

31st & Pearl

‘Like Virgil Led Dante’

If readers’ responses to *The Hattiesburg American’s* 6-July-2010 [report](#) about problems in USM’s Center for Writers are any indication, the kinds of problems caused by the Shelby Thames administration (2002-07) have continued well into the Martha Saunders administration (2007-present). And, after the better part of a decade living with these types of issues, the 100-year old institution looks now to be coming apart at the seams. The report linked above has rapidly generated almost 50 pages worth of readers’ comments, with the majority castigating Saunders and CoAL dean Denise von Herrmann for actions that have led to the loss of CfW director Frederick Barthelme and *Mississippi Review* editor Rie Fortenberry, who was also affiliated with the CfW.

Not only have the shortcomings of Saunders and von Herrmann been highlighted by *THA* readers, stories about internal jealousies involving the two broad divisions of English at USM – creating writing and literature – are told in some detail by those commenting on Ed Kemp’s *THA* report. According to the stories, a small contingent of literature faculty worked closely with von Herrmann in ousting Barthelme and Fortenberry. In defending the CfW and its luminaries, some *THA* readers are now commenting about the penchant among some of the faculty in literature – both male and female – for engaging in sexual relationships with one-another, as well as with students. One commenter indicated that it was considered “cool” and “chic” for lit profs to get it on with students and other faculty, whether or not marriage is involved on either side. Stories like these threaten to compound the harm caused by Saunders in letting the nationally-renowned CfW fall into disarray.

Speaking of Saunders, one commenter (“malcom1212”) wrote on 9-July-2010: “So sad, Saunders has been bad news for USM as whe [sic] was for Whitewater, leaving a slew of lawsuits in her wake that cost the University millions to litigate. I recall her telling us when we hired her in 2007 that that she was going to take us to the next level. She is leading us like Virgil led Dante to the lowest level of the Inferno so put on your fire protection gear. The cost of her monthly plane could have funded these positions.” Sadly for the institution, malcom1212 is on point.