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Word-weaving in Tennessee: The National Storytelling Festival

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authors ~ poetry ~ books

Word-Weaving in Tennessee

THE NATIONAL STORYTELLING FESTIVAL

Appalachia is a storied land. Every place within the region has its own story, and virtually every person who has spent a significant amount of time in a specific Appalachian place has been affected by—indeed, has become part of—that story. The region's artists have learned to interpret those stories through their preferred creative medium—whether visual art, music, craft, writing, or the spoken word.

This section of Appalachia—Asheville and many nearby communities in the North Carolina Blue Ridge—is a hotbed of art and artists, and each art-form is showcased hereabouts in specialized venues.

Visual art can be seen in galleries and museums; music can be heard in clubs, concert halls, and music festivals; crafts can be witnessed at fairs and stores, among other sites; and the written word—as literature—can be savored in bookstores and lecture halls. The spoken word—in the form of storytelling—is one of the more difficult art-forms to present in formal settings.

Historically across Appalachia, people savored storytelling by the fireside or on the front porch. Today, in the wake of the storytelling revival, stories can be heard at a range of organized events, and certainly at the National Storytelling Festival, which has been held every October since 1973 just across the border mountains from Asheville in Tennessee's oldest town: Jonesborough.

Several Appalachian masters of the spoken word will be in Jonesborough on October 5-7 to headline the 40th Anniversary offering of the Festival. People who can be there that weekend will be privileged to hear the magical word-weaving of several Appalachia-based storytellers, including Donald Davis, Connie Regan-Blake, Bil

BY TED OLSON

Lepp, Hannah Harvey, and John McCutcheon. And it is anything but the case that if you hear one you will have heard them all—these five storytellers have had different experiences living in Appalachia and have developed markedly different storytelling performance styles.

Davis, one of the most revered storytellers in the U.S., bases his repertoire on his formative years in Haywood County, North Carolina. Asheville-based Regan-Blake, long one of the more active shapers of the storytelling revival, tells a range of stories—some funny, some serious, all unforgettable.

Lepp, a West Virginian, is perhaps the leading practitioner of the type of exaggerated story popularly known as the tall tale (which emerged in Appalachia during the early 19th century as “Old Southwestern humor”). East Tennessee Harvey is a performance ethnographer who transforms the oral narratives of Appalachian people into heart-warming solo storytelling performances.

To most people, McCutcheon needs no introduction, but for the uninitiated he is a musician-storyteller with strong ties to Appalachia, and his stirring performances combine musical virtuosity with songs and banter that project a deep social conscience.

Appalachia will be further represented in Jonesborough through some special events held just before or during the Festival. On Wednesday, October 3, Davis will present a special pre-Festival evening performance, sharing stories about his father. The next evening (Thursday, October 4) will bring another pre-Festival event—this one to feature humorist Jeanne



Donald Davis

Photo: Fresh Air Photo



Bil Lepp



Carmen Deedy



Kevin Kling

Robertson, who hails from the small town of Graham, located in Alamance County, North Carolina (just east of the Blue Ridge foothills). At 10:30 p.m. on the Friday night of the Festival, Asheville's own David Holt (with his band The Lightning Bolts) will present a “Midnight Cabaret” performance of storytelling and song.

Joining all these Appalachia-based acts at the Festival will be major storytellers from other parts of the U.S., including such popular tellers as Jay O'Callahan, Laura Simms, and Judith Black. And audience members who will be attending the Festival for the first time should not miss performances by Carmen Deedy, Andy O'futt Irwin, and Kevin Kling.

Deedy's stories are fascinatingly multicultural (as a child in Cuba during the 1960s she witnessed the Cuban Revolution), and she smartly maintains a delicate balance between entertainment and education (she is an award-winning children's book author).

Irwin, one of the more idiosyncratic storytellers on the national scene today, combines high-energy comedy with tender stories relating the experiences and perspectives of his aged but spirited “aunt Marguerite.” As subtle as Irwin is over-the-top, Kling's stories bring meaning to the kinds of quietly profound experiences that most people overlook.

Each year the National Storytelling Festival seeks to represent stories from a range of cultural traditions, and this year is no ex-

ception. For instance, Festival attendees may see and hear performances by Kevin Locke (a traditional teller and dancer from the Lakota tribe), Alton Chung (whose stories draw from the diverse cultural heritage of his native Hawaii), Michael Harvey (a British storyteller who specializes in narratives from the Celtic tradition), as well as two acts—Rex Ellis, and duo Kim and Reggie Harris—whose stories and music memorably relate the African American experience.

If you do attend the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough this October, be prepared to enjoy stories regardless of the weather. And be prepared to be both charmed and, in some sort of quiet way, transformed.



40th annual National Storytelling Festival, October 5-7, 2012 in historic Jonesborough, Tennessee.

More details are available online; visit www.storytellingcenter.net/festival



Ted Olson is the author of such books as *Breathing in Darkness: Poems* (Wind Publications, 2006) and *Blue Ridge Folklife* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

He is the editor of numerous books, including *The Hills*

Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still (University Press of Kentucky, 2012). Olson's newest collection of poetry, *Revelations: Poems*, will be available in October 2012. His experiences as a poet and musician are discussed on www.windpub.com/books/breathingindarkness.htm

Asheville Flyer Takes Off

While there is no shortage of free publications in our area (with *Rapid River Magazine* being our own favorite) artist/entrepreneur Tim Arens noticed a decided lack of activities and publications aimed specifically at children. In response to this void, Arens, who was the driving force behind this summer's successful Fathers Day Festival, is launching *The Asheville Flyer for Kids*.

A free monthly newspaper, *The Asheville Flyer* will feature announce-

ments of upcoming events, links to web sites, puzzles, safety tips, and other articles relevant to kids. According to Arens the package will be “chock full of games, jokes, and activities, strictly for kids, all with a sense of humor. Our motto is “Puzzles & pictures & stuff to read, while your parents do something completely boring.”



BY JAMES CASSARA

IF YOU GO: The fun starts with a September 30 kick-off at The Hop Ice Cream Store on Merrimon Ave. The free event begins at 4 p.m. with games, music from 23 Skidoo, and (of course!) plenty of ice cream. For more information on

The Asheville Flyer for Kids visit www.cheesygraphics.com/afk.

RAPID RIVER ARTS & CULTURE MAGAZINE

16th Annual Poetry Contest

5 WINNERS! Prizes Include: Tickets to local concerts; Mellow Mushroom Gift Certificates; and books from Malaprops.

Enter any unpublished poem 35 lines or less.

Deadline January 26, 2013. Winning poems will be printed in the March 2012 issue. Reading fee: \$5 for three poems. For more information please call (828) 646-0071.

Send poems to: Rapid River Poetry Contest, 85 N. Main St., Canton, NC 28716