what I could never seem to articulate so well in fiction or poetry: how my family flew Vis Vac on April 29, 1975, and how we left my mother behind in our flight; how we walked in, slowly, to life in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It turned out that writing about this in fiction and poetry left me, in a way, “hiding.” I felt like I had to acknowledge the story as the truth—or my truth, as I knew and experienced it. I’m also interested in the shape a memoir as the truth—or my truth, the truth as I knew and experienced it—takes. I found that I could write what I often felt like even though I was eight months old. I was deeply influenced by the books I read as a child: In a way, a memoirist is always looking back, at any time in their life, and trying to assimilate so much. It must have been painful to see how obviously I tried to shed my Vietnamese so that I could become fully “American.” Back then, when I was a kid, I thought it was basically either/that I could be “American,” or I could be “Vietnamese.” As a consequence, I have many moments now I regret not knowing much Vietnamese anymore, and I regret that I didn’t participate more in aspects of Vietnamese culture.

At the same time, of course, my father and grandmother were thrilled to be in the U.S. and very much wanted to be a part of its culture. In Stealing Buddha’s Dinner, that joy in and fascination with American culture is revealed, for example, my dad’s fondness for Burger King, my uncles’ obsession with rock music, and my grandmother’s addiction to soap operas.

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Q: What author was an inspiration to you and to some degree influenced your work? Why?

A: Well, as a kid I had a completely misguided idea about what it meant to be a “real” American. (In a way, a memoirist is always looking back, at any time in their life, and trying to assimilate so much. It must have been painful to see how obviously I tried to shed my Vietnamese so that I could become fully “American.” Back then, when I was a kid, I thought it was basically either/or that I could be “American,” or I could be “Vietnamese.” As a consequence, I have many moments now I regret not knowing much Vietnamese anymore, and I regret that I didn’t participate more in aspects of Vietnamese culture.

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What role did popular culture play in developing your identity?

A: In Stealing Buddha’s Dinner, there is a lot of rock music; pop music in the 80s, which I was a fan of. Well, as a kid I had a completely misguided idea about what it meant to be a “real” American. (In a way, a memoirist is always looking back, at any time in their life, and trying to assimilate so much. It must have been painful to see how obviously I tried to shed my Vietnamese so that I could become fully “American.” Back then, when I was a kid, I thought it was basically either/or that I could be “American,” or I could be “Vietnamese.” As a consequence, I have many moments now I regret not knowing much Vietnamese anymore, and I regret that I didn’t participate more in aspects of Vietnamese culture.

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I wanted to fit in so much with the dominant society that I embraced everything that I could consume as much Americanness as possible, then I could be deemed “American,” from food to literature to clothes.
Stealing Buddha's Dinner
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Bich Minh Nguyen

What are your plans for the future?

As my first novel, Short Girls, will be published this July 2009, I am involved around two assisters, Van, an immigration lawyer who lives in Ann Arbor, and Linny, an aspiring chef who lives in Chicago. The stories haven't gotten along in years, but they are bound to each other by their demanding, eccentric father, who is a failed inventor of practical products to improve the lives of short people. Also Van and Linny are both keeping secrets: Van is hiding the fact that her husband has left her, and Linny is hiding a relationship with a virtual man. Through these complicated relationships, the novel explores the idea of what it means to be short in a tall world—be it sometimes overlooked, for instance, or simply to feel overlooked. Of course, the stories have to come to some things with things they cannot change—their faces, race, family, and height, and in so doing try to make progress in a world that often feels out of reach.

I'm currently at work on my next book, a novel about Laura Ingalls Wilder.

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The “Business of Humanities Granting

“If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together . . . To work out not one method, but thousands of methods by which people gradually learn a little bit more about each other.”

— President Dwight D. Eisenhower

Throughout the year, the Michigan Humanities Council is contracted with ideas and questions about how to create a project that would be awarded a Council grant. This article is an attempt to discuss what the Council considers when awarding public humanities grants and to also clarify the differences between the humanities and the arts. Here at the Council, we guide ourselves by:

• Placing ourselves into a context that is larger than simply that of our own experience.
• Developing empathy for others.
• Looking for opportunities to join our personal life experience to the larger human story in progress.
• Learning how things came to be the way they are today—gaining a deeper understanding of the present by investigating the story in progress;
• The arts present and perform "it" but the humanities discuss or give meaning to "it.

The humanities* are the ways in which we think and express about what it is to be human—our diverse histories, values, ideas, symbols, words, and dreams. Webster's defines humanities as... "the branch of learning having primarily a cultural character." Webster's defines art as... "in its most distinct sense... implies a personal, unattainable creative power... Skill in performance acquired by experience, study, or observation..." By awarding a grant to a particular Michigan nonprofit organization, the Council is looking to

meijer

The Michigan Humanities Council funded the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KIA) and Interlochen Arts Academy (IAA) for a pair of public humanities projects. In 2008 at the KIA, the Perspectives on Place project incorporated interpretive programming, including exhibiting artwork, for the public to better understand deindustrialization. At right in 2007, the IAA collaborated with Traverse City High School Language Arts to create a radio drama of Dr. William Baumwohl's medical research, "Raising Warren".

| President Dwight D. Eisenhower

What is the intended outcome? What is its relevance to contemporary life? Who is the audience? Then, what is the best format for presenting these answers or exploring the subject? The format could be an exhibit, a film showing and discussion, an interpretive drama followed by an audience discussion with the actors and producer while being moderated by a humanities professional, a reading and discussion group, or a video/documentary web-based outcome. All grants have some type of outcome and all require a public programming component. There are just a few examples. One is only limited by the boundaries of one's creativity or methods.

Potential applicants often find it helpful to review the small write-ups provided for previously funded grants in the Grants Archive on the Council’s website. You can also look at a previously submitted and successful grant narrative. Review the Council’s sample form where you can see how and how the project scoring is weighted. Also, review the sample budget forms.

Before you begin writing... Make a quick phone call to the Council to help you determine if your idea is one that would be considered for possible funding. Staff is available to review and critique a draft proposal up to three weeks prior to the major grant postmark deadline. As you write, follow the guidelines listed in the application, including the headings provided in the narrative instructions. This serves as an outline to which you can go back and fill in the pertinent information to include the outcomes about your project. A Grant Review Committee comprised of board members and two outside volunteers makes all final award decisions. Staff does not make the award decisions.

For further information about Michigan Humanities Council grants, contact Cynthia Dimitrijevic, Grants Director, at cdimitrijevic@mihumanities.org or 517-372-7770. The next major humanities grant postmark deadlines is September 15, 2009. Long-range planning, strategizing, and brainstorming could result in an effective grant proposal. Visit the Council’s website and grant archive at www.michiganhumanities.org/grants

*Humanities disciplines include comparative religion, ethics, philosophy, anthropology, classical and modern languages, linguistics, jurisprudence, history, literature, history and criticism of the arts, and those social sciences that employ historical and philosophical approaches such as anthropology and geography, institutional relations, political science, or sociology.
**2009-2012 Arts & Humanities Touring Directory**

The fifth edition of Michigan's Arts & Humanities Touring Directory will be out by August 1, 2009, with more than 200 listings of some of the state's most talented performing and visual artists and humanities presenters. Cultural programming opportunities featured in the directory will include the fields of dance, music, storytelling, theater, and traditional and visual arts. The new edition will be available only online through the Council’s website, www.michiganhumanities.org.

The following changes to the Arts & Humanities Touring Program will be implemented with the new directory:

- The grant application is streamlined to make the process faster and simpler.
- Grants will be awarded throughout the fiscal year until funds are depleted.
- Applications will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Applications for programs October 1 through September 30, 2010.
- All applications must be postmarked at least four weeks prior to the contracted program or exhibition date.
- Grants may be requested for up to 40 percent of interpretation/artist/reimbursement and travel expenses with a limit of $5,000 per single application.
- Nonprofit organizations are limited to receiving four grants per fiscal year with a total award of $4,000.

For more information, visit www.michiganhumanities.org/grants.

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**Performing Tourers Are a Pleasant Part of Our Heritage**

by Barbara Heynderickx Brown

The package arrived in mid-December. There was no ribbon, no bow, in fact no decoration at all except a return address label with a lovelvly graphic of the Mackinac Bridge and the tag line “Michigan People, Michigan Places – Our Stories, Our Lives.” I was a season of gifts, and like a kid Irippled it open as fast as possible.

Earlier the Michigan Humanities Council selected me to serve as one of its 27 adjudicators, all of whom had been carefully scrutinized to make sure we were qualified to render informed and impartial judgments. I was honored and eager to get to work. Individually and then in small groups, we were to study and evaluate the applications sent by artistes, presenters, workshop leaders, and exhibitor staff who wanted their works listed in the 2009-2012 Arts & Humanities Touring Directory. That December package contained my assignment.

Like other adjudicators, I first read the proposals, formulated appropriate questions, and identified concerns. Then I called the applicants’ references to ask about the quality and professionalism of the product. I looked if interpretations were valid and meaningful to audiences and worthy of new or continuing support.

People were generous with their compliments, time, and thoughts. Some detailed how their community or institution was inspired to take a program/idea to a few steps further. Inevitably some responses were less enthusiastic than others.

In mid-January, a series of panels met to share the information gathered about applicants, to discuss recommendations and concerns, and to tally up numerical scores. Staff convened the meetings, operated the AV equipment, and made sure we panelists were qualified to render informed and impartial judgments.

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In mid-January, a series of panels met to share the information gathered about applicants, to discuss recommendations and concerns, and to tally up numerical scores. Staff convened the meetings, operated the AV equipment, and made sure we panelists didn’t get too far behind. They assured our questions. However, we offered absolutely no opinions regarding whether we should accept or deny an application. Staff for the adjudicator had contacted referees and studied the applications, persuade each other of the value of every application without prejudice.

It was easy and very enjoyable to approve many of the applications, and sometimes even easy (but not at all enjoyable) to vote no. Other decisions were agonizing. In the end, we knew some applicants would be disappointed just as others would be delighted. However, we knew that we had made the best choices possible.

For the next three years Michigan’s nonprofit presenters will be able to look in the 2009-12 Arts & Humanities Touring Directory to find important resources for our communities. Open the Directory and discover all “about you” creativity and cultural ownership, demystification and generosity, knowledge and thought provoking expressions of ideas. The entries are as varied as our terrain, as resourceful as our people, and a most “pleasing” part of our heritage.

Barbara Heynderickx Brown describes herself as native in Michigan after years spent in Ohio, Georgia, Ontario, and North Carolina. She credits the people and many vorty cultural organizations in Battle Creek for exposing her to the arts and museums, and notes that it wasn’t until much later – while working as a Director of a museum of art and history – that she realized how empowering these early experiences had been. Barack Obama is currently a consultant for Museum Strategies, and she is working on a collection of her series about michigan during the great depression.

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**What are you doing?” and “What’s New?”**

Facebook: http://twitter.com/mihumanities
Poetry Out Loud
Grows and K-12 Schools Are Invited for Fall 2009!

As final lesson plans are prepared for the 2009 school year, the Michigan Humanities Council invites English and Language Arts teachers to consider adding Poetry Out Loud to their curriculum next year. Poetry Out Loud encourages high school students to learn about great poetry through memorization, performance, and competition. Poetry Out Loud helps students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage.

Participating high schools will receive: print and online poetry anthology; an instructional program guide; an audio CD featuring distinguished actors and writers; and, promotional and media materials.

Each school champion will advance to the state competition. The state winner will receive $200 and an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C. to compete for the national championship. The state winner’s school will receive a $500 stipend for the purchase of poetry books. The runner-up in the state competition will receive $100, along with $200 for his or her school library.

Scholarships and school stipends totaling $50,000 will be awarded at the national finals. Poetry Out Loud has the unique opportunity to transform young lives and school culture. Said Holt High School teacher Margaret Charette: “In 2008, our school didn’t have the state champ, but we had something better: full participation. By that I mean we had Advanced Placement students, art students, athletes, special education students, and if-my-parents-would-let-me-I’d-drop-out students sharing the stage in our school-wide competition. Cheering each other on, sharing the experience of poetry—its power.”

The Poetry Out Loud program is a Michigan Humanities Council partnership program with the National Endowment for the Arts, The Poetry Foundation, Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, the Library of Michigan, and the Michigan Youth Arts Association.

24 high schools and more than 1,000 students recited poems last year