

# Faculty Feature:

## — Brian Castleberry —

By: Alexander Daniels & Marriya Schwarz

If you've ever taken a creative writing class, you may have had the pleasure of meeting Professor Brian Castleberry. For those not in the know, Professor Castleberry is a senior lecturer in the English Department and a recent escapee of Tucker Hall's basement.

His new office on the third floor of Tucker is a cozy space—so cozy it really only fits him and one other person. (The second interviewer for this article is conveniently blocking the only exit.) But for such a small office, it's packed with personality unique to Professor Castleberry.

His desk takes up most of one wall, and on it are a couple of books, a water bottle, the normal office acoutrement, and his trusty iMac. Behind said iMac rests a larger-than-life poster of David Bowie—taken from the *Heroes* album—in a gilt frame, propped at an angle against the wall. On the opposite side of the room is a jam-packed bookshelf, filled with myriad titles ranging from dead writers and historical accounts to contemporary pieces by friends.

Castleberry grew up in Oklahoma, and from a young age, he began to see himself as something of a writer by being

involved in a string of “bad bands.”

“I never really learned how to play the bass guitar very well,” Castleberry says, “[so I] envisioned myself as a songwriter. I was sure I was going to be a lead singer and songwriter.”

Although we will not be seeing him take to the stage any time soon, his adventures in songwriting did provide a bridge to poetry.

After a brief stint of undergraduate education, he “started showing up at these coffee shop poetry things.” For him, the experience was formative. The reason being is that writers— and hu-



“When I went back to school, I was a 25 year old man... who'd read Toni Morrison and thought: *that's really weird that on the back of the book here, it also says she's a Professor of English. Why would a writer also be a Professor of English?*”



man beings in general—need time to cultivate and develop their identities. To quote Professor Castleberry, “you’re still a project for a long time.”

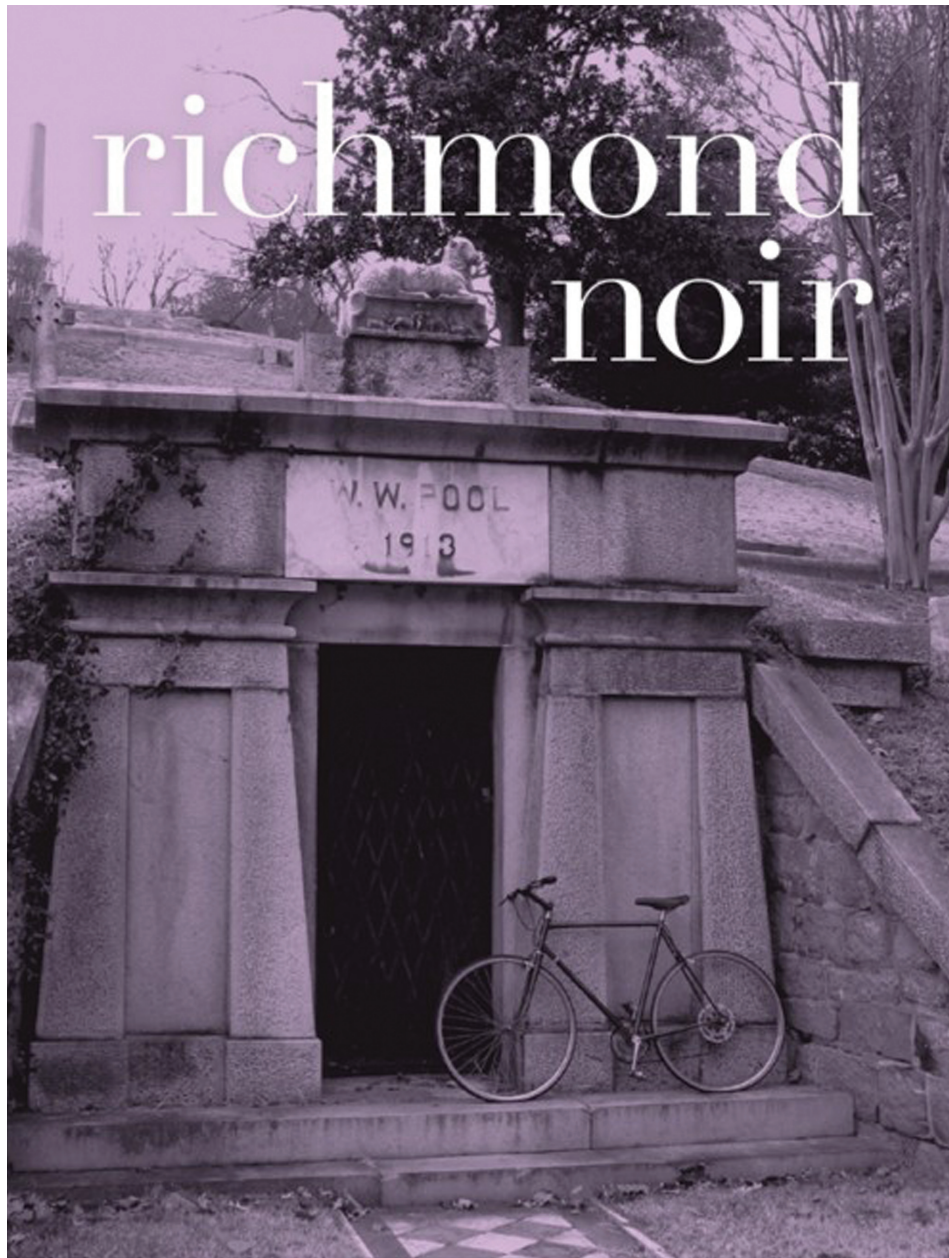
Between the time that he dropped out of college to when he went back in his mid-twenties, he worked an array of odd jobs. For example, there was a time when he was selling shoes at the mall in Oklahoma and another time he joined

his friend’s t-shirt business.

“[We sold] air-brushed t-shirt[s], like the kind of crappy t-shirts that have, you know, a bulldog at the end of a chain or somebody’s name in cursive.”

As part of this business, he went to a lot of state fairs and was always roadtripping to various locales. One of his most interesting stories is when he encountered someone of great fame:

**“Somehow I  
met  
Beyoncé.”**



EDITED BY **ANDREW BLOSSOM,**

**BRIAN CASTLEBERRY & TOM DE HAVEN**

**TOM ROBBINS ♦ DEAN KING ♦ CLAY McLEOD CHAPMAN**

**DENNIS DANVERS ♦ LAURA BROWDER ♦ DAVID L. ROBBINS ♦ AND OTHERS**

“We were at the Texas State Fair once...it’s out on these giant grounds next to a big arena, and that particular year, the musical event for the Texas State Fair was Destiny’s Child. [They] were huge at the time. We were minding our own business. I’m taking money from people, and this kind of unreal looking person comes up—just, from another planet—and points at all the designs that are hanging behind our heads... [She] says she ‘wants one of each of them.’ The whole time this is happening, there’s all these people around kind of freaking out. I don’t know what’s happening—we’re these punk-rock kids who didn’t know what was going on. About twenty minutes later, a guy comes back in a suit and says ‘Ms. Beyoncé will have each one of these.’ All of these shirts, made with her name on it and everything, so somehow I met Beyoncé.”

It wasn’t an immediate jump from a brush with stardom to becoming the professor he is today. It took Professor Castleberry a little while to decide on going back to school. When he did, he was dead-set on becoming a professor—but a professor in art history, not English. However, spoiler alert: he did not become an art history professor. Upon meeting Professor Toni Graham, author and professor of contemporary fiction writing at Oklahoma State University, he received a word of advice.

“[My professor advised that] if I wanted to keep writing, I should, rather than studying art history and thinking I would secretly write a novel. I should stick with English and get an MFA.”

This semester, Professor Castleberry teaches Introduction to Creative Writing, Creative Writing: Fiction, and Long-Form Fiction. Although he would ideally live on an island and just write, he loves teaching, and his advanced workshops are always his favorites.

“Especially by the time I see the

In 2010, Professor Castleberry collaborated on a short story anthology as an editor with Professor Andrew Blossom and author Tom De Haven. This was published with Akashic Books.



students [in upper level creative writing courses, I've had] a lot of them...in previous classes. I get to see them at a point where they're at their peak," says Castleberry.

Along with being a professor, Castleberry treats writing like a ritual.

"If you're like me, you kind of go crazy if you're not writing. You have to have it, and if there are days where you don't write, you don't even know what's happened but you're just in a worse and worse mood. By the end of the week, you're just bouncing off the walls."

His love of writing has culminated in the form of his new book, *Nine Shiny Objects*, the summary of which is quoted here:

"*Nine Shiny Objects*, my first novel, begins with a hopeful idea: what if we set out to make an ideal world? For Oliver Cuttredge, known to his followers as The Tzadi Sophit, that ideal world was inspired by the first sighting of UFOs in 1947. But his well-meaning community runs full speed into the forces of bigotry and reaction, setting off a chain of events that will shape the lives of a number of characters for decades to come."

**"If you're like me, you kind of go crazy if you're not writing."**



Professor of English by day, tomato farmer by evening, they have recently moved to a new house with room enough for four chickens in the backyard. Also, they have two dogs, Roosevelt and Cagney, who are both homages to his love of the early to mid-1900s.

This homage also extends to the artwork on his arms. On his left arm, he has a muted trumpet tattoo, which comes from Thomas Pynchon's novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. Castleberry cites this book as being really important to him during his formative years. Above that, he has a Frankenstein-esque version of "Joseph McCarthy being a monster." On the other arm, he has a little house with fallout from an atomic bomb, a television attached to a dynamite box, and a crushed Campbell's soup can.

The *Dog Street Journal* had the profound privilege to meet with Professor Castleberry, and we are looking forward to reading his debut novel. If his book is anything like his quirky personality and niche love of the atomic era, we're sure his words will explode right off the page.

*Nine Shiny Objects* will be released on June 30th, 2020 by Custom House, an imprint of HarperCollins publishing.

The title stems from a 1947 headline on UFO sightings, "Nine Shiny Objects Streaked Across the Night Sky," which sparked the idea for a story in Castleberry's mind. He knew he had to do something with it, but the original idea for the story was much different from the final product we see today. Even though the idea was formed in graduate school, Castleberry only came back to it in Spring 2018. The final product took less than a year to create. Castleberry cites the speedy process as a result of having had the idea for a long time, but also resulting from his emotional state.

"It was a mental health anchor, in a way," he says.

Professor Castleberry lives in Richmond with his wife and many pets. His wife is the public archaeologist for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, currently excavating various projects, like the John Custis house. They were married in Vegas by an Elvis impersonator, but he assures *Dog Street Journal* that this was "on purpose."

Castleberry and his wife have a cat, Badgers, who he describes as "a loner."

