

Inventing the Truth

Editors, agents, writers to convene Feb. 27-March 2 for inaugural Creative Nonfiction Conference

Southerners tell great stories. Next week some of the country's best and most influential teachers, editors and writers will be in Oxford to help us get those stories on the page — and get them published.

The Mid-South Creative Nonfiction Conference will focus on writing true stories, using techniques of the fiction writer. The conference theme is *Journeys: Travel Writing and Memoir — Turning Experiences into Words*.

Conference Director, Lee Gutkind, dubbed by *Vanity Fair* “the godfather behind creative nonfiction,” has pulled together some of the top editors, agents, writers and writing instructors for the inaugural conference (see “Pitch Your Story” sidebar).

Still Room for Oxford Writers

Writers from Arizona, California, Florida, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Pennsylvania, as well as all the Southeastern states have registered for the conference. But there is still room for local writers.

Neil White, the conference's local coordinator said, “We can still accept 20 or 30 local registrants. Oddly, the response from

writers in other regions has been a bit more brisk than locally.”

In addition to three days of instruction on writing, publishing and the writing life, the conference features nighttime social events so participants can relax and visit with agents and editors who work in the creative nonfiction genre.

Registration for the conference will remain open until Friday, Feb. 29. And six pre-conference workshops still have open slots. The open workshops for Thursday, Feb. 28 include: “Structuring Creative Nonfiction” and “How to Begin Your Memoir.” The open workshops for Friday, Feb. 29 include: “The Art and Craft of Characterization in Memoir,” “Scenes From a Notebook: How to make words cinematic,” “Book Proposals and Query Letters” and “Word of Mouth” (with Oxford instructors Blair Hobbs & John T. Edge).

The cost of the full-day, pre-conference workshops is \$175. The cost for the full, weekend conference is \$350.

A Coup for Oxford & Ole Miss

When Gutkind decided to relocate his Creative Nonfiction Conference, he made site visits around the country. The people of Oxford and Ole Miss put together a package that lured Gutkind from larger markets. “First, Samir Husni and Charles Overby came through with the perfect facilities,” White said. “Then, the Oxford Tourism Council helped with a grant. Then, Gloria Kellum and the University came on board with fabulous support. Russell French and the Oliver Britt House offered housing for the top editors. And, finally, Campbell McCool and Plein Air underwrote 20 merit scholarships for writers with great promise.”

White said financial support has also come from dozens of businesses and arts patrons. “Oxford has a way of making people feel welcome. Our restaurateurs, business owners and civic leaders have come together to make this event a wonderful experience for the writers. And I'm sure they will return the favor by spreading the good word about our town.”

Plein Air Endows Scholarships

Five local writers have been selected as Plein Air Scholars for the inaugural Creative Nonfiction Conference. Campbell McCool, a representative of Plein Air, said, “All along we've been trying to build a neighborhood that is focused on the arts. Becoming involved in the Mid-South Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference is just one more way for us to do that. We think it is a wonderful addition to the community and are very pleased to be able to sponsor these scholarships.”

Exclusive for Conference Attendees

Pitch your Story

One-on-One to Book & Magazine Editors

One of the most exciting events scheduled for the conference is the “One-On-One” meetings with agents and editors. Fledgling writers spend untold hours composing query letters and pitches to literary agents and editors. Most end up in a slush pile. If the writer is lucky, he or she will receive a nice form letter that reads something along the lines of “Though your story has merit, in this crowded marketplace we are unable to take on your project. Best of luck.”

But for conference participants, all that changes on Saturday afternoon from 3-5 p.m. Writers will have the opportunity to meet with agents and editors individually to pitch their story ideas, get face-to-face feedback, exchange contact information and, perhaps, even find an agent.

In 2005, when Lee Gutkind held his Creative Nonfiction Workshop in Baltimore, Oxford resident Neil White participated in the “pitch fest.” He made a connection with literary agent, Jeff Kleinman, and two years later Mr. Kleinman sold Mr. White's book, on proposal, to William Morrow (a division of Harper Collins).

“If I had not attended Lee's conference in Maryland, I would never have found an agent,” White said. “This two-hour session, alone, justifies the cost of the conference. Writers rarely get this opportunity.”

Participating agents and editors

- Charlie Conrad Vice President, Executive Editor and Editorial Director of Paperbacks at Doubleday/Broadway, a division of Random House, Inc.
- Gutkind, Founding Editor of Creative Nonfiction journal.
- Kristen Iversen, Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal *The Pinch*
- Gillian MacKenzie, a literary agent who represents a wide variety of nonfiction writers, including journalists, academics, memoirist and scientists.
- Ted Moncreiff, Executive Editor of Condé Nast Traveler.
- June Thomas, foreign editor of Slate.com.
- Webster Younce, senior editor at Houghton Mifflin. His authors include Paul Theroux, Diane McWhorter, Joseph Epstein, Christopher Merrill, David Kertzer, Ward Just, and Jonathan Miles. He also oversees Houghton's publishing program for JRR Tolkien.