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TEN WRITERS OF EXCEPTIONAL PROMISE EACH RECEIVE \$40,000 WHITING WRITERS' AWARD

Awards Ceremony Keynote Speech by Grace Paley

New York, October 27 – The Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation today named ten recipients of the 2005 Whiting Writers' Awards. The awards, which are \$40,000 each, totaling \$400,000, have been given annually since 1985 to emerging writers of exceptional talent and promise.

Since its inception in 1985, the program has awarded more than \$5 million to 210 poets, fiction and nonfiction writers, and playwrights. Among the past recipients who have later achieved prominence in their field are Jonathan Franzen, William T. Vollman, Mary Karr, Colson Whitehead, Tony Kushner, Jeffrey Eugenides, August Wilson, Jorie Graham, Cristina Garcia, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

This year's winners include one playwright, three fiction writers, five poets and one who writes both poetry and fiction.

"The Whiting Awards again celebrate an exceptional group of writers who, this year, come from all over the country, from Florida to Alaska," says Barbara K. Bristol, Director of the Writers' Program. "All of them have published a first book, and the smaller, independent presses are well represented. This year, too, there is a particularly strong showing for poetry. We are grateful to our selectors for ferreting out some of the most exciting and gifted writers who are now beginning to publish their work."

The 2005 recipients were announced at a ceremony at Peterson Hall in New York on Thursday, October 27. Dr. Robert L. Belknap, President of the Foundation, and trustee Peter Pennoyer presented the ten writers with their awards.

The keynote speaker of the evening was Grace Paley, one of America's most revered short story writers. Born in the Bronx, New York, in 1922, Paley established a reputation as a writer with a remarkably supple gift for language with her highly acclaimed

collections, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), and *Later the Same Day* (1985). Her *Collected Stories* was a Finalist for the National Book Award in 1994. She is also the author of a collection of nonfiction, *Just As I Thought* (1998), two books of poetry and her collected poems, *Begin Again* (2000).

The ten writers recognized this year for their extraordinary talent and promise are:

Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, fiction. Her first novel, *Madeleine is Sleeping*, was published by Harcourt in 2004. She lives in Los Angeles.

Thomas Sayers Ellis, poetry. His first book, *The Maverick Room* (Graywolf Press), was published this year. He teaches at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Nell Freudenberger, fiction. Her collection of stories, *Lucky Girls*, (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2003) won the PEN/Malamud Award. She lives in New York City.

Rinne Groff, plays. Her play, *The Ruby Sunrise*, will open on November 1 at the Public Theater. She teaches at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Ilya Kaminsky, poetry. His book, *Dancing in Odessa*, was published this year by Tupelo Press. Born in the former Soviet Union, he now lives in Berkeley.

Seth Kantner, fiction. His first book, *Ordinary Wolves*, was published by Milkweed Editions in 2004. He was born and raised on the Alaskan tundra and lives in Kotzebue.

John Keene, fiction/poetry. His first novel, *Annotations*, was published by New Directions in 1995. A professor at Northwestern University, he lives in Chicago and Jersey City.

Dana Levin, poetry. She is the author of two books, *In the Surgical Theatre* and *Wedding Day*, both published by Copper Canyon Press. She lives in Santa Fe.

Spencer Reece, poetry. His book, *The Clerk's Tale*, was published by Mariner Books in 2004. He lives in Juno Beach, Florida.

Tracy K. Smith, poetry. Her first collection of poems, *The Body's Question*, was published by Graywolf in 2003. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

More detailed biographies of the winners are attached.

Whiting Writers' Awards candidates are proposed by about a hundred anonymous nominators from across the country whose experience and vocations give them knowledge about individuals of extraordinary talent. Winners are chosen by a small anonymous selection committee of recognized writers, literary scholars, and editors,

appointed annually by the Foundation. At four meetings over the course of the year, the selectors discuss the candidates' work and gradually winnow the list. They then recommend up to ten writers for awards to the Foundation's Trustees. The Foundation accepts nominations only from the designated nominators.

The Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation was established in 1963 by Flora E. Whiting. In 1972, her unrestricted bequest of over \$10 million enabled the Foundation to establish the Whiting Fellowships in the Humanities for doctoral candidates in their dissertation year. In the years since, the Foundation has annually awarded grants to Bryn Mawr, University of Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale to fund these Fellowships, the recipients of which are selected by each institution. The Foundation created the Whiting Writers' Awards in 1985 under the direction of Gerald Freund, who organized and led the program until his death in 1997.

To learn more about the Whiting Foundation visit the website at:
www.whitingfoundation.org.

Sarah Shun-lien Bynum's first novel, *Madeleine is Sleeping*, was published by Harcourt in 2004 and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Her short stories have appeared in *Triquarterly*, *The Georgia Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and in *Best American Short Stories*. The Whiting Selection Committee admired her "acute writerly intelligence" and agreed that she was "full of inventive promise and daring." Earlier this year, she moved to Los Angeles, had her first baby and began teaching at UC San Diego. Ms. Bynum is a graduate of Brown University and the University of Iowa Writers Workshop.

Thomas Sayers Ellis is a poet whose first book, *The Maverick Room*, was published this year by Graywolf Press. That collection takes as its subject the social, geographical and historical neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., (where he was born and raised) bringing different tones of voice to bear on the various quadrants of the city. It is a book, the committee agreed, written by a "sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued" poet, "full of passion and fury," and they concurred that he is an "innovator and a complete original." Mr. Ellis is known in the poetry community as a literary activist and the co-founder of The Dark Room Collective, an organization that from 1988 to 1998 celebrated and gave greater visibility to emerging and established writers of color. His poems have appeared in magazines such as *Agni*, *Callaloo*, *Grand Street*, *Tin House* and in *Best American Poetry* (1997 and 2001). He is associate professor of English at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland and a core faculty member of the Leslie University Low Residency MFA Program.

Nell Freudenberger's first book, a story collection entitled *Lucky Girls*, was published by Ecco/HarperCollins in 2003 and won the PEN/Malamud Award. The committee commented on how formally mature her writing is and added that her "control of tone and level of wise, ironic detachment should serve her very well – if she can see this much about the self at this age, what will she do in 20 years?" The committee observed that the stories in this collection, which are all set in Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, "do not revisit the well-worn territory of Americans abroad, but create

whole worlds and fully rounded characters.” Ms. Freudenberger graduated from Harvard and has traveled extensively in Asia. Her travel writing has been published in *Travel & Leisure* and *The Telegraph Magazine*. She has written book reviews for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue* and *The Nation*. She lives in New York City.

Playwright and performer **Rinne Groff** is the author of *Jimmy Carter was a Democrat* (produced at Clubbed Thumb and PS 122), *Orange Lemon Egg Canary* (Actors Theater of Louisville), *Inky* (Clubbed Thumb and Salt Theater), *Moliere Impromptu* (Trinity Rep), and co-writer with Charles Strouse of *You Never Know*, a new musical. A founding member of Elevator Repair Service Theater Company, she has been a part of the writing, staging, and performing of their shows since the company's inception in 1991. She was trained at Yale University and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, where she currently teaches. The committee felt that Ms. Groff is already in full command of her material and that she promises to become an important force in the theater. She is at work on a commission from The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Her play, *The Ruby Sunrise*, will open November 1st at the Public Theater, directed by Oskar Eustis, and *What Then* (produced by Clubbed Thumb) will open in January.

Ilya Kaminsky was born in Odessa and came to the United States in 1993 when his family was granted asylum by the American government. A chapbook, *Musica Humana*, was published by Chapiteau Press and his first full-length book, *Dancing in Odessa*, was published this year by Tupelo Press. The selectors were impressed that although Mr. Kaminsky “writes out of a place of sincerity and joy, he never gives way to sentiment. He believes in beauty. He sings out the world.” Mr. Kaminsky received his B.A. from Georgetown and has recently graduated from law school. He lives in Berkeley, where he works as a law clerk for the National Immigration Law Center and Bay Area Legal Aid assisting immigrants and the homeless. In the late 1990’s he co-founded Poets for Peace, organizing readings across the country to support relief organizations.

Seth Kantner is the author of *Ordinary Wolves*, published by Milkweed Editions in 2004 and winner of a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award. His book tells the story of Cutuk, a boy who, like the author, was raised and home-schooled in a sod igloo on the Alaskan tundra. Mr. Kantner left the wilderness to attend the University of Alaska and study journalism at the University of Montana. He has worked as a photographer, trapper, fisherman, mechanic and igloo-builder and now lives in Kotzebue. The selection committee observed how well he weaves words from the Inuit language into the narrative, “with no false notes.” One committee member said, “I had huge hopes when I began reading this book, and it stole my heart.”

John Keene is Associate Professor of English and African American Studies at Northwestern University, where he teaches fiction, cross-genre writing, African-American and diasporic writing, and translation (he reads five languages.) He has been the recipient of fellowships from the Artists Foundation of Massachusetts, The New Jersey State Council of the Arts, the *New York Times* Foundation, Yaddo and the Bread Loaf Writer’s Conference. Mr. Keene, who has a B.A. from Harvard and an M.F.A. from New York University, is a longtime member of the Dark Room Collective and a graduate fellow of Cave Canem. His first novel, *Annotations*, was published by New Directions in 1995. The selection committee agreed that he “doesn’t sound like anyone else” and remarked on his dense poetic prose which they likened to Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. A new collection of poems entitled *Seismosis* is forthcoming from 1913 Press. He is working on another volume of poems, a collection of short stories, and a novel.

Dana Levin’s first book, *In the Surgical Theatre*, was published by American Poetry Review/Copper Canyon Press in 1999, and Copper Canyon brought out her second book, *Wedding Day*, this year. She has a B.A. from Pitzer College, an MFA in English and Creative Writing from NYU, and is Chair of Creative Writing, Humanities, and Interdisciplinary Studies and Associate Professor at the College of Santa Fe. Ms. Levin has been awarded an NEA fellowship, a Lannan Foundation Writer-in-Residency, PEN’s Joyce Osterweil Award, a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress, and a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer’s Award. Her work has appeared in many anthologies

including *The Poet's Child*, *This Art*, *American Poetry: The Next Generation*, and in magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Poetry* and *Volt*. Ms. Levin is at work on a new collection of poems. The selection committee found her work to be “deft,” “intelligent” as well as “full-throated and confident.”

Spencer Reece is a poet whose book, *The Clerk's Tale*, was published by Mariner Books in 2004. Fifteen years in the writing, this book, the selectors unanimously agreed, was by a poet “completely accomplished, ready for prime time.” They found the work “finished, deep and varied” and “elegant, resonant and moving.” Mr. Reece has worked for many years as a sales associate at Brooks Brothers, and the title poem describes a day in the life at the store in the Mall of America. His work has also appeared in *Boulevard* and *The New Yorker*. He is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize and an NEA poetry fellowship. A graduate of Wesleyan University, he received a M.A. from the University of York (U.K.), and a M.T.S. from the Harvard Divinity School. Mr. Reece lives now in Juno Beach, Florida.

Tracy K. Smith's first collection of poems, *The Body's Question*, won the 2002 Cave Canem Prize for the best first book by an African American poet and was published by Graywolf in 2003. She has a B.A. from Harvard, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Columbia, and was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University. She has been a recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award. She lives in Brooklyn, and is currently a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Princeton University and an Adjunct Assistant Professor in Creative Writing at Columbia University. The committee was delighted by Ms. Smith's book and about her work-in-progress, *Duende*, they remarked on its “historical intelligence”, its “almost Whitmanesque public voice.” “She writes about the emotional life of the intellect,” said one member, likening her to “Elizabeth Bishop, moving through the world cerebrally.”

Recipients of the Whiting Writers' Awards

2004

Daniel Alarcon (fiction)
Kirsten Bakis (fiction)
Catherine Barnett (poet)
Dan Chiasson (poetry)
Allison Glock (nonfiction)

Elana Greenfield (plays)
A. Van Jordan (poetry)
Victor LaValle (fiction)
John Jeremiah Sullivan (nonfiction)
Tracey Scott Wilson (plays)

2003

Courtney Angela Brkic (fiction/nonfiction)
Alexander Chee (fiction)
Christopher Cokinos (nonfiction)
Trudy Dittmar (nonfiction)
Major Jackson (poetry)

Agymah Kamau (fiction)
Ann Pancake (fiction)
Lewis Robinson (fiction)
Jess Row (fiction)
Sarah Ruhl (plays)

2002

Jeffrey Renard Allen (fiction)
Elizabeth Arnold (poetry)
Justin Cronin (fiction)
Kim Edwards (fiction)
David Gewanter (poetry)

Melissa James Gibson (plays)
Michelle Huneven (fiction)
Danzy Senna (fiction)
Evan Smith (plays)
Joshua Weiner (poetry)

2001

Judy Blunt (nonfiction)
Joel Brouwer (poetry)
Emily Carter (fiction)
Kathleen Finneran (nonfiction)
Matthew Klam (fiction)

Brighde Mullins (plays)
Akhil Sharma (fiction)
Jason Sommer (poetry)
Samrat Upadhyay (fiction)
John Wray (fiction)

2000

Robert Cohen (fiction)
Samantha Gillison (fiction)
Lily King (fiction)
John McManus (fiction)
Albert Mobilio (poetry)

Andrew X. Pham (nonfiction)
James Thomas Stevens (poetry)
Kelly Stuart (plays)
Colson Whitehead (fiction)
Claude Wilkinson (poetry)

1999

Gordon Grice (nonfiction)
Michael Haskell (poetry)
Ehud Havazelet (fiction)
Terrance Hayes (poetry)
Naomi Iizuka (plays)

Ben Marcus (fiction)
Yxta Maya Murray (fiction)
ZZ Packer (fiction)
Margaret Talbot (nonfiction)
Martha Zweig (poetry)

1998

Michael Byers (fiction)
Nancy Eimers (poetry)
Daniel Hall (poetry)
W. David Hancock (plays)
James Kimbrell (poetry)

Ralph Lombreglia (fiction)
D.J. Waldie (nonfiction)
Anthony Walton (nonfiction/poetry)
Charles Harper Webb (poetry)
Greg Williamson (poetry)

1997

Jo Ann Beard (nonfiction)
 Connie Deanovich (poetry)
 Erik Ehn (plays)
 Forrest Gander (poetry)
 Jody Gladding (poetry)

Suketu Mehta (fiction/nonfiction)
 Ellen Meloy (nonfiction)
 Josip Novakovich (fiction/nonfiction)
 Melanie Rae Thon (fiction)
 Mark Turpin (poetry)

1996

Anderson Ferrell (fiction)
 Cristina Garcia (fiction)
 Molly Gloss (fiction)
 Brigit Pegeen Kelly (poetry)
 Brian Kiteley (fiction)

Chris Offutt (fiction/nonfiction)
 Elizabeth Spires (poetry)
 Patricia Storage (poetry/nonfiction)
 Judy Troy (fiction)
 A.J. Verdelle (fiction)

1995

André Aciman (nonfiction)
 Michael Cunningham (fiction)
 Lucy Grealy (nonfiction/poetry)
 Suzannah Lessard (nonfiction)
 Reginald McKnight (fiction)

James McMichael (poetry)
 Mary Ruefle (poetry)
 Russ Rymer (nonfiction)
 Matthew Stadler (fiction)
 Melanie Summer (fiction)

1994

Mark Doty (poetry)
 Louis Edwards (fiction)
 Kennedy Fraser (nonfiction)
 Mary Hood (fiction)
 Randall Kenan (fiction/nonfiction)

Wayne Koestenbaum (poetry/nonfiction)
 Rosemary Mahoney (nonfiction)
 Claudia Roth Pierpont (nonfiction)
 Mary Swander (poetry/nonfiction)
 Kate Wheeler (fiction)

1993

Jeffrey Eugenides (fiction)
 Dagoberto Gilb (fiction)
 Kevin Kling (plays)
 Mark Levine (poetry)
 Nathaniel Mackey (poetry/fiction)

Dionisio D. Martínez (poetry)
 Sigrid Nunez (fiction)
 Janet Peery (fiction)
 Kathleen Peirce (poetry)
 Lisa Shea (fiction)

1992

Roger Fanning (poetry)
 Eva Hoffman (nonfiction)
 R.S. Jones (fiction)
 J.S. Marcus (fiction)
 Jane Mead (poetry)

Suzan-Lori Parks (plays)
 Katha Pollitt (poetry/nonfiction)
 Keith Reddin (plays)
 José Rivera (plays)
 Damien Wilkins (fiction)

1991

Stanley Crouch (nonfiction)
 Rebecca Goldstein (fiction)
 Allegra Goodman (fiction)
 John Holman (fiction)
 Cynthia Kadohata (fiction)

Scott McPherson (plays)
 Thylas Moss (poetry)
 Rick Rofihe (fiction)
 Anton Shammas (fiction/nonfiction)
 Franz Wright (poetry)

1990

Emily Hiestand (poetry)
 Tony Kushner (plays)
 Yannick Murphy (fiction)
 Lawrence Naumoff (fiction)
 Dennis Nurkse (poetry)

Mark Richard (fiction)
 Harriet Ritvo (nonfiction)
 Christopher Tilghman (fiction)
 Amy Wilentz (nonfiction)
 Stephen Wright (fiction)

1989

Ellen Akins (fiction)
 Russell Edson (poetry)
 Ian Frazier (nonfiction)
 Mary Karr (poetry)
 Natalie Kusz (nonfiction)

Luc Sante (nonfiction)
 Timberlake Wertenbaker (plays)
 Marianne Wiggins (fiction)
 Tobias Wolff (nonfiction/fiction)
 C.D. Wright (poetry)

1988

Michael Burkard (poetry)
 Lydia Davis (fiction)
 Bruce Duffy (fiction)
 Gerald Early (nonfiction)
 Jonathan Franzen (fiction)

Mary La Chapelle (fiction)
 Li-Young Lee (poetry)
 Sylvia Moss (poetry)
 Geoffrey O'Brien (nonfiction)
 William T. Vollmann (fiction)

1987

Mindy Aloff (nonfiction)
 Joan Chase (fiction)
 Mark Cox (poetry)
 Pam Durban (fiction)
 Gretel Ehrlich (nonfiction)

Deborah Eisenberg (fiction)
 Alice McDermott (fiction)
 Reinaldo Povod (plays)
 Michael Ryan (poetry)
 David Foster Wallace (fiction)

1986

John Ash (poetry)
 Hayden Carruth (poetry)
 Kent Haruf (fiction)
 Denis Johnson (fiction)
 Darryl Pinckney (nonfiction/fiction)

Padgett Powell (fiction)
 Mona Simpson (fiction)
 Frank Stewart (poetry)
 Ruth Stone (poetry)
 August Wilson (plays)

1985

Raymond Abbott (fiction)
 Douglas Crase (poetry)
 Stuart Dybek (fiction)
 Jorie Graham (poetry)
 Linda Gregg (poetry)

Wright Morris (fiction/nonfiction)
 Howard Norman (fiction)
 James Robison (fiction)
 James Schuyler (poetry)
 Austin Wright (fiction/nonfiction)