

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Blount County events to celebrate Appalachian writers and rural voices

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A full day of literary community and authorial exploration is coming to the Blount County Public Library in Maryville on Saturday, Oct. 25.

The day starts off with the Anna Belle Smith Literary Festival, held 10 a.m.-2 p.m., and culminates with a 5:30 p.m. event from the Tremont Writers Conference.

The event, “Writing Rural America,” will bring together four renowned Appalachian authors to discuss how their work addresses issues unique to rural America.

The Tremont Writers Conference is in its third year, while the Anna Belle Smith Literary Festival is in its fourth.

The two annual events are organized separately but have found a serendipitous connection at the Blount library.

“The partnership that we’ve developed between the library and the Tremont Writers Conference is, I think, such a natural fit,” said Sheri McCarter, who is the library’s writer in residence, the literary festival’s organizer, and a 2024 Tremont Writers Conference participant. “I think what Tremont is doing and what the literary festival is doing really focuses on celebrating our talent here in this area and promoting our regional writers, as well as giving them opportunities to develop.”

The weeklong Tremont Writers Conference is primarily focused on helping the writers selected for participation hone their skills through the inspirational surroundings of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and small-group workshops led by accomplished authors.

But each year, the conference includes a Saturday evening event that invites the whole community to engage with its authors.

Panel to examine rural communities’ concerns

During previous events, the discussion has focused specifically on Appalachia, but this year’s panel will look more generally at the concerns of rural communities across America.

The evening will feature readings from the authors, opportunities for audience members to ask questions and get their books signed, and brief author interviews led by Tremont Writers Conference organizers Jeremy Lloyd, manager of field and college programs for the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, and Frances Figart, creative services director for Smokies Life.

“Many people who live in sparsely populated areas feel that their values and longstanding concerns are not taken seriously by economists, politicians and Hollywood,” Lloyd explained. “There are exceptions, of course. But a glance at any recent electoral map reveals a growing cultural divide in our nation and how left behind many rural residents feel. Our guest authors address many of these concerns in their books, but perhaps more importantly, they celebrate these rural places, too. That’s what we’re here to do: lend our ears to great writing and to be reminded that as humans and Americans, our future is inseparable from the well-being of the land.”

For both Figart and Lloyd, preparation for the panel is a slow and deliberate process. They read as much of the writers’ work as they can beforehand and carefully consider which questions to ask.

The goal, said Lloyd, is to allow the audience to hear writers read their work aloud and to ask questions that probe beneath the surface, digging to ward something the writer has never been asked before.

“When I read the author workshop leaders’ works, I look for overarching ideas, themes, and values that consistently run through them,” Figart said. “Then I try to frame my questions in such a way as to allow the authors to reveal some of the backstory of why those themes are important to them and how they make choices in their writing to uplift those values and concerns. The passages they choose to read vividly illustrate these ideas and bring that backstory to life for our audience.”

This year, the panel will include Maurice Manning, a Pulitzer-nominated poet; Crystal Wilkinson, a recent Kentucky poet laureate and writer of books, short stories, poems, and essays; Karen Spears Zacharias, an award-winning author of many novels



Jeremy Lloyd (at lectern) of the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont engages with participants in last year’s panel discussion. PROVIDED BY VALERIE POLK/SMOKIES LIFE.



Authors and community members interact during the 2024 Anna Belle Smith Literary Festival at the Blount County Public Library, which is expected to draw more than 50 regional authors this year. PROVIDED BY BLOUNT COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

and nonfiction works; and David Joy, whose award-winning books include *Those We Thought We Knew* (2024), winner of the 2023 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, 2023 Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction, and 2024 Sir Walter Raleigh Award.

Though these writers’ styles and subjects vary widely, rural lifestyles and concerns—especially those of Appalachia — drive their works.

Anna Belle Smith Literary Festival draws regional authors

The evening event will come on the heels of the Anna Belle Smith Literary Festival, which is expected to draw more than 50 regional authors representing a wide variety of genres to display their books in the library.

Writers will be available to sell and sign their works or just have a good chat about writing.

Meanwhile, several published authors — including Figart and Zacharias — will be leading workshops focused on the craft of writing.

The festival aims to offer an exciting experience for published writers who want to meet their readers, people who

are interested in writing but lack experience, and members of the public who are simply looking to spend their money locally when searching for their next great read.

Two common threads will run throughout the day: a love of literature and the spirit of community.

“That was one of the things that I loved about attending the Tremont conference — it felt like such a family affair,” McCarter said. “There was so much camaraderie in it, and I think that spirit is the same spirit as Anna Belle Smith.”

Though the act of writing is a solitary one, community is often the key to inspiration. McCarter urges any writers or lovers of good writing in the area to come out, make a day of it, and jumpstart their creativity just in time for National Novel Writing Month in November.

“What a great way to kick that off at the end of October, to spend a day engaging and interacting and maybe igniting some passions,” she said. “And, at the very minimum, picking up some good books for when cold weather finally rolls in.”

The fourth annual Anna Belle Smith Literary Festival will be held at the Blount County Public Library in Maryville, Tennessee, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 25. At 5:30 p.m., the library will host “Writing Rural America,” a Tremont Writers Conference panel discussion featuring four renowned authors. Both events are free with no registration required.

The Tremont Writers Conference is jointly coordinated by Smokies Life and Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. The window for considering applications opens in January and runs through early May of each year. Participants are chosen by July and then prepare for the conference until late October.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokies-life.org.