

In memoriam

“Inspiration is a community phenomenon.”

Sarah “Sally” Sasz wrote these words while she was my student. It was the Fall of 2017 and Sally was enrolled in my afternoon section of “Literature in a Digital Age.” The context was an essay she wrote, “Fan Fiction,” a practice by which writers borrow elements (characters, languages, worlds) from other writings and rewrite them, legally or otherwise, into new forms. Sally’s specific focus was Michael Chabon’s *The Final Solution*, an elegiac novella that pays tribute to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In Sally’s argument, language, literature and expression are boundless, even if, for reasons of commerce, we protect them at times with laws. To paraphrase her point: writers who borrow do not always steal.

Sally’s sentence stood out to me. It was a memorable opening line and it carried philosophical weight. Indeed, I remembered it every time I saw her in the hallways of Greenlaw or around campus. The sentence also has a history, as it grew from her interest in Goethe’s writings on *WeltLiteratur*, or “World Literature,” a foundation for many wonderful enterprises, including our own Department of Comparative Literature at Carolina. Sally was new to UNC and she was clearly enamored of the intellectual environment on campus, where ideas, theories and evidence are discussed with both intensity and respect. During our afternoon class, when circadian rhythms told us to rest, she was always most awake, seated near a window, at focused attention. As the semester wore on Sally seemed to absorb that light; as the days grew shorter and shadows lengthened, Sally continued to bloom. To make her noun into a verb, she was inspired. Books and ideas, words and theories and the community of their life, of our lives - she embraced them in her rare and gracious way.

Goethe meant many things by *WeltLiteratur*, and it has meant many things to others. It is the bedrock of the institution of literature - the work of translation, scholarship, publishing, editing, writing, imagination, cultural exchange and the study of every language. Common to them all is the argument that expressivity exceeds control and restriction. In its highest forms, it ultimately belongs to what Goethe in a letter to Thomas Carlyle called a “common world.” It is ours and it is to be cherished and defended, debated and enjoyed, appropriated and rewritten, with inspiration only to guide us.

Inspiration and community. Sally found them at Carolina but she also gave them to us by her bright presence and her hard work. She embodied our motto *lux libertas*: Sally was a light in the classroom, in the office and in the corridors of Greenlaw Hall, and in her work she was inspired, and therefore free.

Henry Veggian