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Lackey Receives Imagine Fund Award for Research on the American Biographical Novel

Summary: Michael Lackey received a 2013 Imagine Fund Award for work on a new book titled *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists*.

(Feb. 13, 2013) - Michael Lackey, associate professor of English, received the all-University 2013 Imagine Fund Award for work on a new book titled *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists*. It is the first book of interviews in which authors define their objectives as biographical novelists.

Lackey’s interest in the genre piqued while researching a biography on J. Saunders Redding, a member of the Haverford Group featured in his forthcoming book *The Haverford Discussions: A Black Integrationist Manifesto for Racial Justice*. While researching the biography, Lackey looked to Jay Parini’s *Benjamin’s Crossing* for inspiration, and the biographical novel “took a hold of [him],” raising questions as to the genre’s significance and potential. He reached out to Parini, and the two formed a friendship that not only informed Lackey’s writing process, but also provided him the opportunity to speak with other biographical novelists. Parini later delivered the University of Minnesota, Morris’s 2012 Barber Lecture at Lackey’s request.

Upon completion of *Truthful Fictions*, Lackey will have interviewed some of the country's most famous writers, including Michael Cunningham, Anita Diamant, Bruce Duffy, Sherry Jones, Russell Banks, Julia Alvarez, Edmund White, Jay Parini, Lance Olsen, Joanna Scott, and M. Allen Cunningham. Although his original intent was to use these interviews as a resource for his scholarly monograph about the biographical novel, Lackey soon realized that they could also stand on their own as a distinct project.

“To date, there has been no scholarly study clarifying why this genre of fiction has become so popular,” says Lackey. “To figure out why contemporary writers are writing these kinds of novels, I contacted some of them, but then I realized: this could be a book. I have been recording and transcribing my interviews so that we can understand why these writers are doing what they do from their own perspectives.”

Lackey also aims to identify the cultural and intellectual shift that led to the proliferation of biographical novels in the 1980s. When asked what he believes to be the reason for the shift, Lackey points to the genre’s varied achievements.

“Biographical fiction gets at an interior truth about history, an imagined psychological perspective to identify and define the conditions and ideologies that gave birth to momentous historical events.”

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