
Summer 2014

A Lookout for a New Genre

Laura Davis
Linfield College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine

Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2014) "A Lookout for a New Genre," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol11/iss1/11

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.

A lookout for a new genre

In his first weeks at Linfield College, Austin Schilling '14, avid athlete and former self-described "meathead," viewed college as a means to an end – four years to a degree to bolster an eventual career in law enforcement.

But a literature class, "The Human Experience of War" taught by English Professor Lex Runciman, altered everything.

"It changed the way I thought," said Schilling, who was challenged to examine the way he viewed the world. He rediscovered a love of books, switched his major to English literature, began working in the Writing Center and became enthralled with teaching. Now, Schilling is working with David Sumner, professor of English, on a project that is the first of its kind – an anthology of fire lookout stories. The finished product will be a collection of writing with commentary and analysis, along with an introductory essay.

"There's no such thing as a recognized genre for fire lookout literature – yet," said Schilling, who focused his honors thesis on the topic.

Sumner stumbled across the idea while writing on environmental subjects for some 20 years – his dissertation concentrated on American nature writing and environmental ethics. "I kept coming across writers who had experience as fire lookouts when they were unknowns," he said. "I wondered if there were more."

With funding from the Linfield Center for the Northwest, Schilling and Sumner researched influential nature writers who served as fire lookouts, people assigned to remote mountaintops to watch for fires. Lookouts often filled their time by writing, interpreting the landscape and thinking introspectively about their places as human beings.

"They had experiences along the way that pushed their conceptions of self and humanity's relationship with nature to a new level," Schilling added. "A lot of the ideas we have today have stemmed from these experiences."

Schilling and Sumner looked at influential nature writers such as Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Edward Abbey, Philip Whalen, Doug Peacock and Martha Hardy, one of the first female lookouts, to find out if their work centered on the experience.

"These writers are like the Plato and Aristotle of nature writing," said Schilling. "If you're going to talk about nature literature and how we think about it, you have to acknowledge the power of place of the lookout in pushing nature literature forward."

Kerouac spent 63 days during the summer of 1956 as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the North Cascade Mountains of Washington. He wrote about his experiences in the books *Lonesome Traveler*, *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*. Last summer, Schilling and Sumner retraced Kerouac's steps, hiking to two lookouts in the Northern Cascades.

"If you've hiked to the top of a lookout, there's nothing quite like it," Schilling said. "It's an experience worth writing about." And one that's dying out. Lookout jobs are scarce these days, with technology and drones replacing people. Most towers have been decommissioned or destroyed.

Sumner said Schilling's research expanded his own understanding of the project.

"Austin has a strong work ethic and a good critical eye," Sumner said. "He's able to bring an analytical framework to the project. And he's excited about it; Austin's imagination has been piqued."

Schilling hopes eventually to teach after his experience working with peers in the Writing Center. His advice for others is what he has learned for himself.

"Push yourself intellectually through the act of writing in the biggest way that you can," he said. "That will make you a better writer and thinker and ultimately a better human being."



Professor David Sumner, left, and Austin Schilling '14 are working on a project that is the first of its kind – an anthology of fire lookout stories. Last summer, Schilling and Sumner retraced author Jack Kerouac's steps, hiking to two lookouts in the Northern Cascades.

– Laura Davis