ments, Graham, like Bacow, found that “everything is interesting.”

Harvard, she said, “is a fascinating and wonderful institution, in an interesting period of change.” Beyond the personal appeal of being involved, joining the Corporation provides the opportunity to “pay back for the education that was the seed for the skills that enable me to play this role now.”

Joseph O’Donnell’s offices at the eastern edge of Cambridge afford a sweeping view across the Charles River, from the Museum of Science to Massachusetts General Hospital and the financial offices in Back Bay. The panorama neatly represents his career in business, as a significant supporter of biomedical science and research, and as a leading figure in Boston—who remains deeply grounded in his roots across the Mystic River and the Charles.

O’Donnell grew up in Everett—his mother still lives there—but “Harvard has been my new neighborhood since I was 19 years old.” When he was admitted to the College on scholarship, his father, “a cop,” told him, “Remember what kind of an opportunity going to a place like Harvard is—remember that daily.” Evidently he has. As a student, he said, he benefited from earlier supporters who endowed buildings and scholarships; as an athlete, he “met a lot of really good people, and even then thought that if I ever had the opportunity, I wanted to pay back.”

A consummate people person, O’Donnell describes Harvard—where he coached and worked at the Business School before pursuing his own business career—in those terms: “The great thing that differentiates great institutions is their people and the continuity of those people, who get it”—people like Jack Reardon (who directed financial aid when O’Donnell was an undergraduate, and now is executive director of the HAA), and his own classmate Bill Fitzsimmons (the College’s long-time dean of admissions and financial aid). “The institution,” he said, “has been almost paternal to me.”

“I worry about the future of the place,” O’Donnell said. “It would be pretty easy for it to become like any other place.” To help forestall that, he has—as an Overseer, HAA director, fundraising volunteer and donor, and business school adviser—paid particular attention to alumni affairs and development, a realm in which the Corporation will now establish a joint committee with the Overseers. During Neil L. Rudenstine’s presidency, O’Donnell reported, he helped Harvard build bridges to local and state government leaders “across the board.” Under President Lawrence H. Summers, he was engaged in Allston planning.

That effort—derailed by the financial crisis in 2008—proceeded perhaps better on the permitting and regulatory front, he said, than in terms of Harvard’s internal decisionmaking. As one of three alumni involved in the Allston Work Team and its new approach (see page 96), he described it as “the best committee I ever served on,” as deans jointly aired issues and resolved them together in a school and University context. As a side benefit, of course, he got to know most of the current deans.

In his new capacity, O’Donnell expects to be involved in financial matters, drawing on his business experience, and alumni and community affairs (“I’ve been doing that ex officio anyway”). “And for certain I’ll be involved” in capital-campaign planning—all with the “goal of making Harvard one university” that is more capable than ever. Locally and in many realms of human progress, he said, “Harvard is the linchpin, in the middle of it. Maybe we should be less shy about the contributions we make to this community and to the world.”

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Aulus and Me

by Madeleine Schwartz ’12

As a humanities concentrator, I’m often asked if “students still read.” I work as an assistant for the head of the Harvard libraries, so I’ve served on a few panels for librarians and alumni anxious to know what the reading climate at Harvard is like. Do students buy books printed on paper anymore? Do they go to the library at all? It’s true that we don’t read exactly the way our parents do: I do a lot of research through online journals, I read blogs, I have a Twitter account. But it’s been my experience that reading at Harvard is much too nuanced a phenomenon to be summarized by a mere change of format. It has less to do with e-readers and e-ink than with the fact that people build their identities around the culture they consume.

I’ve been thinking over these questions this summer while researching my senior thesis. I plan to look at Aulus Gellius, a gentleman-scholar in Rome (A.D. c. 123–c. 165) who kept careful notes of his reading habits in a three-volume miscellany that survives almost entirely intact. Reading, for Gellius, was a social activity, so much so that the desire to be seen as well-read set the tone for almost all the interactions he had with his peers. Not only did he go scroll-shopping with friends along the Tiber and compare notes about new

Photograph by Stu Rosner

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746
The friendly buzz of libraries is an aspect of student life at Harvard that I cherish. Certain chats happen in libraries that I’ve rarely had anywhere else at school: friends encountered there discuss literary matters more readily. Maybe it’s the hushed atmosphere—a sense of excitement often permeates the brief encounters between acquaintances in reading rooms.

Reading at Harvard is social, too, as it was for Gellius. Many of the meaningful conversations I’ve had in college have been about books that I’ve read, or should have read, or should never read. The closest friendships I’ve developed during my three years in Cambridge overlap in large part with those people with whom I’ve shared important intellectual experiences—be it discoveries of a certain author or shared coursework. From classrooms come long discussions comparing ancient treatises with modern songs; from books, lists of recommendations exchanged throughout the summer; from the libraries, lunchtime conversations about the oddest objects owned by Harvard (so far: a book bound in human skin, and Walt Whitman’s death mask, which still has some hair stuck to it).

One of the most interesting things I’ve found in my research on Gellius is that a certain posturing surrounds all literary interactions. Not only are he and his contemporaries eager to find the right words and quotations, they also look for the right shoes, the right cloak. Pupils are frequently chastised about their appearance. The most cogent advice for literary success in that period came from the contemporary satirist Lucian: “Your sandals should be those of an Attic woman—you know, with lots of sections on them—or else boots from Sicyon, conspicuous with white felt.” Lucian may have meant to poke fun, but his advice wasn’t far off. According to the historian Philostratus, one successful orator of the time, Alexander, was “always arranging his hair, cleaning his teeth, and polishing his nails, and always smelled of myrrh.” Another, Favorinus, took the idea of self-presentation even further. Said to have been born a eunuch, he was so skilled at self-presentation that his high voice, unusual effeminacy, and self-confidence earned him a place among the most well-respected orators of his time. There’s even the suggestion that he may have used his skills for seduction—he was charged with an adulterous affair with a well-known noblewoman. Self-presentation was as important as, or even more important than, the substance of one’s work.

How different is that from Harvard? The small group of pretentious but well-meaning literati (I count myself among them) who congregate at the offices of the Advocate, our literary magazine, proudly sport horn-rimmed glasses and sweaters reminiscent of early Woody Allen movies. A few years ago, everyone got their cardigans monogrammed with the magazine’s seal. It’s not unusual to hear Foucault and Bolaño referenced along with Lady Gaga and Beyoncé at parties.

This posturing is not confined to would-be editors. It permeates discussions throughout the campus. How often have I seen a fellow student improve a comment in seminar with perfect pauses what it would have been like to live in a world where social standing depended on such an exacting display of knowledge. The library is fresh off a bedbug scare and fairly empty. Working there can be a little bit lonely. There’s no one to take breaks with—and though I’m sure the neighboring scholar would be fascinated to know that Aulus Gellius inspired a whole generation of ferocious note-takers in the Renaissance, he might be put off were I to lean over and tell him.
and well-placed hand gestures? Together, they can make even a vague statement like “I agree with Tim’s point” sound a little smarter. A determined facial expression makes one seem focused; uneasy hesitation suggests one is trying to downgrade the magnitude of one’s own thoughts.

Some may pass this off as laziness. Sometimes it is. It’s happened that everyone in a class section admits beforehand to reading the same version of The Symposium—the Wikipedia one—but each person has picked out a choice quotation that implies they’ve studied the text carefully. Presentation often covers up, or at the very least adds some polish to, hasty preparation.

Yet I don’t think this posturing is only a shortcut. It’s part of how we’ve been taught to deal with texts. At an elite university like Harvard, we are meant to learn not just the skills that will help us succeed in careers but those that will help us shine in the accompanying cocktail parties. Learning to act well-read is something that coheres in careers but those that will help us not just the skills that will help us succeed in one’s education. From the first moment that we learn to say “I go to school in Boston” as code for “I’m smart and I know it,” we learn how to use reading as a way to make ourselves more attractive.

So when people ask me what reading at Harvard is like, I can’t help but think: Be it scroll, book, Kindle...or whatever comes next, there will forever be social display around reading.

A few nights before I left Cambridge for the summer, I went to the Advocate to hang out with some friends. The evening started out as it usually does—the quiet movement of furniture being dragged across the floor, talk of who was done with exams and what was left to study. After a few hours had passed, a small group gathered, and two of the boys decided to recite some poetry.

Back and forth they went: Coleridge, Whitman, Carson. Ten, 15 poems swung by. Each boy paused to rearrange his glasses. The rest of us sat quietly, taking a sip from a cold drink, or shifting cautiously in the Advocate chairs. When the two had exhausted their memories with an incomplete attempt at “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” someone turned on the stereo and the evening slipped back into its regular course.

Sincere or pretentious? Posturing or a display of knowledge lovingly culled? I can’t answer everyone’s questions, but I can say this. When I went to sleep that night, I felt satisfied.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Madeleine Schwartz ’12 is looking for a pair of white felt boots. The translation from Lucian used in this essay is by Tim Whitmarsh, that from Philoctetes by Wilmer Cave Wright.

New Fellows

Harvard Magazine’s Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows for the 2011-2012 academic year will be Isabel Ruane ’14 and Katherine Xue ’13. They were selected after an evaluation of writing submitted by nearly two dozen student applicants for the two positions. The fellows, who join the editorial staff during the year, contribute to the magazine as “Undergraduate” columnists and initiate story ideas, write news and feature items for print publication and harvardmagazine.com, and edit copy. Ruane, of Wilton, Connecticut, and Mather House, was a member of the women’s sailing team that finished seventh in the national championships this past May in Cascade Locks, Oregon. She is interested in pursuing a concentration in history and literature or history. She served as a counselor at Camp Onaway on Newfound Lake in New Hampshire during the summer. Xue, of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Quincy House, is concentrating in chemical and physical biology. During the past summer, she taught English and other subjects in Namibia, under the auspices of WorldTeach. She is a member of the Harvard Ballroom Dance Team and has written and edited for several campus publications. The fellowships are supported by Jonathan J. Ledecky ’79, M.B.A. ’83, and named in honor of his mother.

From left: Katherine Xue and Isabel Ruane.