

NEWSROOM

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [2023](#) / [April](#) / Junior presents lauded literary research at NYU

JUNIOR PRESENTS LAUDED LITERARY RESEARCH AT NYU

MATTHEW JOHNSON'S FOCUS WAS DEEP DIVE INTO "FLIGHTS"

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | April 12, 2023*Read time: about 3 min*

When Matthew Johnson first read the book "Flights" for his English class, his literary love was not set afire.

"I really didn't like it at first," he said.

But then, after rereading it, discussing it in class and working on assignments that focused on it, he discovered that the novel began to inspire and impact him in ways he never could have predicted.

"I found that after doing research on it, I really began to appreciate the novel," said Johnson, '24 [English](#) and [history](#).

The book, "Flights," was part of a class taught by Dr. Margarita Marinova that centered on Eastern European female authors. The bestselling novel is written by Polish Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk.

Johnson's passion for the book grew so strong that he poured heaps of intellectual thought and energy into a paper he was assigned to write about it. The result was a dynamic academic piece that garnered an invitation for him to present it at the prestigious Undergraduate Research Symposium held at New York University's Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia.

"I was genuinely blown away by the invitation," Johnson said.

English Major Presents at NYU



Johnson delved deep into the author's style and use of tender narrative, which he describes as a fourth-person voice. The 400-page book is composed of 116 different fragments, but Johnson studied the universal string that the author weaves throughout the novel.

"There is no clear plot," Johnson says. "Of the 116, some are written about people's lives, one is about a clock, others are focused on travel. And some are centered around the ideas of mobility, mortality, and human preservation. Each fragment has a story."

The goal of the presentation assigned by Marinova was to generate research.

"There was so much about the novel to study," he said. "It was really fascinating. There was a lot there to analyze. The novel's brokenness and structure is what was interesting to me. There was so much to say about the novel."

Johnson's paper, entitled "Weaving a Cosmos Through Tokarczuk's Flights," studied in large part the way Tokarczuk utilized the concept of cosmos through the novel. His paper explored stars, constellations and how they became the threads of her literary tapestry. He also employed different theories to draw conclusions about the author's thought process and final work. The book is centered around feminism and its history in Poland. It is described as being a novel that has a complex, nonlinear structure. Its many pieces focus on several themes, including travel and the preservation of the human body.

"Matt's paper on the Polish Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk's novel 'Flights' explored the originality of her writing as both form and content, and raised important questions about what it means to be a feminist today. Few American students are familiar with Tokarczuk's work, or Eastern European female authors in general. Matt's talk was therefore not just fascinating and new to most, but also cutting edge in terms of theoretical approach and cultural context."

The depth of the paper Johnson crafted prompted Marinova to send him an application to the NYU research symposium. Christopher Newport was not originally one of the schools invited, but when Marinova received an email about it, she immediately thought about Johnson. He embraced the opportunity and submitted his paper. The result was a coveted invitation to present at the symposium. Of all of the students who applied from universities across the U.S., only 20 presenters were accepted.

Marinova said she was overjoyed to get the news that Johnson's paper had been selected.

"But I was not surprised," she said. "I saw great potential in his writing, and was especially happy to see him try to engage with complex theoretical ideas. That's something I push all of my students to do in their work, but his essay was an especially successful attempt to incorporate larger philosophical questions in literary analyses."

"I have not had students participate in such a high-profile symposium before, but I hope now that others will feel empowered to try as well. We have so many excellent students in our department."

Johnson, who grew up outside of Richmond, had never been to New York City, so the invite not only opened the door to a formidable academic experience, but also to an incredible cultural adventure.

He took the train to NYC and it deposited him into an urban world to which he immediately related and embraced. He took it all in, walking around Washington Square, and seeing the sites that only New York can offer. He adored every minute.

"This was my Disneyland, my Jerusalem. I loved it. I felt at home there," he said. The conference proved equally

stimulating and rewarding. Johnson found himself in the company of other presenters from Harvard, Yale and UPenn.

“It was an amazing opportunity,” Johnson said. “So many academic juices were flowing. We had great dialogue after my presentation.”

It would not have been possible, he said, without the educational opportunities that CNU has afforded him. Johnson discovered a deep appreciation for English his freshman year when he read James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son.”

“I fell in love,” he said.

Johnson was drawn to Christopher Newport because of the small class sizes and the promise of being able to work closely with professors. His work with Marinova, who has served as his mentor, has elevated his admiration and adoration for CNU. He plans to apply directly to a PhD program and then follow in Marinova’s footsteps, becoming an English professor. He intends to focus on African American literature. Johnson is pursuing the [English Major with Distinction Program](#), which requires mentorship and academic prowess in the form of publication or conferences.

“The professors here are phenomenal,” he said. “They really help students grow.

“Professor Marinova has been absolutely incredible,” said Johnson. “She has definitely inspired me.”
