

*Fulbright Recommendation for John Black*

John Black, whom I have known since 1994, is one of the most distinguished members of the senior class at Williams College (he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the end of junior year), and one of the finest students I have taught in recent years. John's remarkable record in his major field, Geoscience, has earned him a number of distinctions: a Keck Foundation summer research grant (where his work led to publication of a research abstract); selection as a teaching assistant in our introductory Geoscience course and as a tutor in our Math/Science Resource Center; and the opportunity to write his senior honors thesis with our most noted geoscientist. But John's academic interests and abilities are broad-ranging: he has earned an exceptionally high average while taking a variety of demanding courses in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in the sciences.

In the fall of his junior year, John took my advanced-level course on Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon. Their novels are notoriously difficult, but John plunged into the work with a degree of commitment and skill that surpassed that of the more experienced senior English majors in the course. I was struck by John's intellectual ambitiousness and courage. In his papers, he took on some of the most complex critical questions these novels raise (e.g., the ways Nabokov's imagery conflates past and present in *Invitation of a Small Warrior*, and the insistently provisional nature of the gestures by which Pynchon allows his characters to redeem themselves in *Gravity's Rainbow*). These papers were argued with a rigor, precision, and attention to detail that reflected John's scientific training; but their critical insights were, at the same time, the product of John's keen artistic intuitions, his respect for the ways the creative process transcends facts and evidence, and his unembarrassed love for the power of the written word. They offered sophisticated, revealing, and original insights into these challenging works. Similarly, his final exam (a series of take-home essays) demonstrated his rich, textured understanding of the strategies and values that shape Nabokov's and Pynchon's works, as well as his unusually mature ability to draw distinctions and to balance local details with larger generalizations.

I was also struck by John's remarkable performance in the classroom. Collectively, the thirty students in this class (mostly senior English majors) were the finest I have had in seventeen years of teaching--the most lively, engaged, and animated in discussions. And in this group, John stood out as one of the two or three best. His contributions to discussions were splendid--at once provocative and open-minded, well-timed, challenging, and insightful. Whenever John spoke, the other students were especially attentive, since they knew he had something important and helpful to say, and since he himself was so respectful of--and attentive to--the views of others. His work in my course vividly demonstrated his commitment--as he says in his personal statement--to "offering what I have learned to others, and showing them how to teach themselves. "

I have remained in close touch with John since last fall, talking with him about literature, his studies in Australia, and his plans for the future. Though I know he will always maintain his strong literary interests, John's deepest commitment is to Geoscience. While I am not qualified to judge the details of the research project he proposes to undertake in New Zealand, his plans strike me as characteristically ambitious, carefully thought out, and highly promising. I have no doubt that John's combination of keen intelligence, scholarly passion, scientific experience, and abundant energy will lead him to make the finest possible use of a Fulbright grant.

Finally, let me add that John is a delightful person. He is attentive to the needs and concerns of other people; modest and sympathetic in his judgments; alert to the ethical implications of his actions; and at ease in working with people of all ages and backgrounds. He is also blessed with a lively and generous sense of humor. He will be an outstanding representative of our country abroad.

I recommend John, then, with the greatest confidence and enthusiasm. If I may be of additional help in assessing his application, please feel free to call me at (413) 597-2138 [office], or (413) 458-8589 [home]. Thank you for considering this letter.

Sincerely yours,