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A meeting of the minds: Bringing together readers and writers

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Of the many forms of entertainment readily at our fingertips, from television and movies to YouTube and the many vast and varied wonders of the rest of the internet, reading is probably still the most liberating.

Picking up a book not only takes the reader to another world, it gives them a hand in creating it. To read is to draw your own landscape, compose your own soundscape, shape the features of the characters yourself, the way that only you see them, with the writer as your hopefully expert guide. More than watching TV or going to the movies or perusing the endless pages of the web, reading is, at its essence, a creative pursuit. And that's what makes the relationship between reader and writer so unique — it's co-creative in a way that little other entertainment is.

Cultivating that relationship is the special draw of events such as Western Carolina University's annual Literary Festival, an event that pulls together authors and poets from around the region and around the nation, giving them a venue to interact with their readers, past, present and future.

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Mary Adams, a professor at WCU and director of the festival, has been putting the lineup together for years. Each time, she tries to get a good mix of new and old, of regional and national, to offer readers access to some of their favorite authors as well as exposure to some excellent writers they may never have read otherwise.

This is partially what the festival is about — instilling a love and appreciation for reading in both newcomers and veterans, kindling excitement about written words by revealing the creator behind them.

One of this year's featured writers, author Susan Vreeland, is a well-known novelist whose historical fiction is often rooted in art history. She believes that this is one of the most important and gratifying things about readers and writers meeting, peeling back the layers and exposing the story that lies beneath the story on the page.

"I'm telling them the story behind the story," said Vreeland. "That's what authors can

offer, how they came to write the books what motivated them to.”

Vreeland, whose works have been made into movies and performed on stage, believes that the reader — or actor — interpretation of the writer’s work is an essential part of what makes literature, literature.

She gave the example of an actor portraying one of her short stories. He came to her, curious about whether she meant his character to be a constant teaser. No, she said, she hadn’t, but if that’s what he saw in it, it is what he should portray.

“That was a surprise, kind of a delightful one where he saw maybe more than I remembered,” said Vreeland. “It’s the viewer’s participation and you don’t want to deprive them of that.”

Adams, the festival’s director, said that she hopes this is just what festival-goers will be exposed to, meeting the writers and hearing their stories, putting a face on what might otherwise just be words.

“I would like people to read more and to have contact with the people writing the real books today, that people can come away with a greater love for reading,” said Adams.

Alan Weisman is another best-selling author gracing the festival this year. His most recent book, *The World Without Us*, explores what our planet would be like if humanity disappeared from it.

Weisman said that, especially in writing this particular book, the experience and interpretation of the reader was vital to him.

“I did not want to write another environmental book that gets read only by environmentalists,” said Weisman. He knew, he said, that average readers aren’t usually enticed by environmental tomes, and part of his mission in writing the book was to bring those readers into the dialogue.

“They find them [environmental books] scary, or they find them depressing or they find them overwhelming,” said Weisman. “Our mission [as writers] is to reach as wide an audience as possible, that it would be attractive or irresistible or seductive to that big readership out there.”

And, as the book is now in 34 languages and has long remained a bestseller, the strategy seemed to have worked.

The response to it, Weisman said, was somewhat surprising to him, but what his readers have drawn from the book and brought to the table in discussions around the country and the world is the resilience of life on earth.

“I have given countless talks, and it’s crossed a lot of boundaries — I’ve spoken to all different types of religious groups, I’ve been on Catholic radio programs, I’ve spoken to Mormon audiences, and ultimately, I think readers find out that life is this incredibly wonderfully powerful resilient force that always comes back no matter how messy things get,” said Weisman.

As a writer, he said, he’s been surprised by the wide range of people that responded to his work and pleased by their reactions.

“I really hoped that readers would take from all of that is not the message that this world would be better off without us, but if we would just lighten up on nature, we’d give it a chance to do the things that it does so beautifully,” he said.

And it’s venues like the Literary Festival that allow readers to glean those insights from writers, making the reading experience deeper and richer.

For writers, the chance to interact with their audiences, they say, improves and informs their craft, allowing the creativity of the reader to spill over into the work of the writer.

So many writers became so because they began as avid readers, so rubbing elbows with fellow and future bibliophiles is, to many, a privilege.

“I was so curious about so many different things,” said Weisman, which is why he became a writer to begin with.

Vreeland was a high school teacher with three decades of education under her belt before she turned to writing, and she sees her writing as an extension of her educational career, it’s next incarnation.

That’s why, for her, the reader is so important — they are, essentially, who she is writing for, and to expose them to new art, new time periods and new understanding is, she says, a great gift.

The greatest part of what she does, said Vreeland, is the knowledge “that something I write could reach into a person’s mind and heart and uplift that person and broaden his thinking and his understanding of life and humans.”

That understanding, she said, is the goal of writing and a contribution to culture that will last as long as the word is printed on the page.

“Each time we bring our readers imagination to the fore, each time we stimulate our readers’ imagination so that they live in another time and place,” said Vreeland, “that’s another step upwards for the human race.”

Spring Literary Festival

WCU's ninth annual Spring Literary Festival will feature Cathy Smith Bowers, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Fred Chappell, Délana Dameron, David Gessner, Elizabeth Kostova, Don Lee, Bret Lott, Lee Martin, Ginger Murchison, Susan Vreeland, Frank X Walker, and Alan Weisman, as well as the Gilbert Chappell Distinguished Poet's panel, with Distinguished Poet Mary Adams.

When: April 3-7

More information: www.litfestival.org

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