

# Gates — researches, writes, teaches, gardens

Joanne Gates, Ph.D. leads a full life busily involved in doing research projects, writing and teaching at JSU in the English department. Each of these efforts complements and enlivens the other. She and her husband, Greg Halligan, enjoy gardening for both practical and aesthetic reasons.

## Early years

Born in New York, Joanne Gates grew up on a farm outside West Winfield, a small central New York state town, actually smaller than Jacksonville, with only one traffic light.

Today her father, Arthur Gates, makes his home between West Winfield and Bradenton, Fla.

After graduating from high school, Joanne earned a B.A. degree from Vassar College with a drama major and the equivalent of an English major. At Vassar she wrote for the college newspaper, served on the SGA and was senior class president.

## Substitute teacher

For four years before entering graduate school, Joanne did substitute teaching in parochial schools in Alexandria, Va., and New Jersey. During these years, her interest in drama with emphasis on writing plays continued to develop.

## Graduate school

Joanne's application to the MFA program in theatre at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst included a play she had written. During the early period of graduate school, she switched and decided to specialize in directing. Soon she switched again to focus on dramaturgy. "This was right for my interests in criticism, theatre history," she says.

"In the summer of 1980, I was awarded the opportunity to be a critic fellow at the O'Neill Theatre Institute. I'd gone to the National Theatre Festival as my Region's Critics Award winner."

Her master's thesis was a dramaturgy project dealing with Ibsen's play, *Hedda Gabler*. This work included a fresh translation of the play in the form of a program booklet with essays, pictures and chronicled decisions of the director, for example changes in production as work on the play advanced.

## Robins leads to Ph.D.

Early in graduate school, Joanne discovered the actress, Elizabeth Robins, who had acted in Ibsen roles. She had a good access to historical documents in theatre history in the form of reviews of the publications and wrote a paper for her Victorian Theatre class.

"This work led to Joanne's realization that the more significant aspect of Robins' accomplishments was her writing. 'Robins wrote a dozen or so novels, several plays, only one of which was produced and published, and many short stories,' as well as several volumes of personal memoir," says Joanne.

"I myself had written plays and wrote a play about Robins as my first effort at creative biography.

"My intense interest in Robins and the work that resulted caused professors, especially Professor Joseph Danahue, to urge me to complete a Ph.D. before I left Amherst, so it was a natural shift to enroll in the English graduate program," says Joanne.

"My professor said that two American actresses were responsible for changing the way Ibsen's plays were performed. Robins was influenced by *Doll's House*. She acted the role of Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* and helped negotiate a dispute between two translations," says Joanne.

The biography, *Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist* by Joanne E. Gates (1994) was begun in 1984 as her dissertation. "By that time I had moved from Robins as actress to Robins as writer," says Joanne.

"I had grown fascinated with Robins' output — all those novels, the memoirs, the suffrage play turned into a novel. She wrote two novels in Alaska — one loosely based on her brothers trying to reach the Klondike before all the claims were taken. The other was on her own experience in which she captured the flavor of travel and of Nome. She was captivated and kept studying," says Joanne.

"It was only an afterthought to my dissertation version of the biography that the creative scene-scripting entered into the form of the biography. After being prompted by my dissertation director to provide some 'glue' to hold together my separate chapters, it came to me that the best way to do this was to highlight the way that Robins' life, as represented by the surviving documents, was highly dramatic. My first chapter's scene recreated an event she describes in a letter to her father. I used a diary entry to recreate a scene where she dug up the coffin of her deceased husband, 25 years after his death," says Joanne.

In addition to graduate teaching opportunities at the University of Massachusetts, Joanne also taught at Mt. Holyoke College, Holyoke Community College and Grinnell College.



Dr. Joanne Gates

Anita Ford

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## Teaching at JSU

Dr. Joanne Gates began teaching in the JSU English department in January of 1987. In that time both of her books, *Elizabeth Robins — 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist* and *The Alaska Klondike: Diary of Elizabeth Robins*, co-edited with Victoria Joan Moessner of University of Alaska, Fairbanks, have been published.

Joanne teaches Computer-Assisted Freshman Composition 102 in both fall and spring semesters. She also teaches the American and English literature survey courses as assigned. "I enjoy teaching the four survey courses. I love them all. It's a challenge to give such a span of work," says Joanne.

"Teaching Thoreau's *Walden* in the summer at the same time our green beans are ready for harvest is fun — just special," says Joanne.

Another special course is Women's Literature for upper level and graduate students.

Shakespeare is a favorite course in which she teaches eight plays each time she receives the assignment. Carmine Dibise also teaches the Shakespeare courses. Shakespeare combines her love of drama and literature. "I consider it a privilege to teach Shakespeare," says Joanne.

## Writing project — 1997

In the summer of 1997, Joanne was a participant at the JSU National Writing Project which brings together teachers of all levels and subjects from K-postgraduate. Several weeks are devoted to writing, reading and discussing methods of teaching writing and sharing for the purpose of stimulation.

"I cannot stress enough its value to all the participants and to JSU itself. Many of the writing fellows are working on their graduate degrees. Others are teaching — everything from kindergarten to high school science.

"Deborah Prickett, the assistant to interim director Gloria Horton during my 1997 summer, is now the director of a follow-up interest group which is interested in using classroom-based research and teacher inquiry methods.

"The group who is participating is about half JSU faculty and half faculty from area schools. We learn a lot from each other's successes and difficulties. One thing we are is a support group, but we are also training ourselves to make good use of classroom issues and turn them into success stories. I continue to be influenced by my students, and think we need to be aware of their different learning styles.

"Students often take on way too much, more than they can handle reasonably. Some work, and many have household responsibilities," says Joanne.

"Since 1997, my interests have shifted to editing texts on line. I have the permission of the literary executor Mabel Smith, to make Robins' documents available in electronic editions. Based on my review of the field of electronic literature on-line, I was able to put together a JSU faculty research grant which funded the effort for one year. Since then, it has expanded quite a bit. The most recent addition is Robins' collection of speeches and essays of women's suffrage. *Way Stations*. A year ago I completed (with the aid of the English department staff) the hypertext edition of her break-through novel, *The Open*

*Question: A Tale of Two Temperaments*. I was able to travel to Zanesville, Ohio, to "Elizabeth Robins Day" at the Stone Academy, which is featured as the family dwelling in the novel. As the web site expands, it will be more and more useful to teachers, students and researchers," says Joanne.

## Diary of Robins

*The Alaska — Klondike: Diary of Elizabeth Robins* co-edited by Victoria Joan Moessner and Joanne E. Gates has been published by University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.

Joanne says that Moessner came to New York University to read the collection of Robins' papers and applied for a grant from the Alaska Humanities Foundation to work on the diaries. "She pulled me in as a Robins' consultant. This evolved into a co-editing project once we sought publication. I received a JSU grant for part of the work. We communicated by phone, mail, e-mail.

"We read and corrected together from the original. I did the word-processing from her typed version.

"Our original plan was to get it into typescript form. Then we had to find a publisher.

"The University of Alaska Press eventually accepted it because they publish many regional works.

"I think that finally having the 1900 diary in print is important in that it recognizes that there is more of quality to her writing than what was published in her lifetime. There are several unpublished plays and unpublished novels which I refer to in the biography as essential to understand her great output," says Joanne.

The diary is significant because it reminds people of how much more Robins wrote than she published. Her work 99 years later marks the progress of a century. There is much interest in looking back. Diaries are quite popular now.

Joanne says, "What surprises me is how readable the Robins' diary is.

"She felt she must find out if she could really write fiction. She had written under a pseudonym. When her name was disclosed, she had to figure out how much career she had as a writer," says Joanne.

## Reading scheduled

Tuesday, Oct. 26, at 7:30. Dr. Gates will read from *Alaska — Klondike: Diary of Elizabeth Robins* on the 11th floor of Houston Cole Library.

"My talk will address the importance of the diary as both a literary document and a historical resource. As her biographer, what I found important was the fact that she recorded so precisely events and people's story. It is also fascinating to see how she transformed the real-life records into several works of fiction. She annotated the diary heavily, even noting that she was going over it again in a different color pen. She overwrites one page of recorded events to note "Nucleus of Come and Find Me." She inserts commentary on her brother when she is preparing to use the diary in 1932-33 for a memoir of her brother, Raymond Robins," says Joanne.

## Research travel

In addition to New York University, Joanne went to England in 1985 to visit Elizabeth Robins' home there. "I even slept in her bedroom. It is now a public rest home for women, but anybody could go. There were many pictures, and I interviewed some who had known her — Phyllis Harrhall, editor of *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, for example.

In both 1986 and 1998 I visited the Robins' home in Zanesville, Ohio, where she lived with her grandmother as a child.

"In Brooksville, Fla., I visited the home of her brother, Raymond, and talked to one person who had known her," says Joanne.

## Personal view

Joanne and her husband, Greg, enjoy their garden. They grow green beans, okra, tomatoes, eggplant, even some corn. They enjoy being able to have collards up to December and again in early spring. They also can and freeze.

She says another southern staple, okra, is easy to like. "We make a lot of vegetable rice lentil soup, and it works as a good thickener, as well as in stir fries with tofu." She's even written a poem on okra.

"We're not exactly experimenters; we're just discovering what works best in the southern growing season."

Joanne says, "I am also a fan of book — TV, as well as following from a distance, through the wonders of TV and sometimes AM radio, the Braves and all the 'home teams' — JSU, Alabama and even Auburn."

Anyone who listens to the home teams and gardens both the soil to grow food and the minds of students to motivate and give them a love of learning is a winner.