

MOUNTAINS

April 30 is deadline to apply for writers conference



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Frank X Walker and David Brill share a fascination with the Great Smoky Mountains. One has been cultivating his passion for four decades; the other just fell in love with the Smokies last year.

Both will be helping to lead the 2024 Tremont Writers Conference Oct. 23-27, and both are encouraging those who would like to apply to do so now, as the deadline, April 30, is fast approaching.

Brill has written extensively about Great Smoky Mountains National Park, his articles on science, ecology, the environment, health, fitness, and adventure travel appearing in some 30 national and regional magazines, including Smokies Life Journal. He is excited to join this inspiring and immersive retreat for writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry held inside the park itself.

"We writers often work in isolation, sitting alone in our garrets as we craft the stories we'll send out into the world," he says. "While the writing process itself may be solitary, what we write about and how we tell our stories generally reflects the cumulative influence of other writers whose work we admire because of its stylistic flourishes, its compelling narrative drive, its careful attention to detail and description."

"But words on a page or computer screen are somewhat static compared with face-to-face engagement with the writers who crafted them, inviting them to explain the 'how' of it all, the tools, techniques, and organizing structures they've employed in telling their stories."

What better setting could one wish for to have that much-needed face-to-face engagement than the park's historic Walker Valley? It's a strikingly beautiful haven of biodiversity near Townsend, Tennessee, situated beside the



The 2024 Tremont Writers Conference will be held Oct. 23-27 at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. Faculty will be Maurice Manning in poetry, Monic Ductan in fiction, David Brill in nonfiction, and Frank X Walker as guest author and craft talk presenter. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE

Middle Prong of the Little River and not far from the breathtaking Spruce Flats Falls. Here, just a short distance from the famous Cades Cove, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont has been connecting people to nature for more than half a century — and many of them have been writers.

"Writing and literature are nothing new to Tremont," says Jeremy Lloyd, Tremont's manager of field programs and collegiate studies. "One can trace the literary arts back to our earliest beginnings when students wrote poetry each day in their outdoor 'sit spots.' One also pictures the allure of our wild setting inspiring people to set pen to paper long before Tremont existed as an outdoor school and education center."

Last fall, as leaves of all hues glided down from the immense trees in Walker Valley, Tremont Institute held its first writers conference in partnership with Smokies Life. The chance to be a part of this retreat into the wilderness drew more than 100 applicants from all over the country. Twenty writers were select-

ed to spend five days deep in the Smokies — housed, fed, coached, and led by Tremont staff and author workshop leaders.

"We look forward to doing it all over again later this year when we'll welcome back Frank X Walker as our guest author," says Lloyd, co-coordinator of the conference.

Walker is the first African American to have been named Kentucky Poet Laureate. A professor of English, African American and Africana Studies at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, he coined the term "Affrilachia" and co-founded the Affrilachian Poets.

"What excites me the most about the upcoming Tremont Writers Conference is re-entering a space at a slightly different angle that was so rejuvenating a year ago and bringing some of my family along to also soak up the mountain mystique," he says.

Walker's "Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers" won the 2014 NAACP Image Award for Poetry and the Black Caucus American Library Association Honor Award for Poetry. Other honors he has garnered include the Denny C. Plattner Award for Outstanding Poetry in Appalachian Heritage, the West Virginia Humanities Council's Appalachian Heritage Award, and the Donald Justice Award for Poetry from the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

"I truly enjoy helping to create a safe space out of which writers of every level can grow, be challenged, and discover something on the page that advances their craft as writers," Walker says. "Teaching is what I do."

In contrast, Brill — after having spent nearly 40 years in the field of journalism — doesn't see himself as a teacher.

"I don the instructor's hat with a degree of reluctance and, instead, tend to regard myself as one among a group of apt students eager to learn and develop as writers in the presence of other writers," he says. "I'd prefer to cast myself as editor and facilitator whose chief aim is to inspire workshop participants to polish existing skills and cultivate new

ones."

The author of five nonfiction books including "Into the Mist: Tales of Death and Disaster, Mishaps and Misdeeds, Misfortune and Mayhem in Great Smoky Mountains National Park" (Smokies Life 2016) and "As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker," Brill is in the early stages of drafting Volume 2 of "Into the Mist."

"I fully expect that the workshop participants' energy, combined with a five-day immersion in the national park's rugged wilderness setting, will see my creative reserves fully recharged," he says.

Walker is fully immersed in the final edits for a new collection of poems slated to be published later this year, "which means I will finally have time to get back to a fiction manuscript that is set in the mountain south," he says. "Being at Tremont should give me an opportunity to breathe some new life into the character of the landscape in the manuscript."

Tremont is probably best known for utilizing its unmatched landscape to teach visitors about science and the natural history of the Smokies. The writers conference is no exception: afternoon hikes and other outdoor activities provide ample opportunity for certified naturalist guides to introduce visiting writers to the fascinating flora and fauna of the region.

Applications for the Oct. 23-27, 2024, Tremont Writers Conference are being accepted now through April 30. See faculty bios, view the full schedule of activities, read detailed guidelines, and apply today at writers.gsmit.org.

Frances Figart co-coordinates the Tremont Writers Conference as the creative services director for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services to park visitors. For more information, visit SmokiesLife.org.

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