Deep South Writers' Conference Promotes Development Of Professional Writing Skills

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The Deep South Writers' Conference is one of the activities which has placed the University of Southwestern Louisiana on the "literary map." Nationally known authors of novels, poetry, short stories, songs, science fiction and other genre will conduct workshops during the three-day 23rd annual conference, scheduled to begin Friday.

The conference is organized by members of the USL English Department. "The main purpose of the conference is to let local writers meet with national ones," Dr. Joe Riehl, president of the Deep South Writers' Conference, said. "We are trying to promote the development of professional writing skills."

Dr. Marcia Gaudet, a conference staff member, explained that the event is comprised of a writing contest and workshops conducted by professional writers. "The connection between the two (the conference and the workshops) is that local writers have the opportunity to have their manuscripts read by professionals," Gaudet said.

This year, about 1,100 writers from throughout the nation submitted works in the categories of novel, short story, science fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama. The works are read by anonymous judges who are sometimes speakers at the conference and sometimes local people, according to Dr. David Thibodaux, clerk of the contest.

Annually, about 200 people attend the conference which is held on the USL campus.

Dr. Carl Wooton, director of the conference, said the authors conducting the workshops "probably do their most effective work of the conference" when they are not conducting workshops. "One of the stipulations that we ask the authors to adhere to is that when they're not conducting workshops, seminars and lectures, they remain available and visible," he said. "We want them to be around for private conferences."

This year's speakers include Ernest Gaines, author of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and A Gathering of Old Men; Jonathan Holden, author of Design For A House and Falling From Stardom; John D. Loudermilk, composer and lyricist; George Alec Effinger, author of What Entropy Means To Me, The Bird of Time and The Stone Fire; Joel Clemenha, author of Heathen Pioneer and Marriage Wheel; James Lee Burke, author of Half of Paradise and To The Bright and Shining Sun; and Chris Segura, author of Marshland Bruce and Bayou Phantasm.

Sonny Hyles, USL English faculty member, said, "these are heavy-duty folks that any conference would be proud to have."

Riehl said it is "not that difficult" to get national authors to participate in the Deep South Writers' Conference because "the faculty here is well-connected." "The people here (instructors) hold degrees from universities all over the country and are in touch with friends," he said. "When we think of someone whom we'd like to have participate in the conference, generally someone here knows someone who can help us."

Dr. Carmen Cramer, conference program director, said the authors enjoy coming to Lafayette. "Lafayette has a certain mystique to people," she smiled. "When you mention Cajuns, they almost always become interested in visiting the area."

But local authors who have become well-known also have been invited. "Each year, we try to get a few local people to participate in the conference," Wooton said. "This year there is James Lee Burke who is from New Iberia and J.D. Loudermilk who lived in Lafayette. They demonstrate to local folks that local folks can do it."

Several winners of the writing contests have also aided the conference and USL. One is Elizabeth Dubu, author of the novel Cajun. "She said the contest gave her the incentive to continue writing," Riehl said. "She now supports the contest with the Dubu Award (a cash award for the short story winner)."

F. Ray Mouton, of Lafayette who was the winner of the 1982 novel category, donated a house to USL for the writer-in-residency. Currently, this year's writer-in-residency, Ernest Gaines, is living in the house.

In addition to the workshops and contests, the conference activities include a presentation of three plays which will be staged Friday in the Burke Hall Lab Theatre and public readings by the guest speakers Saturday and next Sunday.

Wooton explained how the Deep South Writers' Conference began. "It started in 1961 when a group of USL people and some of the Louisiana Pen Women met at a meeting in New Iberia," he said. "The Pen Women talked about the possibility of conducting a conference, but they didn't have a place to hold it."

USL allowed the Pen Women to use the buildings on campus and the USL faculty helped with the preparations. "The original thought was that the conference might rotate to other cities," Wooton said. "But that didn't work."

When USL became the permanent home, the university began taking on more duties. Now the conference is a separate organization supported by USL.

All of the conference staff members emphasized that the university administration has been supportive of the conference."You hear that nationally the humanities aren't being well-funded," Crater said. "But that's not the case here. The administration and the public have been very supportive of the conference and the humanities in general. That's encouraging to those of us in the field."