

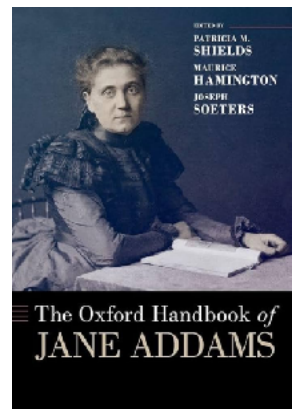
“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”
—An Interview Series with John Capps—



[Judy Whipps](#) is Professor Emerita of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies at Grand Valley State University. She is the author of over three dozen articles, primarily addressing early feminist pragmatism. Some of her recent articles appear in the [European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy](#), the [Oxford Handbook of Jane Addams](#), and the [Bloomsbury Handbook to Pragmatism](#) (co-authored with Danielle Lake and Sunny Heenan). She co-edited, with Marilyn Fischer, the four-volume set [Jane Addams's Writings on Peace](#) and was the lead editor for four editions of *Reflection and Engagement*, a reader for first-year students at GVSU. Her newest project, *Protecting Social Rights: Feminist Pragmatism from Addams to Perkins*, is due out in the next year. She is a past recipient of SAAP's Ila and John Mellow Prize.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

When I discovered American philosophy, it felt like I had found an intellectual home, a place to stand. It was the only philosophy that made sense in the context of living. The fields I work in, pragmatism and feminism, embrace an experimental and experiential approach to addressing social problems. This approach gave me a pathway to think with others about social issues. I look for people who have wisdom about life and who care about our shared communities. I find that in some American philosophers, both past and present. I loved teaching American philosophy.



How did you become an American philosopher?

I came of age in the late 1960s, a time of intellectual and emotional restlessness, embodied in an urgent dissatisfaction with the state of the world and a desire to change it somehow. I dropped out of college and joined a religious commune. I stayed there for fifteen years even though it became authoritarian and abusive. After I left that group, I had to find my way in the world, and after a few years, I returned to

college. As an undergraduate, I found myself asking, “So what?” of everything I learned. I wanted to know how an idea made any difference in our shared lives. My advisor, Stephen Rowe, pointed me toward American philosophy. My first in-depth exposure to American philosophy was a semester-long undergraduate course on Williams James.



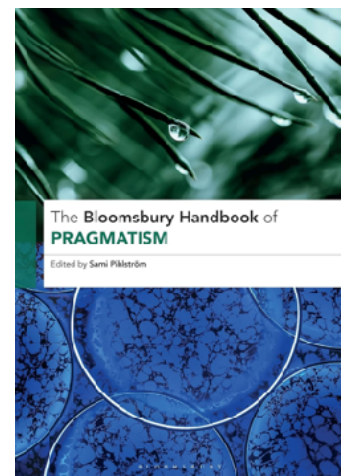
In my early 40s, when I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, I felt I could only bring part of who I was—the rational thinking and analytical part—into the conversation. When I continued my Ph.D. work at Union Institute with Elizabeth Minnich, American philosophy gave me the space to bring my whole self, thinking and experiencing, into the room. I’m still in awe of the clarity of Elizabeth’s thinking and deeply grateful for her patient support. She taught me to be a feminist and validated my interest in Dewey’s philosophy. I was also fortunate that Charlene Seigfried agreed to be on my dissertation committee in the 1990s, which allowed me to explore Addams in depth. I have been going to SAAP meetings for nearly 30 years! It’s hard to imagine my professional life without the SAAP community.

How would you describe your current research?

Recently, I have been exploring feminist pragmatism in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the work of Florence Kelley, Grace Abbott, and Frances Perkins. Their feminist pragmatism was acted out in legislative and judicial activism. They developed a philosophy of social rights that required a change in how the Courts interpreted the Constitution. It has led me to read court cases and pragmatist legal theory.

What do you do when you’re not doing American philosophy?

I worry about the future of democracy! But I also find other fun things to do. I am a docent at the Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, where I talk to people about art and plants. I participate in Osher Lifelong Learning classes, occasionally give community talks, travel, read mysteries, hang out with friends, and play around in my flower garden. Retirement has given me more time for thinking and more time for friends and family.



What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

Can I change the question to books that changed the way I think? Of course, the list is long, but near the top are Addams's *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism*, Arendt's *Men in Dark Times* and *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, Gavin's *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, and Fischer's *Jane Addams's Evolutionary Theorizing*.

Sometimes, I wonder if I'm a "real" philosopher. Ideas don't stick unless I understand the cultural context and life stories of the people writing them. I need to think with people in a particular context. Because of that I often turn to historians and biographers when I'm reading philosophy. Kathryn Kish Sklar's writing on Florence Kelley has been essential to my recent work.

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