

Summer Course Explores New York City through Walt Whitman's Eyes and Poems

By JO KADLECEK

No one can accuse poetry instructor Karen Karbiener of lacking passion. While she was finishing her doctoral studies in English, Karbiener, GSAS '01, loved discussing the "great books" with her students of "Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy," part of Columbia's core curriculum. That same enthusiasm earned her a teaching position at Colby College in Maine this past year, and there, Karbiener took her excitement to the air waves in a weekly two hour radio show called "The West End" on WMHB, central Maine's only alternative radio station. The popular show included the "Sock Puppet Poetry Reading Series," which encouraged students and staff to make public their love of poetry.

But it is the summer course she teaches at Columbia that has really captured Karbiener's heart. Because she grew up in Brooklyn and Queens the daughter of German immigrants, Karbiener looks forward to coming home to teach her class, "Whitman and New York" offered Monday and Wednesdays afternoons from July 8-August 16. It will be the second time the course is being offered and Karbiener hopes to teach it for many summers to come.

"Whitman was inspired by the city's everyday reality as he rode the ferries and omnibuses and walked up Broadway," Karbiener says. "The same sights and sounds that still frighten or disgust tourists are still oddly cherished by New Yorkers like me. Walt was the first one of us to express his love."

Born in part out of a chapter of her dissertation entitled "British Romanticism and the Americanization of Walt Whitman," the three-point comparative literature class was designed by Karbiener as a way of helping students understand the relationship

between New York in the 1840s and 50s and its first major poet. Not only does Karbiener introduce students to Whitman's early poetry, journalism, and short fiction, she does so by simultaneously exploring the development of the city, its influence on Whitman's work, and

lyn Bridge and stops half way for a poetry reading over the East river, paying tribute to the river Whitman ferried across each day to work in Manhattan. Next, they tour historic lower Manhattan and ride the Staten Island Ferry, all in an effort, Karbiener says, to "capture the spir-

letter press Whitman would have used. Karbiener also introduces students to Langston Hughes' Harlem and the Beat poets at Columbia, all of whom were directly influenced by Whitman's work. Students are expected to memorize 10 lines of any Whitman poem and recite them

class—comprised of 18 students from countries such as Australia, Brazil, Japan, and academic institutions like Columbia, Barnard, Vassar and Union Theological Seminary—developed such a bond that many kept in touch throughout the year. They even reunited this spring to celebrate Whitman's 183rd birthday at The West End restaurant. Their enthusiasm might be why enrollment for this summer's offering of "Whitman and New York" has a dozen more students than last year's.

"The class was like a team or members of a crew trying to find out the treasure on the island of New York City," according to visiting student Noriko Nonokya. "It was my first English class and first class at Columbia and I am glad that I took it. I came to love the City and Columbia for offering this kind of class. It had a marvelous combination of the academic and free spirit."

Considering the response of students like Nonokya and Poumpouridis, Karbiener is eager to teach the class again this summer, though she has plenty of other projects to work on. Her dissertation chapter on Whitman will be included in a collection of essays entitled "Wordsworth's American Century, 1802-1902" to be published later this year. In 2003, her own edition of Mary Shelley's



Karen Karbiener, far left, with her class of Whitman students last summer.

even a few of his contemporaries, like city resident Edgar Allan Poe and frequent visitor Charles Dickens.

"So much of the New York that Whitman knew is still standing," says Karbiener, who leads her class through areas of the city that would have been familiar to the poet. "This is a very hands on class, very centered on and in the city."

In addition to using texts like Henry Christman's "Walt Whitman's New York," Philip Lopate's anthology, "Writing New York" and, of course, Whitman's selected works, including his most famous, "Leaves of Grass," Karbiener takes her students to Brooklyn Heights where Whitman grew up. After a literary tour of his old neighborhood, the class walks across the Brook-

lyn Bridge and stops half way

for a poetry reading over the East river, paying tribute to the river Whitman ferried across each day to work in Manhattan. Next, they tour historic lower Manhattan and ride the Staten Island Ferry, all in an effort, Karbiener says, to "capture the spirit of where Whitman was."

A third trip takes the class to the South Street Seaport and a visit to Bowne and Company Print Shop where every member of the class works on the type of

one of their outings during the term.

"I came away from the class with a sense that I had seen the same city, encountered the same sights, heard the same sounds,

"When we read a line by Whitman that detailed the feel of the water droplets on his face as he rode the Staten Island Ferry, we knew exactly what he had been feeling, because we were reading the poem while riding the ferry ourselves."

—Vicky Poumpouridis, CC '03

that Whitman himself had as he wrote line after line," says Poumpouridis. "His words simply came off the page. All this, thanks to Karen and her ability to breathe life into words on a page."

Last summer's inaugural

"Frankenstein" will be published by Fine Creative Media. And a long-term project she is particularly enthusiastic about, "The Encyclopedia of American Counterculture," will be published by M.E. Sharpe in 2004. As the project's general editor and creative visionary, she hopes that the two-volume catalogue of people, movements, and events will establish a "tradition" of American radicalism that runs more deeply and consistently through our culture than is conventionally supposed.

But for the next few months, Karbiener is right where she wants to be doing what she loves.

"Whitman captured a timeless New York spirit in his poetry that I really feel, and that I hope to communicate to my students," she says, quoting with equal fervor from his poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

"What is it then, between us?"

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.

**I too lived,
I too walked the streets of Manhattan Island,
and bathed in the waters around it;**

I too felt the curious abrupt questions

stir within me . . ."

Film Professor Annette Insdorf Hosts TV Coverage of Cannes Festival

Annette Insdorf, director of undergraduate film studies, just returned from her annual trip to Cannes, France, for the prestigious Cannes Film Festival.

Insdorf hosted television coverage of the festival, presenting opening night on the Independent Film Channel (IFC) on May 15 and co-hosting closing night on May 26 on both BRAVO and IFC.

Since the mid-1990s, Insdorf has co-hosted the closing night festivities with film critic Roger Ebert. After a brief-on-air introduction, the pair comments on the best films, events and parties, and attempts to predict who the jury's winners will be. Insdorf

also translates the entire ceremony from French to English.

Insdorf says she was particularly looking forward to the premieres of Roman Polanski's "The Pianist," about a Jewish pianist in the

Warsaw Ghetto during World War II, and "Laurel Canyon," the second feature film by Columbia MFA alumna Lisa Cholodenko, whose film "High Art" was a success in Cannes in 1998.

She also planned to see Michael Moore's new documentary "Bowling for Columbine," and Alexander Payne's "About Schmidt," starring Jack Nicholson and Hope Davis.

In addition to her role with the Cannes Film Festival, Insdorf was recently interviewed for the

June 2 edition of the new French television program "Double Je," hosted by Bernard Pivot.

"Bernard Pivot is to France what Charlie Rose is to New York—a gifted interviewer whose programs are top-rated," says Insdorf. "After the success of his 'Apostrophes' and 'Bouillon de Culture,' he has created 'Double Je,' a French-language arts magazine composed of interviews with artists, writers, critics, scholars, etc. of many nationalities."

In the interview Insdorf reflected on her personal trajectory, from Paris to Columbia, as well as on French culture and the courses she teaches at Columbia. Insdorf and Pivot also discussed Francois Truffaut, the French director, screenwriter and critic whose ideas formed the basis for auteur criticism, the concept wherein a film reflects the imagination of one man. Truffaut is the subject of Insdorf's first book, "Francois Truffaut," and someone Pivot

knew and admired.

Insdorf and Pivot also discussed her most recent book on Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski, who is best known for "The Double Life of Veronique" and his trilogy "Blue, White, Red."

Insdorf's book, "Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski," was just released in France. The paperback version is due out this month in the United States from Talk Miramax/Hyperion. Insdorf has added a new chapter in the paperback version about Kieslowski's influence on recent films.

"In the new chapter I bring in such films as 'Run, Lola, Run,' whose director, Tom Tykwer, just directed 'Heaven,' from a script by Kieslowski," says Insdorf. "Indeed, I discuss 'Heaven'—which will be released in the fall by Miramax—in depth."

The original hardcover was published in October 1999.

