

The Sea of Faith
Charlotte Iannone, Class of 2026

This summer, I received the Micoleau Family Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts to prepare for my honors project in the English Department. I am pursuing a fiction honors project, tentatively titled “The Sea of Faith.” This project is about the family of Jotham Post, a founder of East Williston, New York, the village where I grew up. I first became interested in Jotham Post in 2020, when I noticed a painting of his house burning down that hangs in our Village Hall. I started to research his family in my own time and became very invested in some mysteries in the historical record. More than anything, I am very interested in the fact that soon after Jotham’s death in 1928, his wife and daughter abandoned the house until it mysteriously burned down in 1950, despite there being little reason for them to do so. Drawing upon a historical foundation, I am writing a fictional reconstruction of his life, as well as the lives of his wife, Cornelia, and his daughter, Clara. The novel focuses on the relationship between Jotham and Clara. It alternates in perspective between the two of them, beginning with the night of her birth and ending with the destruction of the family home. I am exploring themes of familial obligation and free will, as well as the decline of the American small town.

At the start of the summer, I spent a month refamiliarizing myself with all the research I have done in the past. I carefully organized all of the research that I had collected in the past by category (newspaper article, land record or map, census, written account, genealogy record) and by date. Looking to fill in any gaps in my research, I spent two weeks scouring the historical archives of the East Williston Village Hall and Volunteer Fire Department. When I found documents that were relevant to my project, I scanned them and added them to my archive. I also combed through the archives of local newspapers to find any articles relating to the Post Family or East Williston’s development. I then reinterviewed Barbara Seixas, a woman that has lived in my village since she was born in 1935 and witnessed the Jotham Post House fire. Further, I connected with the treasurer of the East Williston Community Church (which Jotham Post financed and built) and received valuable information about his family from her. Once I arrived on campus, I laid out a basic plot and divided the events of the story into chapters. Each chapter occurs at a significant time in Clara’s life, shedding light on her relationship to her parents and East Williston, as well as the individual she is developing into. The book itself will be in three parts. The first part tracks the family from Clara’s birth to her wedding; the second, from a year after the birth of her first child to Jotham’s death; and the third, from Jotham’s funeral to the destruction of the house.

I read a wide breadth of works to supplement my writing. I can divide them into two categories: fiction written between 1880 and 1940 and recent historical fiction written about said time period. Through fiction written during my time period, I sought to understand how authors within that time period viewed their own moment and its social conventions. Among the many books that I read, the most significant to my research and understanding of my project were *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather, and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson. *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of short stories written about a quintessential American small town in the early 20th century, was especially helpful to my understanding of how I will frame East Williston in my novel. From current historical fiction novels like *The Manikin* by Joanna Scott and *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood, I learned how recent authors interpret the turn of the 20th century in their writing. Both of these texts have to do with old family houses and declining families, so they also provided me with an understanding of how established writers tackle this subject matter.

I finished the summer with a completed draft of the prologue and first three chapters, as well as drafts of many scenes from incomplete chapters. My research this summer provided me with a strong foundation for my honors project, as I have about a fourth of the project drafted and all of my research completed. I am incredibly grateful that Bowdoin made it possible for me to complete this work.

Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke

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