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Special thanks to Samantha Daugherty, Nathan Gathwright, Lori Forgay, Nick Harris, John Sparks, Nann Goplerud, and Jonathan Reynolds who helped make the conference possible.
The Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference is now one of the best (if not the best) writing conference in the country. It's hard to imagine that little more than six years ago it was just an idea. The conference has helped to launch successful writers such as Susannah Charleson, Mike Mooney, Craig Hanley and Bill Marvel. The writing competition continues to attract more submissions from top journalists throughout the nation. The best nonfiction writers come to share their stories with the tribe raising the bar year after year.

Now, the Mayborn conference is seeking to spread its reach a bit further. The next goal is to raise funds to start a historical nonfiction track. With writers such as Hampton Sides and David Grann at this year's conference, it is evident that journalists are writing the best historical narratives. The conference is also partnering with interested donors to bring teenagers to cultivate their interest in writing. These students could be future Mayborn School of Journalism students, journalists and perhaps, even, Pulitzer Prize winners.

The Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference is grateful to Sue Mayborn, whose name, joined with that of her late husband, Frank W. Mayborn, graces the name of our school of journalism. We expect our conference to continue providing opportunities for educators, writers and aspiring publishers to grow as we explore all avenues of storytelling in the years ahead.

Mitch Land, Conference Director
Mayborn School of Journalism

A note from the Director

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At a time when we’re told long-form literary journalism is facing extinction, the Mayborn has evolved into the very lively center of the literary nonfiction universe. Each summer, the nation’s most acclaimed nonfiction storytellers gather for an annual pow-wow in Dallas to demonstrate their devotion to their craft, and to their tribe.

Bob Shacochis, a literary journalist extraordinaire and National Book Award winner, once thought of Dallas as “a literary wasteland…a venue championing a seemingly aggressive disregard for fine books, writing and the writing life.” Then, in 2007, in the death-grip of a Dallas summer, Bob came to the Mayborn, sat in on our lectures, workshops and question-and-answer sessions and began to see Dallas in a new light. “Now, thanks and ever thanks to the Mayborn tribe of storytellers, I have to think of Dallas as a preferred destination, a center of literary gravity, perhaps the very heart of the universe these days for nonfiction writers in America.”

At the Mayborn, our tribe talks about subjects seldom discussed at other literary conferences: about how to harness the precision, emotion and power of poetry in our nonfiction prose; about the physicality of words and the need to serve up language that is crunchy and pleasant to caress on the tongue; about how travel narratives can sometimes be a form of “mental illness theater;” about how in writing memoir we can count on losing our privacy, our best friends and sometimes our sanity; about the awkward two-step writers and editors dance every day, but especially on deadline; about how it’s okay to digress, sometimes far from home, when we’re writing about, say, iceberg lettuce or pine trees; about how we can play with chronology on the page without changing the truth of the story; about the value of becoming Zen-like to earn the trust of our subjects and the treasure of their story; about approaching every story, no matter how long we’ve been doing it, as an amateur--as though we’ve never written a narrative before.

After deliberating all day about such great verities of literary nonfiction, the tribe can be heard hooting and hollering all night in someone’s hotel room, rehashing and debating the hottest issues of the day - like the claim by Vanity Fair’s writer, Bryan Burrough, at this summer’s conference that he pretty much knows what a story is going to say before he even begins to report it. Poor Bryan. He became a punching bag for every speaker that followed, including our Saturday night keynote, Mark Bowden, who proclaimed that unlike his prophetic tribesman, he goes into every story feeling as “ignorant” as he did on his first assignment as a cub reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Yet Mark and Bryan reveled in every minute of the Mayborn. As Mark said, after spending three days at the Mayborn -- sharing ideas and methods and sometimes sparring with other storytellers like Bryan - he came away feeling like he had joined a vibrant literary community that cared deeply for one another. Where else but the Mayborn, he told me, can you find speakers and conferees “drinking and laughing and swapping stories until three in the morning...like normal human beings. You wouldn’t want to miss that.” Bryan left me an autographed copy of his latest book, “The Big Rich” with a note inside: “George, you’ll never know how much I owe you.”

Lee Hancock, a narrative writer for The Dallas Morning News who brought her 13-year-old daughter and her daughter’s friend to the conference, kept reflecting on her Mayborn experience, periodically starring at Bob Shacochis’s words scribbled on yellow post-it-notes: “Writing is an essential act of community.” She began thinking: “What if this annual gathering acted like a community, welcoming youngsters and introducing them to the ideas and excitement and possibilities of the craft? What if you could catch a kid before they’d been convinced that writing was either the colossally boring stuff of English composition classes or the impenetrable mysteries of something called ‘literature.’”

Afterward, Lee called me, so excited she was breathless, saying she wanted to start a $5,000 scholarship program starting next year to bring seventh through twelfth graders to the conference, with the idea of creating a new generation of nonfiction storytellers. Lee’s generous act, and our speakers’ generous words, make clear that the Mayborn matters. And that’s why I have faith that the Mayborn Tribe of Storytellers will flourish from now ’til kingdom come.

George Getschow, Writer-In-Residence
Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism
I went home from my first Mayborn Conference in 2008 with a take-away line that captured a life-changing experience. I was so moved by Bob Shacochis’s Friday night keynote speech that I transcribed several favorite lines onto post-it-notes and stuck them on the wall of my writing workspace. Though I had to sit out the next year’s conference, I kept mulling my Mayborn experience. Periodically, I would stare at Shacochis’s words scribbled on my mounted yellow post-it-notes. As I talked one evening with Erin, my 13-year-old daughter, about a middle-school writing assignment, I showed her the post-it-notes. We read Shacochis’s words aloud. Something clicked, enlivening what had been a mundane mother-daughter exchange about seventh grade homework.

Then came an odd mental leap. There was that word “community” -- and the way that Shacochis had used it. The Mayborn liked to bill its attendees as a tribe. So why didn’t they really act like one for aspiring writers like Erin? If they were truly about fostering writing community, where were the kids?

My daughter and I have long shared a fondness of good writing. I asked Erin if she’d like to go with me to the 2010 conference. To ensure she didn’t feel too out-of-place, I proposed inviting her best friend Sophie to join us. Erin said yes and Sophie’s parents agreed to let her join us. Though I wasn’t sure how it would go, I figured we could always retreat to the indoor or outdoor swimming pool if the kids got tired of the conference.

We never made it the pools. The weekend was magical for the girls and for me. They attended every lecture. They took notes. They shyly approached speakers during breaks.

When the girls climbed into the backseat of my Subaru, they launched into a raucous chant, complete with dancing. “We’re members of the tribe!” they yelled, rocking the car.

I called George Getschow and laid out a proposal: What if I funded a scholarship for four more kids to attend next year’s conference? We’re still exploring the possibilities. It’s my hope that my contribution might become seed money for a permanent scholarship fund.

Having seen what the Mayborn did for my daughter and her friend, I think it could have a profound impact on other youngsters. Including a small group of kids each year could carry forward to new generations of writers what Shacochis raised in his 2008 speech – that the choices we make as writers carry social responsibility, that writing is an essential act of community. Why not start kids young and make the Mayborn a rite of passage? It might even inspire some of elders. Most important, it might ensure the perpetuation of the tribe.

Lee Hancock
The Dallas Morning News

Bringing kids into the tribe
Award-winning writer donates $5,000 to Mayborn scholarship fund

“Writing is an essential act of community.”
Bob Shacochis

Look who’s talking
Keynote Speakers

Mary Karr
Mark Bowden
Gary Smith

Speakers

Kael Alford
Hannah Allam
Thorne Anderson
Robert Blau
Bryan Burrough
Paula Butturini
Kevin Fedarko

S.C. “Sam” Gwynne
Colin Harrison
Sonya N. Hebert
Kristen Hinman
Bill Marvel
James McGrath Morris
Michael Merschel

Jeff Prince
Ken Raymond
John Phillip Santos
Bob Shacochis
Jack Shafer
Hampton Sides
Steve Weinberg

Note: Pictures are in order of name listing.
"The notion of a “literary community” is an abstraction, in that those of us making a living writing stories spend most of our days off in our own worlds. Each of us tends to be, by virtue of the work, excessively self-absorbed. Except for one long weekend in Texas every year, that is, when the notion of a literary community takes shape at the Mayborn conference, where we mingle and converse, share ideas and methods, and sit up drinking and laughing and swapping stories until three in the morning ... like normal human beings. You wouldn’t want to miss that."

Mark Bowden

"Like the hippie says in Woodstock, “Three days, man!” The Mayborn conference is like Woodstock without the mud, music, booze, and drugs. Well, okay, there was no mud. What struck me most was how people would listen to writers all day, then adjourn to the hotel bar and continue talking about writing until closing time, and then head to somebody’s hotel room and talk some more. I didn’t think it was possible for a conference to be that serious and well organized and still be such a good time."

Jeff Prince

"It’s easy to slip into a comfortable complacency as a writer. Attending the Mayborn Conference reawakened my creativity and got me thinking about the stories that underpin what we do as journalists."

Melissa Repko

"This was my fourth conference, and it was again outstanding from stem to stern. I left refreshed and invigorated. It is always a pleasure to hang out with people who are passionate about writing."

Gary Borders

"The conference was a perfect balance between workshopping, listening to dynamic speakers and networking with agents, editors and writers."

Pamela Stone
keynote speaker and memoirist Mary Karr told the crowd to “just try to write one true sentence” during Friday night’s festivities at Austin Ranch.

“Knowing the truth is not about manufacturing events. It’s choosing what to write about, one, and then examining your motives.”

Mary Karr,
Friday Night Keynote Speaker
“There is a great need for nonfiction stories that communicate a deeper sense of meaning and quench the curiosity of readers. As journalists, we have the very skills and platform from which to do this.”

Sonya Hebert

“Kristin Hinman’s ‘Audacious Act of Profile-writing’ lecture was spirited and, well, audacious. The former Riverfront Times writer provided great tips on finding and reporting on colorful characters. Taking us through one of her stories, she said her job was to create narratives inspiring the reaction, ‘Oh my gosh, did you read that story...’”

Jason Sheeler

“What distinguishes the Mayborn isn’t merely the quality of the talent it attracts, but the refreshing lack of pretension. George Getschow, Mitch Land and the University of North Texas have created an environment in which beginning writers and superstar authors are on equal footing, all brought together by a love of words and writing and literary journalism. The atmosphere is optimistic. Anything seems possible.”

Ken Raymond

The auditorium filled to the brim as Saturday’s literary giants told the tribe about searching for family history and getting the goods from a source.
Bryan Burrough reminded the tribe Saturday that writers can’t fall in love with their words, because “people are busy, and they are dying to put down your article.”

“Jeff Prince’s presentation on the influence of songwriting on his newspaper writing was clever and entertaining. But it also contained a serious lesson. It caused me to think anew about the importance of writing with rhythm and paying attention to cadence. Now, I’m going to rededicate myself to reading a story aloud before sending it to an editor. I will listen to how the words fall on the ear, and then catch and change clunky phrasing I hear. If the story sounds good to the ear, my hope is that it will filter into the reader’s brain more easily as he reads it.”

Scott Parks

“Mayborn is to a writer as a jumper cable is to a weak battery: an instant recharge. It’s a weekend of successful writers talking intimately about their craft and carefully answering questions that range from technical to existential. Although I have written professionally for more than 40 years, Mayborn was a wonderful tool that helped me refocus and develop a plan of attack for a number of long-form projects.”

Cragg Hines
“I generally begin working on a story in total ignorance, which I think is the ideal starting point for me, because only if you are truly ignorant can you ask the truly ignorant question.”

Mark Bowden

“Missy Matherne tells the story of a coffeeshop crush through song on Saturday night.”

Joy Tipping

Mark Bowden told a rapt crowd Saturday night that there is an inch-deep sea of information available. The lack of depth allows narrative storytellers to dig in and go deep in their writing.
“So much of what happens in the interactions between you as the writer and the subject hinges on their trust in you, their confidence in you. And so much of that hinges on how comfortable you are. Any uneasiness you bring is going to cost you dearly.”

Gary Smith, Keynote Speaker

Paraphrasing Gary Smith: “I write about people. Sports is just sort of there.”
I will never care about a draft pick or the score of a basketball game, but I’ll read Gary Smith because he writes about people — as should we all.

Avi Selk

“The biggest thing I got from [the conference] was Gary Smith’s idea that we need to ask more from our sources. That at some point we inevitably feel that we have asked enough of them, but in fact they want to tell us more. He also had a fascinating twist on the notion of allowing moments of silence to happen in an interview. He would ask the source: ‘What were you thinking?’”

Sam Gwynne
2010 Contest Winners

MANUSCRIPT AWARDS

Phil Scearce
Village Voice Media, First Place Award for Literary Excellence, $3,000
Robert Cargill
Mayborn Nonfiction Second Place Award for Literary Excellence
Anita Snow
Mayborn Nonfiction Third Place Award for Literary Excellence

RESEARCH AND REPORTING ESSAYS

Michael Mooney
The Dallas Morning News, $3,000 First Place Award
Thomas DeTitta
Ann and Nick Ricco, $2,000 Second Place Award
Audrie Palmer
The Oklahoman, $1,000 Third Place Award

PERSONAL ESSAY

Kathy Whitman
The Dallas Morning News, $3,000 First Place Award
Sallie Moffitt
Ricco Family Partners, LTD, $2,000 Second Place Award
Lauren Wolf
AON, $1,000 Third Place Award

From left to right: Lauren Wolf, Sallie Moffitt, Audrie Palmer, Thomas DeTitta, Michael Mooney, Michael Brick, Pamela Skjolsvik, Charlie Lewis, Evan Moore and Director Mitch Land. (Not pictured: Phil Scearce, Robert Cargill, Anita Snow and Kathy Whitman.)
“Always be working on the most ambitious story you’ve ever done. If you’re a little bit scared, that guarantees you’ll continue to grow. ... Just start, start anywhere, and get going.”

Mark Bowden,
Keynote Speaker