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SMITH COLLEGE'S INDEPENDENT STUDENT PRESS

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Letter from the Editorial Board

This year at Smith College is the “Year on Democracies” and, in that spirit, The Sophian aims to write articles that follow and document how Smith makes its decisions and in whose interest. Smith’s President, Kathleen McCartney, told our Managing Editor this semester that we should cover “something nice about the college, like how good the Mountain Day shirts were.” While the Mountain Day shirts were admittedly better than in years past, our goals as a student paper are set higher than this. We are committed to telling complex, nuanced stories of our student body and the administration here at Smith. We are interested in both holding the administration accountable to its promises and celebrating the passion and vibrancy of our community.

As local newspapers around the country shut down,

the power and importance of local journalism becomes increasingly clear. Our team of about 60 students works tirelessly to cover the happenings of the five blocks of our campus and beyond. In doing so, we refine our skills to become the new faces of journalism when we graduate. We also work to expand our scope and showcase Smith students’ various creative endeavours.

We, the editorial board of The Sophian, are thrilled to present this October 2021 issue, our first physical print edition after a year and a half of exclusively digital publications. Join us in investigating the ways that COVID-19 is still affecting student life and experiences, diving into the archives to learn about Smith traditions and their histories and delighting in our unique student community.

Our staff has grown tremendously this fall, which has helped us to expand our reach as we strive to highlight the variety of stories and endeavors that take place on our campus. We would like to specifically recognize all the first year and sophomore students, who have entered this community with little knowledge of the traditions and culture here. After a year and a half of being so dispersed and isolated, seeing fellow students on campus gather in community again brings us tremendous joy.

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COVID's Effect on Study Abroad Plans and Experiences

NAOMI SCULLY-BRISTOL '25
NEWS WRITER

COVID-19 has made participating in study abroad programs more complicated than ever, with only five students able to do so last semester. This semester, Smith's study abroad office is offering more opportunities, but students are still experiencing some hurdles and confusion with the process.

"I was supposed to go in the spring of my junior year to Ecuador, and that ended up getting cancelled because the COVID situation there just wasn't looking great," said Grace Jensen '22, a Spanish minor. She ended up going on the PRESHCO program to Spain after her planned trips to Ecuador in fall 2020 and then spring 2021 each got cancelled.

"Smith was in communication with me," said Jensen, "it was hard not knowing, but I also understood where they were coming from." In October the study abroad office sent Jensen an email letting her know that her trip for the spring was cancelled. This year there were no programs available in Latin America, so she went to Spain.

There are two parts to the decision regarding which programs students can participate in and countries they can travel to. First, the study abroad risk advisory group, made up of faculty, deans and the five college risk manager, looks at a variety of metrics, such as state department and CDC advisories, hospitalization rate and financial risk, to conditionally approve students to go. After that the group continues to monitor the test positivity rate, new case rate and vaccination rate. If conditions deteriorate, trips can be cancelled even up to a week before departure.

"First I got conditional approval, I think at the beginning of June, from study abroad and at that point I had sent all the stuff, but I didn't really expect Smith to approve it," said Jaimie Mayor '22 "and then they never rescinded their approval." Mayor, a linguistics major, is currently in Jordan with a CET program—they were planning to go their junior year, but ended up delaying until this year due to the pandemic.

Due to the uncertainty that COVID brought upon these programs, students struggled to plan for their semesters. They still needed to register for classes and housing at Smith in case their programs were cancelled, while also registering for courses and housing through the study abroad programs in case they weren't cancelled.

"That was kind of stressful," said Sophia Esparza, a junior currently in Denmark, "It felt like nothing was set in stone until I actually got to Copenhagen and got to my room and unpacked my bags, and I was like 'okay, it's not getting taken away from me, I'm actually here.'"

Despite the anticipated hurdles, many students remain committed to traveling abroad. "I'm doing a



PHOTO BY MARIAM HABIB '25

lot of advising because there are a lot of sophomores, and quite a few juniors, who are like 'let's make this happen'," said Lisa Johnson, Associate Dean for International Study, "and I love working with them to figure out how to make that happen."

The Office of International Study has developed a playbook, which is on Smith's website, that details what students on the four Smith programs can expect out of their experience. They are currently operating in the moderately restrictive mode which includes a flexible quarantine, multi-modal instruction and limited independent travel. The playbook is not for all 120 plus programs Smith offers, but these programs have likely developed something similar of their own that meets Smith's safety expectations.

"Everything is pretty much the same," said Mayor, "it's just mainly making sure I have the PCR test to fly and stuff like that."

One issue that students in non-English speaking countries have faced is masks. Not being able to see facial cues or read lips can make understanding a foreign language increasingly difficult. "In classes sometimes when the professor is wearing a mask and also talking really fast, and also people here have a certain accent, all of that combined makes the Spanish a little difficult," said Jensen, "but that's how you learn I guess."

Despite these hurdles, many students who are currently abroad report an overall positive experience. "I was originally very hesitant about staying with a host family, but it has definitely been a highlight of my trip," said Li Li Fiano, a junior in Spain with PRESH-

CO, "I have been able to try many different foods, sports and meet so many lovely people."

COVID has made study abroad a more difficult and confusing process. Trips have been cancelled and students may feel stress and confusion regarding the status of their programs and uncertainty about whether they'll actually be able to go. Even so, students have been working hard to make the best out of the situation.

Jensen, whose trips were cancelled twice and who wasn't able to travel to the country she originally wanted to, said "it was kind of my only option, but at the same time I'm really glad I'm here. I don't have any regrets, and I'm not really upset about that right now."

ELLA LANGENTHAL '25
FEATURES WRITER

Smith Mock Weddings

A white dress, bouquet of flowers, music and wedding party—the whole shebang. Since nearly the founding of Smith College, Smithies have been marrying each other in elaborate mock wedding ceremonies.

Already this year, only a little over a month into the semester, a mock wedding has been held, of course, at the Orb. When Amelia Wesley '25, and one of her roommates, Madison Whitmore '25, found out that they shared the same birthday, they decided that the only proper way to celebrate would be to hold a fake wedding as a birthday party, with their third roommate, Juno Elkner '25, acting as both officiant and photographer. Wesley, dressed in a 40's style wedding dress found at Goodwill, walked down the aisle to the Twilight wedding song, while Whitmore, dressed as the groom, stood waiting. The event had been planned a couple of weeks before, and friends joined as members of the wedding party: maid of honor, mother and father of the bride, even an impromptu flower girl throwing dried leaves. The whole party was meant to be a fun and celebratory time, with a lot of humor. Wesley said, "We chose to do it at the Orb because it just seemed like the funniest place."

During the ceremony, Elkner read some of Sappho's poems to the bride, groom and attendees. However, there was another surprise, planned by the three roommates: Elkner objected to the marriage, stating that they didn't want to live with a married couple, to add to the drama and goofiness of the ceremony. Wesley said she and her roommates hope for this to become an ongoing tradition, and are planning to hold another mock wedding next year for their birthday. Only fitting, as when Wesley threw her bouquet after the ceremony, it was Whitmore who caught it.

Wesley said that no one planning the ceremony had known about the tradition of Smithies holding mock weddings, but even so, parts of the ceremony are similar to other mock weddings held over the years. For instance, nearly every mock wedding ceremony parodied heterosexual marriages, with one member dressing up as a groom and one as a bride, and other members of the wedding party splitting up fairly evenly in dressing up in more traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine clothing.

According to Eavan McNeil '22, who as a part of the archives concentration has spent a lot of time studying the history of Smith College including its past social scene, many photos of Smithies from the early to mid 1900s show women dressed up in suits and other masculine clothing, both for fake weddings and for other parties and social events at the time. In an article found in the archives detailing the wedding ceremony of Mabel Duncan and Helen Langley Putnam, both class of 1893, Putnam, who played the groom, is said to have worn "a swell shirt front and a swallowtail



PHOTO BY JUNO ELKNER '25

coat." The invitations from this wedding also emphasized this masculine persona, as they read "Mr and Mrs Lyman Hungerford request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their daughter Mabel to Mr. H. Langley Putnam."

Nearly a century later, this same format was used in the invitation for a mock wedding held at Smith in 1983. This wedding was held by the seniors of Cushing House as simply a fun, celebratory time, according to Ellen Hartshorne Whitney '83, who participated in the wedding as a bridesmaid. Whitney said that the idea sprang to life during dinnertime conversations with housemates. Whitney, like Wesley, said that she didn't think any of them had heard of it being a tradition before. "It just sprang from our imagination at one of those round tables," Whitney said, adding that it all came together spontaneously.

According to Whitney, the whole event was a "big fantasy"—a way to celebrate and experience the fun of a wedding without the responsibility of a marriage. And, for most of the women, she added, marriage was still a ways off. But this was a way for them to take part in the "big bride and wedding fantasy" that was prevalent around them, and the fanciness of the '80s. Each person's role fell into place, Whitney said. "The bride just wanted to be loved by a man, wanted to be the bride, and the groom was game for anything." The bridesmaids were all dressed up in a more girly manner, while the ushers were all up for dressing a little more "drag-like," said Whitney.

Looking back, Whitney said it surprised her that they didn't look at it with any sense of irony. "No

one even thought of the possibility that two women might get married, even though we were all smart women and open for the time," Whitney said. She remembers only one of the women in the photos being openly gay at the time, but said that she was still pretty quiet about her sexuality. "It was secure enough at Smith to be out, but you wouldn't talk about it and you wouldn't hold a girl's hand," Whitney described. "Even in a place that was one of the most open places there was and had a range of sexual expression."

Overall, though, the wedding was a light moment for everyone. Whitney said it brought nearly all the seniors in the house together, including people who had different majors and interests, and didn't socialize much. "We were playacting," Whitney said. "A bunch of young women who thought weddings were fun and liked dressing up."

This drama and theatrical aspects of the mock weddings is clear throughout their history, but it wasn't always so lighthearted. In at least a couple cases, and possibly more, this theatricality took a turn for the worse. In a photo from 1907, showing a wedding between Peg Chevalier class of 1907, and Rhoda Atkins of the Capen School, with Ethel Woolverton from the class of 1907, as the officiant, all three women are clearly wearing blackface. According to McNeil, there are other photos from events and parties around that time where participants are also donning blackface. Likely, these women were attempting to include minstrelsy into the performance of these mock weddings. It's unclear exactly how prevalent this was, as many of the early weddings were not photographed, and while

Through History

blackface was not explicitly mentioned in the writing about them, it can't be ruled out either. In talking about this issue, McNeil also noted that it's important to remember that there were Black students attending Smith at this time, and to acknowledge that this was something that they were possibly directly affected by and presented with. While this tradition has not continued through to modern mock weddings and events, it's important to recognize and understand it as a part of Smith's history.

However, in some of the earlier examples of mock weddings, the theatrical elements were also shown in more truly playful ways. At the 25th reunion for the class of 1891, a mock wedding held during the class's time at Smith was described as part of "house dramatics." In photos from the early 20th century this theatricality is clear, with those dressing up as men including fake mustaches, and everyone's faces schooled into expressions of exaggerated seriousness.

This theatricality has continued to the present. McNeil participated as the officiant in a wedding during their first year, which was filmed by a friend to create a documentary for a film production class. For this mock wedding, McNeil and their friends wrote a script for the ceremony, creating a comedy to "parrot Christian marriage," according to McNeil. In this wedding too, invitations were created, everyone dressed up and gifts were even presented to the bride and groom.

Alongside the fun and lightheartedness of the mock weddings, they also may have provided something deeper for those participating, especially in the past. While in the 1983 wedding, Whitney said marriage was still a long way off for most of the wom-



en participating, this was likely not the case for many women at Smith around the turn of the century. Women were still expected to marry soon after college, McNeil said about the early 20th century. They speculated that mock weddings could have been an outlet through which these women could explore their anxieties about getting married in a safe and fun way. They added that this may have also been the case for other popular parties around the time: baby parties, for example, where attendees dressed up like young children. College is a transitional time, as people move from childhood to adulthood and the responsibilities that entails. Parties and events like these could provide spaces to deal with doubts and fears about the future and growing up.

These ideas might still resonate with some people today, as we are still in that same space of growing up, just a century later. It could be part of why the tradition of fake weddings has endured for so long, along with, of course, the silliness of the whole production.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SMITH COLLEGE ARCHIVES

Trigger Warnings and Academia

JANE BRINKLEY '25
OPINIONS WRITER

Bright Sheng, a professor of Composition at the University of Michigan, showed a 1965 adaptation of “Othello” to a class of Shakespeare students last month. In this film, Laurence Olivier plays Othello in blackface. The showing went unpreluded—the professor gave no warning or context to acquaint the students with the material before it appeared on screen. While Sheng issued an apology to the school at large, it was littered with self-preserving reminders of his efforts to include BIPOC artists in his compositional endeavors, further disenchanting many of the students who had made the initial complaint. He was eventually removed from the course, though remains employed at the university in other capacities.

This story feels paradigmatic at this point—schools everywhere struggle to strike a balance between exposing their students to challenging content and maintaining the safety and comfort of the learning environment (which likely inspires them to feel confident enough to engage intellectually with material). At the University of Oregon, my hometown’s main campus, professors like Mark Whalan feel that “to design courses which don’t include such material would greatly distort an accurate sense of what texts have been most influential and important.” Others, like Meredith Loken from the University of Washington, think that “if you give students that space and you give them (warning), they absolutely rise to the occasion.” Certainly, the omission of all racist content from American syllabi would be a grand distortion—films like “The Birth of a Nation,” or “Gone With The Wind,” are important to both film history and race studies. And yet Loken raises a good point, namely that some space and distance might be a necessary prerequisite for approaching such works, even for the most strident and desensitized students.

Vladimir Nabakov, who faced his own backlash beyond the level of which perhaps any modern writer has known, wrote that the very effective experience of encountering a work of literature or art for the first time should go untouched. That is to say, he might not have taken too kindly to trigger warnings, which ostensibly ruin some of the raw power given in a first reading or viewing. I agree with him insofar as the first-reading experience can’t be replicated—I read his ghastly *Lolita* around the age of fourteen and was totally awash; had someone warned me how disturbing it was beforehand, I would never have picked it up from the public library. Call this a mistake of fortune or a casualty of absent parenting, but I wouldn’t take back that experience for the world. It was formative; it made me a more engaged and interested reader.

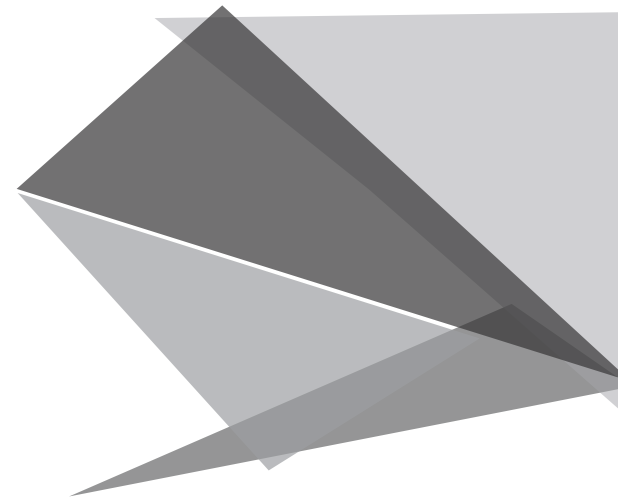


PHOTO BY VICTORIA PARTAKKI '24

Apply Nabakov’s argument to the classroom, though, and it gets foggy. For one thing, reading alone is not emotionally (or financially) contractual. There’s no one in the room but yourself to suffer through *Lolita*. Sheng’s students were likely affected—and negatively so—by an incredibly racist piece of art, and that confrontation happened in a public space where reactions had to be disciplined in full view of others, for a grade.

Context doesn’t necessarily “spoil” art, but can often enrich it. This is why your standard English seminar professor will attend the central text with a thousand short articles and stories on a socio-historical context—she’s not just trying to bore you; she wants your understanding of the work to be rich and complex. Quite aside from any question of political correctness, Sheng made a pedagogically insipid and poor choice when he presented a primary source decontextualized. If it were meant to demonstrate something about Shakespeare’s prose or elucidate the history of ekphrastic work on the bard, why not start there?

The conversation around triggers goes beyond binaries of good and evil, polite and rude. Our ability to teach and learn with respect and contextual understanding of work that hurts and challenges might be the very crux of what education should be. We have a responsibility to set down the dagger and talk to each other.



The Cult Around the Smith Orb

SOPHIA BRUCE '25
ARTS AND CULTURE WRITER

In addition to the tens of thousands of pieces housed at the Smith College Museum of Art (SCMA), our campus is home to over a dozen publicly accessible, mostly outdoor artworks. “Lanning Fountain” in front of Burton Hall, for instance, is an instantly recognizable landmark—the stoic sculpture at the center of the fountain is featured on many of Smith’s brochures and web pages. Yet a new piece of art has gained a cult following within the student body, climbing to an iconic status. This piece, “Orb,” by Australian sculptor Bronwyn Oliver, was installed in front of the Neilson Library this past summer.

Unlike “Lanning Fountain”’s poised representation of Mary Tomlinson Lanning, class of 1912, in classical “contrapposto” posture, “Orb” is modern and ambiguous. Simple in shape but intricate in composition, the artwork is a bronze sphere made up of delicate, veined lines emblematic of Oliver’s style. When asked about her approach to sculpture, Oliver told biographer Hannah Fink:

“My work is about structure and order. It is a pursuit of a kind of logic: a formal, sculptural logic and poetic logic. It is a conceptual and physical process of building and taking away at the same time. I set out to strip the ideas and associations down to (physically and metaphorically) just the bones, exposing the life still held inside.”

This “life still held inside” seems to be a point of attraction for students: an opportunity to imbue “Orb” with different personalities. Tenaya Fottrell ’25 researched student interaction with the sculpture for an anthropology group project and found that there have been at least six instances of “mild vandalism” since the start of the semester. “People have put beach balls inside twice,” she reported. “There have been googly eyes and a cowboy hat, just googly eyes, paper eyes, and someone filled it with balloons.”

Tenaya’s group member, Vincenzia Fasulo ’25, interviewed students who held a fake wedding at the sculpture. “The ‘Orb’ wedding was for two roommates who share the same birthday,” she said. “They decided on hosting the wedding there because then everybody would know that it was a joke—that it wasn’t a real wedding. In my view at least—and I think that sort of encapsulates the Smithies’ view on the ‘Orb’—it can’t be taken seriously.”

Oliver’s “Orb” is located in a high-traffic area of campus, near Seelye, Neilson, Hillyer and Hatfield Hall. As part of the newly-renovated library landscape, the site surrounding it is very open, and the trees there are still uniform, skinny and short. Here, walking past the modern curve of Neilson’s right wing, the college’s wealth is most apparent. Especially emblematic of



PHOTO COURTESY OF SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART. Instillation assisted by U.S. Art Company and Central Mass Crane Service

this newness and wealth is the anomaly of Oliver’s estimated \$350,000 sculpture.

“It would look more interesting to me in a place like Capen Garden,” said Ariella Heise ’22, a studio art major and an intern at the SCMA. “Sticking out of the grass it’s a little abrupt—I feel like that added to the students’ reverence.”

Ariella went on to highlight a distinction between meaningful and casual interactions with art. “Having this wonderful art museum on campus implies that Smith really wants students to interact with art, but in a meaningful way,” she said. “It’s unclear if this is what’s happening here. It feels like interaction with something that is seen as an institutionally owned object, and maybe that’s why it’s easier to not put a lot of thought into it.”

Smith came into possession of “Orb” in 2018 at the bequest of former Smith president Jill Ker Conway (1934-2018). Also Australian, Conway commissioned the sculpture for her home in 2000, and Maya Lin, the architect of Neilson, chose its current placement. The story of “Orb,” and of Bronwyn Oliver’s other works, is perhaps not complete without the context of her intense struggle with depression and her later suicide. She also immersed herself in her metalwork with little protection. “It made me see the ‘Orb’ in a more human way, that somebody had to weld this together and be in contact with the toxic metals,” Vincenzia said.

The Sophian met with Emma Chubb, curator of contemporary art at the SCMA, next to “Orb” to discuss the sculpture’s location, installation and her hopes for its future on campus. “It feels like the space

is going to keep changing,” she said of the landscape, pointing toward the new trees. “And maybe how we see this piece will change with that.”

The 1,000 pound artwork needed to be bolted into the ground with cement for stability. Chubb made it clear that the danger “Orb” poses as such a heavy object is her primary concern when it comes to student interest. “My initial worry is about human safety,” she said. “We get worried when not only the artwork might be harmed but a person. But I think it’s really exciting that students are paying attention, and it would be really helpful for us to know how we can support students in their curiosities and meet their desires.”

The museum is currently working to update their interactive campus art map with information about “Orb.”

Let's Get Spooky! October Media Recommendations

MADDIE REHRMAN '25
ARTS WRITER

It's October! ... Which means that all I really want to do is put on a sweater, drink some tea and enjoy the autumn weather. And I want to get a little scared, because it's Halloween month and ghosts and curses and generally ominous moods just feel right. As a person who spends far too much time reading books, watching TV shows and movies of all sorts (and having many opinions about them all), I have some media recommendations for this spooky season.

Note: I suggest looking up trigger warnings for all of the following content.

TV Series: "The Haunting" anthology

If you're looking for a TV series to watch this month, and you haven't yet seen Mike Flanagan's "The Haunting" anthology, it's time.

Loosely based on Shirley Jackson's novel of the same title, "The Haunting of Hill House" combines ghosts and horror with family drama, the effects of trauma and stellar non-linear storytelling. It tells the story of five siblings, jumping back and forth between their adult lives and their childhood spent at Hill House, where things happened that continue to trouble them in the present. What exactly are these things? The search for the answer to that question, featuring glimpses of mysterious occurrences in the past, will keep you glued to the screen until the very end.

"The Haunting of Bly Manor" is similarly loosely based on a novella—"The Turn of the Screw" and other stories by Henry James. A young woman moves to the English countryside to act as an au pair for two children. Though she doesn't know it yet, the house is very haunted. The horror in this thrilling show doesn't come from jump scares but from a steady foreboding. You'll fall in love with each of the characters and their achingly beautiful, often heartwrenching stories, including one of the most lovely sapphic romances I have ever seen on screen.

Movies: The "Fear Street" Trilogy

I spent the entirety of this past July watching the "Fear Street" trilogy, but now that it's October, I might be due for a rewatch! Based on R.L. Stine's "Fear Street" book series, Leigh Janiak's adaptation consists of three movies—"Fear Street Part 1: 1994," "Fear Street Part 2: 1978" and "Fear Street Part 3: 1666"—all centered around Shadyside, a town where, uh, some bad things happen. Namely, people tend to go on wild murder sprees. The trilogy is replete with vintage vibes (summer camp in the '70s! nights at the mall in the '90s!), puritanical witch hunts, gore and a mysterious witch's curse said to be the cause of the town's troubles. The characters fall into typical horror-movie-character archetypes (e.g. the nerd, the stoner), but they're all



ART BY HELEN MCCOLPIN '23

lovable, and the use of such stereotypes gives the films the distinct feeling of the classic slashers that they draw inspiration from. Plus, the entirety of the trilogy is framed by a lesbian romance. Slasher-style suspense and plenty of teen drama will keep you on the edge of your seat until you reach the films' conclusion.

Book: "Plain Bad Heroines" by Emily M. Danforth. Hollywood meets "The Blair Witch Project" meets turn-of-the-century girls' boarding school—what more could you ask for in an autumn read? How about a curse and many women who love women? I read "Plain Bad Heroines" last October, and it's the perfect book for getting into the Halloween spirit. Switching between a past storyline about a cursed girls' boarding school and a present-day storyline in which a cast of characters are making a movie about said boarding school, it's a horror that's also very fun. Its entertaining narrator, who makes quips about the story through footnotes, adds a whole other level to the storytelling. If you want to read a gothic story that's both contemporary and historical, this is the book for you.

Happy spooky season!