

Junior English Teaching Major **Alexandra Vergara** on Semester in the City: “You have power to help people”

by Laura Smith

Junior Alexandra Vergara is finding her voice in education—not only through her work as an intern this fall with UNH’s Semester in the City, but through her questions and conversations about its future.



Image courtesy of Alexandra Vergara

“You have agency, and you have power to help people and help yourself,” Vergara said during a Zoom interview.

As a UNH Changemaker fellow and member of UNH’s Semester in the City program, Vergara now serves as an intern and writing tutor in 826 Boston Writers Room, a writing program housed in Boston International

Newcomers Academy high school (BINcA), which hosts interns from Semester in the City.

Vergara described her work with BINcA students: “We’re working with them to cultivate a joy for writing and a love for writing as a process and writing as a collaborative effort.”

As a Social Innovation Fellow with Semester in the City, the flagship program of the College for Social Innovation, Vergara continued her enrollment with UNH, earning 16

UNH credits. She was matched to a host organization based on questions and interviews. Because of her English Teaching major and minors in Spanish and TESL, Vergara was a perfect fit for 826 Boston Writers Room: “their whole mission is promoting literacy.”

Faina Bukher, Director of the [Changemaker Collaborative at UNH](#), explained that Semester in the City is a fully-credited fellowship program that gives undergraduate students the opportunity to spend a semester in Boston learning hands-on through well-supported internships in the social sector, as well as opportunities to work with UNH departments on various sustainability initiatives (via [SITC@UNH](#)).

“SITC@UNH students can work with departments that range widely, from the Energy Office to Health and Wellness to the UNH Foundation. And all of the projects have some element of outreach to other students,” Bukher explained.

Semester in the City fellows participate in a transformative 15-week program that allows them to address current social issues while developing essential skills and networks that prepare them for life and work after graduation. Their work is guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development goals, including “quality education.”

Vergara works 8:00–4:30 to provide in-class writing support as well as drop-in tutoring for BINcA students, many of whom are English language learners.

“It’s been wonderful because I get to watch teachers do their thing. And I also get to have a little bit of classroom experience. Even though I’m not teaching, I’m learning how to connect the students with what works for them.”

Vergara’s focus is providing college essay support and resources for students, her “legacy initiative” for her Semester in the City experience.

Working one afternoon in the 826 Boston Writers Room, Vergara met with a student who struggled to capture his experience in writing. She shared a favorite Mary Oliver poem, which opened a conversation. Talking about the poem's powerful details showed the student new ways to write.

"We're really trying to help students expand their way of seeing the world and being able to put that into words and being specific and detail oriented."

Vergara attributes these moments and literacy breakthroughs to the individual attention of the 826 Writers Room and Semester in the City program.

"One of the tenets of the Writers Room is that students really function the best when they can have one-on-one interactions with educators."

In fact, Vergara's experiences have led her to think about how to translate this one-on-one approach to classrooms.

"It has brought up questions for me as I continue my education of, 'how do you have that same energy when you have a classroom of 20 kids?'" she said. "And I don't really know the answer to that problem, but it's definitely something I think about a lot."

Semester in the City, in fact, encourages interns to think big about seemingly unsolvable problems.

"If you think it's unsolvable, we just have not been innovative enough or thought about it enough or collaborated enough. Every problem has a solution. You just have to think creatively to get there."

Vergara has already begun to share her thinking about her Semester in the City experience. She recently participated in a national conference panel as part of "American Cities Rebuilding 2021 – A Virtual Conversation Series," to describe her college readiness work at BINcA. She was interviewed by Hari Sreenivisan from *PBS NewsHour*.

"I love education. I love learning, asking questions, and it's just really exciting to be part of different communities that think similarly that are really excited about difficult questions and how do we answer them and being innovative about solving the problems in the world," Vergara said.

Vergara looks forward to returning to campus—after a UNH study abroad program in Granada, Spain—and continuing her work at UNH.

"I think bringing that energy back to campus can be really revitalizing and exciting."

To learn more about **Semester in the City** and other opportunities visit <https://www.unh.edu/sustainability/changemakers>

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National Day on Writing
Wed., Oct. 20

Write on a leaf? Share inspiration on a river rock? Craft a black-out poem?

Members of Professor Alecia Magnifico's English 725/810S: Seminar in English Teaching participated in the National Day on Writing, trying a variety of writing prompts and sharing their work on a moderated Padlet.

Pictured, left to right: Kate Blakley, Addison Kennamer, Bridget Costello, Lilly Clifford, Jessica MacDowell

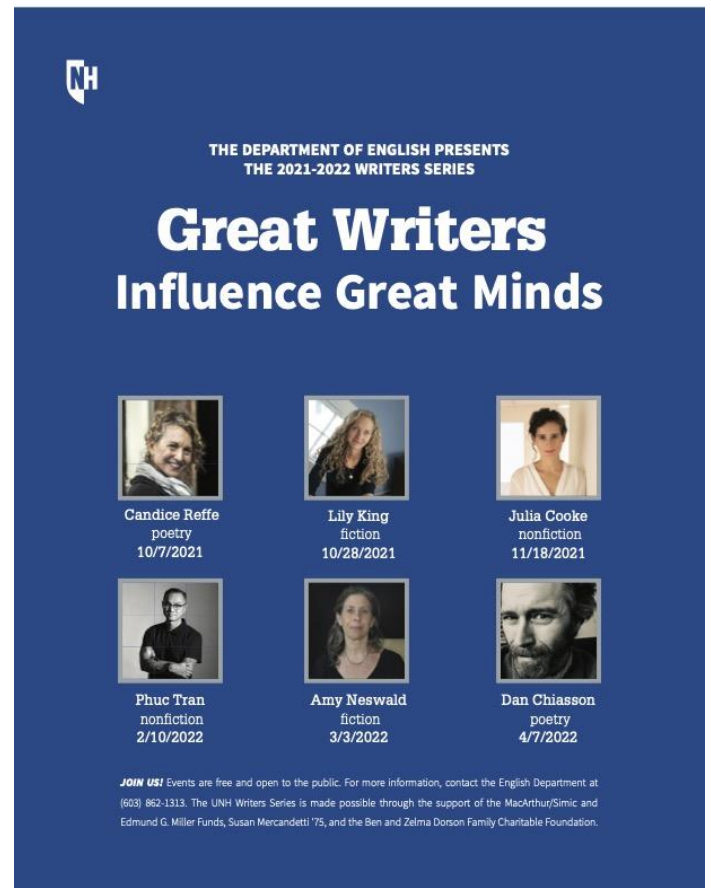
Lily King Writers Series Event

by Fran Teoh

As part of the English Department's Writers Series program, the novelist Lily King spoke at Hamilton Smith Hall on Thursday, October 28th. Professor Tom Payne opened the event expressing his excitement at King's presence at UNH, mentioning she had briefly studied here for a time, and that many students had shared their enthusiasm for her visit. Introducing King was second-year MFA Fiction student Carolyn Mainardi, who reflected eloquently how she identified with the author's recent book, *Writers & Lovers*, stating, "I saw my own experiences reflected in a novel in a way I never had before." King's new short story collection, *Five Tuesdays in Winter*, was released on November 9th.







Beginning her rousing, wide-ranging talk, King remarked that *Writers & Lovers* was a tribute to anyone who's "taken a lot of risks and given up a lot" to become a writer as "it's not easy in this society to be doing that; it's not something we're supposed to do." She spoke of her struggle to write anything after the death of her mother and wasn't sure if she would be able to return to the creative life. Then, one day, she saw the protagonist, Casey, walking her dog in the driveway and was able to craft her narrative around this image. The result was a novel "more personal, intimate, and raw" than she ever imagined writing. *Writers & Lovers*, was the novel she wanted to read in her twenties and thirties, as there are many memoirs "about men struggling to become writers" but hardly any about female literary ambition. For a long time, King felt she was falling behind her peers both personally and professionally. Eventually, however, her hard work and dedication paid off and in 1999, she published her first novel, *The Pleasing Hour*. This was a wonderfully uplifting anecdote, as fear of failure and the great unknown is something aspiring writers know only too well.

King's interest in being a writer is bringing readers on an emotional journey. While *Writers & Lovers* wasn't highly factual, it was very true to experience at the time, she noted, and novels are often vessels that contain a flavor of one's life. Speaking of her writing process, King said she always writes by hand, in pencil and lined spiral notebooks. This relieves the pressure of having to think in polished, complete thoughts, keeping the critic at bay and allowing for a more creative process. She also makes drawings of characters, which occasionally make it into her finished novels. In terms of her Writing 101, King keeps a note of how many pages



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JOIN US! Events are free and open to the public. For more information, contact the English Department at (603) 862-1313. The UNH Writers Series is made possible through the support of the MacArthur/Simic and Edmund G. Miller Funds, Susan Mercandetti '75, and the Ben and Zelma Dorson Family Charitable Foundation.

Watch for upcoming Writers Series events

she's written on a daily basis. She tries to maintain the discipline of writing something every day, five days a week, keeping "banker's hours."

Following questions from the audience, King spoke about her approach to research, commenting "you need the lightest touch" as there are so many details one could use. She writes short stories between novels when stuck for inspiration, as it's a playful form with less stakes. Asked what reignites her creativity, the author replied, "Reading a book in the morning with a strong cup of tea and a notebook, not feeling guilty about not writing." She observed every novel is its own puzzle, and she is learning to spend less time questioning the direction she's going in, and to be open to endings. King thinks a lot more about her readers than before, focusing on how the first page will feel to them. That initial hook is a call to listen to her story, inviting them into her world. She mused that inspiration can strike at any time, from a weekend writing retreat to driving en route to meet a friend, where she envisaged the last three pages of *Writers & Lovers*. Afterwards, the audience had the opportunity to speak with King one-on-one and have books signed as she shared creative encouragement.

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