

Welcome Talk

Good morning, and boy, am I glad to be here—aren't you?

I'm still trying to get over the shock of seeing the words "keynote speaker" by my name. Teacher, writer, book reviewer, workshop leader, writing association president, newsletter editor, webmaster, conference chair—I've been all those things, sure, but this is my first time delivering a keynote. So, Wow! The butterflies in my tummy might take flight and float me right back to Florida.

Seriously, I am always delighted to return to my home state, a journey I've made almost every year since I left over 30 years ago. As soon as we exit I-77 near Bluefield, a sense of rightness settles in my bones, a sense of coming home. I grew up in Clarksburg and married a Clarksburg fella. I lived in WV for the first three decades of my life, by which time I was really tired of my car slip-sliding on ice and snow. We packed up for Florida and try to return only in the summer.

One of my earliest memories is sitting beside my mother on the sofa while she read to us in the evening. As a child, I read everything I could get my hands on, especially books starring strong women. Historical fiction about Phyllis Wheatley, Betty Zane, Lucretia Mott. Novels like *Little Women*, *Heidi*, or *Nancy Drew* mysteries. Even, according to my mother, the dictionary, if I couldn't find anything else handy.

So it's no wonder that I always dreamed of writing books myself. Of creating stories that would give others the same pleasure I found by escaping into other lives and other worlds. In school I wrote short stories and worked on my high school and college newspapers and literary magazines. But once I graduated, I was inconvenienced by the need to earn a living. I spent decades advising a high school newspaper, and grading students' English papers. Most of those students and papers were delightful. Others were not. And as soon as I could retire, I seized the opportunity to pursue my long-delayed dream of writing full-time.

Sometimes you have to dig deep into unknown territory to find your best stories. Do something you've never done before. Be strong and courageous. To come up with my first novel, I met this challenge. Three years before I retired, I inherited a ten-inch glass figurine of the Madonna from a great aunt and set it on top of a chest of drawers. In all that time—okay it might have been five years, or ten—I'd never dusted underneath it. But now I was retired. No more excuses. I mustered all my courage and picked up the Madonna, ready to attack the dust underneath. But immediately I got sidetracked because, hidden on its base, I discovered a rim chip. My jaw dropped open. I stared. This was monumental. Better than discovering that peanut butter goes good with jelly, or that I was one of the 70 percent of people who could roll my tongue into a tube. To an English teacher, a virgin with a chip in the base was a symbol begging for a story.

Soon after my discovery, my mother asked me to visit the Harrison County Library to research our family's connections to the glass industry. That didn't turn up anything all that exciting, but while there, the research librarian shuffled into a back room, the Tomb of Forgotten Books. He returned with a crusty black volume. He blew the dust off and hand me an obscure thesis written years ago by Salem College students. In 1912 glass union workers had pushed through a top-to-bottom socialist government in the small town of Adamston, West Virginia. This library trip occurred around 2006, well before Bernie Sanders rocked national

politics, so the idea that a socialist could get elected blew me away. Those two things, the chipped figurine and obscure thesis, spurred what would become my first novel, *The Glass Madonna*. I dug in and learned all I could about making glass, about life in 1912, and fact-checked what I remembered about the 1970s, the other era in my novel.

As I started to write my story, even though I already had three degrees in English education and journalism (from Fairmont State, WVU, and NOVA Southeastern) I realized I needed help if I was going to write fiction. I signed up for graduate level fiction workshops at Florida State. They were wonderful. And still not quite enough. Three additional ingredients were critical in helping me achieve my goals as a writer. I became active in a writers association, formed a critique group, and found a great editor.

Five years after I retired, I finally had a novel. I was thrilled when *The Glass Madonna* won first place in the Florida Writers Association annual contest. I encourage everyone to enter contests, like the one sponsored annually by the WV Writers, Inc. Awards are helpful marketing tools in this day of crowded book markets.

A minor annoyance after my first book came out was that some people assumed the protagonist was me and the stories of earlier generations were actually my ancestors. Like all writers, I draw from my own experiences, but the art of a novel means pulling from many sources including imagination. For me, it meant straying far from actual events to shape a story world that holds its own truth. One friend even invited me to lunch and only served vegetables because my main character was vegetarian. I confess I do eat less meat these days, but I'm not vegetarian. When I come home to West Virginia, one of the first things I do is grab a pepperoni roll. I even bake them for my book launch parties to expose folks in Florida to one of the finer aspects of West Virginia culture.

My second novel, *The Color of Lies*, drew on my teaching experiences though it, too, was highly fictionalized. It also won awards, but probably the biggest thrill of my writing career (other than coming to this conference, of course) was when the University of North Texas started using this novel in a graduate course to spur discussion on race, class, and gender issues in education. To a teacher, this really meant a lot.

I shouldn't have been surprised when once again people assumed the fictional world I'd created was real. They would ask me what happened to J.D. Marshall, the troubled young man in my story. Hello! He isn't real. I haven't written a sequel so I don't know what happened to him. I hope he went to college rather than jail.

My third book, *Magic in the Mountains*, was nonfiction on West Virginia cameo glass artists near Huntington, so there was no danger of conflating a protagonist and author this time.

When I started my third and fourth novels, *Wet Work* and *Fraccidental Death*, I wanted a character totally removed from anything resembling my own life—and besides my husband nagged me to write a thriller because that's what he reads. So I created Summer Cassidy, a hydrogeologist working on a Ph.D. and generally kicking butt in typical eco-thriller fashion.

No one would ever confuse Summer Cassidy's youthful athleticism with my aging body. I'm the klutz who managed to fall off a bicycle last year when the kickstand was still down. And the woman who toppled from a kayak after it was already beached—just in time for my husband and brother to laugh at me.

Now, if you know anything about marketing, you realize I was not following book marketers' advice. You're supposed to have a recognizable brand, like mystery writer or

romance novelist. My first two books were what's known as serious women's fiction, but the next three strayed. I really like flawed characters because humans are nearly always a blend of good and bad. So my brand became stories about strong women with slightly tarnished haloes.

Writing my books hasn't turned me into a graceful athlete like Summer Cassidy or made me financially wealthy. But writing has made me a stronger woman. Because learning anything new makes us stronger.

Like many writers, I have tried to express what I feel for these hills through my characters. In *Fraccidental Death*, Summer Cassidy is a southern girl experiencing West Virginia for the first time. She muses how "almost overnight in late September the hillsides throw on a glorious shawl of copper, topaz, and garnet." She is stunned by the miracle of fresh fallen snow when "every inch of the world sparkles with a blanket of white diamonds." She thinks the mountains look "like bosoms enfolding small towns between them for safekeeping."

As writers, we have often touched on the beauty of our state and the friendliness of our communities. But our love for the Mountain State doesn't mean we overlook its problems. Those same nurturing mountains can hide the devastation caused by robber barons who help themselves to the timber, coal, and oil without a thought to the people and places they leave behind.

Our writers have voiced outrage over the rape of our state's resources. In *Fraccidental Death*, my protagonist Summer Cassidy risks her life to ensure water quality near oil and gas wells. Denise Giardina and Ann Pancake depicted life in coal towns in *The Unquiet Earth* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. Matthew Neill Null delivered a harsh portrait of the clear-cutting of primeval forests by the timber industry in *Honey From the Lion*. Hubert Skidmore and Dwight Harshbarger examined silicosis deaths caused by tunneling through a mountain in the novels *Hawk's Nest* and *Witness at Hawk's Nest*. As writers, we have stood up in protest.

But West Virginia is so much more than our natural resources.

We have birthed or influenced notable authors in every genre. Pearl S. Buck won the Pulitzer for *The Good Earth* and the Nobel Prize in Literature for her body of work. Her work not only exposed Americans to Chinese culture, but it also explored changes wrought by the railroad and race relations in post-Civil War West Virginia.

West Virginia authors have made their mark in children's literature, with works by Betsy Byars, Walter Dean Myers, Cynthia Ryland, Anna Smucker, and Cheryl Ware. We have produced classic coming-of-age stories like *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, *Crum* by Lee Maynard, *Beetlecreek* by William Demby, and the most famous Christian novel of modern times, *Christy*, by Catherine Marshall.

West Virginia writers have penned memoirs about their honest, hard-working family members. Outstanding examples include Mary Lee Settle's memoir about her grandmother Addie and Julia Davis's *Legacy of Love*, which focuses on her early years in Clarksburg and on her father, who ran for president against Calvin Coolidge. And Allison Glock had us laughing all the way through the story of her grandmother's life in *Beauty Before Comfort*.

We've created some over-the-top fictional characters, too. Like Abe and Goldie, Glenn Taylor's endearing con artists in *A Hanging at Cinder Bottom* and Chuck Kinder's James Dean-obsessed character Jimbo in *The Silver Ghost*.

Keith Maillard has given us spot-on depictions of women who wiggled free from society's straightjackets in earlier times with his novels *Gloria* and *Light in the Company of Women*.

We've written about immigrant experiences. Christopher Janus's novel *Miss Fourth of July, Goodbye* highlights the KKK and its campaign against blacks and Greek immigrant families in southern West Virginia and Russell Marano's *Poems from a Mountain Ghetto* focuses on life in an Italian neighborhood in Clarksburg. Marie Manilla's novel *The Patron St. of Ugly* gave us another fine story of Italian immigrants in West Virginia, with shimmering touches of magical realism.

On a more gruesome note, Davis Grubb (of *Night of the Hunter* fame) and Jayne Anne Phillips (in the more recent novel *Quiet Dell*) created riveting fiction around a real life serial killer. The bodies of widows and children were buried on a murder farm just a few miles from where I grew up.

From the memoirs of Henry Gates, Homer Hickham, and Cat Pleska to the poetry of Louise McNeil, Laura Bentley, Mary Lucille DeBerry, Crystal Good, Kirk Judd, Marc Harshman, Whitney Holmes, Norman and Brucella Jordan, Joe Limer, Edwina Pendarvis, and Randi Ward. From the sci-fi and fantasy of Eric Fritzius, Michael Knost (NAH-st), and Tim Waggoner, to the short stories of Belinda Anderson, George Lies, Larry Schardt and Sandy Tritt. From the heritage collections of Jim Comstock and the folklore collections of Ruth Ann Musick to the films of Daniel Boyd to the novels of Stephen Coonts, Eliot Parker, S. G. Redling, and Carter Taylor Seaton. From the nonfiction of Steve Goff, Evangeline Lilly, Phyllis Wilson Moore, Jessica Murphy, Audrey Stanton-Smith, M. Lynne Squires, Diane Tarantini, and R.G. Yoho to the columns of Norm Julian and Michele Marcum and the songs of Larry Groce, we West Virginians clearly produce works on many subjects in varied styles. And most of us produce works in several genres even if it means we don't have a precise brand that satisfies book marketers.

Whether you are writing newspaper articles, short stories, poetry, nonfiction, or novels, you are part of the grand West Virginia tradition of spinning a great story. I know you are here this weekend for the same reason I am: because you want to become a stronger storyteller. So find the courage to turn your own Madonna upside down. Search beneath the dusty layers of memory and artifacts, search through dusty tomes at the library to craft your best story. Be strong. Be brave enough to craft your own truth.

I'd like to end with a special shout out to my fellow Hilltoppers from Washington Irving High School in Clarksburg, which has produced so many fine writers, including Donna Leasburg and Joe Limer. I want to recognize one WI grad in particular, Terry McNemar, who served as president of the West Virginia Writers, Inc. and contributed so much to the advancement of writers in our state. Rest in peace, Terry. Also our current president, Steve Goff, is a Hilltopper. We appreciate all your hard work on behalf of your fellow writers.

Thank you.