

UWO profs to study ‘genius’ and literary journalists

by Natalie Johnson - Tuesday, January 29, 2013

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Two University of Wisconsin Oshkosh professors will dig into some of America’s most prestigious archives this spring to get the scoop on “genius” and literary journalists.

Miles and Roberta Maguire, of Oshkosh, are two of four UWO faculty members taking sabbaticals during the spring 2013 semester to pursue creative and scholarly efforts.

Miles will examine the work and career of the late Thomas Whiteside, who wrote for “The New Yorker” for 45 years and was selected for a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, known as the “genius grant,” in 1986.

Roberta will uncover, gather and analyze examples of African-American literary journalism, which have largely been excluded from histories and anthologies of the genre.

Miles was drawn to Whiteside’s interesting background. He was born in England in 1918 and raised in an orphanage. Despite having no high school diploma, Whiteside is well-known for having the ability to “take on extremely complicated topics and render them in a way that they were accessible to ordinary readers,” Maguire said.

In 1970, Whiteside’s series on Agent Orange, the herbicide used during the Vietnam War, led directly to U.S. Senate hearings on the substance’s dangers. Shortly after, the Defense Department halted its use.

Maguire plans to analyze previously unavailable archival records at Columbia University in New York City as well as archives located in the Library of Congress’ Wartime Communications Research Unit in Washington, D.C. He hopes to uncover the techniques Whiteside used to translate complex scientific information.

To study the priceless archives, Miles will spend hours sorting through one folder of information at a time, taking notes and photocopying relevant materials. His work also involves meeting with Whiteside’s family members and former colleagues and getting a sense of his life in Manhattan.

Miles said his goal is to eventually write a biography about the journalist and also to share Whiteside’s story with his UWO journalism students.

“Journalism has never been easy, and it often involves a combination of hard work and luck,” he said. “Students like hearing real anecdotes about how stories come about.”

For the past five years, Roberta Maguire has been interested in the hybrid genre of literary journalism through her study of the African-American writers Albert Murray and the late Alice Childress. Literary journalism combines factual and timely reporting with storytelling and narrative techniques.

While the black community has “a long and vibrant tradition in both journalism and literature,” Roberta said this work has not been widely recognized. She will spend long hours searching for examples of literary journalism in the Library of Congress as well as at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. She plans to develop a book proposal about African-American literary journalism and use the information in her classes as well.

Other faculty members taking sabbaticals during the spring semester include Brant Kedrowski, associate professor, chemistry; and Timothy Paulsen, professor, geology. Kedrowski will study a class of molecules known as allenamides at UW-Madison. Paulsen will investigate the glacial and rift history of Antarctica's McMurdo Sound region.

The Faculty Sabbatical Program enables professors to become more effective teachers and scholars and to enhance their service to the University through intensive study.

Learn more:

- [Intensive study ahead for UWO faculty on sabbatical](#)
- [Four UWO faculty members awarded 2010-2011 sabbaticals](#)