Opinions & Expressions
President Adam Falk on learning, 2,500 miles from home. … Letters from readers.

Scene & Herd
News of Williams and beyond.

Life of the Mind
Peter Abrahams ’68 on his life of (writing) crime. … Professor Patrick Spero brings history to life. … Leadership studies’ Nicole Mellow on what we need to know about Election 2012.
features

10 in 2012
Graduating seniors share their hopes, dreams, passions and plans.

A Day in the Life
A photographic essay of 2012 graduate Niralee Shah’s Commencement Day experience.

Alabama Calling
A spring break trip to Tuscaloosa, led by the college chaplains, blends community service with conversations about faith.

A World-Class Mayor
The big dreams of Kevin White ’52 helped rebuild the city of Boston.

On the cover
Niralee Shah ’12.
Photo by Kris Qua
We’ve probably all experienced how leaving home can help us to see it more clearly.

That’s what happened when my travel schedule enabled me to join part of a spring break service trip, one of several around the country organized by the college. This one was to the bottom of the Grand Canyon with eight students and Outing Club Director Scott Lewis, his wife Bernice, and their daughter Mariah; and math professor Mihai Stoiciu. It was awesome—in both the dictionary and the Valley Girl sense of the word.

The canyon itself, almost 300 miles long and a mile deep, brings a lump to your throat, whether you’re gazing down into it, looking up out of it or hiking its steep sides. Like other sublime natural wonders, it both humbles and inspires at the same time. If you’ve never been to the canyon, I urge you to go there. It instills, in addition to awe, deep pride in our national parks.

Most enlightening for me, though, was getting to see our students operating out in the world. The college’s purpose is to prepare students to lead fuller and more effective lives out there in the world. But we rarely get to see the fruits of that labor, which reflect how well we’re structured here on campus to prepare students for life after Williams.

You can guess how smart and alert these students were. But even I was surprised at how quickly they gelled into a strong, supportive group. They welcomed the physical challenge of carting equipment into the canyon and were eager to get down to the service work. They showed great respect for the fragile local environment, for the people they met, and for the park ranger with whom we worked most closely and whose life experience differed greatly from theirs. They quickly figured out that while their education gave them skills to bring to the task at hand, our guide had the expertise needed to achieve our common goal. All of this took place under the guidance of the indefatigable Scott Lewis. Boy, was the group focused—and, boy, did we have fun.

Though we were 2,500 miles away, I was struck by analogies to students’ experiences here in Williamstown. There is the familiar physical vigor and love of the outdoors. But, more basically, I was reminded of the typical Williams seminar class: a small group of very bright students, under the guidance of a practiced and enthusiastic faculty member, focused together on understanding better some subject of inquiry—perhaps “The Path to Enlightenment: Zen and Zen Art in China and Japan,” “Frontiers in Early American History” or “Neurobiology of Emotion,” to name three recent seminars. Nothing is more elating to an educator than a seminar in which students integrate their individual backgrounds, skills and passions into a cohesive force.

This, of course, is wonderful preparation for our students’ future engagement in their communities and professions, which rely on the collaborative work of individuals able to analyze, think, express and empathize.

That’s why I’m convinced that the experiences offered at Williams and colleges like it provide the most effective possible preparation for students who want to go out and make their mark on the world.

As a lifelong lover of libraries, I was very much interested in "Room to Learn" (March 2012)—a look at the future for libraries at Williams. While a great deal of attention has been paid to how bookstores and publishing companies are reacting to the digital age, there has been considerably less focus on libraries. Clearly, the days when libraries were simply a "temple of books"—a quiet repository for completed research—are gone. But can we imagine bookless libraries? If students can check out e-books from their dorm rooms, is a huge expanse of brick and mortar necessary? How do we find the right balance between making the library a place for academic collaboration and—as the critics of the proposed new café at the New York Public Library charge—"a glorified Starbucks"?

By incorporating flexibility in the design, Williams seems to be on the right track of creating a library that conserves the best of the past while accommodating the unseen potential of the future.

—Kate Stone Lombardi ’78, Chappaqua, N.Y.

Common sense makes it impossible to understand how economics professor David Zimmerman could possibly say that the idea of "redirecting income from the top 1 percent" is mutually exclusive with "targeted, community-based programs" ("Beyond the 1 Percent," March 2012). The point of the Occupy Movement is that income must be more equally distributed in this country, and the most effective way to do this is through programs aimed at early childhood. But how are these to be paid for? Zimmerman, it seems, expects the poor and working people of this country to beg for table scraps. The relatively small amount of money donated by the rich must then be directed at the best, most effective programs. The Occupy Movement is about demanding full funding for all effective programs, not politely requesting it and hoping the wealthiest of America start feeling generous.

—Francesca Gomes ’99, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Economics professor Jon Bakija answers "Who are the 1 percent?" giving an average income for this group. But he doesn’t answer two questions that seem more interesting. One, how many are there? Two, how much did it take to get them there? It would also be interesting to know how stable this group is (ins and outs over the years) and, most importantly, how many of the 1 percent are Williams graduates.

—Thomas E. Foster ’69, New York, N.Y.

I read with interest "A Defining Decade" (January 2012). The story of anti-Semitism and the demise of fraternities at Williams has another chapter. In 1952 we members of the Phi Delta Theta chapter chose to pledge a Jewish student in defiance of the national fraternity charter, which contained a clause limiting membership to Aryans. Rather than report Jewish students as "no religion" or Unitarian, we decided to challenge the national fraternity, prompting an incredulous reply that there must have been "some mistake." We were then put on probation and ordered to attend the annual national convention that summer. I understand there was little debate as our representatives presented our case for ignoring "the clause." We were expelled immediately from the national fraternity but had little trouble operating as a local fraternity named Phi Delta from then on.

—Peter H. Sammond ’55, Minnetonka, Minn.
WILLIAMS TO HONOR FIVE BICENTENNIAL MEDALISTS

During Fall Convocation on Sept. 8, the college will award five alumni with Bicentennial Medals for “significant achievement in any field of endeavor.” This year’s medalists are: Erin I. Burnett ’98, a TV journalist and the host of CNN’s Erin Burnett OutFront; Kathleen A. Merrigan ’82, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and an influential force behind federal organic food standards; David S. Paresky ’60, a travel industry pioneer and philanthropist; Norman P. Spack ’65, an internationally recognized pediatric endocrinologist; and Charles N. Waigi ’72, founding director of the nationally acclaimed Jeremy Academy in his hometown of Limuru, Kenya.

On Sept. 7 the honorees (with the exception of Burnett, who is hosting her show that day) will participate in a panel discussion at the ’62 Center MainStage. Check www.williams.edu later in the summer for more information.

CHANGES TO THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES ANNOUNCED

The college’s Board of Trustees welcomed five new members on July 1: Brian D. Carpenter ’86, James B. Lee Jr. ’75, Caron Garcia Martinez ’81, Clarence Otis Jr. ’77 and Martha Williamson ’77. Martinez was elected by the Society of Alumni in the spring, and Carpenter was appointed to replace Gregory H. Woods ’91, who stepped down as alumni trustee in early April after being appointed general counsel to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Michael R. Eisenson ’77 was reappointed for another term on the board. And Thomas M. Balderston ’78, Glenn D. Lowry ’76 and William E. Simon Jr. ’73 stepped down when their terms ended in June.

EMERITUS STATUS AWARDED TO EIGHT

On May 10, more than 60 alumni from across the country and as far away as Germany surprised Robert Dalzell at his last class before his retirement as the Fred Rudolph Professor of American Culture. Dalzell was granted emeritus status at the end of the year along with the late Ernest Brown, professor of music; Jean-Bernard Bucky, the William Dwight Whitney Professor of Arts & Theatre; Lynda K. Bundtzen, the Herbert H. Lehman Professor of English; Markes E. Johnson, the Charles L. MacMillan Professor of Natural Sciences; Glyn P. Norton, the Willcox B. & Harriet M. Adsit Professor of International Studies and professor of Romance languages; Alex P. Willingham, professor of political science; and Reiko Yamada, professor of Japanese. The group represents more than 240 years combined of teaching, scholarship and service.

MATH SCORES HIGH MARKS

Williams’ student math teams earned accolades during the 2011-12 academic year, first by placing in the top 10 and receiving an honorable mention out of 460 teams in the prestigious William Lowell Putnam Mathematical Competition in December. Another group then took first prize in the Regional Undergraduate Mathematics Competition at Central Connecticut State University in April. Both teams were led by coach and math professor Mihai Stoiciu.

Check out the problems the team worked on at the Putnam competition at bit.ly/LULC35. (Solutions are also posted!)
COLLEGE CELEBRATES 223RD COMMENCEMENT
The Class of 2012 was treated to fabulous weather for graduation on June 3. Festivities included a commencement address by noted surgeon and author Atul Gawande (pictured top, at left, with Williams President Adam Falk) and a speech by Phi Beta Kappa Speaker Anders E. Schneider (bottom right). Check out p. 10 of this issue for profiles of 10 seniors (now newly minted alumni), and visit http://bit.ly/williams12 for text, photos and videos of the big day.

GOLDSTEIN, NUGENT RECEIVE NAT’L RECOGNITION FOR THEIR PUBLICATIONS
Language professors Darra Goldstein and Christopher Nugent received national awards this spring for their published work. Goldstein, the Francis Christopher Oakley Third Century Professor of Russian, received the 2012 James Beard Foundation Journalism Award for Publication of the Year for her quarterly journal Gastronómica. Nugent, professor of Chinese, received the Association of Asian Studies’ Joseph Levenson Book Prize in the pre-1900 category for his 2010 book Manifest in Words, Written on Paper: Producing and Circulating Poetry in Tang Dynasty China. See a list of recent faculty books at ephsbookshelf.williams.edu.

SAWYER LIBRARY: A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW
IN MEMORIAM

The college last spring noted the passing of two influential community members—music professor Ernest Brown and former alumni secretary John English ’32.

Brown “broadened culturally the college’s engagement with music,” stated President Adam Falk in a letter to the Williams community announcing the ethnomusicologist’s death, at the age of 64, after a three-year struggle with cancer. In addition to teaching an array of courses including “Music Cultures of the World” and “Black Music and Postmodernism,” he founded and directed both the Zambezi Marimba Band and Kusika African dance ensemble. Read his full obituary at http://bit.ly/ernestbrown.

English, a reporter and avid golfer who was an assistant executive director of the U.S. Golf Association, was Williams alumni secretary from 1959 to 1975, serving as director of the college’s alumni relations, Alumni Fund and public information operations. He continued to connect his classmates to each other for decades as author of the class notes for the Class of ’32. At the time of his death, at the age of 101, he was also the college’s oldest alumnus. In a letter noting English’s passing, President Falk called him “one of the college’s more versatile retired staff members.” Read his full obituary at http://bit.ly/johnenglish.

STUDENT ENTREPRENEURS WIN SEED CAPITAL

Katy Gathright and Imran Khoja, both Class of 2012, are staying in Williamstown this summer, working to launch their “socially conscious flash sales web business,” Designed Good. In a business plan competition judged by a panel of alumni, the students received a $15,000 seed grant, office space and free legal advice. The competition capped a year of entrepreneurial programming organized by local resident and biotech startup veteran Jeffrey Thomas, who brought together area business leaders, professors, staff, students and alumni for events, workshops and a Winter Study class. Khoja and Gathright’s business plan was one of 22 entries. You can read the executive summary for Designed Good at http://bit.ly/Msqd3o.

EPHS PLACE THIRD IN DIRECTORS’ CUP

With NCAA championship titles for women’s crew and tennis—which each set records with seven and five consecutive NCAA wins, respectively—Williams took third in the race for the Learfield Sports Directors’ Cup, given each year to the best all-around athletics program for performance in 18 sports. It’s the first time in 14 years—and the second time since the cup’s creation 17 years ago—that the Ephs haven’t placed first. Middlebury took the cup this year with a total of 1,040.75 points, followed by Washington University (980.25), Williams (964.50), Amherst (950.75) and Wisconsin-Whitewater (815.50).
TAKING THE LONG VIEW

When it comes to building a winning team, Pittsburgh Pirates owner Robert Nutting ’84 is opting to play small ball. And it’s starting to pay off.

Once the legendary team of Roberto Clemente, Bill Mazeroski and “Pops” Willie Stargell, the Pirates in recent years have come to achieve a different sort of celebrity. In 2011 they logged their 19th consecutive losing season—more than any major professional sports team in North America. Yet Nutting believes he can restore the Pirates to their former glory. As head of the 122-year-old Wheeling, W.Va.-based Ogden Newspapers, Nutting has always felt an affinity for the 125-year-old Pirates franchise less than 50 miles away. When he became the team’s principal owner in 2007, he recalls, “They needed a tremendous amount of work. But I’ve always enjoyed the challenge of working with businesses that were broken and finding opportunities to fix and rebuild them.”

Some of his decisions as owner haven’t exactly made him a fan favorite. Heading into the 2010 season, he slashed the payroll below that of the 1992 roster—the last team to appear in the playoffs. He also declined an unsolicited offer by beloved Pittsburgh Penguins co-owner and hockey hall-of-famer Mario Lemieux to purchase the team. The move prompted an open letter in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette stating it was time to “draw a hard line in the infield dirt on when the Nutting regime will be accountable and return this storied franchise to a modicum of respectability—or else depart the scene.”

Reflecting on the public criticism he’s taken (fans have heckled him when he’s attended games, often accompanied by his daughter Cameron ’11 and father Ogden ’56), Nutting says, “It’s difficult to read negative things about myself in the press or be booed by a crowd. But at the same time, I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t think I could build a championship team and show some success at the end of the day.”

Nutting has stood firm on his decisions to focus on drafting talented amateurs over buying high-priced superstars and to redirect money to player development. In addition to nurturing promising college athletes in the U.S., he built a training academy and education facility in the Dominican Republic to attract up-and-coming Latino players and help them earn high school diplomas. The team also signed Rinku Singh and Dinesh Patel—the first Indian citizens to sign a contract with an American pro sports team—after spotting the two in a “Million Dollar Arm” baseball-pitching contest in India.

After flirting with first place in the National League’s Central Division in 2011 but fading down the stretch, the Pirates had a 35-32 record as of June 21 this year and were in second place in their division. The team welcomed more fans in 2011—1.94 million—than in any other year in the previous decade. And, true to his promise at the start of the 2012 season, Nutting opened his wallet to sign All-Star centerfielder Andrew McCutchen to a six-year, $51.5 million deal and made a trade for pitcher A.J. Burnett, absorbing his two-year, $13 million contract.

“I brought long-term, strategic goals to the Pirates,” Nutting says, “and my hope is to build something my kids are proud of.”

—Benjamin Gleisser
by Amanda F. Korman ’10
Commencement is just one stop on a journey that has brought students from all over the globe to Williams, only to scatter them again. Each of this year’s 513 graduating seniors (along with 12 graduate art history students and 30 development economics fellows) has an amazing story to tell. We chose to focus on 10—among them an adventure-seeker shattering stereotypes in Alaska’s salmon-fishing industry; an Afghan refugee rebuilding his war-scarred homeland; a future doctor with an artist’s eye; and a budding journalist incorporating China’s history and culture into his news coverage there. On the following pages, these students share their hopes, dreams, passions and plans.

RAISED IN AN ALASKAN TOWN WHERE THE MIDDLE SCHOOL curriculum included cold-water survival skills, Lindsay Olsen thought of education and adventure in the same breath.

From the time she was 5, her father, Eric ’74, a commercial fisherman, promised he’d drive her by motorcycle to college so that she’d know her way home. Thirteen years later, the Olsens arrived for First Days in leather chaps, the approximately 6,000 miles they’d traveled written onto the tires of Eric’s BMW bike.

Olsen devoured the course catalog, sampling classes across the academic disciplines. Among the history major’s favorites: physiology, printmaking, Scandinavian literature, the 14th amendment and geology of the Galapagos.

Still, the wilds of home’s cold ocean called. Though she’d never before played a sport, the 6’1” Olsen became a standout on the women’s crew team. A junior advisor, she also spent the summer before senior year with two friends, running the only all-female commercial fishing vessel in a fleet of 500 off Alaska’s Bristol Bay. One day they thought their ship might sink; another, they hauled in 10,000 pounds of sockeye, cutting through the sexism on the docks by notching the biggest catch of the day.

The winner of both a Watson and a Fulbright fellowship (she had to turn down the latter), Olsen in August sets off on a yearlong exploration of fishing communities in both hemispheres. Before she goes, she’s spending one more summer with her own crew on the Alaskan sea, her calloused rower’s hands proving with every heave of the trawl what a “girl boat,” as her ship’s been dubbed, is made of.

WITHIN MONTHS OF LEARNING HE’D BEEN ACCEPTED TO WILLIAMS, Mati Amin and his family received more news. His father, Roohul, had been appointed governor of Farah province in Afghanistan by President Hamid Karzai. Given the demands and risks of the position, Roohul told his college-bound son—the eldest of eight—that responsibility for the family now fell to him.

So by the time Amin was a sophomore, five of his siblings were living with him in his off-campus apartment in Williamstown. A year later the youngest two arrived with their mother. Amin helped the older sisters and brother apply to private high schools and colleges. Between classes, the political science and economics major shuttled his 5- and 6-year-old brothers to and from elementary school.

Born in a refugee camp in Pakistan after his parents fled the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Amin knows that his purpose for studying in America (and facilitating the same for his siblings) is to return home prepared to induce change in the war-scarred land. Through his nonprofit Afghan Youth Initiative, Amin has...
helped young Afghans secure trash receptacles for public parks and teach illiterate women the linens trade.

In articles for Foreign Affairs, The Hill and The Diplomat, Amin writes about nonprofit community development and peace talks with the Taliban. He’ll continue to focus on community development with a job this summer overseeing projects for the D.C.-based social enterprise firm Ashoka.

For all this, Amin has become, perhaps above all, the family man his father charged him to be. The main difficulty of his unusual undergraduate life, he says, was the tug of war between his school work, requiring him to hunker down at Schow Library, and his younger brothers, playing at home, where he truly wished to be.

FOR ERIN MCGONAGLE, EVEN BLADDER SURGERY ON MICE REQUIRES AN artist’s eye. Researching bed-wetting in children who experienced trauma, the chemistry and studio art major spent the summer after her junior year in a Philadelphia lab, cutting catheters to fit individual rodent bladders. Even such an apparently clinical task, she discovered, required exquisite observation of detail.

Sure of her desire to be a pediatrician since she was a little girl, McGonagle personalized her path to medical school with a Luce Scholars fellowship that will place her at Angkor Hospital for Children in Siem Reap, Cambodia. For 10 months she’ll use the Khmer language skills she’s acquiring this summer to observe surgeries and work in the hospital’s community-outreach art gallery.

As a high school volunteer at a children’s hospital in Denver, McGonagle cheered young patients with painting and mask making. And a drawing class her sophomore year at Williams helped her to realize that the serious pursuit of art was itself a way to connect with people.

So, for her senior studio art project, McGonagle introduced herself to strangers around the Berkshires and offered to sketch them. In charcoal, she developed emotional connections with people she hardly knew—a prelude to the kinds of leaps of empathy and attention that will be central to her chosen life in medicine.

IN THE LONELY TRANSITION FROM SHENYANG, CHINA, TO one of Los Angeles’ largest high schools, Liyang Zhang nearly forgot himself. As a teenager, he spent his last year in the People’s Republic and his first six months in the U.S. by himself while his parents, formerly workers at a clothing factory, tried to lift the family out of financial desperation.

Unable even to understand the word “agenda” on the blackboard when he first arrived in California, Zhang thought he would attend community college. Then his AP chemistry teacher pointed out Zhang’s aptitude in math and science. A future high-school valedictorian, Zhang had won national math and physics competitions in junior high. Although the exam-oriented academic culture in China hadn’t encouraged such curiosity, he’d developed a hobby of solving complex math problems in his free time.

At Williams, Zhang found more teachers who appreciated, as he puts it, the beauty of knowledge. When philosophy professor Keith McPartland took him out for coffee after his first class as a freshman, Zhang felt the first inkling that he would be at home in Williamstown. By senior year, the math and physics major shared an affection for the irreverent show South Park with his thesis advisor, Romanian-born math professor Mihai Stoiciu, because the two immigrants saw the animated comedy as an encapsulation of the political freedoms available in America.

As a junior, Zhang took six courses each semester, mostly math, brushing off suggestions that he “get a life” by asserting that, happily, the subject was his life. After becoming a U.S. citizen this past fall, he and a team of Williams classmates earned an honorable mention at the prestigious William Lowell Putnam Mathematical Competition, and over the winter Zhang received an offer—only days after the application deadline, in a surprise, 2:30 a.m. phone call—to pursue a Ph.D. in math at Yale. At the end-of-year math department dinner, Zhang’s professors awarded him, simply, “best senior.”

Freedom to Learn

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Newton Davis, Saginaw, Mich.

Finding Balance

NEWTON DAVIS WAS THE GO-TO GUY FOR GETTING THINGS done at Williams. Elected to College Council his freshman fall, he recruited diverse college applicants for the Admission Office and was a leader of the male-minority group, the Griffins Society. He helped to shape Claiming Williams Day and to redesign the ‘82 Grill, and as treasurer of All Campus Entertainment and Spencer Neighborhood, he managed $110,000 in budgets.

But by the spring of his sophomore year, with five classes, two upcoming summer research projects on race and ethnic minorities, and questions forming about his sexuality, his balancing act was beginning to wobble. Fellow students encouraged Davis, the only child of a single mother from Saginaw, Mich., to run for College Council president and serve as a junior advisor. But he was so burned out that he decided instead to spend junior year abroad. In Spain and Brazil, the history and Arabic studies major sorted through his priorities and realized that he needed to focus more fully on fewer things. He also started to feel comfortable saying he is gay.

Back on campus, Davis took up the single activity that had previously never made his to-do list: lingering over a cup of coffee with an acquaintance or a friend, trading stories and questions. He discovered that what had been missing in his prior, hectic life was this kind of challenging but supportive connection.

The recipient of an ultra-competitive Harry S. Truman Scholarship his junior year, Davis began to explore how he could pair his innate ability to lead with his desire for more meaningful encounters with others. Sifting through post-graduate possibilities, he was drawn to work that mixed a business mind-set and a nonprofit ethic. As he begins a consulting job with Accenture in Philadelphia this fall to prepare for a career in international social enterprise, Davis imagines for himself a life where, between the boardroom and places in need, he builds a bridge—and finds balance.

J. Adam Century, Troy, N.Y.

Making News

ADAM CENTURY WAS IN AN INTERNET CAFÉ IN CHINA THE summer after his junior year when he saw the announcement: State-issued IDs would now be required to access the Web. Reading the jargon-filled notice, Century thought to himself, “There’s a story here.”

A researcher and reporter interning at The New York Times’ Beijing bureau, Century set the ball rolling on a story about the government’s latest attempt to curtail bloggers’ freedoms by collapsing the anonymity of café IP addresses. Within a week the news had made its way into the Chinese press, and the state announced it would roll back the policy.

Century grew up in Montreal and then Troy, N.Y. Though he wanted to be a journalist, he wasn’t sure what he’d be qualified to write about until, at the age of 16, he spent a year studying in Nanjing, China. Narrating the trip to friends, Century sought to entertain his audience with stories of unusual experiences—such as the day at compulsory military training when he had to march the goose step for nine hours straight. At the same time he wanted to challenge American assumptions about China’s culture, explaining, for example, that teens in Nanjing dated and played basketball just like their U.S. counterparts.

At Williams, the history and Asian studies major worked to round out his experiences in China with a better understanding of its past. His professor, scholar of medieval Chinese literature Christopher Nugent, helped Century to pull 2,500-year-old verse into his senior thesis about the impact of microblogs on the public sphere.

Century is heading back to China to report again for the Times, first using his Jeffrey O. Jones ’66 Fellowship in Journalism and then on a research Fulbright. The former Williams Record staffer sees his education as his distinguishing professional badge: keeping millennia of history in mind as he brings to light new information for the country’s citizens and readers abroad.
HILLARY HIGGS DIDN’T THINK OF HERSELF AS A LEADER. EVEN AS FRIENDS IN HER inner-city high school in Springfield, Mass., credited her tutoring with helping them to graduate. Even as she excelled in three varsity sports. And even when, at 16, she publicly confronted the Springfield School Committee about a proposed calculus requirement she felt would cripple her peers’ chances of making it to college—a move that landed her the first student seat on the city education panel.

It wasn’t until a friend became the unintended target of a gang-related shooting, and the award to honor his memory as a successful student-athlete was placed in Higgs’ hands, that she began to understand that her community was looking to her as a point of light.

At first, coming to Williams challenged Higgs’ self-perception. She struggled to reconcile her urban Western Massachusetts identity with the bucolic, well-to-do town only 75 miles away, even as she logged milestones like setting the college record in the 400-meter dash (56.11 seconds). But by senior year, with a National Education Association internship and a summer spent as a teaching assistant for Williams’ Summer Humanities program under her belt, the American studies major realized that she had the gumption—and desire—to become a high school teacher in urban areas like the one she grew up in. An experience helping a student connect with The Great Gatsby by comparing the decadence of West Egg with the glitz of the hip-hop world fortified her personal theory on teaching: Make it relevant, and students will learn.

With the goal of one day starting her own education nonprofit, Higgs began her master’s in urban teaching at Boston College in June. One of only 25 national recipients of a $30,000 Woodrow Wilson-Rockefeller Brothers Fund Fellowship for Aspiring Teachers of Color, she was humbled to learn that Boston College would also be waiving the entirety of her tuition, matching its commitment with hers.

STORYTELLING HAS ALWAYS BEEN MICHAELA MORTON’S first love, whether she’s following her passion for writers like Samuel Johnson as an English major or learning a new language well enough to translate entire plays as a French major. Or she’s trodding the boards of the ’62 Center, playing the role of the acerbic singer of “The Ladies Who Lunch” in Stephen Sondheim’s ’50 Company or the highfalutin Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest.

The Winston-Salem, N.C., native spent her junior year in Paris, where she resided with a family, attended church and studied at the entirely French-speaking theater conservatory Cours Cochet. There Morton found fortification in adopting the local style of spending time: long meals that finished with coffee and a stroll, and a whole day of rest and reflection every Sunday.

She brought that lifestyle back to Williams, where she joined the board of Storytime, a weekly congregation of students who carve an hour out of their hectic Sunday nights to listen to a peer narrate sometimes humorous, sometimes wrenching personal stories over homemade cookies. The gatherings, to Morton, consecrated time as the French might.

A poet whose work twice earned honorable mentions in the college’s Bullock Poetry Prize competition, Morton also started writing for the stage—including a whimsical kids’ musical, Big Shoes, which was chosen to be performed in rural elementary schools by the North Carolina-based Open Dream Ensemble. Aspiring to build a life out of acting, writing and translation, Morton will spend August through November traveling with her production as a member of its cast, proving with her own work that a storyteller can speak with the body as well as the pen.
WILL SU HAD ALREADY BOUGHT A MIDDLEBURY SWEATSHIRT when he was snapped off Williams’ wait list in late July of 2008. But the Montgomery Village, Md., resident accepted the 11th-hour offer, sensing that Williams was the kind of place embodied by the teacher he most admired at his all-boys school. John Botti ’96 was regarded for both his universally inviting teaching and for knowing every student in his classroom well enough to ask about the big game or the sick parent without missing a beat.

At Williams Su cast his net widely as a tutor at the local schools, actor in theater productions, student chair of the Honor and Discipline Committee and club water polo player. But it was in his art history classes that Su, the son of Chinese immigrants, felt the hum of material both critically satisfying and broadly appealing. Devoted to art objects made of paint, clay and metal, the subject, to Su, invoked visual, visceral pleasures that could be understood by anyone.

As a college museum tour guide, he saw that with the right prompts he could induce a third grader just as easily as a college senior to do a formal analysis of Harold Edgerton’s high-speed photograph of the path of a bullet through a bar of soap. His senior year, Su crafted a thesis on conceptual artist Jenny Holzer’s work, arguing that her heat-sensitive bean bags and concentric garden of strange plants push audiences to get involved—to plop down on a seat or water the soil. When he landed a Teach for America post in Charlotte, N.C., Su withdrew his applications to Ph.D. programs in art history. Before heading into the high-volume impact of museum work, he says he wants to go one-on-one in the classroom, where he first learned that a personal connection is a door to something more.

AT THE START OF EVERY PROBLEM SET, NIRALEE SHAH WOULD ASK herself anew why she was majoring in math. By the end of each one, she would find herself falling in love again with the subject. The yank between frustration and elation, originating in a multivariable calculus class her freshman fall, convinced Shah to leave behind her political science aspirations for the department that would eventually award her “best senior colloquium.”

Born and raised in North Adams, Mass., 10 minutes from campus, Shah spent her time at Williams pursuing that mental crucible where discomfort meets discovery. After 14 years of ballet training, she took a spot on the college’s innovative contemporary dance ensemble, CoDA. With conceptual artist Sol LeWitt as a muse, she began to choreograph for poetry, forcing herself to stop thinking of movement as a set of rules and instead letting her body express itself freely, as art.

As she heads to Manja, Jordan, to teach math at King’s Academy in the fall, Shah is drafting her own strategies for the quandaries ahead both inside and outside of the classroom. Situated literally in the middle of the desert, the New England-style prep school, founded by Deerfield’s Eric Widmer ’61, has a tricky time procuring sneakers that would enable girls to play sports. So Shah is considering teaching the Brazilian martial arts-inspired dance style Capoeira—no shoes required.

See photographs of Niralee Shah’s commencement day on the next page…

Niralee Shah ’12: A Day in the Life
See a slideshow of Niralee's day at http://bit.ly/shahslideshow
Alabama Calling

by Rob White

It’s no surprise that a group of Williams students spent their spring break in Tuscaloosa, Ala., helping to rebuild homes in the wake of devastating tornadoes that rolled through the city the previous April. What made this trip different—perhaps unique—is that the students also spent their time engaged in deeply personal conversations about faith.

Williams’ four chaplains, whose own faiths span the Abrahamic traditions, came up with the idea last fall, soon after Bilal Ansari, the college’s first Muslim chaplain, joined their team. They’d all served communities including prison inmates and Calcutta’s homeless, and all saw a shared service project at Williams as a powerful opportunity for interfaith dialogue. “By sharing spiritual traditions,” College Chaplain Rick Spalding said before the trip, “we hope to better understand each other, appreciate other religious teachings and deepen our most personal commitments as citizens in a fragile, multifaceted world.”

The 11 students who went, many of whom weren’t involved in organized religious life on campus before, included a Jain (practicing an ancient religion from India), an evangelical Christian and an atheist who was raised Jewish. The chance to do service work, travel and make new friends was a draw; equally intriguing was the opportunity to bring faith to the forefront of their busy lives.

As Ben Shuham ’14, a Jewish student, wrote of the trip in The Williams Record, “Faith (or the lack thereof) is a subject many of us do not focus on during our time at the college. … Even in religious studies classes we approach faith through an academic lens, usually without bringing personal belief into the discussion.”

Bunking on air mattresses in Tuscaloosa’s First Presbyterian Church, students and chaplains spent their days building a new house for Pam and John Nero, whose old one had been un-roofed by the tornado. Nights were spent in intense, wide-ranging, sometimes hilarious, conversations about the pros and cons of various dietary practices, the collision of science and religion, and “absolute truth.”

“As Williams students, we’re going to have the opportunity to change our world in just a few years,” says Jay Mehta ’13, a Jain from Westchester County, N.Y. “Coming to terms with what we do and don’t believe in, as well as understanding the outlooks and beliefs of others, will be vital.”

Read more about the trip on the following pages. And check out http://bit.ly/alabamaservice for photos and videos.
On scaffolding, around dinner tables and in places of worship throughout Tuscaloosa, students and chaplains explored questions they might not otherwise have had time to consider on campus. Such as what it means to be called by God and whether science and religion are mutually exclusive. A conversation about forgiveness fascinated Sam Jeong ’14 (pictured here, center). Ansari, the Muslim chaplain, discussed “completely forgetting the thing that happened,” Jeong recalls, while Cantor Bob Scherr and Spalding (at right), a Presbyterian minister, said they would set aside the event in their minds but carry it with them as part of the story of who they are. Says Sarah Gottesman ’14, “The conversations seemed to exist in the space between what we thought we knew and what we were just discovering as we spoke and listened.”
Habitat work is a study in organized chaos. With three people managing each piece of clapboard, a fourth to hold the level and a fifth and sixth to work the tape measure, strangers on the Williams trip quickly became partners. Deeply personal conversations seemed entirely natural, as when site leader Pete Deworken, an evangelical Christian (pictured below, right) told the Williams group that he moves his family from place to place as he feels called to by God. Chih McDermott ’14 (below left, in the red and white cap), also an evangelical Christian, was particularly moved by Deworken’s definition of service: “We will all know our calling by what our heart breaks for.”

Service to others is a value shared by virtually all religions, which is why this project was a powerful platform for interfaith dialogue. “Some of our work is about lifting up the important differences between various faith perspectives,” says Spalding, “and some of it is about the strength we draw from a common humanitarian taproot. Inviting a small, religiously diverse group of students to engage side by side with us in humanitarian work brought to that work both a sense of common cause and a sense of religious and spiritual particularity.”

Adds Muslim Chaplain Ansari, “Exploring the inner faith identities that are immersed in an elite, secular institution brings about students engaged with and prepared to meet the unmet needs of the world.”
These days, when Muslim students at Williams cook Shabbat dinner for Jewish students, it’s an enjoyable but not particularly notable campus event. Such faith-centered—and multi-faith—interaction is fairly common on college campuses. But in the opinion of College Chaplain Rick Spalding, such encounters these days are particularly robust at Williams. “All the membranes are more permeable than they’ve ever been before,” says Spalding, who came to campus in 2000 after serving Presbyterian congregations and several colleges and universities (most recently Harvard).

In any given year (or on any given day, since Williams students themselves sometimes move in new religious directions), the campus community reflects some 30 faith traditions, from Anglican to Zen Buddhist. The job of the chaplains’ office, as it says on their website (http://chaplain.williams.edu) is to promote “courageous, candid and transformative dialogue among religious communities and between theologies and other disciplines of intellectual life.”

Spalding carries out this mission alongside three other religious leaders. Cantor Bob Scherr came to Williams in 2004 after a career leading synagogue communities. Father Gary Caster arrived three years later, having worked at Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan Universities and with Mother Teresa (“more accurately, for her,” Caster jokes) in Calcutta. Muslim Chaplain Bilal Ansari, whose father was San Francisco’s first imam and whose mother is a Pentecostal minister, arrived on campus last September following a career in prison ministry.

They do their work at Williams through initiatives like the Alabama trip as well as “Theology on Tap,” held late at night in the Paresky Center’s ’82 Grill, where the chaplains answer students’ questions about their respective faiths. Another program is “Encountering Religion,” in which chaplains and religion professors chat informally with students about the sometimes uncomfortable intersection of religious conviction and academic analysis. Says Caster, “We all want students to understand that a Williams education is not about tearing down faith but instead about broadening perspective and deepening understanding.”
He was audacious and outspoken. But the big dreams of Boston Mayor Kevin White ’52, who passed away in January, helped rebuild the city of Boston.

By David Kibbe
He was audacious and outspoken. But the big dreams of Boston Mayor Kevin White ’52, who passed away in January, helped rebuild the city of Boston.

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As America’s Bicentennial celebration reached its height in the summer of 1976, millions of tourists in Boston cheered the Tall Ships as they circled the harbor. The newly opened Faneuil Hall Marketplace drew crowds to a festival atmosphere. The Boston Pops lilted and soared in a nationally televised Fourth of July concert. And an ebullient Mayor Kevin Hagan White ’52 strolled past City Hall in a parade, his arm around the Queen of England.

There was no bigger moment for the City of Boston—or for its mayor. “Getting the Queen here, that was really Kevin,” says Michael B. Keating ’62, counsel to the city’s Bicentennial organizing committee and today a partner at Foley Hoag. “He was never limited in his own mind by what he could do for the city.”

White was mayor for 16 tumultuous years, from 1968 through 1983, a time of profound change that saw Boston struggle with racial conflict and then shed its image as a provincial backwater to become a modern city.

He became a giant among American mayors, laying the groundwork to run for president in 1976. But any national ambitions were doomed in part by the violent protests over a 1974 federal court order to desegregate Boston’s schools. Later, his record was tainted by a federal investigation into his administration and fund-raising activities, though he was never charged with a crime.

When White died on Jan. 27, 2012, at the age of 82, after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, city and state leaders looked anew at his legacy. “He held the city together,” says Paul S. Grogan ’72, a former speechwriter and aide to White and now president and CEO of The Boston Foundation. “He planted the seeds for what would become the Boston Renaissance.”

White was born into Boston’s Irish political class. His father and grandfather both had been City Council presidents. But White himself was closest to his mother, Patricia, who preferred the classics to politics. White was such a voracious reader that, as mayor, his historical allusions often left Boston pols scratching their heads.

“He was able to go to both Tabor Academy and Williams, so he had an elite, private education layered over the legacy of old Boston politics,” Grogan says. “It made him a unique amalgam of attributes. He often talked about how Williams had lifted his sights considerably.”

White was 38 when he was elected mayor, and he filled City Hall with idealistic young aides who would become leaders in business and government. His first chief of staff was no City Hall insider but rather future Congressman Barney Frank, a young Harvard graduate who grew up in New Jersey. White, Frank recalls, “was aware he was a transitional figure between the old Boston political tradition in which he grew up and a newer set of things he was embracing.”

At the time, America was being consumed by racial tension. Large-scale riots were engulfing disenfranchised black communities in Detroit and Newark. The summer before White took office, Boston had seen three days of looting and violence in Roxbury after police broke up a demonstration at a city welfare office.

White was the first Boston mayor to truly reach out to black neighborhoods. He walked the streets—shirtsleeves rolled up, jacket over his shoulder—and talked to residents on their front stoops. He placed people of color in upper-level city jobs and promoted black police officers to positions of higher authority.

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, White, fearing a riot, proposed canceling a James Brown concert at the Boston Garden already scheduled for the following night. He then changed his mind and asked the Godfather of Soul to broadcast the show live on public TV, offering Brown $60,000 to cover any loss at the gate. Since the city budget couldn’t cover the expense, White coaxed the money from a consortium of Boston business leaders.

The night of the concert, White took the stage, imploring the audience to “honor Dr. King in peace.” Brown, in turn, paid White the ultimate compliment, calling him a “swinging cat.” The mayor’s plan worked—people in Boston stayed home that night, and the city remained relatively calm, even as devastating riots broke out across the country.

“One of the great things about him was his openness and his ability to improvise … and do things that were unconventional,” Frank says. “It seemed almost the natural thing to do, given his style, which was, ‘Let’s not just go by some old rules. Let’s look at what we’ve got and do the best thing with it.’”
White didn’t have any control over the independently run Boston school system, but its troubles came to define him. A decade after schools in the South had been forced to integrate, Boston still had in essence two public school systems—one black and one white—divided by neighborhood. The black schools were systematically underfunded, with constant turnover of teachers, out-of-date books and shortages of desks. The Boston chapter of the NAACP filed a federal lawsuit to correct the inequity. In the summer of 1974, a U.S. District Court judge ordered black and white students to be bused into each other’s neighborhoods.

White disagreed with the order, fearing a backlash in Boston’s white neighborhoods. But he was adamant that the law be enforced. “No man, not even a president, stands above the law,” he said the day before school opened in September 1974. “And no city or group within it can stand in defiance of the law.”

South Boston, a working class Irish neighborhood, quickly became the epicenter of resistance. When buses carrying black students from Roxbury rolled up to South Boston High School that first day, they were met by a large crowd yelling racial slurs. At the end of the school day, the buses were pelted with rocks. White immediately met with black and white parents in their own communities to appeal for calm. He mobilized hundreds of city and state police, ordered that buses have police escorts and banned protests in the vicinity of school grounds.

Tensions roiled in South Boston and other communities for several years as a succession of schools were integrated. Parents protested in the streets, while students fought in school hallways and cafeterias. The violence eventually abated, but White was powerless to stop an exodus of middle-class families—both white and black.

“He didn’t control the school committee, he didn’t control the decision, and yet he had to do almost the impossible to hold it together,” recalls his son Mark White ’80, a real estate developer in Boston. “That didn’t mean it didn’t get chaotic, but I often wonder, had he not been at the helm, with his experience at that time, would it have been four times more chaotic?”

Indeed, The Boston Globe, which had criticized White in the early 1970s for not supporting busing as a moral issue, took a different tone in an editorial after his death: “White sought to manage the crisis without unduly inflaming passions on either side: his stance struck many Bostonians as a lack of leadership but may, in retrospect, have been the least damaging approach he could have taken.”

The busing crisis, broadcast nightly on network TV, ended White’s national ambitions and nearly cost him the mayor’s office. In 1972, U.S. Sen. George McGovern, a South Dakota Democrat, had offered White the vice presidential slot on his ticket, believing he could deliver urban Catholic votes. McGovern withdrew the offer two hours later when Sen. Edward Kennedy, a longtime rival of White’s, objected.

White barely won re-election as mayor in 1975, and he began building a political machine that many said was modeled on that of Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley. Supporters said White never turned his back on neighborhoods; he successfully fought the expansion of Logan Airport and a proposed highway that would have cut a swath through Boston’s communities. But critics saw White’s increasing focus on the downtown business district in the second half of his administration as a detriment to the rest of the city.

White considered the redevelopment of the city’s financial and commercial sectors as crucial to Boston’s prosperity. And Faneuil Hall, right outside his office window, was the catalyst. The hall had hosted some of the first debates for American independence, but the surrounding area had become a dilapidated collection of meat and produce markets. White envisioned a historic urban setting that showcased the best his city had to offer—a cobbledstoned festival square with shopping, dining and outdoor entertainment. When Boston financiers passed on the idea, White went to New York to get the money.

The marketplace, which today draws 18 million visitors a year, was an instant success upon opening in August 1976. It was the crown jewel among a host
of projects White would build in the downtown during his tenure: 38 new office buildings, 50 major renovations and 17 built or planned hotels. Prior mayors had drawn up plans to revitalize Boston, but “Kevin White was the man who sold it,” said Thomas O’Connor, a Boston College history professor, in an interview with the *Review* prior to his death in May. “He was the one who in many respects put the new Boston on the map.”

Still, by the 1980s, White’s hold on the city’s affections was weakening. Increasingly, he spent time not at City Hall but at the Parkman House, a city-owned mansion that he had renovated with $600,000 in public money and private contributions to host official functions. The press and political rivals chafed at his chauffeur-driven limousine and the lavish, catered dinners he hosted there at taxpayer expense. White countered that Boston needed to act like a world class city in order to become one. He was also being pursued by an ambitious federal prosecutor, William F. Weld, who would become Massachusetts governor a decade later. More than 20 city employees and nearly as many businessmen were convicted on a range of charges, including bribery, extortion, perjury and obtaining fraudulent disability pensions. White was investigated for soliciting contributions from city employees for a lavish birthday party for his wife, which he was forced to cancel.

White maintained his innocence, but polls predicted his political demise. In 1983 he announced he would not run for a fifth term. He started teaching at Boston University and enjoying the company of old friends. He was neither bitter nor brooding about how it all ended. “It wasn’t like the job made my father,” says Mark White, the eldest of White’s five children. “He had a big personality before he took that job, and his personality was still there after he left that job. He was still the same guy.”

In 1989, five years after White left office, the U.S. Attorney’s Office closed its investigation without filing any charges against him.

When White’s family publicly acknowledged that he was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease a decade ago, many looked at his achievements in a new light. His supporters, deeply entrenched in civic life, had never left him. The Boston of today—far more inclusive and cosmopolitan than anyone could have imagined upon White’s election in 1967—decided it owed him a debt of gratitude.

Williams College also honored White, a former trustee, with its Bicentennial Medal for distinguished achievement in 2004. Though ill, he was able to accept the award in person. Growing up, White struggled with dyslexia and graduated near the bottom of his class at Tabor Academy, where he was class president and captain of the baseball team. The headmaster convinced Williams to take a chance on him. “My father always looked back … and thought in many ways Williams gave him his first real break,” Mark White recalls. “He became a lifelong learner. … It gave him the confidence that when he was in the room with other people that went to Williams, Harvard, Amherst, he had already seen that world. He was not intimidated.”

In 2006, Boston unveiled a 10-foot-high bronze statue of White near Faneuil Hall. The statue, by sculptor Pablo Eduardo, depicts the former mayor confidently striding away from City Hall, his coat slung over his left shoulder. White and his family attended the ceremony, and old friends and aides had tears in their eyes. The fingers on the statue’s right hand have since been worn shiny and gold by the untold numbers of people who have touched them. The monument stands between statues of Samuel Adams and James Michael Curley, another legendary mayor. The placement, and the fact that it was unveiled while he was still alive, Mark White observes, “says volumes about what the city thought about him.”
He’s been dubbed by Stephen King “my favorite American suspense novelist.” And critics at *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and Salon.com routinely heap gushing praise upon his work.

But bestselling suspense and mystery novelist Peter Abrahams ’68 still wonders at the persistent distinction between crime fiction and literary fiction. “It’s silly,” he says. Taking in the sweep of marshland behind his Falmouth, Mass., home on a Sunday in May, Abrahams says the only thing that matters is telling a great story.

Since graduating Williams, he’s produced 19 novels, including the popular Echo Falls Mystery series, as well as several books for young readers and the Chet and Bernie Mysteries (released under the fleetingly secret pen name Spencer Quinn, outed in early 2009 by the *Cape Cod Times*).

“I’ve never had more on my plate,” says Abrahams, who attributes his love of stories, particularly adventure stories, to both a childhood surrounded by books and to his late mother, who taught him how to turn a phrase and choose “the exact right word.”

Inspired as a teen and young adult by writers like Graham Greene and Ross Macdonald, Abrahams, an Edgar Award nominee, turns out a book every two years or so. It’s an output he maintained even during that long stretch when his writing schedule was arranged around the demands of four athletically overachieving children, now adults.

These days his schedule is far more routine, with the airy clapboard house occupied by Abrahams, his wife Diana and two feisty retrievers. Abrahams, who says he does some of his best writing in the shower, works at a desk in a roomy, spare studio over the garage. “Notice the desk faces away from the view,” he says, describing a “Calvinistic” routine of waking to an hour of e-mail correspondence and Facebook updates, followed by a trip to the gym or tennis court, and then hunkering down to meet his daily quota of 1,000 words. He rarely falls below it.

Abrahams doesn’t read crime fiction—“I don’t want any contamination,” he says. And perhaps that’s one reason why his novels continue to surprise. Though full of heart, his prose, praised by *Kirkus Reviews* as “pitch perfect,” is restrained. He leaves the bludgeoning to his characters. “I like a sentence to do more than one job,” says Abrahams, who has made a point over the years of paring down dialogue and keeping description to a clean, precise minimum. “The imagination of the reader is one of your biggest tools.”

His books are laced with literary references, though readers may not always understand them. It was years before one reader, a teen-aged girl in England, noted in a fan letter how she appreciated that a character named Strade drew inspiration from Arthur Conan Doyle’s Inspector Lestrade. Though committed to the suspense genre, Abrahams toys with it in bold ways. His 2005 psychological thriller *Oblivion*, for example, presents a protagonist who, in addition to being a famous private investigator on a confounding case, suffers from amnesia caused by a brain tumor that has death nipping at his heels.

One day several years ago, Abrahams and his wife were sitting in their kitchen when Diana said, “You should do something with dogs.” Abrahams decided within moments that he would try to write a book from a dog’s point of view. He recalls dashing over to his office, fingers itching. “Sometimes six hours of work can happen in 30 seconds,” he says.

The result was the Chet and Bernie mystery series, in which Chet the dog functions as Watson to Bernie’s Holmes. An unabashedly crotch-smelling, leg-lifting canine, Chet advances the story by describing what Bernie’s up to while holding forth in the sparsest doggie poetry: “And then—yes. She barked. … I barked back. She barked. I barked. She barked. I barked…”

Another of Abrahams’ beloved sleuths is Ingrid Levin-Hill, a quick-thinking, soccer-playing, *Sherlock Holmes-*reading 13-year-old who resides in Echo Falls, “home of a thousand secrets.” The Echo Falls series has won several awards, including the 2006 Agatha Award.
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Abrahams describes his profession as one of the loneliest. But with his Echo Falls and Chet and Bernie fan bases percolating on Facebook, grateful readers get to commune with each other and with the author. “Isn’t this beautiful?” Abrahams asks, showing off a lush Chet-and-Bernie-themed quilt made of squares sewn by fans.

An English major at Williams, Abrahams occasionally looks to his undergraduate days for inspiration. In his 2000 novel Crying Wolf, a small-town Colorado scholarship student is seduced into the world of unimaginably rich Manhattan twins on a New England college campus modeled after Williams. As it simmers, the hall-of-mirrors tale takes the reader off campus as well as beneath it—to a network of steam tunnels inspired by the mischief of Abrahams’ student days, when his studies were often neglected in favor of underground journeys without maps.

As for what lies next on his own journey, Abrahams says he hasn’t given retirement a moment’s thought. “Maybe it’s ultimately and ironically a failure of imagination,” he says, “but I can’t imagine life without making up stories.”

“If one more literary person says in that oh-so-condescending tone, ‘I don’t read . . . mysteries,’ I’m going to take a novel by Peter Abrahams and smack him on his smug little head.”

—Critic Michele Ross, writing for the Cleveland Plain Dealer

Read more about the author at www.peterabrahams.com.
And follow his canine creation at www.chetthedog.com.
It’s 2:45 on a Thursday afternoon, and students in Patrick Spero’s “Politics of the Presidency” class are evaluating the campaign ad they’ve just viewed.

“It was scathing,” says one student. “A great attack.”

“The music was so effective,” adds another. “It really gets your attention.”

The group could easily be discussing the latest TV spot for the 2012 presidential race. But the ad, created by history major Sarah Herr ’12, depicts a campaign that took place nearly 200 years ago—the contest between Whig William Henry Harrison and Democrat Martin Van Buren.

Armed with tablet readers on loan from the college’s Office for Information Technology, Spero’s students spent the spring semester creating videos for the candidates of every major, transformative presidential election from George Washington in 1789 to Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

While the technology and medium were anachronistic, everything the students used in their videos—music, pictures and words—were from the time period of the election being studied. That meant no images from currency, postage stamps or portraits rendered at a later time.

Put another way, Spero says, the videos needed to “capture the spirit of the election, as things actually were in that year, not the spirit of our historical memory.”

Students waded through a staggering array of primary resources, including approximately 1,000 historical newspapers, the Library of Congress image database, musical recordings and photographs. Grades were based on the videos’ academic and production values.

The students put in as much time—if not more—as they would writing a paper, with each minute of video representing eight to 10 hours of research, reading, production and editing. But unlike a paper, which might be read by the professor and perhaps a handful of fellow students, these videos had a much wider audience. Some 10,000 people from more than 50 countries viewed the students’ work on realclearhistory.com, a popular aggregator site that featured their videos.

Spero’s approach has garnered attention from leading historians such as Barbara Oberg, a member of Princeton’s history department and general editor of the Papers of Thomas Jefferson. “I am bowled over!” she wrote to Spero after viewing one of the ads. “I wish I’d known about these ads when I covered the election of 1800 in a junior seminar.”

Meanwhile, Spero’s students relished the opportunity to explore the early days of the Republic in a new way. “The fact that you have to think like a campaign manager from the late 18th or early 19th centuries when putting these videos together forces you to really immerse yourself in the history of the American presidency,” says Scott Fyall ’13, a history and political science major. “You must understand the issues that voters had to consider for each election.”

Says history major Kaitlyn Carrigan ’14, “There are so many sensory elements involved in creating the video. I’m engaged in the work in a really deep level.”

That this kind of coursework is even possible speaks to the sweeping changes that technology has brought to the study of history. As recently as two decades ago, access to primary sources was highly limited—confined to rolls of microfilm, which couldn’t be searched easily, or to the archival holdings of a specific college or university library. As these resources have
been digitized, researchers can quickly access exactly what they are looking for from anywhere around the globe. It’s a revolution to which Spero, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 2009, has had a front-row seat. “During my undergraduate years, 95 percent of my research consisted of books and microfiche,” says Spero, who also teaches a leadership studies course on the American Revolution and a history class on the American frontier. “By the end of graduate school, three-quarters of my research was digital.”

The shift aligns with Spero’s professional aspirations to make history more accessible to the general public. In addition to publishing in academic journals and anthologies and presenting at dozens of conferences, he’s also focused on harnessing the power of technology in his field. As the Pew Post-Doctoral Fellow in Early American History at the American Philosophical Society, he wrote the first digital catalog of nearly 800 manuscript collections. Among them were the more than 10,000-page Thistlewood diaries, which provide a window into slavery, and a collection consisting of the William Temple Franklin Papers, Arthur Lee Collection, Benjamin Franklin Papers and Benjamin Franklin Bache Collection, which, taken together, offer a near-complete picture of America’s diplomatic maneuverings in Europe during the American Revolution.

Spero previously worked as producer, education director and researcher for Now Debate This!, a multimedia educational project exploring the lives and legacies of Washington and Lincoln. “I never felt satisfied unless I was somehow bringing history to the public,” he says.

“People of all ages find history prior to the mid-19th century, when photography became available, difficult to connect with. Technology changes that in a really profound way.” —History and Leadership Studies Professor Patrick Spero

Spero’s students certainly enjoy the approach—despite their initial trepidation over having to master tablet readers and video editing software. “But I was more curious than scared,” says history major Kelsey J. Roggensack ’13. “So I gave it a try.”

“We have all practiced writing papers for years and years,” says Herr. “This class was entirely different—it was an extension of liberal arts for the digital age.”

Check out campaign ads made by students in Spero’s “Politics and the Presidency” class at http://bit.ly/zT54Z0.
Red and blue are not fixed properties. We tend to think of “red” and “blue”—denoting electorates that vote Republican and Democratic, respectively—as enduring. The South is Republican, and the North is Democratic. But this, of course, is a change from a time when the South was solidly Democratic and the North a Republican bastion. Change does come, driven by economic shifts (such as northern deindustrialization or sun belt growth) or demographic trends (like the explosion in the Latino/a population or the rise of the “creative class”). In 2008, demographic changes favorable to Democrats, such as growing numbers of highly educated professionals, at least in part helped Obama to win a number of typically red states, including Virginia and Colorado. At bottom, then, electoral politics is about capturing new political real estate by taking advantage of changing conditions and emerging issues.

Sometimes there are seismic shifts… The 1932 election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt ushered in the New Deal era, making national government activism the norm. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 also helped generate a dramatic shift to a new public philosophy, one that perceived government as part of the problem. So deep and transformative were these shifts, even subsequent leaders of opposing parties governed along the same lines. Dwight D. Eisenhower accepted the basic tenets of FDR’s government activism, while Bill Clinton conceded, “The era of big government is over.”

…but we’re probably not experiencing one right now. While Obama’s election as the nation’s first black president was historic, expectations that it marked the start of a new progressive era were unrealistic. Obama campaigned—and has since governed—with a mixture of standard Democratic commitments and “post-partisan” pragmatism. He has stressed moderation and ideas over ideology, paired stimulus spending with tax cuts and advanced health care reform without the single-payer option that progressives championed. Right now neither party appears to offer a radically different vision of governance than what each has offered in the past. Still, the issues being debated today—the loss of the middle class, the national deficit, immigration, the environment and the role of the U.S. in international affairs—will likely be the bedrock for fundamental change sometime in the future.

So-called “new” movements really aren’t that new. While the media jumped to cover the Tea Party and Occupy Wall
Street, evidence suggests that these movements aren’t new at all. Recent research shows that Tea Partiers represent a variant of Republican conservatism that’s existed for decades. Similarly, groups on the left have been criticizing Democrats since FDR. Rhetoric aside, party identification is the biggest predictor of voting choice. In recent elections, roughly 90 percent of Democrats and 90 percent of Republicans have voted loyally for their own party’s candidate.

**Even independents are rarely that...** Although roughly one-third of people in the U.S. identify themselves as independent, research shows the vast majority of them are “leaners,” consistently throwing their allegiance behind a single party. It’s likely that only about 10 percent of voters are truly undecided or up for grabs.

**...meaning elections are won at the (increasingly small) margins.** This was the case in 2008, when increased Democratic turnout, especially among African Americans, nudged Obama ahead in Virginia (which hadn’t voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964) and North Carolina (which last chose a Democrat, Jimmy Carter, in 1976). Both states are now considered “in play” for the Democrats in 2012, though religious conservatives might turn out in higher numbers as a result of President Obama’s embrace of socially progressive stances on gay marriage and reproductive rights. When the parties are so closely divided, and large portions of the country are uncompetitive, attention focuses even more tightly on the few remaining swing states, which see the lion’s share of campaign advertising and attack ads.

**“It’s (maybe) the economy, Stupid.”**

Conventional wisdom suggests that a weak economy favors the challenger and a strong economy, the incumbent—which would have predicted a win for George Bush in 1992, when economic indicators were looking up. It turns out that media portrayal of the economy also makes a difference. This helps explain why Clinton’s de facto slogan in 1992, “It’s the economy, Stupid,” was so successful. Which parts of the economy are improving, the timing of economic change and campaign messages can make a difference, too. All of which helps to keep politics interesting—and it’s why we all tune in on election night.
Born of refugee parents in Iran, learned English in Canada and now call California my home. Fortunately, borders have become mere lines that delineate areas for further exploration, whether they be of intellectual disciplines, faiths, cultures or lifestyles. I am forever a student.

MUSTAFA SAADI ’12