

Bringing Middle-Earth to Lower Beamer

An inside look at the Tolkien Society's creative writing group

By HANNAH PUGH

"One of the best parts is the people I know who are going to be there," says Shannon Egan, fourth from left.



When I arrive at my first WhInklings meeting, the Stupe table has an array of pineapple chunks, watermelon and carrot cake, and is adorned with pink flowers and a "Reserved" sign on a silver pedestal in the corner. "WhInklings" stands for the Wheaton Inklings, named in honor of the famous literary discussion group which included writers such as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson. Originally an extension of the Wheaton Tolkien Society, the group not only exists for its members to appreciate Tolkien's work but to also experience his writing process hands-on.

Meetings are held in the Stupe on the first and third Tuesday of each

month from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. The group typically includes around 15 writers in the corner booth near the Sam's entrance. Laura Schmidt, one of the original founders of the group and archivist at the Wade Center, explained, "The Stupe atmosphere is the right kind of atmosphere for this group. It feels low-key, it is easy to get food or beverages. And the Inklings met in a pub, so to stay true to our calling as the WhInklings, we want to meet in the Stupe for as long as we can."

Schmidt graduated from Wheaton in 2003 with a double-major in English literature and history. She said, "I read Lewis and Tolkien growing up. Tolkien is my ab-

solute favorite and Lewis is a close second." Schmidt throws her head back and laughs when I ask her if she is a writer. "Do I call myself a writer? Probably not. Do I write a lot? Yes — for my job. I do a lot of blog writing and I review a lot of writing. I facilitate the group to make sure we are having good conversations, that people are getting their work submitted, and that they have good feedback from everyone."

The regulars include faculty, staff, students and alumni. "For me it is always a goal to build community outside of the classroom," Schmidt said. Members from a variety of majors attend WhInklings meetings, including philosophy, history, economics, math,

science, English and more. The diversity of interests allows writers to benefit from resources they would not have access to on their own, such as historical architecture or laws of physics. Schmidt said, "People will say, 'Hey! I have a book on medieval cottages,' or something like that. We've actually had that happen."

Junior Shannon Egan, a current member of the group, said that "one of the best parts of being in WhInklings is the people I know are going to be there. There are a couple of particular characters like Miss Ellie Roth. She used to attend Wheaton. She is utterly infatuated with Michael Crichton, the screenplay writer for

Jurassic Park." Roth currently works for Browne & Miller Literary Associates where she reviews young adult science fiction and fantasy titles for "Booklist."

"There's Tim," Egan continued, "He is a published writer. He tends to bring both more professional insights and common complaints. And of course there is Laura, who works at the Wade Center. She is an absolute jewel. She is the one who creates the traditions. She and Ellie tend to bring in treats as well, cookies, brownies, homemade sorts of things — it's very sweet."

Additionally, Stephen Lovett, a professor of mathematics contributes to the meetings. "I have

written plenty of textbooks,” he said, pointing to a shelf in his Meyer Science Center office. “I have written about four math textbooks. Sometimes to relax I try to write fiction. None of it has been published. It’s fun, it’s relaxing and sometimes it helps me think about ideas. I’ve worked for quite awhile on a trilogy that is near-future science fiction.”

Schmidt emphasized that it is important for the group to provide community and encouragement to its members. Being a writer, specifically a fiction writer, is often a lonely journey. The WhInklings exist to empower these writers to express their creativity through mutual edification and listening. “Writers need feedback to keep moving forward,” Schmidt said. “In fact, Tolkien needed that. He needed C.S. Lewis and the Inklings beside him. That was a common theme in his life as well. We want to be a safe [and fun] place

ciated anxieties. I’ve been working on the same novel (among other projects) for about five years now, and there are some other long-time members who have been following that book’s journey the entire time.”

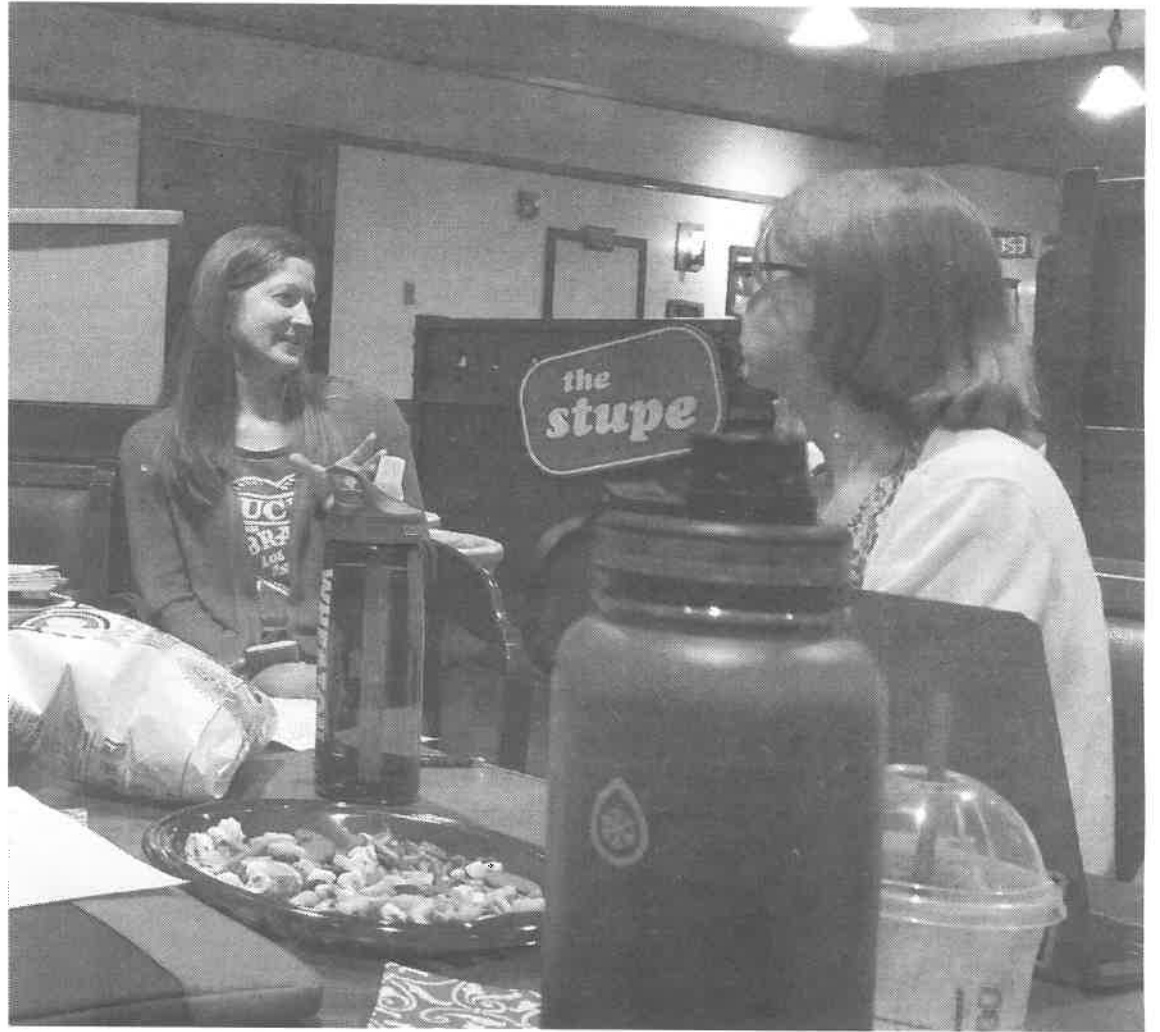
Generally, the group will read two to three submissions before coming to their bi-monthly meeting, then gather to share comments, criticisms and encouragement with each other. They begin by asking the author if they would like something specific to be reviewed, such as character development, setting, pacing or dialogue. They always express gratitude. When I visited, a writer named Jacob shared a short-story. “Thank you, Jacob, for sharing this piece,” everyone chanted in rehearsed unison. The group then focuses on the areas where the writer requests feedback. Otherwise, they provide general feedback for the writer. The criticism is tailored to provide the writer with

Sure, ‘feedback’ is kinder, but I like [my work] being torn apart.”

According to Tolkien,

literature was that it was enjoyable, but ultimately was made of “lies that are covered in silver.” Due

live. “Storytelling is a way for people to consider the issues, conflicts and the matters of the world that



writing is about emulating the image of God.

Lewis met Tolkien and

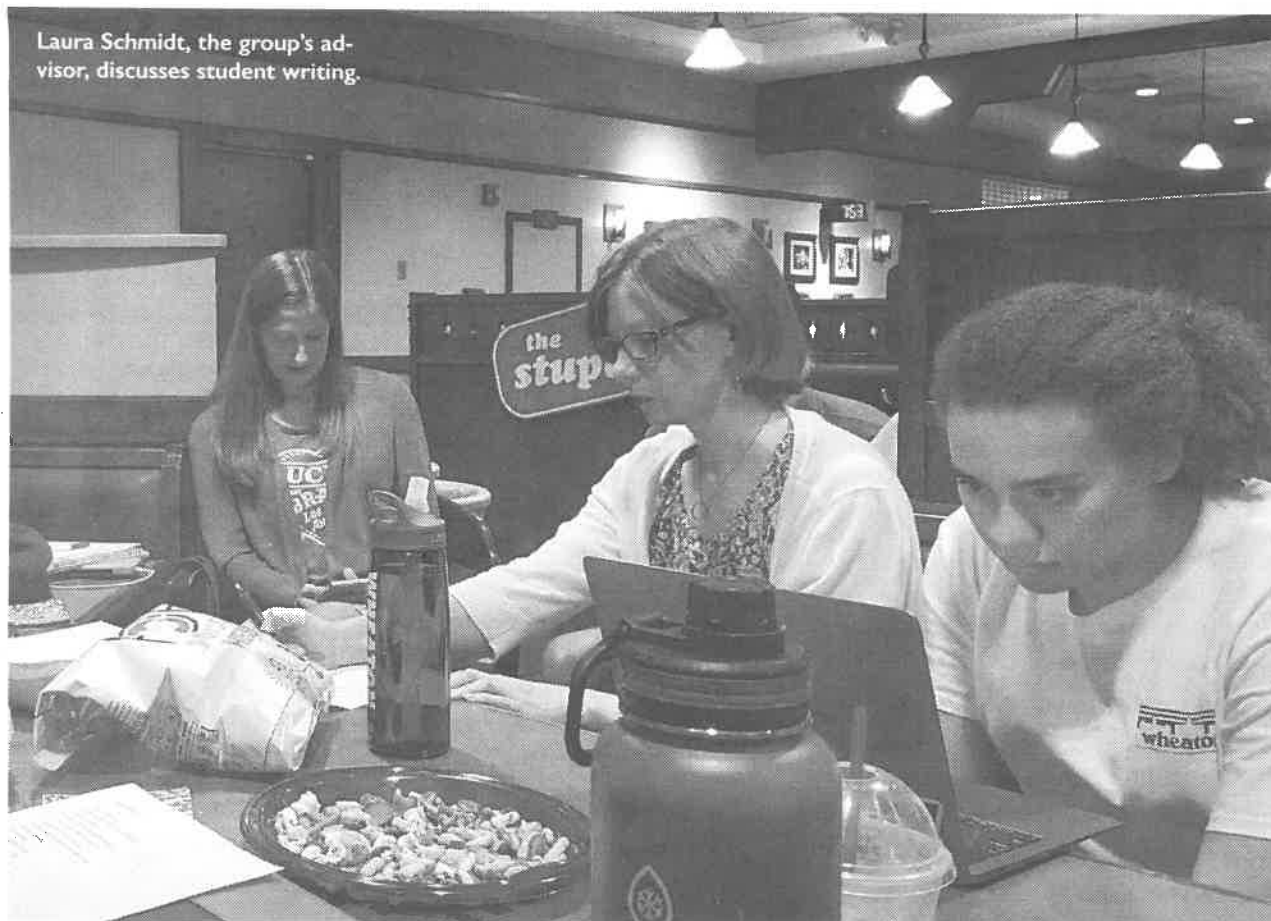
we are in now through the lens of magic, mystery and wonder,” Egan said. “You can play with bringing certain things forward, or putting certain things in the background by shifting setting and plot. It’s a way to learn more about the world and more about yourself, and to consider what it could be.”

As Lovett put it, “storytelling is a laboratory for thinking about human experience. It is for folks who like fantasy and sci-fi and speak a similar language — they see life through a certain lens.” Similarly, sophomore William Schneider said, “I’ve found that my experience in fantasy has helped me understand some hard-to-comprehend aspects of the nature of God and creation.”

Schmidt continued, “I used to think that everyone had to love fiction to understand creativity. Now I understand that

God can speak to people through many kinds of avenues. The WhInklings see it through fantasy literature, and we seek to nurture that group of people.”

By surrounding themselves with other storytellers, the WhInklings try to better understand the world in which we



Laura Schmidt, the group’s advisor, discusses student writing.

for people to share.”

“The act of writing a novel is solitary, so to have time carved out to connect with other people who know what that’s like is emotionally healthy,” Roth agreed. “WhInklings helped connect me with writers on campus who could relate to the writing process and the asso-

the most honest and encouraging edits they can receive. I was surprised at the brutally honest feedback, but when asked about his feelings toward criticism Jacob replied, “Any closer I can get to good writing is something I am going to cherish.” Roth jumped in: “I welcome the word ‘criticism.’

Schmidt described how Lewis benefited from Tolkien’s view of writing, an incredible example of the power of creating as a group. Lewis, who was an atheist before eventually converting to Christianity, spent his early years focusing primarily on the physical world. Schmidt said that Lewis’ perspective on

“Creating can be a lonely process,” Schmidt said. “And you need community to be able to flourish in the act of creation and the journey that goes with it. Anyone who wants to join the WhInklings for that purpose is more than welcome.”