Award Helps Junior Faculty Reach Milestone Crucial to Achieving Tenure

For most assistant professors in the humanities, the key to tenure is publishing a major academic book. UW-Madison’s Center for the Humanities provides a boost to junior faculty in this pivotal endeavor, and announced three recipients of its First Book Award this week—historian of the recent life sciences Nicole Nelson, classics researcher Nandini Pandey, and scholar of print culture Jonathan Senchyne.

The competitive program allows junior faculty in the humanities and interpretive social sciences to assemble a “dream team” of readers for their first academic book-in-progress. Winners get to invite leading scholars in their field to join an interdisciplinary group of reviewers from among the faculty at UW. All read the scholar’s manuscript and meet together in Madison for a hands-on workshop to collectively devise strategies for improving the manuscript and placing the book with a top academic publisher.

The goal is to turn solid and promising manuscripts from UW humanities researchers into first-rate, field-shaping books. This year’s recipients will expand their scholarly networks and draw on the expertise of readers within and outside of their own fields to ensure their work reaches broader audiences across disciplinary boundaries.

Assistant Professor of the History of Science Nicole Nelson’s First Book award-winning manuscript, “Model Behavior: Animal Experiments and the Genetics of Psychiatric Disorders,” uses ethnographic methods to explore how scientists develop and deploy animal models to produce molecular knowledge about human alcoholism and anxiety. Nelson contends that animal experiments are not only a major part of the practice of contemporary biomedicine, but also a way in which we come to know and define ourselves. In this truly interdisciplinary project, Nelson demonstrates the non-human animals at the center of scientific and cultural understandings of disorders and behaviors we might think make us “uniquely human.”

Nandini Pandey, Assistant Professor of Classics, joined the faculty at UW in the fall of 2014. Her research focuses on Latin poetry in its complex relationship with early imperial art and political power. Her manuscript “The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome,” explores how Roman writers responded to Augustan iconography in ways that shaped its perception in subsequent culture. Pandey’s project is part of a larger re-examination of scholarly assumptions about the relationship between art, society, and power in the Augustan period. Her project is
grounded in Latin literature, but also engages with history, art history, archaeology, and critical theory. Pandey’s manuscript is poised to not only join other scholarly breakthroughs on Roman poetry, but also to make a sophisticated contribution to scholarship on material culture.

Jonathan Senchyne, Assistant Professor of Library and Information Studies and Associate Director of the Center for the History of Print and Digital Culture, studies the materiality of books, print, and media, focusing especially on the intersections of materiality and culture. His manuscript, “Intimate Paper and the Materiality of Early American Literature” examines the literary, visual, and material cultures of rag paper in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through looking at paper, a material threshold between text and reader, Senchyne explores the connections between material and meaning, gender and labor, private and public. His first book will not only illuminates new dimensions of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literary public sphere, but also appeal to scholars in media studies more broadly.

Past recipients of the award have not only seen their work through to press but garnered major prizes for their books. The inaugural First Book seminar centered on the manuscript of Merle Curti Associate Professor of History Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen. Her book, American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas, received the American Historical Association John H. Dunning Prize, the Society for U.S. Intellectual History Annual Book Award, and the Journal of the History of Ideas Morris D. Forkosch Prize for the Best First Book in Intellectual History. Associate Professor of Law Mitra Sharafi took the 2015 Law and Society Association's J. Willard Hurst Prize for her book, Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsí Legal Culture, 1772-1947. Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities, Associate Professor of Communication Arts Karma R. Chávez’s trailblazing book, was named the 2014 Book of the Year by the LGBTQ Communication Studies Division of the National Communication Association.

The Center's First Book program was initially funded by a short-term humanities programming grant from the A.W. Mellon Foundation. This year, in recognition of the successes of the program, support has been provided by the University of Wisconsin–Madison Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education (with funding from the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation) and the International Division.

A full list of past recipients and their projects, as well as information on how to apply for the award, can be found here: http://humanities.wisc.edu/research/first-book