

## 2021 English Graduates Among Those Who Win Edgar F. Shannon Award



*Pictured: Sarah Berkowitz, Samantha Wallace, J.P. Ascher*

**By Richard Milby**

As is customary on Commencement Day, Arts & Sciences Dean Ian B. Baucom stood to award the prestigious Edgar F. Shannon Award to honor academic success and passionate extracurricular involvements. This year, however, instead of one award, Baucom honored many.

Given the unprecedented challenges of the past year, Baucom announced that the award would be presented to the entire 2021 class of Arts & Sciences undergraduate and graduate students including PhD's, MAs, and MFAs. English Department recipients comprised one hundred and ninety-one people.

The Z Society's Edgar F. Shannon Award, named for an esteemed university president and English Department faculty member, is one of the highest awards a UVa student can receive, honoring an individual who "has pursued academic greatness with fervent ardor and keen insight while never forgetting the importance of those priorities aside from school."

The graduating class of 2021 has faced many challenges aside from the usual demands of school. In what has been an extraordinary year, the accomplishments of this cohort of graduate and undergraduate students were deemed to be worthy of extraordinary honor. Raising the baseball-sized glass shard commemorating the award, Baucom praised the graduates and conferred the honor en masse.

"Yes," Baucom said slyly, "you can put that on your resume."

At this year's Final Exercises, held Saturday, May 22, students and families of the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences gathered in person to commemorate a year that was spent largely apart from one another. Graduates spaced in rows six feet from one another sat on the field of Scott Stadium and listened to pre-recorded speeches and sentiments from Reddit founder and 2005 graduate Alexis Ohanian, Henry Hoyns Professor of Creative Writing at UVA Rita Dove, and singer Brandi Carlile. This thoroughly unusual ceremony was lent a sense of normalcy through in-person addresses by President James Ryan and Dean Baucom.

But for the English PhD and MA students who were among those honored as recipients of the Shannon Awards that day, the reality of the challenge posed this year to scholarship, to teaching, and to the pursuit

of literary education was not lost. They taught classes online, met their committee members virtually, borrowed books on screens instead of in person, and yet still persisted in their projects. The award recognizes their tenacity as much as their accomplishment.

“It’s hard to concentrate on the niceties of eighteenth-century literature when the world is burning down outside your window,” says English PhD Sarah Berkowitz. Berkowitz was awarded for the work that culminated in her doctoral dissertation, “Family Men: Constructing the Gentleman in the Eighteenth-century British Novel,” which explores how the novel allowed the gentleman to become equivalent to an entire community, and the opportunities and limitations such equivalency presents. Her scholarship examines “character” as a literary category and has previously considered how digital tools can help modern users interact with eighteenth-century characters.

PhD Samantha Wallace won for the work leading to her dissertation “Epistemic Uncertainties: Contemporary Narratives of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence,” which argues for the value of uncertainty to feminist theory as a way of acknowledging the complexities of sexual and gender-based violence. She also co-founded Humanities and Global Cultures’ Public Humanities Lab, where her commitments to feminist pedagogy and digital literacies informed her teaching, research, and outreach.

Grant King, MA, reflected on the ways in which the pandemic “made me rethink my teaching, changed the way I engaged with my classmates, and fundamentally altered my writing practices.” King’s MA thesis is entitled, “Queer Theory, Queer Practice, Queer Teaching: An Exploration of and Experiment in Queer Pedagogy.”

For King, sharing the award with friends and fellow students in English and beyond only heightened the honor, which “carries with it the recognition and awareness that those of us with graduate careers dominated by the pandemic have done something that has not been demanded of anyone since the influenza outbreak of 1918: battling quarantine, isolation, and unpredictability while doing the intense intellectual labor of our academic work.”

For PhD graduate J. P. Ascher, “figuring out that my own collection of books could guide the revision of my dissertation was a moment of triumph. Rather than focusing on what I had lost, the conferences that were canceled, the people I couldn’t see, I instead slowed down and took stock of what I did have.”

Ascher won for his research on bibliography, textual criticism, and the history of quotation during the long eighteenth century. His dissertation, “Reading for Enlightenment in the Beginning of Philosophical Transactions” recounts a foundational textual history and develops new techniques for textual criticism. This summer he will be continuing his doctoral research at the Royal Society with a fellowship from the Bibliographical Society of America and the Katherine F. Pantzer Jr. Scholarship from the Bibliographical Society.

Ascher believes that “solidarity is priceless in two ways: it costs nothing and it is worth everything.” That may not be a bad way to consider this prize: in a few words on a hot summer day in May, Dean Baucom conferred a lasting and worthy honor on a deserving cohort.

We congratulate the graduate class of 2021 for their accomplishments, both great and small.