

Winter With the Writer 2017 Recap

By Morgan McConnell

Storytellers make great teachers. The visiting authors for the 2017 season of Winter With the Writers made a significant impact on the Rollins and Winter Park communities. Rollins invited authors who represent literature on both a local and national scale, including two National Book Award Finalists. All writers came from a variety of backgrounds and unique communities. This framework allowed Winter With the Writers to explore a diverse range of stories, essays, and poems that offer significant insights into writing and literary themes.

Susan Orlean, a creative non-fiction author and writer for *The New Yorker*, opened the season by joining the Winter Park community at the Enzian Theater for a screening of the film *Adaptation*, which is loosely based on her book *The Orchid Thief*. She shared her thoughts on the film during a Q&A in which she explained that the decision to cast Meryl Streep as Orlean encouraged her to accept the absurd portrayal. The next day, Orlean took a different approach to the master class by facilitating a discussion about leads. Orlean knows the importance of hooking the reader, and she taught everyone in attendance how to create an immediate human connection at the beginning of a work. Later that evening, Orlean read from her book *Rin Tin Tin* and shared passages from her not yet released book, which she currently refers to as *The Library Book*.

David Kirby and Peter Meinke visited Rollins College the following week, and their classes and readings were equally inspiring. Meinke, a fiction writer and the Poet Laureate of Florida, taught a master class that engaged the interns in a critique of the poems and short stories they had submitted. David Kirby taught a similar class in which he critiqued interns' poetry and encouraged audience participation. Both classes helped writers think in terms of specific style; you do not have to conform to formal verse, but you can create your own rhyme scheme and structure for your poems. They later performed a joint reading, Meinke reading from his short story collection *The Expert Witness* as well as from his poetry collection *Lucky Bones* and Kirby reading from his book of poems *Get Up, Please*. Meinke's work ended on a more serious note while Kirby's maintained a certain humor, although he did share with the audience the tragic car wreck that inspired his poem "I Had a Girl."

Chris Abani, a Nigerian writer who published his first book at age 16 and who was imprisoned for his books' content, arrived on campus on February 15. He taught a one-credit course that allowed students to recognize their own writing style and storytelling structure. This class will forever inspire those lucky enough to take it, and our intern Ingrid Egeli said that she "felt like it was a truly spiritual experience." Abani carried this lesson into the master class, where he established the importance of structure and character as well as content. You shouldn't buy furniture for a house that you haven't built, he says. During the reading, Abani's enchanting voice transported us into the worlds of his books *Becoming Abigail*, *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, and *Sanctificum*. During the Q&A, Abani expressed the importance of experiencing sadness and acknowledged that there is something sweet and uniquely human in that emotion.

The final week of Winter With the Writers celebrated Rollins' partnership with the National Book Foundation. On February 22, Lisa Lucas, the Executive Director of the National Book Foundation, gave a talk and participated in a Q&A at the Lowndes Shakespeare Theater. She expressed her desire to make the National Book Awards more like the Oscars, arguing that literature needed to be brought to the local level to establish diverse literary communities across the nation. The next day, National Book Award Finalists Jay Hopley and Chris Bachelder taught separate master classes and participated in joint reading and Q&A. Hopley approached the master class by stressing the importance of listening to poetry; for each poem that he critiqued, he required that an audience member read the poem and then asked the intern who submitted the work to read it as well. Bachelder's class was also a workshop, and he provided careful evaluations of the interns' prose while encouraging them to openly critique each other's work. Later that evening, both authors read from their acclaimed books, Hopley's poetry

collection *The Abridged History of Rainfall* and Bachelder's novel *The Throwback Special*. Bachelder and Hopler utilized elements of humor and grief, provoking a variety of emotions in the audience members.

All of these authors taught us powerful lessons during the master classes and the readings that will forever change our perspective on literature; however, as an intern, some of my most meaningful experiences came from the private moments with the writers. Orlean never ceased to share her wisdom, even telling us how we can stay in shape and mentally acute while writing by investing in a treadmill desk. Meinke and his wife Jeanne Clark were so charming, and they collected mementos to remember their time with the program; Meinke even showed us his journal, which he always keeps on hand so he can write down ideas for stories and poems. Perhaps their most memorable keepsake from their visit is the gift from the interns, which features a wooden sculpture of a house engraved with phrases from his poem "Old Houses." Meinke even made a point of sending the interns a picture once he had decided where to put it. Meanwhile, Kirby teaches poetry in a way that makes it genuinely accessible, and he laces humor through his conversations with the same skill that he shows in his poems. Abani, too, possesses great wit, and after spending time with him at lunch and participating in the master class and attending his readings, my face hurt from laughter. Hopler has many passions, and it was wonderful to hear about his yoga practice and his love for animals, which at one point resulted in him rescuing and housing several hunting dogs. Bachelder took great interest in the interns, and his words of encouragement both in and outside of class will never be forgotten.

Although the 2017 season of Winter With the Writers has come to a close, there is still much to look forward to in the future. With the support of donors, the engagement of the Winter Park community, the work of the interns, and the dedication of program director Carol Frost, this has been a marker of a successful season and of many more to come. We thank the writers for sharing their art and knowledge, allowing us to take part in this thriving literary world.