Louisiana can leave a mark on writers

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

Louisiana can leave a mark that makes Louisianians writers of people who aren’t natives or even long-time residents.

That’s the word from Dr. Mary Ann Wilson, an associate professor of English at USL. She’s writing a book about Jean Stafford.

Stafford, Wilson told Lafayette Rotarians Thursday, was raised in Colorado. She lived in Baton Rouge while her first husband, world-renowned poet Robert Lowell, studied at Louisiana State. And she returned when her third husband, A.J. Liebling, researched Earl Long for his book The Earl of Louisiana.

Stafford’s own short stories appeared in The New Yorker over three decades beginning in the 1940s, and she published books of her own, including the novel Sense of Place.

Wilson said Stafford’s sense of place was acute when she moved with Lowell to a one-bedroom apartment in Baton Rouge.

“She thought it was provincial,” said Wilson, who researched Stafford’s letters in Colorado. “She thought it was claustrophobic. So she wanted to head east.”

In the meantime, “she made fun of it all,” Wilson said.

Stafford wrote about the mildew that attacked her books. She wrote about paste-hungry cockroaches that “demolished Proust and several of the Russians.”

And she wrote about rats wearing checkered caps and “smoking 5-cent cigars between meals.”

Wilson said Stafford’s description of Louisiana, shaped in part by trips to the Teche country, was “beautiful but lethal. ... I’ve never been anywhere where I was so little tempted to go barefoot.”

Stafford returned to Louisiana 20 years later with Liebling as he reconnoitered Uncle Earl.

Liebling was Jewish, a New Yorker, a writer for the Eastern liberal press that made Long a national joke during his brief stay in the Texas mental hospital to which his wife, Blanche, had him committed after several unsavory Long escapades. So Liebling was not the sort of man to whom Long — a notoriously free speaker — would speak freely.

But Liebling had an in — a history of writing about croupiers and track touts. So when Liebling asked Long to name his betting system, the book broke quickly from the gate.

“Watching Liebling operate taught (Stafford) a lot about how to approach a figure like that,” Wilson said.

Stafford learned a thing or two from Long, too, Wilson said. Like splashing Coke on his head and face to escape the Louisiana heat.

“That’s right,” Stafford later quoted Long. “I’m a hot papa.”

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