Writ large

The 40th Annual Deep South Festival of Writers:
celebrating literature and artistic expression
from across Acadiana to across the world.

By Jessica Shadoian

The world of ideas will gather at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Thursday through Sunday, Oct. 12-15, for the 40th annual Deep South Festival of Writers. This year’s event marks not only the conference’s 40th anniversary, but also the university’s centennial.

A Lafayette tradition, the festival brings the finest poets, artists and writers available to Louisiana for a weekend of readings, craft lectures, hands-on workshops and foot-stomping festival fun. Adding to the celebration, this year the conference has a new home, the UL Alumni House at the corner of St. Mary Boulevard and Cedar Park Circle.

The Deep South Festival of Writers encourages literature and art in Acadiana through public performances, craft lectures and exhibitions from artists from across the country. The festival brings nationally and world-renowned artists here to inspire the artist in all of us. Anyone of a creative bent — painters, playwrights, garage musicians, photographers, bar-surfing poets, and even readers who keep a cherished novel on their bedside table — are welcome.

This year’s festival will showcase Louisiana writers and artists, and the Louisiana setting in literature and the imagination. All genres, from poetry to photography, drama to journalism, fiction to folklore, will be represented. Many of the events are free and open to the public, including many that are simply not to be missed.

On Friday, Oct. 13, the only bad luck would be to miss Paroles et Musique, a Cajun/Creole extravaganza featuring Acadian poets Jean Anemoon, David Chemarin, Debbie Clifton and Zachary Richard. Starting at 6:30 p.m. at the Alumni House, these four singing minstrels will create a dazzling blend of music and French verse. Following Paroles et Musique, at 7:30 p.m., look into Louisiana Faces, a joint reading and photography presentation by Jason Berry and Phillip Gould.

Don’t leave your chairs too quickly, because close upon the heels of Louisiana Faces will be a fiction reading by local favorite and nationally acclaimed author Tim Gautreaux. Gautreaux’s stories are a Louisiana institution.

Not enough activity for your Friday evening? Join the festival at 9:30 p.m. for a party and musical performance by Thomas Fields, the “Big Hat Man,” and his foot-stomping Zydeco Band. All the Deep South Festival writers, artists and guests will pack the Alumni House into the wee hours. This promises to be the party of the year, the place to see and be seen. Pay attention between sets, maybe you’ll learn a few (literary) things.

Events won’t slow down at Saturday night, just as full as fun. Join the Festival at 7 p.m. at the Alumni House for a reading with Connecticut author Vincent Shingler, prize-winning poet and the editor of the Connecticut Review.

Henry Glassie, author of 10 nonfiction books and 50 articles, and president of the American Folklore Society, will follow with a nonfiction reading at 8 p.m.

Then, make yourself ready for the legendary Saturday Night Poetry Crawl. Enjoy an evening of open mic readings as writers, artists and guests of the Festival converge to local restaurants and cafes. At each location, anyone (here’s where you bar-surfing poets come in) can get up and read from their writing. Bare your soul and your creative leanings in a relaxed atmosphere among old friends, good food and fine beer. So work up the gumption and bring something you’ve written to share with the crowd.

Sleep in after Saturday night, but be sure to join us at 11:30 a.m. on Sunday for a reading by UL’s own Ernest J. Gaines, the best-selling author of A Lesson Before Dying. When Gaines reads his work aloud, the whole world stops to listen. Get there early, for while the whole world will listen, only about half will find chairs.

While these night-time activities are not to be missed, serious writers and artists will want to know how they can join the Deep South Festival of Writers as daytime conference participants. Register for $40 at the door and gain access to dozens of additional readings, workshops, craft lectures and the Deep South Bookfair.

Registrants will have invaluable and educational access to these amazing authors and artists in small, intimate venues. For registration and schedule information, call 482-8506. This incredible line-up of talent will gather only once this October at the Deep South Festival of Writers. Don’t miss the opportunity to join in the celebration.

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A neotraditionalist for the ages

Tim Gautreaux revives the art of regionalist fiction — and wins his fans’ hearts with every word. By David Koon

THE READ
Tim Gautreaux will read to registered conference participants on Friday evening as part of the Deep South Festival of Writers at University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Call 482-6906 for registration and schedule information.

A writer in the tradition of such regionalists as Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor, Tim Gautreaux has been causing a critical fuss with his fiction ever since his first story appeared in the literary journal Kansas Quarterly in 1981. With his plain-told, often humorous, always brilliant tales of Cajuns and Creoles living down-home lives in the Indian country of southwestern Louisiana, Gautreaux has earned the hearts of new readers with every story.

Born and raised in Morgan City and now a professor of English at the University of Southeastern Louisiana, where he has directed the creative writing program, Gautreaux is the author of three collections of prose: The Original of the World and Other Stories, and a novel, Next Step in the Dance.

In an age when we have been assured that regionalist fiction is dead, Gautreaux books — most set within the narrow confines of Acadiana — have been best-sellers by literary fiction standards, and have been profiled everywhere from the online Web site Atlantic Monthly to National Public Radio. Even though he would be easier to set his works in a more “generic” locale, Gautreaux is dedicated to the idea of regionalism as a way for writers to connect with their material.

“If you want to make a story authentic,” Gautreaux says, “write what you know. It’s money in the bank. It’s where your aunts and uncles and your language come from. You know it better than anyone.”

Gautreaux knows what he’s talking about. Writing about the people and places of his Cajun homeland has won him the prestigious National Magazine Award for fiction, a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, and several nominations for the Best American Short Stories and New Stories from the South series. His work has been broadcast on the Pulitzer Prize-winning NPR series The Writer's Block and his stories have appeared in The New Yorker and The Best American Short Stories.

In the meantime, Gautreaux has become a reader, writer and public speaker of some acclaim, and served as the Crishman Southern Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi.

With the success of his three books, Gautreaux has proven himself to be a writer of power, humor and grace; his books will find their perch in the Southern canon in the years to come. Writing about the tiny corner of the world we in Acadiana call home, Gautreaux has become an award-winning writer of national reputation, reading his stories all over the United States, to both foreign and again, Gautreaux funny, goofy, sad, poignant and surreal stories prove that no matter how far afield he roams, his heart has never left South Louisiana.

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An exercise of faith

Uncle Neil's tales delight, whether written for the younger set or a more adult readership. By Rikki Clark

THE READ
Neil O'Boyle Connelly will read to registered conference participants on Friday afternoon as part of the Deep South Festival of Writers at University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Call 452-6906 for registration and schedule information.

"It's a physical thing. I have a physical reaction to writing. It's almost like an addiction," says Neil O'Boyle Connelly, one of the featured writers for this year's University of Louisiana at Lafayette Deep South Festival of Writers.

"I write every morning," he continues. "I look at it like jogging. Sometimes you have a great run, sometimes a not-so-great run, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I ran."

If Connelly is delayed by meetings or errands, and cannot write until the afternoon, he "draws the blinds, makes some coffee, fries up a couple of eggs and pretends it's morning."

The novel has succeeded. His novel, St. Michael's Scale, is forthcoming from Scholastic Pects (the publishers of the phenomenally successful Harry Potter series for young adults).

Not all of Connelly's work is for the younger set, though. He is working on The Unheimlich Kennedy Terror, which explores the nature of faith, wrestling and the Home Shopping Network. "It's about the things that we never stop learning," he says. "About things that we never stop doing."

Connelly honored his writing skills as a child. As the youngest in a very large Catholic family, he concocted creative versions of daily events in order to be heard. "I realized that I needed to use great details to get the 30 seconds of attention I needed to tell my family about my day," he says. "We are a family of story tellers."

Connelly earned his master's of fine arts from McNeese University in Lake Charles. He left Louisiana to teach at Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington, N.C. "The city that the last four out of six hurricanes have hit," he says out. He returned to Louisiana this year as an associate professor at McNeese University.

He was born and raised in Allentown, Pa., the 10th child to a homeopathic doctor father and mother who is now the oldest active female scuba diving instructor with the YMCA. "She dives all over the world," Connelly says. "Recently she was in the Mediterranean Sea exploring a Phoenician underwater city. My father isn't too happy about the whole idea."

Connelly misses his family, friends and girlfriend, Beth, on the East Coast. "I'm officially the uncle of 25," he says. "Although dozens more call me 'Uncle Neil.' " But his passion for writing and his duties as a professor keep him grounded. "I take the obsessive-compulsive approach to writing," he admits. "I put on a pot of coffee, fry some eggs and keep typing away."

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Just folks

Folklorist Henry Glassie finds the foundations of art in the tales of our ancestors. By Steven W. Beech

THE READ
Henry Glassie will discuss the purpose and possibilities of nonfiction writing at 6 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 14, at the Alumni House as part of the Deep South Festival of Writers.

President Clinton has expressed his intention to nominate Henry Glassie, college professor of folklore at Indiana University, to the National Council on Humanities. Glassie is an internationally renowned folklorist who has published widely on American folklore, material culture and history and Irish folklore and history, as well as Turkish, Bangladeshi and Japanese traditional arts.

Three of his works have been named notable books of the year by the New York Times, and he has won numerous awards and honors, including a Guggenheim fellowship, the Chicago Folklore Prize, the Henry Prize in the Social Sciences, the Turkish Ministry of

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COVERSTORY

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Culture's Award for Superior Service, and the state Certificate of Honor from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of Bangladesh.

His books include Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (1968), Folk Housing In Middle Virginia (1975), All Silver and No Brass (1975), Passing the Time in Hallowed Places: Culture and History of an Ulster Community (1982), The Spirit of Folk Art (1989), Turkish Traditional Art Today (1993), Art and Life in Bangladesh (1997), and Material Culture (1999).

In the following question-and-answer session, he talks about folklore, his work, and his participation in the Deep South Festival of Writers:

What would you like people to know about you? I guess that I spent my entire life searching for and celebrating the excellence of common people. That I'm committed to frightening people, captivating moments which would frighten prejudice.

What exactly is folklore? Folklore is, I think, the relationship between personal creativity and social order. Politically, it is dedicated, or should be, to undoing neglect and compensating for people being ignored in the past, bringing into the record of creativity people left out due to race, gender and class.

It seems that you are very interested in regular people doing regular things. Can you comment further on that? In particular, I would like to say that it is regular people doing regular things excellently. I celebrate people going about common activities in a mood of joy (as in commitment). Those who do well what they have to do are what compel me those with a mood of excellence and power in the most common affairs.

Can you tell me how you and your work figure into both creative writing and the Deep South Festival? The Deep South Festival is the first part of this festival, said, "All great art is founded on folklore." It expresses excellence in the common place. (William) Faulkner's writings demonstrate an understanding of traditional culture and its commitment to excellence. Without folklore, there could have been no characters in Faulkner's writings. Without those characters, there could not have been a Faulkner. I ask, how can folklore not be in literature? I don't think you can have serious literature without a reference to the phenomenal power that I call folklore.

For the second part, my mother's family is from Franklin, I.e., my father's family is from the countryside of Virginia. To a great extent, it would be accurate to say that everything I've written has to do with a meditation of the complexities of thinking through a very emotional attachment to a small community from the Faulkner region of Virginia, and an international intellectual attachment.

Can you tell me what you will be talking about at the festival? This conference interests me a lot, because I'm asked to talk about some thing that I've never been asked to talk about before. I'll offer a meditation about writing. I'm not going to talk about the craft of writing. I'm going to talk about the purpose of writing. It is an opportunity for me to say why I write, and to address in small caps the politics of writing. I'll look at the rationale of the nonfiction writer.

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Tied to the land

Though his career has taken him up north, Tim Parrish's work still draws on his Baton Rouge roots. By Billy Fontenot

THE READ
Tim Parrish will read to registered conference participants Monday afternoon as part of the Deep South Festival of Writers at University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Call 482-6906 for schedule and registration information.

Deep South Festival attendees will be glad to see a return to Cajun country by Louisiana writer Tim Parrish, author of the recently published short-story collection Red Stick Men. Now the director of creative writing at Southern Connecticut State University, Parrish spent 27 years in Baton Rouge before heading north, and is still heavily influenced by the city of his birth.

Baton Rouge is a main character in all the stories of Red Stick Men, which has been called "an accomplished first collection of nine terse stories" (Publishers Weekly) and "refreshing — sometimes inspirational — debut collection about hard-working people trying to do the right thing" (Kirkus Reviews). Parrish admits he cannot shake the city's
influence" (Nations Rouge) still has a full-scale
ion on my imagination and every time I go
back there something about the melange of
trouble and fun and conservatism and hedon-
ism and creativity and lechery inspires me
to try and capture it.

The author is a graduate of Jesuit High
School and Louisiana State University and,
like most authors, Parrish draws on the mem-
ories of his youth for inspiration: "I grew up
on the industrial north side of town, went to
college on the other side of town, taught at a
mostly African-American high school even
further north than where I grew up, and
grew music all over the place, so I feel like I
know the place and people really well.

"But I'm no stranger to Acadiana," Parrish
says. "I've had many a great time in Lafayette.
I remember, many years ago, traveling to
Lafayette because the bands X and Los Lobos
were both in town, playing at two different
crops on the same night. That was a long
fingal.

"And here's something I don't think
many people know. When I was about 20, in
1979, the very first story I ever submitted
was to the Deep South Writers Conference.
Contest. I won first place in the science fic-
tion category. In my parents' home, some-
where, I've got the award.

In addition to the people and places in
Louisiana, Tim Parrish finds inspiration 'in
every good thing I read, every interesting per-
son I talk to and every good record I hear. In
fact, I have to say that seeing the Sex Pistols
changed my life, and the early records of
The Clash, X, Hüsker Dü, The Replacements,
and Evan Jones and the H Bombs probably had
as big an aesthetic influence on me as any
book and helped me when I was too restless
to be a writer. I went to the rock shows to
settle down and read. Too bad inspiration
takes me only as far as my chair and then
the work starts.'

Parrish is currently in high demand, trav-
elling and giving readings from Red Stick Men
and his other stories, but he's still writing
new fiction. He is working on "a slow of stor-
ies, some of which might turn into a novel.
Those are about a man who was a Baton Rouge
cop in the '70s. It's a first-person inves-
tigation of his relationship to his damaged
past as a cop, as a Vietnam vet, as a Southern
Baptist and as a person who has trouble con-
necting with other people. In these stories
and the others I've been fooling with, race is
a prevalent concern.

Red Stick Men is Tim Parrish's first collec-
tion of short stories, and the book clearly
illustrates why Robert Olen Butler considers
Parrish "a splendid writer with a remarkable
literary future."

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