

USM English Department Put in Receivership

HATTIESBURG – Ed Kemp’s [15-July-2010 follow-up](#) to *The Hattiesburg American’s* earlier [story](#) about the non-renewal of Frederick Barthelme, a nationally-renowned writer in USM’s English department, revealed a detail that many in the USM and Hattiesburg communities were likely unaware of – that the Martha Saunders administration placed the USM English department in receivership back in the spring of 2010. As Kemp’s latest report indicates, CoAL associate dean Steven Moser – a *music* professor – was named interim chair of English back in the spring of 2010, when CoAL dean Denise von Herrmann placed the department in receivership. In an e-mail sent to *THA*, Moser states, “I welcome and appreciate this short-term opportunity to lead the English Department here at Southern Miss while a more long-term individual is recruited for this position.” According to sources, a *music* faculty admitting that the opportunity to lead an *English department* is “welcome[d] and appreciate[d]” is both bizarre and unsettling.

The main focus of Kemp’s recent story involves new details in [the situation](#) facing Barthelme and the CoAL’s Center for Writing, which Barthelme led. According to Kemp, a meeting between Moser and the CfW faculty was held recently, during which Moser presented some ideas for the CfW’s future without Barthelme. Attendees stated that Moser puzzlingly suggested that a Mississippi-based “mystery writer” be considered as a potential replacement for Barthelme. According to CoAL poetry professor Julia Johnson, “[t]he name just came out of nowhere.” Johnson also stated that the individual is a “non-literary writer” who holds limited appeal to CfW students. Other members of the CfW/English department told Kemp that this situation is a symptom of the USM central administration’s penchant for top-down governance, with little or no input from faculty. As Johnson explained, decisions about who to hire are generally made by faculty first, not college- or university-level administrators, as in this case.

According to another CoAL poetry professor, Angela Ball, students considering creative writing programs should scratch USM’s from their lists. According to Ball, a USM faculty member for 31 years, the creative writing and poetry programs at USM are “in grave danger.” In speaking for the affected CoAL faculty, Ball told Kemp “[w]e just kind of feel like a conquered people at this point.” Ball also informed Kemp that the group intends to contact the Association of Writers and Writing Programs for advice on going forward from this point. Finally, compounding recent events, Johnson tells Kemp that she has received a more lucrative offer to join another university in 2011, stating that Barthelme’s treatment at the hands of USM administrators makes the offer very appealing. Johnson, who was groomed to eventually replace Barthelme, stated that she did not come to USM to work in the kind of lower quality writing center that is being created now at Southern Miss.