The Mayborn Tribe

Paul Knight, now an assistant editor at Texas Monthly, frets over the same questions swirling around the Mayborn Conference as he did when he was on staff at the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism helping organize it. Before returning to the conference each summer, he says doubts arise in his mind: Can the last conference be topped? Is any of the Mayborn magic still hanging around? Can the tribe come together once again? And each year, he says he gets the same answers: “Yes, yes, and yes.”

Paul says the 2011 conference was the strongest Mayborn ever. “Not only did speakers and panel members dish out information that felt fresh and smart, each presentation seemed to build on the one before it, with an almost narrative arc, fitting in some piece of the puzzle – Ted Conover used mathematical equations! – until larger answers emerged. The sometimes-messy and always- gray area of ethics stood out as a theme. And while Gene Weingarten's Sunday afternoon speech (probing the right and wrong of choices he made in two of his stories) created the buzz and captured the attention of media bloggers, it was the speakers before him who primed the crowd to help make Weingarten’s talk resonate with the tribe in a way that bloggers and newspaper editorialists couldn't fully grasp.”

The theme of last year’s conference was the tricks and trials of immersion journalism. Our speakers kept our tribe of storytellers (bound together by our devotion to the narrative craft) spellbound with tale after tale of diving or falling into deep and complex stories riff with moral quandaries, ethical dilemmas, physical danger, legal peril and whacky characters. “These were people who would stuff a lizard down their pants and then get on a plane,” explained Jennie Erin Smith, who spent ten years hanging around reptile smugglers to create Stolen World. Joshua Foer, a young journalist for Slate, entered a national memory competition and, to his astonishment, won the contest. “I had been approaching it thinking I was writing about this bizarre subculture of weirdos,” he said. “And now I was their king.”

Ted Conover, America’s king of participatory and undercover journalism, told the tribe that the “willingness to do something crazy” is a sure way to attract readers to your story. “It's when things go wrong that the reader gets interested,” he said. Ted speaks with authority. He’s ridden the rails with hobos, crossed the Mexican border with human smugglers, and gotten slugged by an inmate during an undercover stint as a prison guard. Tom Huang echoed a similar message, urging the tribe to step outside their comfort zones, court difference and confront the stories they fear. “Fear keeps us in our old journalistic routines, clinging to our source lists, at our desks,” he said. Our Friday night keynote, Diane Ackerman, offered advice on conquering fear: “You have to invent your confidence,” she said, by doing stories that you didn’t dare do before.

Like Paul Knight, every year as I begin selecting speakers for the next conference, the same questions, the same doubts, surface: Can the last conference be topped? Is any of the Mayborn magic still hanging around? Can the tribe come together once again?

Fortunately, our annual conclave continues to rouse the sort of boisterous fervor that Dallas Cowboys’ fans demonstrate whenever their team's winning. At this year’s conference, 16,000 followers of bestselling author Rebecca Skloot found their smart phones and computers overflowing with her “re-tweets” of one attendee’s glowing comments about the conference. Alex Heard, an author and editorial director of Outside Magazine, simultaneously tweeted a message across the country that the Mayborn staff loved to hear: The Mayborn “is putting bigger schools to shame with its commitment to literary journalism.”
For Joy Tipping, a writer for The Dallas Morning News, her pining for the Mayborn Conference each year reminds her of her childhood longings for Christmas. “When I was little, I looked forward to Christmas all year, and come early December, I’d start bouncing up and down (literally) at the mere thought,” she says. “I realized while eagerly anticipating the Mayborn this year that it’s become that kind of I-can’t-wait experience for me.”

The Mayborn has become one of those special, “I-can’t-wait experiences” for me, too. Why? Where else but the Mayborn can you swap war stories in the hotel lobby until 3 a.m. with Newjack’s author, Ted Conover, or two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Gene Weingarten, or the editor-in-chief of O, The Oprah Magazine, Susan Casey, or the Dean of American Sportswriters, Frank Deford? Or, for that matter, where else can you lay eyes on the former Dean of the Mayborn School standing in the lobby a few hours before sunrise, wearing a day-glow wand around his head, toasting “the awesomeness” of some 50 or 60 Mayborn tribesmen and women standing alongside him?

Hyperbolic as it might sound, the truth is that there’s always something special going on at the Mayborn Conference. Year after year, once obscure writers capture major book contracts after entering our manuscript competition; others get taped on their shoulders for dream jobs in journalism after editors read their personal essays or narratives published in our literary journal, Ten Spurs; and still others bump into a Mayborn literary agent or author at the conference who offers to help them secure “a book deal” at a New York publishing house.

Last year, watching 10 high school and community college students and their teachers stand among our 350 conferees, raising their hands to ask the sort of penetrating questions that you might expect from seasoned journalists, was one of the most thrilling developments in the Mayborn’s history. These students were the winners of our inaugural National Biography Writing Contest, which earned them an all-expense-paid ticket to attend the conference and participate in a day-long biography workshop conducted by noted biographer James McGrath Morris. They’ll also see their biographies published in The Dallas Morning News. Lee Hancock, a former staff reporter for the paper, and Jim Moroney, its publisher, established a scholarship fund, The Mayborn Young Spurs Excellence and Opportunity Initiative, hoping to attract other donors to ensure the perpetuation of our tribe. In watching how quickly our 10 high school and community college biography winners bonded with the rest of our tribe, I’m optimistic about the future.

So despite prophecies that the Final Days are upon us, that long-form literary journalism is facing extinction, I have no doubt that our ever-growing, ever-evolving tribe of storytellers will gather in Grapevine to discuss and debate the great verities of literary nonfiction for decades to come. As your tribal chieftan, I offer a bit of advice: Snap up your seats early because they’re getting harder and harder to come by.

George Getschow, Writer-in-Residence & Conference Director
Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism