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MAGGIE NELSON AND "THE ARGONAUTS": GUEST SPEAKERS ON CAMPUS

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Written by **Annyston Pennington**

"October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes," Maggie Nelson began, reading from her latest novel, *The Argonauts*, at an event on Monday, September 18th. Nelson, an author and critic, was invited for a reading and discussion hosted by the University of Texas's Dr. Ann Cvetkovich for her class "Feminism and Creative Nonfiction." The event was sponsored by the LGBTQ Sexualities Research Center for Women's and Gender Studies, the Department of English, and the New Writers Project.

That afternoon, Maggie Nelson brought in crowds rarely seen in the Glickman Center. Prepared with the sparkling lemonade and plates of anti-pasta served as refreshments, students and professors were packed window-to-wall to see Nelson speak on her memoir.

” “I feel like if Maggie Nelson didn't exist, I would have had to invent her.”

Comprised of woven together paragraphs of anecdote, theory, and reflection, *The Argonauts* has received praise from notable media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and National Public Radio (NPR). Even more suggestive of the power of Nelson's work is her near-cult following of writers, artists, and queer-identifying young adults. When introducing Nelson, Dr. Cvetkovich expressed the modern punch and appeal of the work, saying, "I feel like if Maggie Nelson didn't exist, I would have had to invent her."

Nelson kicked off the event by reading a handful of pages from the beginning of the novel, paragraphs of thought-provoking and clever prose concerning the early days of her relationship with Harry Dodge, a gender-fluid artist. As she touched on subjects abstract as Wittgenstein's philosophy and as personal as early days of romance in under-construction hotels, Nelson arrested the attention of everyone in the room with the complexity of her prose and openness of her person.

After enthusiastic applause, the reading transitioned to a conversation between Nelson and Dr. Cvetkovich. From what Cvetkovich suggested, they were in a sense extending a private dialogue concerning the book, Nelson's life, and literary and feminist theory. After Cvetkovich introduced a subject for discussion, such as the contentious topic of the "personal as political," she handed the mic over to Nelson to answer and reflect.

Nelson spoke on these subjects with intelligence while maintaining that air of informality that was so inviting to audience members. Discussions of how personal narrative relates to political movements, among other complex subjects, can err on the side of esoteric, but the conversation was kept fresh and lively.

Nelson closed out the dialogue with a bit more from *Argonauts*—a passage that, while inappropriate for this website, left the audience speechless with laughter. Following this last excerpt, the event wrapped up with an open Q&A of which audience members took glad advantage. Many students touched on Nelson's influences while others sought to receive feedback on interpretations of themes in *The Argonauts*. Not fully

satisfied with the formal limitations of the Q&A, some audience members queued after the event to speak to Nelson one-on-one—and ask for a quick autograph.

” [Nelson] handled the issues of womanhood, gender, sexuality, and the navigation of queerness within the family structure with serious skill.

As a whole, the event featured both the mental stimulation of a captivating lecture and the enthusiasm of an audience moderately star-struck (or perhaps I am projecting). Nelson was armed with social and literary theory as well as a candid sense of humor that pushed the audience to disruptive laughter on several occasions. *The Argonauts* itself was characterized, according to Nelson, as her most humorous novel yet. However, she handled the issues of womanhood, gender, sexuality, and the navigation of queerness within the family structure with serious skill.

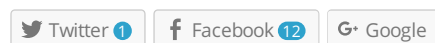
The decision to bring a respected and culturally relevant author such as Nelson to the University of Texas was not only an exciting one on the behalf of Dr. Cvetkovich and the other sponsors but also a necessary one. A campus such as UT should aim to promote both diversity and acceptance; exposure to LGBTQ+ matters and the identities that fall under this umbrella is a must for students. Nelson’s reading provided an interesting setting for expanding upon students’ knowledge of these issues—though by the enthusiasm of the Q&A, many present appeared familiar with the subject matter. Equally important was the opportunity for students who identify as LGBTQ+ to attend an event that reflected their concerns and interests in an academic space.

” Bringing in thinkers from off-campus, while still guided by our professors, fosters an atmosphere for intellectual growth.

Guest speakers on campus expose UT students to new ideas when they may be potentially limited by their sphere of understanding—campus, greater Austin, etc. Bringing in thinkers from off-campus, while still guided by our professors, fosters an atmosphere for intellectual growth. Such events as the Maggie Nelson reading have the ability to ignite new lines of thought that may have otherwise been left underdeveloped or unknown.

Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*, “I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed...Its paradox is, quite literally, *why I write*, or how I feel able to keep writing.” As students we often find ourselves confronted with this question of *why?*: Why keep doing what we are doing? Hearing from those who are successful yet asking this same question can reinvigorate us. Extracurricular learning opportunities are a must and remind students why we do what we do—why we work so hard to pursue higher learning and a fuller understanding of the world around us.

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