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Design-Author Pioneer Inspires Community With Residency at RU-N

By Lawrence Lerner

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Warren Lehrer tells lots of stories. And he does so in multiple mediums, drawing on a skillset that is as deep as it is varied. But the story that stands out is the one that crystalized his eclectic career path.

As an undergraduate at CUNY Queens College, in New York City, he majored in painting and drawing. He'd also been a writer of poetry and short stories, and had written for the school newspaper. At some point, words started to leap into his paintings, much to the chagrin of one of his professors, who admonished him that words and images should not go together.

"When I left his office, I knew I had a mission," says Lehrer with a sly grin. "I would combine words and images, for better or for worse. It could be no other way."

Lehrer, a graphic designer, writer and performer who is known internationally as a pioneer in the fields of visual literature and design authorship, is bringing his special brand of storytelling to Rutgers University-Newark as part of a semester-long residency this spring.

The residency includes an exhibition of Lehrer's work at Dana Library that runs through mid-May—along with a performance reading by Lehrer, followed by a panel discussion on the future of the book, on April 7 at the Paul Robeson Campus Center.

But the heart of the residency is what Lehrer is bringing to the classroom: He's serving as a guest instructor for undergraduate graphic-design and interactive-design classes and is working with students from the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program, all of whom are contributing to Lehrer's latest book, titled appropriately enough, *A Life in Books: The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley*.

Residency à la Bleu Mobley

To understand what it means for these classes to be "contributing" to *A Life in Books*, it's essential to understand Lehrer's latest tour de force, which illuminates the groundbreaking creativity and depth of the design-author's oeuvre.

A Life in Books is not one book but 101 books written by Lehrer's alter-ego, Bleu Mobley, a prolific author who, while serving a sentence in prison, decides to write a memoir, then aborts the project, leaving a stash of cassette tapes onto which he's poured his deepest thoughts. Lehrer the author starts *A Life in Books* by playing a kind of Truman Capote to Mobley, contacting the writer through his lawyer to ask if he can listen to the tapes (permission granted), then edit a book that would be one part memoir, based largely on the tapes, and one part retrospective of Mobley's works.

The result is an innovative graphical novel that plumbs the depths not only of Mobley's career but of issues ranging from growing up, marriage and fatherhood to poverty, capital punishment and the death of the book in the digital age—all while pushing the boundaries of the book form in the spirit of Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware and Ben Katchor.

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During his residency at Rutgers University-Newark, Lehrer is having the design and writing students flesh out two of Mobley's 101 books and build a website for one of them.

“Though the students are using the framework from my book, the goal is to help them discover their own voice, to give them room to find their own way into the stories,” says Lehrer.

Professor Chantal Fischzang, who teaches the graphic-design class that Lehrer is working with, echoes that sentiment, adding that his residency is important on a number of levels.

“Warren is influential in our field in a very specific way: He's about authoring his design,” says Fischzang. “He's exposing our students to new ways of approaching their work, to making content. And he brings an amazing performative energy into the classroom, which really engages students.”

Silo-busting and Other Tricks of the Trade

Lehrer's current Rutgers University-Newark residency is actually his second (his first came in 2009). Both times, it was Professor Tim Raphael, director of the Center for Migration and the Global City, who brought him to campus.

Raphael first met Lehrer in 2003 at a panel where the graphic designer–author and his wife, actor and radio producer Judith Sloan, were speaking about their multimedia oral-history project “Crossing the Boulevard,” which documented post-1965 immigrants in the New York City borough of Queens, the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world.

When Raphael read a recent article in *The Atlantic* about Lehrer’s new book, he felt it was time to get him back to campus. He’s always been drawn to Lehrer’s use of multimedia—graphical books, performances, film and video, animations, radio documentaries, websites—on projects that are at once whimsical and thematically serious.

He also appreciates that Lehrer—who at age 58 is as spry as they come—is investigating the form and role of the book in the digital age, and he feels that the multidisciplinary aspect of Lehrer’s work is especially germane to the times.

“Warren does a great job of silo-busting, of getting students from various disciplines to collaborate on projects; it’s the nature of his work,” says Raphael. “At the same time, he’s getting our MFA Creative Writing students—who are already looking for the next place that poetry and the novel are going—to expand their toolkit and think about new ways of telling stories. He’s a terrific role model.”

Lehrer’s Rutgers University-Newark residency is but one stop on a grand tour for *A Life in Books*, which includes performance readings, film screenings and stints at many other universities across the U.S.

And while Lehrer’s work takes him all over the map—media-wise, thematically and geographically—he is no stranger to academia. He did his graduate work in graphic design at Yale University and is a professor at Purchase College, SUNY, and also a founding faculty member of the Designer as Author graduate program at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

The panel he’ll be part of on the future of the book, on April 7, will include other academic–artists and like-minded folks, including Rutgers University-Newark Photography Professor Nick Kline; Andrew Losowsky, a fellow at Stanford University who is working on a community pop-up publishing toolkit for crisis situations; and Beth Anderson, executive vice-president and publisher at Audible.com.

Lehrer is looking forward to what that panel discussion holds in store, and to seeing what his Rutgers University-Newark students come up with as they develop, then wind down, their projects.

“Lehrer is German for ‘teacher.’ So I have little choice—it’s natural for me to teach. I have high standards and love working with students, and giving them the inspiration and investigative space to hatch their own ideas,” says Lehrer. “I’m looking forward to seeing their final projects. That’s the best part.”

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