May 16, 2013

Dear First-year Student:

On behalf of the Department of Literature and the College Writing Program, we welcome you to American University. To set the stage for your first year here at AU, we have chosen a book that we call our “community text” for you to read before you arrive in August. You and your classmates will discuss the book and write about it in your College Writing or Honors English class. The College Writing Program and the Campus Store will also sponsor an essay contest to honor the best writing inspired by the community text.

The dialogue we develop around the challenging themes that define our community texts unifies our students and faculty in an intellectual experience. When we ask tough questions, explore controversy, listen to one another respectfully, and sharpen our claims, we illustrate how writing is a social act at the heart of an academic community. Welcoming our text's authors to campus to discuss their work is an essential part of that shared intellectual experience.

We’re delighted to announce this year’s choice: Eula Biss’s *Notes from No Man’s Land: American Essays*. We will bring Ms. Biss to campus this fall for the sixteenth annual Writer as Witness Colloquium on Tuesday, September 3 at 8:00 p.m. in Bender Arena. She will address the American University community, and meet with students and faculty to discuss the book, as well as the craft and artistry of writing.

In *Notes from No Man’s Land*, Biss examines race in America through prose that is simultaneously spare and rich, personal and incisive. A Booklist starred review notes: “Biss calls our attention to things so intrinsic to our lives they have become invisible, such as telephone poles and our assumptions about race… Matters of race, sense of self, and belonging involve everyone, and Biss’ crossing-the-line perspective will provoke fresh analysis of our fears and expectations.”

*Notes from No Man’s Land* received the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. *Salon.com*’s Kyle Minor calls the book “the most accomplished book of essays anyone has written or published so far in the 21st century.” Biss’s writing has also earned a Pushcart Prize, a Jaffe Writers’ Award, and a 21st Century Award from the Chicago Public Library, and has appeared in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading, The Best Creative Nonfiction* and the *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Nonfiction* as well as in *The Believer, Gulf Coast, Columbia, Ninth Letter*, the *North American Review*, the *Bellingham Review*, the *Seneca Review*, and *Harper's*. She teaches writing at Northwestern University.

The American University Campus Store is offering *Notes from No Man’s Land* at a discount. You may order the book directly through the Campus Store website: [www.american.bkstr.com](http://www.american.bkstr.com). Copies will also be available for purchase at the Campus Store during all of the New Student Orientations, when you’ll have your first opportunity to talk with classmates about *Notes from No Man’s Land*. 
You will find additional resources on this website prepared by our colleagues in AU’s library: http://subjectguides.library.american.edu/collegewriting.

As you read this summer, think about possible questions for the author to address during the September Colloquium. You may email questions or comments to: cwp@american.edu. You also will have the chance to ask your questions directly at the Writer as Witness Colloquium on September 3. We look forward to meeting you there to hear your responses to the provocative questions raised by Eula Biss’s work. Enjoy the rest of your summer.

And welcome to AU!

Cordially,

Jonathan Loesberg, Chair
Department of Literature

John Hyman, Director
College Writing Program