Kate Daniels is hoping the face of Southern literature will change—literally—as a result of the “Millennial Gathering of the Writers of the New South.” The historic, two-day literary conference will take place at Vanderbilt April 6–8.

“We hope the gathering will make a major statement about Southern literature at the millennium,” says Daniels, conference organizer, poet, and assistant professor of English. “The grandeur of Vanderbilt’s reputation for Southern literature has overshadowed some of the more recent developments, such as the presence of more women, minorities, and working people in the ranks of important Southern writers and poets.”

More than 40 writers are planning to attend, among them a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. Yusef Komunyakaa, who writes from his experience as an African American and a Vietnam veteran, will deliver the keynote address in poetry on Friday, April 7. A professor at Princeton, Komunyakaa received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1994 for his book, Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems (Wesleyan Poetry).

Novelist and short story writer Lee Smith will deliver the keynote address in fiction on Thursday, April 6. Smith, who recently retired from the faculty of North Carolina State University, has won many awards for her work, most recently the Academy Award in Literature presented by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in May 1999.

According to Dave Smith, coeditor of the internationally acclaimed Southern Review, a literary journal founded at Louisiana State University in 1935 by Fugitive poet Robert Penn Warren, BA’25, the effects of the Vanderbilt conference could be significant and far-reaching.

“The old generation of Southern writers is dead,” says Smith, one of the most eminent contemporary Southern writers. “This conference, to my knowledge, may gather in a single place and time almost everyone of importance in the new generations of Southern writers. I expect to see a sense of fellowship and camaraderie emerge, as well as a profitable exchange of views on our common endeavor and the culture in which we live. If previous gatherings are any guide, it might have some very substantial, international effects.”

“The setting of the Millennial Gathering at Vanderbilt is particularly appropriate, given that Vanderbilt was the home of the Fugitive literary movement in the early 20th century and has produced many award-winning writers,” Daniels says.

Writers with Vanderbilt ties will be well represented at the conference. In addition to Daniels, they include the following:

- Novelist and short-story writer Lee Smith
- Novelist Walter Sullivan, A’41, professor of English
- Professor Mark Jarman, a poet
- Novelist Walter Sullivan, A’41, professor of English
- Novelist Walter Sullivan, A’41, professor of English
- Roy Blount Jr., BA’63, and novelist

With the publication of the Fugitive, these Vanderbilt writers sparked a renaissance of Southern literature during the 1920s and 30s: Allen Tate, BA’22; left; Merrill Moore; Robert Penn Warren, BA’25, standing; John Crowe Ransom; and Donald Davidson.
Infante to step down as A&S dean

Dean Ettore F. “Jim” Infante has announced that he is resigning for health reasons from the position he has held since 1997.

“Jim Infante has brought brilliant intellect and intense energy to bear on the entire University,” Chancellor Joe B. Wyatt said. “His ideas and innovations will benefit all future generations of Vanderbilt students and their faculty mentors.

As dean of Vanderbilt’s largest college, Infante said he feels he has been able to “rearticulate and rejuvenate” the undergraduate curriculum. “One of the most precious things about Vanderbilt is its commitment to undergraduate education. I believe I have been able to help enhance the undergraduate experience for which Vanderbilt is so well known.”

Another focus of his efforts has been ensuring that the faculty have the resources they need for research and teaching excellence. “I have attempted to see to it that the faculty of the college have the support and the means to be the kind of scholars and teachers that they and we want them to be.

“I am particularly grateful to alumnus and other friends for their continued and enthusiastic support of the college and its activities. It is a wonderful institution, fully deserving this care and concern,” he says.

One alumna expressed his admiration of Infante’s relationships with students. “I felt that Dean Infante had an understanding and concern for the students and their way of life and ability to learn,” said William C. Lutz, A60, of Sholton, South Carolina, retired senior vice-president of Enterprise Rent-A-Car. “I also admired his ideas about getting alumni together with small groups of students, talking with them about business and what the world business is really like. He will be missed by all.

Infante, a mathematician professor, came to Vanderbilt in August 1997 as the successor to the late Madeleine J. Goodman. He had been senior vice president for academic affairs at the Institute of Technology, the Twin Cities Campus’s College of Mathematical and Physical Sciences and of Engineering.

The weekend included meetings with A&S deans and the parents of Preston Moister, left, the parents of Preston Moister, and Pat Tuff, whose son, Chris, is also an A&S freshman. Both families live in Atlanta.

The association publishes the “Allied Social Science Associations Convention Cornerstone” newsletter. You may contact the editor by e-mail at Cornerstone@vanderbilt.edu or by U.S. mail at Box 7703 Station B, Nashville, Tennessee 37235.

More than one thousand parents, other family members, and guests shared in their freshmen’s exciting new surroundings during the traditional freshman family Weekend last October.

The weekend included meetings with A&S deans and faculty advisers, entertainment, and plenty of free time to spend with the newly arrived-from-home student.
For the research paper, students drew names out of a witch’s hat. Each name represented one of the people involved in the Salem Witch Trials.

Students researched their assigned person, determining the person’s social characteristics, relationships with others, and their relation to the trials. Characteristics such as gender, race, age, occupation, religion, interpersonal conflicts, and social status were examined for their relevance to issues and themes involved in the trials.

Freshman Christopher G. Dorn studied Susanna Martin, who was convicted and executed in 1692. “She was very intelligent and very outspoken, and that’s probably why she was accused,” he notes.

The interdisciplinary variety also helps students make good choices of a major subject, says Associate Dean George Graham.

“I loved the seminar structure of the class,” Sweeten says. “I went to a public high school where class sizes were fairly large, so I wanted to attend a university where I knew that I could get specialized attention.”

As with freshman seminars generally, says Nabers not only kept the seminar in Salem and other Witch Hunts: Witch Trials as Sociological Crucibles, but had little to do with the dark arts that are getting Harry Potter in so much trouble these days.

No, Professor of Sociology Gary Jensen’s popular seminar served a more uplifting purpose: To teach students how to examine the sociological causes, structure, and changing dynamics involved in community turmoil.

“Everyone’s heard of the infamous 1692 witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts. Few realize that the Salem trials came at the end of what is known as the Early Modern Witch Craze that spanned three centuries. I wanted students to learn how to look at such sociological phenomena in the context of relationships and conflicts in the community.”

In the process, Jensen’s students covered 500 years of Western civilization, including satanic panics, ritual child abuse, and political witch-hunts such as the 1950’s “Red Scare” in the United States.

“I feel like I have learned a great deal about Salem and witch hunts in general,” says freshman Eric Catalfamo. “I found our detailed analysis of the sociological patterns that recur in witch trials throughout history to be fascinating.”

“Professor Jensen was amazing,” says freshman Kiah D. S. Dennis. “He knew everything there was to know about the Salem witch trials and such. It was fun just to listen to him talk about everything because he was so animated and knowledgeable about the subject.”

As with freshman seminars generally, Jensen’s class fostered close communication among students and teacher, allowing the former to participate actively in their own education. Because the class also fulfills a writing requirement, the seminar required students to complete three essays and one semester research paper.

Freshman seminars, he says, are designed in the turbulent 1970’s to draw students closer to faculty and to infuse a passion for learning, the freshman seminars are structured to foster close working relationships among students with faculty members, who are often senior professors. No more than 18 students are registered in each class, and courses that fulfill a writing requirement are kept at a 15-student maximum.

“Which helps students develop the ability to write clearly and persuasively,” says Nabers. “It almost had a family atmosphere to it.”

Making that transition with other freshmen in a supportive environment was more than fascinating, says Nabers: it’s fun. Undergirding the fun and intellectual stimulation, however, is the true purpose of the seminars: to help students develop a scholarly approach to asking and answering questions, as well as finding and communicating solutions to problems.

“Professor Nabers says that her seminar on murder and detective fiction challenged her thinking. “You began to question if you really believed, for example, that entrapment was a crime. It twisted your head in knots and forced you to question everything, and the discussion that was sparked from it in class was phenomenal.”

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Brainstorm • Scientists have known for years that, to perceive figures against a busy background, human vision uses color, brightness, and direction of motion. But startling new findings by Professor of Psychology Randolph Blake and graduate student Sang-Hun Lee indicate that the human brain can also use the precise timing of subtle visual changes, even in the absence of any other cues, to group elements into objects. This is “the most interesting new work in visual psychophysics to come out in the last 10 years,” says neuroscientist William Newsome of Stanford University School of Medicine. “They tell us something new and important about what the visual system can do.” And, that, says Blake, “is their thrust. They say, ‘We measure and understand the underlying neural basis.’”

Stress less, live longer • What are the things in life that affect the process of aging? asks psychology Professor Oakley Ray. His research has shown that lifestyle and environment are more important than genetics. “What we can do is control the environment,” he says. “How old you are is in your head,” he says. All of this is elaborated in his new book, Getting Up the Senate: The Unequal Consequences of Equal Representation.

New faculty • Jay M. Bernstein has joined the Vanderbilt faculty as the W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy. He received his undergraduate honors degree in philosophy from Trinity College in Connecticut and his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Edinburgh. A leading world scholar, Bernstein has written extensively on the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, aesthetics, philosophy of literature, and mass culture.

Walter J. Chazin, right, has joined the Vanderbilt faculty as professor of biochemistry and director of the new Structural Biology Program, a major initiative that bridges the University and the Medical Center. This new program will involve approximately 12 investigators focusing on atomic resolution in structural biology—detailing molecular structures down to the atomic level. It will also be a resource center promoting molecular biology across the campus and will bring computational biology expertise to Vanderbilt for the first time. Chazin comes to Vanderbilt from the Scripps Research Institute in California.

Kudos • Cathy L. Jeffreys, professor of Spanish and chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, has had her book, Modernidad, Moderny, and the Development of Spanish American Literature, recognized by Choice magazine as a 1999 Outstanding Academic Title. It was published by the University of Texas Press, Austin, in 1998.

A&S graduate devotes life to serving others • Although she has been content just to learn about the different people who inhabit the world. On campus, in her community, in the streets, the former Ingram Scholar devotes her time and energy to helping others. It's a pattern that began in high school, matured during her undergraduate days at Vanderbilt, and prepared her for her chosen career. With a major in Spanish and international public policy, McDonald is currently working as a lead program and fund development specialist at the national headquarters of SER (Services for Education and Rehabilitation), the nation's largest non-profit in the United States working with Hispanics on job education, training, and community development, she says.

Biblical inspiration • McDonald credits her commitment to service to her reading of the Bible, especially the parable that speaks of the woman wearing clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and calling people to account for injustice. “It's a commitment that grew and matured while attending Vanderbilt on an Ingram Scholarship, which requires a substantial commitment to community service on the part of the student. In the next millennium, computers may use individual molecular switches, allowing them to shrink to the size of salt grains.

Molecular electronics—molecular switches— is currently the focus of considerable research worldwide. Vanderbilt physicist Sokrates T. Dimitrakopoulos, left, has acquired a supercomputer valued at $1.2 million from the IBM Corporation that will allow him to simulate electrical properties of the molecular circuits more effectively. His and members of his research team, Massimiliano DiVoncenti, center, and C. C. Vattay, are pictured with the new computer.

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Remember that professor who inspired you to choose your life's work? The one who caused you to think differently about something you had always taken for granted? Your most unforgettable character? We want to know who they are. If one of your professors made a lasting impression on you, let us know about her or him. We also welcome your short articles (300 words maximum) about interesting faculty members. Send your nominations or articles by e-mail to Cornerstone@vanderbilt.edu, or by U.S. mail to A&S Cornerstone, Box 7703 Station B, Nashville, TN 37235.

Where are they now?

Several Vanderbilt students flank the Queen Mother of the Ashanti Tribe, center, while participating in the Vanderbilt Study Abroad Program in Ghana during the summer of 1999. Joining them were Vanderbilt Professor Felix Buaheng, third from left, director of the program; and of the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center at Vanderbilt, and several members of the Queen Mother's entourage at the far left and right of the photo. Vanderbilt's program at the University of Ghana is one of the College's newest Study Abroad Programs.

DID YOU KNOW?

Celebrating a new millennium and a new century

Many things have changed at Vanderbilt since the beginning of the last century. In 1900, arts and sciences classes were held in Main Hall (now Kirkland Hall), which sported two towers. A single tower replaced them after a fire destroyed the upper part of the building in 1905.

Seven of the hundreds of trees and shrubs on campus have been designated Tennessee State Champion trees. One, Vanderbilt's bicentennial oak, is more than 250 years old and was growing at the time of the American Revolution.