

MOUNTAINS

Apply for Writers Conference by end of April



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

About this time last year, I was asked to be involved with designing the first-ever conference for writers to be held within the boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The inaugural Tremont Writers Conference is the coordinated effort of two educational park partners: Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont and Great Smoky Mountains Association.

Now that the applications are flowing in, it's exhilarating to see this unprecedented event becoming a reality. From Oct. 25-29, some 20 writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry will arrive in Townsend, Tennessee, and make their way to Tremont's breathtaking campus tucked away beside the glorious Middle Prong of the Little River. They will be immersed in an intensive retreat of brainstorming and fine-tuning their work while learning about nature and writing in small groups led by three inspirational author workshop leaders.

"I'm most excited about getting out of the city and being in the Smoky Mountains in the fall," says Frank X. Walker, who will lead the poetry cohort. "Nothing resets my internal clock and fuels my creativity like being surrounded by so much majestic beauty."



Walker I remember being thrilled when Walker became the first African American poet laureate of my original home state, Kentucky. A native of Danville and professor of English, African American and Africana Studies at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Walker coined the term "Affrilachia" and co-founded the Affrilachian Poets.

His "Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers" won the 2014 NAACP Image Award for Poetry and the Black Caucus American Library Association Honor Award for Poetry. He has won numerous other honors and awards, and his most recent of 11 poetry collections is "Masked Man, Black: Pandemic & Protest Poems."

When interviewers like me ask Walker what he is reading, his answer almost always includes his students' work. In addition to teaching during the regular semesters, he spends several weeks every summer leading workshops around the country, including Cave Canem in Pennsylvania and the Summer Fishtrap Gathering of Writers in the mountains of Oregon.

"I'll bring my wife and 5-year old along, and we will get to enjoy hiking and exploring and reintroducing him to the great outdoors all over again," he says.

At the Tremont Writers Conference in October, Walker will lead small-group poetry workshops each morning. His fellow author workshop leaders are award-winning novelist Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle of Cherokee, North Carolina, working in fiction (featured in an earlier column) and Janet McCue teaching the selected nonfiction writers.

Though she lives in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, McCue is something of a celebrity among Smokies aficionados. She co-authored "Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography" (GSMA, 2019) with the late George Ellison, winning the 2019 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award.

"George taught me the value of digression. 'Trust in the reader,' he advised, 'she'll catch up,'" McCue says. "I've been fortunate to work with talent-



In addition to attending creative workshops, writing conference attendees will join experienced Tremont naturalists for guided explorations of the surrounding national park. The scenic Spruce Flats Falls is a short walk from the Tremont campus. JOYE ARDYN DURHAM



Modeled on a Cherokee pattern, the open-air Council House is one of several outdoor classroom meeting spaces available on the Tremont campus, which also includes on-site lodging, a fully staffed kitchen, and science lab. ERIN ROSOLINA/GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT

ed writers on several projects, and my writing became stronger by working with a co-author."

McCue is currently collaborating with filmmaker Paul Bonesteel on a biography of George Masa, whose photographs of the Smokies played an important role in the establishment of the national park.

"There are mysteries punctuating Masa's life which Paul and I wrestle with; there are cultural nuances and linguistic distinctions that confuse us," she says. "Presenting the information in a cohesive and compelling narrative is an ongoing challenge, and I am certain we will have discussions at the writers conference on structuring a story, on reframing a narrative. I'm hoping that new ideas and approaches will begin percolating in my brain as we have these conversations."

McCue is now retired from a long career as a librarian at Cornell University, where she specialized in library administration and digital library development. She says the mentoring aspect of the Tremont Writers Conference has great appeal.

"Throughout my career as a librarian, I mentored other writers and librarians. In turn, I've been coached by everyone from swim instructors to grandchildren," says McCue. "Grandchildren help my imagination just as swim coaches made sure I got to shore. We need all types of mentors as writers."

Like McCue, Walker is a scholar of history and is currently working on multiple historical poetry projects, one dealing with Lewis and Clark and the other involving the Civil War. He says focusing on others' writing and starving his own creativity for short periods of time always sends him back to the page inspired and ready to create something new.

"My favorite parts of the writing

process are the generative and crafting stages," he says. "It's where good furniture is really made. Everything after that is just sanding and polishing."

McCue enjoys the communal aspects of polishing her work: "Writing may be a lonely experience, but refining it is anything but solitary. Puzzling over approaches, sharing early drafts, revising your prose, sending it to an editor — each of those steps strengthens your narrative."

Each afternoon at Tremont, writers will join experienced naturalists for



Although Great Smoky Mountains Association has previously hosted nature journaling workshops and guided hikes in the Smokies as part of its annual members weekend event, the 2023 Tremont Writers Conference is the first writers conference to be held within Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

guided explorations that spark curiosity and wonder through hands-on experience with the region's cultural and natural history. Evenings will conclude with hearty dinners, fellowship with peers, and readings by writing faculty. Meals and lodging are provided.

Author workshop leaders and conference participants alike will benefit from the involvement of MacArthur Fellow and Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction writer Richard Powers, who will lead sessions at Tremont as well as a public craft talk at Maryville College on the final night of the conference. Powers is a park local, living in Townsend, Tennessee, and his two most recent works — "The Overstory" and "Bewilderment" — are both partially set in the Great Smoky Mountains.

Acceptance to the Tremont Writers Conference is based on manuscript evaluation, with chosen writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry notified by July 14. Limited financial aid is available. Additional information may be found and applications to participate in the event may be submitted online now through April 30 at writers.gsmit.org.

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