

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 28, 2008
Contact: Laurel Eldridge - 423-267-1218,
LEldridge@artsedcouncil.org



arts & education council

Writers and Their Fans Celebrate the Power of the Pen

Fellowship of Southern Writers Celebrates 20 Years at Conference on Southern Literature

(CHATTANOOGA, TN) From literary lion Louis Rubin Jr. to hot new playwright Marco Ramirez the 2009 Conference on Southern Literature in Chattanooga will feature established and emerging authors offering readings, panel discussions and book signings. Best-selling novelist Lee Smith will deliver the keynote address and renowned man of letters and conservationist Wendell Berry will take part in a session on historical fiction.

This year's conference, sponsored by the Arts and Education Council April 2 - 4, will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, which houses its archives at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and holds its meeting in conjunction with the biennial writers' conference.

The FSW was founded by towering literary figures – Cleanth Brooks, Walker Percy and Eudora Welty, among them – to recognize and reward outstanding literature by southern authors.

Up to 50 members of the Fellowship will participate in this year's event, discussing literary biography, writing to and from another race and the process of transferring a play from the page to the stage. The Fellowship will also award nine literary prizes and induct eight new members, offering an opportunity for attendees to discover up-and-coming voices in Southern literature.

Other conference participants include fiction writers Jill McCorkle, Josephine Humphreys, Clyde Edgerton, Bobbie Ann Mason, Robert Morgan, Allen Wier, Elizabeth Spencer, Richard Bausch, Allan Gurganus and Madison Smartt Bell; poets Rita Dove, Andrew Hudgins, Jim Applewhite, Ellen Bryant Voigt, and Dave Smith; and playwrights Jim Grimsley and Beth Henley.

Held in the art deco Tivoli Theater in downtown Chattanooga, the event attracts book lovers from across the country for a non-academic, book love fest. Regulars say they like the “approachable and friendly writers,” the “diversity of the speakers and topics” and the “wonderful ambiance.” The authors are eager to meet their fans, chat about literature and autograph books.

“When people attend for the first time, many are surprised how accessible the writers are,” says Susan Robinson, AEC Executive Director. “It’s not like going to a class or hearing a lecture. Writers mingle with readers and with one another. Conversations and chance encounters are happening everywhere. And you certainly don’t have to know all the authors and their works to enjoy the event. Regulars say one of the delights is discovering writers they’ve never heard of, much less read, and starting the exciting adventure of exploring new works of literature.”

THE STORY OF A PARTNERSHIP

In 1981 two Chattanooga English professors, together with the Arts and Education Council, established the Conference on Southern Literature. The biennial event brings award-winning Southern authors and their admirers together in a *non-academic* setting, allowing the readers to hear their literary heroes read from their works and take part in panel discussions.

The first five guest authors were Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, Cleanth Brooks, Andrew Lytle and Margaret Alexander. In subsequent years, Jim Dickey mesmerized attendees with readings from *Deliverance*, William Styron recalled the segregated society of his boyhood and Shelby Foote called for history to be constructed like the thrilling narrative that it is. (continued...)

(Conference release, page 2 of 2)

After its smashing debut, the Conference was embedded in Chattanooga cultural life as a biennial event, drawing 1,000 people from across the country each year.

At the same time, Cleanth Brooks and Louis Rubin began thinking about making Chattanooga the headquarters for an organization that would encourage excellence and recognize distinction in Southern writing, soon to be known as the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

Why Chattanooga, over more obvious locations like Sewanee, Vanderbilt or Chapel Hill?

“The universities most active in contemporary Southern letters...[were] associated with a particular group of writers, and we did not want the fellowship to fall under the aegis, however benevolent, of any one group,” Louis Rubin explains. “Moreover, although we ourselves were academics, our hope was that in years to come the Fellowship would be comprised principally of novelists, poets, and playwrights, without a predominantly academic character.”

Rubin’s participation in the 1987 Conference on Southern Literature confirmed their choice in Chattanooga.

“The efficiency with which the Conference was promoted and operated, the widespread support it enjoyed within the Chattanooga community, the fact that it was a civic and not an academic undertaking, and equally that it was not identified with any one school or group or coterie or particular kind of Southern writing—these were very impressive,” Rubin recalls.

In due time the Fellowship of Southern Writers was formed and started meeting in conjunction with the Conference, holding its meetings on the UT-Chattanooga campus and bestowing awards and inducting new members before Conference audiences. In the 20 years since, Fellowship members, new and old, have come to cherish this gathering as a reunion of old friends and an opportunity to forge new relationships.

“For me the Conference is like one big unpredictable, emotional, important family reunion: I get the feeling I’m meeting cousins (both writers and readers) connected to me by literature, history, geography, all the complex mystery of southernness,” says novelist and Fellow Josephine Humphreys. Clyde Edgerton sees it as “a chance to feel at home among stories.” To Ellen Bryant Voigt, the Conference is “...a big family reunion, but with much less quarreling.”

The 2009 Conference on Southern Literature celebrates 20 years of a collaboration that has launched careers, celebrated the written word and delighted audiences. Over 75 prizes have so far been awarded to emerging and established writers; thousands of students and teachers have relished the opportunity to work with writers in the classroom; April has been named Southern Literature Month in Chattanooga.

But perhaps most importantly, amidst trends of decreased reading among all ages, the AEC Conference has encouraged people to pick up a book and (re)discover the power of the written word. “Story-tellers need story-hearers (and vice versa),” says novelist Allan Gurganus. “This eco-system is less regional than it is eternal, essential.”

Be a Part of It!

General admission for all three days is \$125. One-day tickets are \$55-65. Discounts are offered for AEC members and full time students. Call the Arts & Education Council at 423-267-1218 or visit www.SouthernLitConference.org for more information, to request a brochure or to register.

###