WOMEN’S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women’s History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Karen Loeb _________________________ Dept. English _________________________

Course Number and Name English 411 Creative Writing Fiction _______ Semester _____________
completed Fall 2004 __________________________ __________________________

Title of Nominated Work “The Strawberry Queen” ________________________________

__________________________________________________________

CATEGORY: Sampson: Undergraduate Research Paper ___ See _______
Undergraduate Project ___ Olson X___
Graduate ___ Kessler _______
Turell _______
Belter _______

STUDENT INFORMATION:

Name Diana Prince _____________________________

Email princedk@uwec.edu __________ Year/Major Creative Writing _____________

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**WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.
I'm pleased to nominate Diana Prince's story "The Strawberry Queen" for an undergraduate award. I believe it represents an involving and well-realized short story. Diana worked on it in Fiction Workshop this past fall, making revisions on it after class discussion and comments from the instructor. The story itself has somewhat of a twist to it regarding gender and class relationships. Diana manages to give us the man's point of view and the woman's point of view at the crucial moment in the story, causing us at the very least to consider just what is going on. Her use of timing in the story, building up to the moment of confrontation, is particularly well done.

Karen Joel-
Sophia closed her eyes for a moment and inhaled the new car smell of her mom's black Ford Explorer, and then stepped out onto the gravel driveway. Her thighs stung as she peeled them off of the black leather seats, leaving the backs of them a little raw.

"Ow! Mom, why'd you have to get a car with leather interiors? You get stuck in the summer and frozen in the winter. It doesn't make sense," Sophia complained as she smoothed her wrinkled high school softball T-shirt and shorts, then raked her hands through her shoulder length brunette hair. She put it up in a messy ponytail and then pulled down a curly lock and twisted it around her index finger.

“Well, I got every other option, so I figured ‘Why not?’” her mom replied as Sophia leaned in on the passenger side window.

“You could have saved some of that money and helped me buy a new car,” Sophia said.

“That’s why you go to school and have this job.”

“Yeah, I’m just raking in the money Mom. Watch out for this high roller.” Her mother gave her a hard stare and Sophia backed off.

“Well, Luke’s over by the buckets,” Sophia said as she pointed in the direction of the berry field grounds, “I better catch him before he walks out in the field. See ya.” She walked away and waved without looking back as her mother drove off. Her tennis shoes kicked up dirt from the gravel road, some of it getting in the holes in the soles. Luke saw her coming up the driveway and lifted his chin in her direction. He kept shifting his
weight back and forth as he waited for her. She looked slimmer than the last time they saw each other; that was around Christmas. His eyes squinted whenever the bill of his ratty Duke cap didn’t shield them from the bright sun. As soon as she reached him, she leaned on him with one arm. She took one shoe off and turned it upside down so a pebble and some sand could fall on the grass. Luke took the liberty to push her over.

“Hey! You will seriously pay for that so you better watch your back,” she yelled at him, then turned her head to cover her smile.

“If you can’t handle a little baby pebble in your shoe, how are you going to make it out in the field?” His grin could hardly be contained. “Why didn’t you wear sandals anyways?”

“If I’m going to be bending down every five seconds and basically crawling on the ground, I want to at least be comfy” Sophia said. She said ‘hi’ to the person behind the field’s selling stand and wondered why some people wanted to pick their own berries when she and Luke were getting paid to do that for them. She then walked over to a stack of old Kemps ice cream pails, all with cracking plastic rims and black soil cemented in the scratches on them. The top one was missing its plastic handle; the next two were dustier than the others. She lifted out the three after and brushed them off a bit. Luke rolled his eyes.

They walked down the edge of the field. About five feet of waist high weeds grew between them and the county highway. Luke’s thick arm reached out and he snapped off a Black-eyed Susan, which he then stuck in the top of Sophia’s ponytail. She looked around quick to see if anyone was looking, then back handed him in the gut and ran full speed down the field. She turned into the row they would be starting on and threw herself
in front of the low tangle of strawberry plants. Luke’s big chest was heaving as he came trotting up.

“Haven’t been lifting lately, I see,” she said with a smug look on her face.

Luke smiled. “It’s been a few months, but I’m all man, baby.” He bellowed the last part as he lifted up his T-shirt to reveal a soft belly that told on him for all the bonfire parties he’d attended.

They half squatted in front of the strawberry plants, one on each side facing each other as they picked. Luke’s big hands easily pulled the berries off the vines, so he was able to get a few feet ahead of Sophia. She paused to set a full bucket, gleaming with a red hue where the sun shone through, behind her. She noticed the distance between herself and Luke and hastily started throwing the biggest berries she could find into her second bucket. As she moved the mass of green around, she discovered an over-ripe strawberry lying on the ground. She picked it up quickly, gently squeezed it, and chucked it at Luke, hitting him on his stubbly cheek. A tiny seed and some pink tinged juice were left where it had hit.

“I told you, payback sucks!” she said, laughing as he wiped the smear from his face with the bottom of his shirt. His little pudge peeked out again.

In high school they had been constantly pulling pranks on each other and today was no different. At their graduation ceremony when Sophia went up to the stage to accept her diploma, Luke set a Whoopie cushion on her seat. He had it hidden under his burgundy gown, pulling it out while her picture was taken with the principle. He snuck up behind Sophia’s chair and slipped it under her just before she sat down. All of the seated graduates and grads-to-be erupted with laughter, as Sophia’s face quickly matched
the shade of her gown. She hadn’t spoken to him for a month that summer, even when they were approaching strawberry time.

“Did you hear about the party out at Jim’s on Friday?” Luke asked as he simultaneously threw little red berries into his bucket. “You want to go?”

“Isn’t that going to be mostly a high school crowd? I feel too old for that.”

“No, there’ll be a bunch of people from our grade there; I see them there every time I go.” Luke had stopped now and was waiting for Sophia’s answer.

“I don’t know,” she didn’t look up as she twisted the top off a golf ball sized strawberry and bit into it. “I don’t really talk to anyone anymore, except for maybe Aimee on the phone and you here.” She said this slowly and thoughtfully.

Luke’s eyebrows furrowed together. “You know you could hang out with me outside of here. I only work at the restaurant part time in the summer, so it’s not as if there isn’t time.” His voice had taken a sharp tone as he said this. It cut into Sophia, accompanied by a twang of guilt.

“You’re right,” she said quickly, “we should get together sometime and rent a movie or something.” Luke’s face seemed to brighten at this. She then added, “We could see if Aimee wants to come too.” Sophia hoped he would at least shower after he was done at the restaurant. She hated the smell of the deep-fry grease that saturated his clothes and hair. He would always leave with a sheen on his face from the film of grease sticking to it.

Sophia thought about the last time she had seen Aimee; the three of them were listening to the band at the fair play two years ago. Aimee, Sophia, and Luke had met some of their other friends in the beer tent and danced to the local band, the one that was
willing to play anything that was requested even if they barely knew the song. It hadn’t mattered then that they were underage because the bartenders were their parents’ friends and knew it was okay. Aimee and Luke danced together most of the night. When they got drunk they both got a little touchy-feely, and that week it just happened to be with each other. The night had been going great with everybody showing off drunken dance moves that always seemed cooler in their minds, until Luke had grabbed Sophia by the waist and started dancing seductively beside her. She glanced over at Aimee, who was glaring at the two of them. Sophia quickly pushed Luke away and he bounced back to Aimee and started dancing with her again. Aimee never brought it up to Sophia, but since then there had always been an underlying chill whenever they spoke. She knew it had something to do with a conversation about a boy they had both liked.

“He called me tonight and wanted to know if I wanted to get together,” Sophia had said into the receiver. There was a short sigh.

“Well, what did you tell him?” Aimee asked.

“I don’t know. I said yes. What was I supposed to say?” Sophia felt her stomach slowly knot up and start to turn. This wasn’t going very well.

“Well, for starters, that you would never go behind your best friend’s back and get with a guy that she liked, because you’re not that kind of person. That’s what you should have told him,” Aimee said in a wavering voice.

“Look, he didn’t know that you liked him because you’ve never done or said anything to give him that idea, so what’s he supposed to do? Have ESP and read your mind? No! He started liking someone, and that happened to be me.” Sophia was grasping at the air in her bedroom trying to comfort her friend. “Don’t you see? I’m not trying to
hurt you.”

“I see that you always get what you want without ever earning it, and right now you don’t care who gets hurt in the process. You think as long as you say it wasn’t your intention, it’s okay. But where does that leave me?” The other line clicked before Sophia could respond and all she heard was the dial tone. The next day she told the boy that she didn’t really like him; she was just kidding about the date. His mouth fell at the sides and his cheeks turned pink as he walked away. Sophia had wanted to go after him but Aimee had just walked up.

An hour later, Sophia and Luke had finished three rows and filled countless buckets to sell to tourists who stopped but didn’t want to take the trouble to pick the berries themselves. Luke picked up two of Sophia’s buckets, besides his own four, and slid them onto his muscled arms. Sophia dazed off on her walk back to the entrance as she lazily swung her full pail. She gazed at the cottony clouds floating over the hills dotted with cows. They were most likely chewing their cud and gazing right back at her, at least she liked to think so. She suddenly wished she had a camera so she could capture this scene and show it to her friends back at school. She walked up to the little hut that sold off the pre-picked strawberries and plopped down her single bucket. Luke was already there with his and the rest of hers. She was teased every now and then about never having to do as much work as he did. But Luke had always carried her pails, so it wasn’t any big deal. As they walked back out to where they had left off, Luke asked again about Friday night. Sophia avoided his eyes and said she’d see what was going on. They spent the next half hour seeking out any hidden berries. Finally, Luke broke the silence.
“Do you want to go swimming after we get done this afternoon? The high’s supposed to be around 90 degrees and the lake is warm by now.” The sun had been unusually speedy in warming up the land and Sophia could definitely feel the effects. Sweat had been beading on her body the whole time, then trickling all over her. She felt so gross and repulsive to others that she agreed to meet him there when they were all done. A satisfied look spread across his face when he heard that and he went along a little faster.

The end of their last row was coming closer, their quota almost filled. They threw a few more strawberries in the bulging buckets and called it quits. After dropping off their final load, Luke drove them out to a sheltered part of the lake they had swum at since ninth grade. Sophia practically had to jump down from Luke’s F-150; his lift kit was so high. A smile ran across her face as she remembered the Geo Metro he had when he turned sixteen. It was the only vehicle he could afford and it worked well, but he was teased mercilessly about it. She had been one of the worst ones, calling it ‘the Speck’ and a clown car. She even bought a red rubber nose and made him wear it while posing for a picture beside his car.

Suddenly, it dawned on her that she had no swimsuit. Her shoulders crumbled as she groaned. Luke took notice and asked, “What’s up? Don’t tell me you’re still afraid of the fish biting your toes. That’s half the fun—not knowing what’s going on underneath.”

“Shut up, that was from when I was twelve years old. The problem’s that I don’t have a swimsuit. Now I’m going to be all wet on the way back. I don’t even have a towel.”

Luke’s eyes twinkled. “We could go skinny dipping, but you’d have to promise
not to take advantage of me once you get me naked."

"You know me; I can't keep my hands off you. But I think I'll pass. I'll just jump in like this." Sophia kicked off her tennis shoes into the grass and started walking to the water. A closed-off bridge hovered over where a deep creek emptied into the lake, blocking the way to traffic from the main road. Only fisherman came here otherwise. She climbed up the criss-crossing metal beams with the ease of a monkey. Pulling herself up to the top one, she looked out at the tiny motor boats that dragged unsteady skiers behind them. She undid her ponytail and let the warm breeze run over her face and lift her hair. The forgotten flower fell from her hair band and did cartwheels down to the water. Luke climbed up and took the spot next to her. She looked at him suddenly and said, "If you push me from here, I swear I will..."

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna push you," he said exasperated. "What am I—evil? I wouldn't do that."

She watched her legs dangle over the lapping water below. Then Luke stood up and prepared to jump; he went first. Luke always went first. As Sophia rose, her heart started pounding harder and she felt its beat throb in her arms and legs. She stepped off the metal and cut through the thick air with the force of her body falling. It seemed like minutes before she plunged into the green water, going down so deep that her toes touched the sandy bottom. She pushed off and rocketed back towards the surface, opening her eyes to look at the distorted light shining from the sun. She thought of the stained glass window above the front door at home; a sun rising, half hidden by the horizon. She broke the surface with a gasp and bobbed up and down a couple of times, shaking the water from her head. Her hair was like coffee spilling over her shoulders.
Luke swam over by her and they started treading water under the bridge. He looked at Sophia’s white T-shirt as it glued itself to her shoulders and then billowed out in the hazy water. He became aware of his gaze and turned away, redness splashing his face. Sophia was watching a speedboat whiz by and saw its skier topple into the boat’s foamy wake. She giggled faintly and Luke reddened even more, his eyes lowered in reverence to girl before him. They both looked back at each other at the same time and Luke moved his face closer to hers. Her round-cheeked smile deflated, like the air pushed out from her shirt as her limbs cycled through the water. Her foot kicked and she shot back swiftly.

“What are you doing? What are you doing?” she demanded, trembling slightly. She looked down and tried to cover her body with her arms, sinking a little as she did so. Turning quickly, she started swimming to the part of the shoreline that met the base of the bridge. Luke moved his powerful arms and cut through the water, easily catching up to her.

“Wait! Sophia wait, I didn’t mean it.” Water splashed his face and went in his mouth as he sputtered out his words. “It was an accident. I thought you...” He reached out his hand for her shoulder, halting her erratic breast stroke. She turned to face him, curling her body up, except for one leg that balanced her in the shallow water. At the depth they were at now, they could clearly see the cappuccino sand in its smooth, waved pattern. All mysteries of the lake bottom were revealed, to the disappointment of the onlooker. Her anger and humiliation burst with a hurricane force.

“You what? Thought I would want you just like that?” She raised her right arm from the water and snapped her fingers as she said it. The magnitude of her voice startled
even her. “Did you think that I was just going to give up everything I’ve worked for and all of my college plans for you? I like my life now—without you.”

Her words were thrown at him like a bucket of water. The sting rippled through him, floating over every muscle in his face. He looked over at a downed tree trunk and the tiny purple flowers growing at the base of it. His eyes moved back to Sophia’s and he nodded his head. Leaning his solid body forward, he parted the water before him and glided toward the base of the bridge. Sophia’s stomach shrank inward. She called out Luke’s name, but he ignored her. His back glistened as he hoisted himself out of the water. Sophia stayed stationary as her tongue swelled in her mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” was all she could force out as he walked off on the path. He never turned back or acknowledged her. The rumbling diesel engine started up a few moments later. It cackled at her as the gears shifted, making a few exaggerated whines before it faded down the road.

The soft bird calls, previously muted by their voices, materialized around her. She gazed through the shallow water at the scarlet polish on her toes, curling them in and out of the sand. The stillness of the air settled around her. She let the weak movement of the water cradle her body, as a phoebe sang out from a tree close to the shoreline. The melodic song irritated her eyes, already stinging from salty tears. One slid down over her cheekbone and rested there. She lifted her hand to her face and wiped it away with a red fingertip, stained from the sweet ripe strawberries.