

2008 Mayborn Conference

N. Scott Momaday

Keynote Lecture: Harnessing the Magic of Imagination and Mystery in Language

Growing up on Rainy Mountain Creek in Oklahoma, N. Scott Momaday listened to his father tell stories from the Kiowa oral tradition even before he could talk, stories that he says “crackled and rang with Kiowa words, exclamations and songs” that nourished his imagination and, later, his writing life. From the Kiowa oral tradition, Momaday says he came to know that “much of the power and magic and beauty of words consist not in meaning,” but in the sound and symbols and mystery of words. As an essayist, playwright, poet, memorist and novelist, Momaday’s quest is always to use language to its highest potential, “to realize a reality beyond the ordinary.” More than any of the literary arts, Momaday says poetry gives the greatest potential to achieve his quest. Momaday says when it succeeds, a poem “brings together the best of your intelligence, the best of your articulation, the best of your emotion.” Momaday, the Poet Laureate of Oklahoma, believes that if nonfiction writers can learn to harness the precision, emotion and power of poetry, their stories will assume a reality and a meaning that will yield the “true spirit of the story” over time. Momaday will read a few selections from his essays and poetry to illustrate how this quest can be achieved.

Bob Shachochis:

Keynote Lecture: Don't Go There: Nonfiction Storytellers Need to Know When They're Saying Too Much or Saying Too Little

To be authentic as a writer, you have to have a sense of human decency, recognizing when you're saying too much or saying too little. To be authentic, you have to live up to your end of the bargain in the trade between our subjects agreeing to tell us their most intimate, personal, embarrassing secrets in exchange for us telling their stories responsibly. To be authentic, a nonfiction writer must remember that writing is an essential act of the community. Nonfiction writers should act as if everyone they know or have known is very much alive. We all know in our guts certain elements of a life that we should pass over in silence, out of human decency. Shachochis will discuss how writers must learn to develop a clear artistic sense of when he or she is saying too much or saying too little, how to discern when they're writing has the right dose of emotional density and when it's crossing the line into the tawdry, into the realm of victimization. The bargain that writers make with our subjects is one seldom talked about at nonfiction literary conferences. This one you won't want to miss.

Candice Millard

Keynote Lecture: Something to Say: Five Rules for Writing Nonfiction

The one secret that every successful writer of nonfiction knows is that all the talent and hard work in the world won't get you anywhere if you don't have something to say. Compelling writing starts with a story—one that captures not only the reader's attention but the writer's. Candice Millard, author of “The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey,” relies on five fundamental rules while writing nonfiction. She respects hard work, has great admiration for talent, but believes that, above all else, writers should holdout for the story that grabs them by the collar and won't let go.

Andy Van De Voorde

Lecture: Out of the Comfort Zone: How Village Voice Media Writers Push the Edge of the Long-Form Envelope

As the nation's largest and best established publisher of metropolitan newsweeklies, Village Voice Media has set the standard for putting out magazines on newsprint. The company has won numerous national writing awards, including Pulitzer Prizes and two consecutive first-place honors from the Investigative Reporters and Editors organization. Andy Van DeVoorde, executive associate editor of VVM, oversees recruiting and hiring for the company. He will explain how VVM regularly tackles stories the mainstream media misses and how its writers take calculated risks, both literal and literary like a Denver writer following a pack of wealthy young meth users on a weekend binge that included an impromptu trip to Las Vegas, or a writer in Miami living among a swarm of sex offenders instructed by the city to live under a bridge. VVM stories can take the form not just of carefully crafted features, but also illustrated comic-book style tales, personal essays or even Dr. Seuss-parody poems. This daring has helped create a fresh, high-spirited brand of journalism that keep readers coming back.

Cathleen Medwick

Lecture: How Dare They Cast a Critical Eye on My Masterpiece

You've spent five years—or, like some of us, many more—researching and revising your nonfiction manuscript. You put on a few final touches, send your muse some flowers and overnight your precious creation to a literary agent in New York. She thinks it's perfection and sends it to a seasoned editor at Random House. The editor is dazzled and tells you you've come up with that rarity, a literary blockbuster. After minimal and respectful editing, galleys of your book go out to reviewers across the country. You stock up on caviar and champagne and prepare your friends for the inevitable celebration. Months go by; finally, you pick up The New York Times Book Review and there's the review: "An ambitious, even noble undertaking..." the reviewer begins, making you shudder with anticipation, "...that ultimately disappoints." With astonishing speed, your book migrates from the New Releases shelf at your bookstore to the 50% off table, and soon begins showing up in bins at second-hand booksellers. What went wrong? Cathleen Medwick, a contributing editor at O, The Oprah Magazine, offers insight.

Paul Meyer and Stella Chavez

Lecture: Reconstructing the Scene: Writing with intimacy and authority in a world of fragmented memories, factual disparities and psychological trauma.

In the summer of 1998, along a muddy band of water in rural Mexico, an 11-year-old girl named Yolanda Mendez Torres was raped by a man more than three times her age. Eight summers later, journalists Paul Meyer and Stella M. Chavez arrived on the riverbanks, at the trailhead of a 5,000 mile journey to discover and chronicle details of the girl's captivity in two countries. "Yolanda's Crossing" would become a novel and nationally acclaimed narrative series told over seven days in The Dallas Morning News. But getting there was an often treacherous exercise in sifting through disparate memories of events, places, conversations and dates. It started that day down by the river with a hand scribbled map, an incomplete family tree, a spreadsheet of names and an appetite for surprise. Meyer and Chavez will share how to use reportage to create more intimate, honest and powerful stories.

Panel Discussion: Brian Sweany, Pam Coloff

Learning to Two-Step: The Editor/Writer Collaboration

Taking an idea and turning it into a 7,000-word magazine story is a demanding and difficult process whose success depends on the ability of the editor and writer to both collaborate and compromise. In this panel discussion, Brian Sweany, articles editor of Texas Monthly, and Pamela Colloff, an award-winning staff writer for Texas Monthly, talk about this give-and-take-from agreeing on a vision for a story to shaping the narrative and negotiating creative differences. George Getschow, a long-time Wall Street Journal editor and writer, will moderate.

Nick Heil

Lecture: Storytelling Under Siege

As non-fiction storytelling in general and the news media in particular settles into the electronic age, it's becoming easier and easier for journalists to feed off of blogs, vlogs, websites, and other Internet-based sourcing, rather than the primary sources themselves. This happened on Everest in 2006, the mountain's second deadliest ever, and one that prompted more controversy even than it's most lethal season 10 years earlier. The screaming headline—that 40 climbers had walked by a dying man on their way to the summit—was technically true, but obscured many of the larger truths at play during this grim year. In his book, *Dark Summit*, Nick Heil set out to look beyond the headlines, to dig deeper—much deeper—than anyone else seemed to be doing before publishing their own stories. Getting at the truth requires more than reading postings on the web, and Heil discusses his effort to reach those who'd been blamed or held accountable in the Everest deaths of 2006, and how he eventually pieced together a story that was very different than the one being told by the mainstream media. A tough climb, so to speak, and one that required getting past personal prejudices and preconceived notions, as Heil himself discovered.

Ben Montgomery

Lecture: The Breakneck Narrative: Storytelling at High Speeds

Let's face it, a lot of daily reporting makes the world seem smaller and dumber. We overload our websites and the pages of our newspapers with throw-away inverted-pyramid journalism that lacks insight and curiosity and context. We rarely tell people what's important and why it's important. We write in black and white and don't leave room for complexity. And we wonder why people aren't reading us? If we want to save ourselves, if we want to prolong the slow death of newspapers, let's give readers some import and meaning and intellectual economy. Let's tell transcendent stories that matter, the ones people will remember tomorrow. This can be done, by god. And it can be done on deadline. And it can be done in your newsroom. Ben Montgomery, a general assignment reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times*, will explain how to tell rich stories when the clock is ticking. Drawing a roadmap: Would you drive across country without a map? You shouldn't write a story without a plan either. Outlining is just as essential as reporting and writing.

Lee Hancock

Lecture: The Heart of Our Stories: Doing Good with Narrative.

Lee Hancock jokes that she covers nuts and disasters. Her assignments in 25 years of newspaper journalism sound like an index to modern tragedy: Iraq and 9/11. Stories known by their datelines: Waco, Jasper, Oklahoma City. Andrea Yates drowning her five kids because she heard internal voices and called them Satan. Another mother stoning three sons on Mother's Day weekend for a voice she mistook as God. A basketball player killing by his teammate and their coach trying to cover up what happened to protect a rotten program. A cross-dressing bank bandit's suicide by cop. A jailhouse talk with a career con who vanished with a prison warden's wife and resurfaced 11 years later on an East Texas chicken farm. A trailer-park chat with the klucker eventually convicted of killing three little girls in Birmingham, in the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church. So much suffering, meanness and absurdity -- it can make even the most intense, adrenaline-junkie reporter question the wisdom of what we do. It can seem crazy not to wonder: might we all be better off turning it off, turning away? Are we trading in what one of Lee's story subjects calls misery porn? Amid such tragedies, other voices and questions can call us to what matters - to the heart of our stories. They can be as unlikely as the tire repairman vowing to rebuild his flood-ravaged New Orleans "one tire at a time," or as urgent as a Katrina survivor's call; "We got people in wheelchairs and walkers. They need somebody to do something. Try to do your best for us." To honor these voices we're privileged to hear, to do our best, Lee has come to believe we must ask ourselves

continually: what matters most? How can we find the deepest meaning in our stories? What good is in the telling? Literally, what good can we do? As Lee has tried to explore such questions, she's found reason for hope. Sometimes - even at the worst of times - bearing witness can be redemptive. If we're fortunate, our stories can heal. Lee's presentation will include discussion of some of her recent narrative and news reporting -- including stints in New Orleans after hurricanes Katrina and Rita; hybrid investigative-narrative work exploring neglect and exploitation of the elderly; and the consequence of indifference and inaction in those stories and a subsequent expose of flophouses that prey on the chronically mentally ill.

Wright Thompson

Lecture: Finding the Fault Lines: To Write a Seamless Story, Create a Great Outline

Good stories look like jigsaw puzzles, where the fault lines command almost as much attention as the completed picture. But a great story is like a photograph, you don't think about how it's put together. You see it all, at once, your mind instinctively moving in the right direction. That's what a great outline does for a non-fiction piece. It makes it seamless, makes it seem as if it just appeared, fully grown. Wright Thompson, senior writer, ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine, will discuss how to do that.

John Burnett

Lecture: Listening for Beasts and Hellions, an NPR Correspondent Reveals the Secrets of Reporting and Writing for the Ear

The author and broadcast journalist who's worked for NPR for 22 years has learned how to listen for compelling stories. A former print journalist, Burnett explains how writing for the ear has sharpened his skills as a writer. Oddly enough, it's his ear that has drawn him into some of the strangest places on the planet, listening for beasts and hellions.

David Patterson

Lecture: WHAT PUBLISHERS TALK ABOUT WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT YOUR PROPOSAL

What on earth *do* publishers want? David Patterson, Senior Editor at Henry Holt and Company, will talk about how publishers assess your book proposal. Publishers are becoming choosier all the time about the books they acquire from authors, and we're expecting the authors to be increasingly well-informed about how to sell their book in the marketplace. Selling an idea to a publisher has some things in common with how you'd imagine the book may ultimately be sold to customers in stores; is the story or idea compelling; is it expressed well; does the author have a good - or growing - reputation; does the book seem to fit in a tradition of other books that have worked well, while also remaining distinctive from those books? Among the topics to be addressed in this discussion will be; how an agent may help you navigate this process; how to research the lessons and successes of similar books; and - especially - how to attempt to do all of this while keeping true to *your vision of your project*. Publishers and stores will want to know what your book is "like," while book readers may want to know how your book is different from others. Solving this riddle is one of the pressing conundrums - and joys - for authors and your hopeful editors!

Susannah Charleson

Lecture: The Bones in the Mud and the Bear in the Woods: When Story Meets Opportunity Off the Beaten Path

Every search-and-rescue mission begins with a mystery. The same can be said of good stories and writing careers. How do writers lay hands on a great story that seems to elude them? What does an author do when the book she begins takes a detour? How do we reconcile our own creative conviction with the realities of publishing's changeable terrain? In the cloud of conflicting advice on best-practice, how does a

new author plot his road to publication? The unexpected happens, and it can happen fast. Susannah Charleson, human partner to a search-and-rescue K9, attended the 2007 Mayborn with an idea and four months later had a major book contract for *Scent of the Missing*. Charleson will discuss lessons learned behind her search dog that unexpectedly apply at the keyboard—to the query letter, the book proposal, the agent pitch, and the story that, despite the noise and wrangling, must maintain its own integrity.

Alexandra Wolfe and Ken Wells

Panel Discussion: Transforming the Prosaic Business Story into Literary Art

Actually, as Wells and Wolfe will explain, there should be nothing prosaic about the business narrative in an era when subprime and hedgefunds have become household words and markets are having an unprecedented impact on the economy, politics, culture and art. Indeed, if grand narrative, underpinned by the human condition, is what you seek to write, there is no more fertile field these days than business and commerce. Learn how it's done by two literary artists.

Tim Madigan

Lecture: What a Novel Idea: Stretching the Boundaries of Conventional Journalism

In an era of shrinking space for the big sweeping narrative, Tim Madigan's publisher, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, decided to buck convention. Earlier this year, the paper published the longest narrative in the paper's history - a 24-part series - called *To Catch a Killer*. Madigan and two other reporters immersed themselves in the case files on three murders, sifting through boxes of evidence; reviewing thousands of pages of case notes and trial transcripts. They also interviewed scores of sources. *To Catch a Killer* is more than a true-crime series. It's a true-crime novel that stretches the boundaries of conventional journalism. Several names were changed at the request of the sources and to protect victims. Reader response to the series has been overwhelming, giving Madigan and his publisher hope that long-form narratives can revitalize newspaper business. Madigan will talk about how *To Catch a Killer* stretched the boundaries of conventional journalism, and how the reporting and writing methods employed in his "true-crime novel" are applicable to narrative writers everywhere.