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A note from the Director

Five years ago, we launched the first Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. It has been such a pleasure to watch it grow from infancy to national prominence.

This year, we kicked off the event with travel writer Paul Theroux on Friday night at the western-style Austin Ranch. He encouraged the conference attendees to go out and see the world. After a long day of a wide-array of speakers, including a Web writer and our first documentary filmmakers, public radio host Ira Glass took the stage and regaled the audience with a mixture of sound bites, music and stories. He spoke of Scheherazade from the Arabian Nights, the story that related how her life was spared for 1,001 nights of powerful storytelling.

The fifth year of The Mayborn ended with Latin American correspondent Alma Guillermoprieto showing the parallels between dance and storytelling through writing.

These types of storytellers and our annual conference would not be possible without the continued support of our many sponsors, especially 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
and Interim Dean
Mayborn School of Journalism

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Ira Glass, the rock star of National Public Radio, harbored grave reservations about speaking at our 2009 Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. A week before arriving in Grapevine, he told a Dallas Morning News reporter he had an awful time at Harvard’s Nieman Conference, finding it both “pious” and “pretentious.” And the words “literary nonfiction,” he told the reporter, conjures up images of schoolroom boredom.

But after hanging out with the Mayborn Tribe of storytellers, Ira had a change of heart that’s now enshrined in my copy of his book, The New Kings of Nonfiction. Ira wrote, “Hey George, I’m so glad you talked me into coming out to your great conference.”

Thanks to Ira, travel writer extraordinaire Paul Theroux and our other speakers, the 2009 Mayborn Conference was more like a literary rock concert than a somber gathering of serious-minded journalists. This year’s conference featured a live mariachi band, a ballet dancer and surreal portraits of some of our speakers painted by local Latino artists. In every way, our gathering was more playful than pious, more suited to Ira’s personality than Shakespeare’s. At the Mayborn, we understand that amusing our muses inspires better storytelling, and so does Ira. “I think at a writers conference, or any other kind of serious venue where thoughtful people talk about how to make better work, and how to make work that will have some kind of importance, one of the things that gets left out is the thought of how important it is that you amuse yourself while you’re doing it.”

Roy Blount Jr.’s lecture, “Getting Physical with Your ABC’s,” provided plenty of amusement. Roy had several people rolling on the floor of the conference auditorium talking about how the tongue is forced to perform bizarre acrobatics pronouncing multisyllabic words like polyurethane foam and how saying the word “sphincter” constricts the throat. Julia Reed, an author and columnist for Newsweek, cautioned writers not to take themselves or their writing too seriously. “Trust me, you’re not that cool,” she said.

Despite all the fun, there was nothing frivolous about the topics discussed at this year’s conference. The Wall Street Journal’s Roger Thurow brought the tribe to their feet with his emotionally charged presentation about his “calling” to cover hunger. Powerfully, eloquently, he made clear that U.S. farm subsidy programs and policies help growers in America, but have devastated African villages and left millions starving and destitute. And Alma Guillermoprieto, a former dancer and longtime New Yorker contributor, literally pulled a ballet dancer through a series of grueling steps to point out that great storytelling is often painful. “We don’t do pretty, we do tough, and we do true,” she said. Striking his soundboard and spinning his tale of the Arabian Nights, Ira, eyes moist, reminded us that Scheherazade saved her life by telling compelling stories each night to her self-appointed executioner, her husband, the king. A thousand and one nights later, her life was spared forever. At a time when we’re told these are the Final Days, when newspapers are suffering from declining readership and revenues, Scheherazade’s story offers a pathway to our own salvation: tell great tales over and over again.

That was the recurring message resounding across the walls of the auditorium: whether you’re a journalist, author, filmmaker, radio host or blogger, your mission is the same – tell stories that illuminate, instruct, provoke, that make us think, make us feel. Stories are “a backdoor to a very deep place in us,” Ira said, “a place where argument and reason don’t really hold sway.”

Mike Mooney knows that place. Only a year ago, he was a Mayborn graduate student. This year, after claiming a slot in both “The Best American Crime Reporting” and “The Best American Sports Writing” anthologies for 2009, he became a Mayborn speaker. “It was kind of emotional being there this year,” said Mike, who has attended every conference since our inception in 2005.

It was for me, too. Sitting in the front row of the auditorium, listening to my protégé’s talk about infiltrating youthful subcultures, I spent most of Mike’s lecture fighting back tears, thinking about his remarkable achievements. When he stepped away from the podium, we hugged and I watched Mike’s eyes open wide as a throng of conferees approached him, hoping to glean some insights from Mike that would help them achieve his success as a storyteller. I smiled at Mike and walked away, leaving the young writer to pass along his storytelling gems to our hungry tribe.

George Getschow, Writer-In-Residence
Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism
The Mayborn Turns Five

Past Speakers Include

Joyce Carol Oates
Susan Orlean
Gay Talese
Norman Pearlstine
Ken Wells
Bob Shacochis
Hampton Sides
N. Scott Momaday
and more...

And those speakers have drawn people from around the nation and beyond.
Did You Know?

The Mayborn registered almost 300 conferees in its fifth year.

The Mayborn is produced with a small team of university staff and students from the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas.

The Mayborn distributed $15,000 in cash prizes to seven winners for exemplary writing.

The Mayborn recruited literary agents, workshop leaders and judges who donated their professional expertise and valuable time to the one-on-one sessions and writing competition.

Fifteen students and teachers from throughout the country were given scholarships to attend the conference.

The Mayborn convenes annually to educate its tribe of storytellers.

Look Who’s Talking

“At this late hour, the young writers concluded their second day at the fifth annual Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference by raising a glass to the conference’s architect and muse, George Getschow, the writer-in-residence at the University of North Texas. He answered the toast with one of his own to those gathered, whom he calls the “Mayborn tribe.” Those words were a theme of the conference: here we are, defiant, a clan for whom stories are no less vital than breath or blood. This tribe, after all, has closed ranks in the past year, as papers shuttered, magazines imploded, and thousands of storytellers went from employed to un-.”

– Sam Eifling

“I Heard it While in Grapevine: Stories abound at The Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference”
Columbia Journalism Review

Other coverage

Keynote Speakers

Ira Glass
Paul Theroux
Alma Guillermoprieto

Speakers

Roy Blount Jr
Alfredo Corchado
Gordon Grice
Stephanie Elizondo Griest
Michael Hall
Ashley Harrell

Michael W. Kauffman
Bill Minutaglio
Cynthia Salzman Mondell
Allen Mondell
Michael J. Mooney

John Parsley
Julia Reed
Joy Sewing
Dianne Solis
Roger Thurow
Susan Warren

Note: Pictures are in order of name listing.
ON THE CONFERENCE

“After it, I always feel changed - like I’ve received a potent blood transfusion. I have a renewed creativity and a better outlook on the world knowing such generous and kind people like these are doing such great work.”

Lori Forgay

“Thank you for the fabulous conference. You put together another winner. It was very impressive and inspiring to have so many talented people all in one place: presenters, workshop leaders, attendees, organizers, and support staff.”

Kathleen Hawkins

ON CREATIVE MARKETABILITY

We have to do things that writers have never had to do before. Ours is the first generation where writers have had to put on a T-shirt to market their book.”

Gordon Grice

ON IRA GLASS

I listened to Ira Glass weave his magical tales, threading in everything from the peculiar story of a man who may or may not have spilled his wife’s ashes in a parking lot to his discovery that his own storytelling rhythms mimicked that of his childhood rabbi. He talked about Scheherazade, a bride whose scheduled execution by her husband, the king, is delayed night after night (and ultimately canceled) so the king can hear one more tale. Ira Glass IS Scheherazade.

Not that his life was on the line at the Mayborn, but a storyteller can die so many little deaths as listeners tune out or turn off. Instead, the hushed crowd couldn’t get enough of him. Like the king, we had already listened to many stories — so many of them exhilarating and inspiring — by the time he took the stage.

Nancy Churnin

I floated in my seat during Ira’s talk, which was superb.

Kalena Cook
“Books are just...you can just hear all these little voices and all these magical stories just kind of seeping onto the woodwork. It was just such a powerful experience.... It just makes me so happy to know that there is someone else in the world who has such a deep profound respect for books and love of books. It was beautiful, absolutely beautiful to see all these books.”

Stephanie Elizondo Griest

“Archer City is the birthplace of one of the greatest writers of our time or any time- Larry McMurtry. His legacy is the largest antiquarian bookstores in the country, a place that can nurture future storytellers.”

George Getschow

At 7 a.m. on July 24, a bus of excited writers and teachers journeyed to Archer City, Texas, to see Larry McMurtry’s stomping grounds and setting of his book The Last Picture Show.
“The idea of this school of journalism putting this on is sort of outreach too, because it makes it accessible to a lot of people who can’t attend the school, the Mayborn school, but have the experience of the Mayborn contact and what they are doing.”

Paul Theroux, Friday Night Keynote Speaker
The auditorium filled to the brim as Saturday’s literary giants spoke about alphabet Juice, hunger, and finding stories in everyday events.

“I particularly like Roy Blount Jr. I thought he was very funny, low key, very intelligent, but with no attitude at all.”

Paul Theroux

“A story seized me,” said Wall Street Journal reporter Roger Thurow, who felt it would be morally criminal not to try to prevent hunger. Thurow gave us a gut-wrenching account of how digging deeply into an obvious story — hunger in Africa — led him to uncover the causes. We gave him a standing ovation.”

Leila Merrill

UNT Regents Professor Ray Busby cracks a joke to keynote speaker Ira Glass.
Saturday night proved remarkable with a turnout of 500 people to hear public radio host, Ira Glass, speak about how storytelling can quite literally, “save your life.”

“Ira Glass is brilliant. He did not give us a speech. He delivered a performance.”

Scott Parks

And it was not just about how Glass told the tale, with his artful mix of music and humor and that irresistible soft, yet undulating voice that draws you in — but the richness of the ideas and feelings he shared.

Nancy Churnin

Flamenco dancer Rubi Trevino added flair to the festivities of Saturday night.
Sunday morning started with a moving talk from Alma Guillermoprieto, digging deep within her past and showing the fluid movement of how a story can, in fact, dance.

Ever since the conference Alma Guillermoprieto’s commanding voice has been echoing through my head “take risks, take risks!”

Lori Forgay

“We are storytellers. We can’t help it. We’ll find a way.”

Alma Guillermoprieto, Keynote Speaker
2009 Contest Winners

MANUSCRIPT AWARDS

Sally Pringle
Village Voice Media, First Place Award for Literary Excellence, $3,000

Kalena Cook
Mayborn Nonfiction Second Place Award for Literary Excellence

Jack Schwartzwald
Mayborn Nonfiction Third Place Award for Literary Excellence

RESEARCH AND REPORTING ESSAYS

Marissa Alanis
The Dallas Morning News, $3,000 First Place Award

Sarah Perry
Nick and Ann Ricco, $2,000 Second Place Award

Raul Moreno
The Oklahoman, $1,000 Third Place Award

PERSONAL ESSAY

Tony Schwalm
The Dallas Morning News, $3,000 First Place Award

Brantley Hargrove
Ricco Family Partners, LTD, $2,000 Second Place Award

David Wallis
AON, $1,000 Third Place Award

From left to right: UNT Provost Wendy K. Wilkins, David Wallis, Iris Podolsky, Sue Mayborn, Sarah Perry, Marissa Alanis, Mary Pfeiffer, Raul Moreno, Ann Ricco and Tony Schwalm
(Not pictured: Sally Pringle, Jack Schwartzwald, and Brantley Hargrove)
“Narrative is the back door to a place deep within us.”

Ira Glass,
Keynote Speaker