

The Good Earth

FEATURES — BY ADMINISTRATOR ON FEBRUARY 1, 2009 AT 8:41 PM

By Angelina Sciolla

Among Bucks County's many natural assets are its novelists, poets and dramatists, past, present and future

Dorothy Parker, whose stinging wit was often best served very cold and very dry with an olive, once said: "I don't care what is written about me so long as it isn't true."

The following is true. Ms. Parker spent a great deal of time formulating her observations on everything from New York Theater to the social politics of the rich and famous right here in Bucks County. At those moments when the Algonquin and its inhabitants became more tiresome than entertaining, Dorothy Parker would disappear into a bucolic nook of our beloved county and simmer over the idiosyncrasies of New York literary life.

Today, real estate agents tout the literary prestige of the area as a selling point for prospective home buyers. Who wouldn't want their children to experience a sort of writerly osmosis by virtue of their nearness to the energies of some of the country's most accomplished authors? Could the next great American novel be set in Yardley, perhaps, along the banks of the Delaware? Or amid historic row houses of Bristol Borough?

Possibly.

Bucks County is famous for covered bridges, landmark homes and the itinerant bohemian enclaves that, over the last hundred or so years, provided inspiration for painters and writers. Yes there was Provincetown and other tranquil and scenic escapes not terribly far from the action. Still, as a result of its natural beauty and proximity to agents and editors in New York, Bucks County also became a magnet for some of the biggest names in American contemporary writing, from musical theater to mainstream fiction.

Don Swaim, a widely published author and coordinator of the Bucks County Writers Workshop identified two compelling reasons for the strong literary tradition of Bucks County. In two words – value and proximity.

"It was once known as 'the poor man's Connecticut,' because Bucks, with its rural character, farms, and old stone houses, resembled Connecticut, but was a lot cheaper. Being less than two hours from New York City also made it easily accessible. A lot of the county's charming rural character has been dimmed by development, yet vestiges of its original appeal can still be found," he explained.

The legacy established by the likes of Pearl S. Buck, whose novel, "The Good Earth," won both a Pulitzer and a Nobel prize, as well as fellow Pulitzer winners James Michener and dramatist Moss Hart, is burnished by the perpetuation of a thriving literary scene and environment for writers. The journey continues as writers are either nurtured here or find their way to Bucks County only to stay for the inspiration. Current residents include Oscar-winning screenwriter Ted Tally, playwright Christopher Durang, and James McBride, author of "Miracle at St. Anna," which was recently adapted for the screen by Spike Lee.

And there are others whose names become more recognizable with each new book, short story or poem they publish. The area is plentiful with authors, some of whom balance fulltime jobs and families while pursuing and perfecting their craft.

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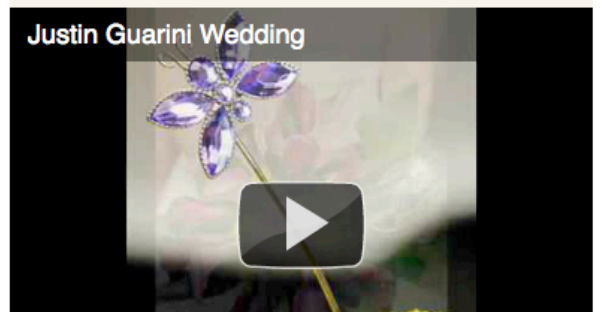
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Continuing the tradition

The Bucks County Writers Workshop (BCWW) was established in 1998 as a peer review group for local writers. Don Swaim has interviewed and written extensively on numerous writers. His prolific collection of radio interviews with the luminaries of literature can be heard on his web site, WiredforBooks.com. After many years in New York City working in broadcast journalism and as the host of the CBS radio show, *Book Beat*, Swaim and his family settled in Bucks County.

As the coordinator BCWW, Swaim sees that writers who are embarking on or attempting to finish projects have the benefit of a peer audience to help them along. The group meets twice a month at the Lenape Middle School (in winter) and the Bucks County Library (in summer). Participants post their work to the BCWW web site in a password protected area accessible by members only and then receive feedback at the meetings. Membership is exclusive in the sense that only about 20 people at a time can constitute a peer group. Some writers request to be placed on waiting lists. In addition, writers must demonstrate a serious interest and investment in their work.

"Members need not have to have been published to join," Swaim said, "but they should have a body of work behind them."

Most members of the BCWW have been published in newspapers or magazines and a few have published novels, including two members who have self-published.

The BCWW web site contains a plethora of guidance and information for writers, including a stylebook filled with basic writing tips and workshop etiquette. But the most valuable contribution of the BCWW to the local writing community is just that, the fostering of a community.

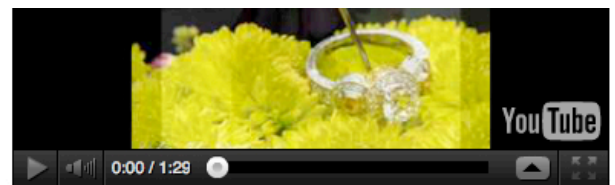
"Peer review, in my opinion, is invaluable. Even Stephen King sends his work in progress to trusted confidants for feedback," Swaim acknowledged. "Writers often work in a vacuum so there is no substitute for receiving objective criticism. At the same time, reading the work of others and analyzing it enhances one's critical ability, which in turn can be applied to one's own writing. There is also a certain camaraderie in being with others who share the same goals and aspirations."

A sense of community is critical to a writer. Richard Rhodes, an award-winning historian and author of historical fiction, has said in interviews that "writing, by its nature, is a solitary profession. That's why writers have to find their own community."

That's precisely what Bucks County has been for writers, past and present.

It was a long way from 105th Street in New York City to a farm in Bucks County, but Pulitzer-prize winning playwright Moss Hart made the trip with some help from a little piece of theater called "You Can't Take It With You," which he wrote in collaboration with George S. Kaufman. Kaufman also owned a farm nearby and, during the 1930s and 1940s, both men frequently retreated here to write and work together. They went on to create American contemporary classics like "The Man Who Came to Dinner" and even wrote a comedy set in Bucks County called "George Washington Slept Here." Kaufman also briefly played host to John Steinbeck when the two collaborated on the screenplay for Steinbeck's novel, "Of Mice and Men."

In 1957, James Michener, who had already racked up an impressive list of titles and several awards including the Pulitzer for his first novel, "Tales of the South Pacific," had just returned from an extended trip to Europe and was tucked away at his farm in Tinicum Township. He was working on his book, "The Bridge at Andau," the story of Hungarian refugees escaping Soviet occupation of their country, which he had just witnessed firsthand. Michener was also nursing back to health the adventurous female war correspondent Dickey Chapelle, who had been imprisoned, Soviet-style, for several months after reporting on the Hungarian crisis. A gaunt and listless Chapelle, whose confidence had been shattered by her experience as well as the accusations that she had deliberately gotten herself captured for (all for the sake of an exclusive), leaned on friends James and Mari Michener for support. During her convalescence at the Michener farm, Chapelle mapped out the next steps in her career, and it was where Michener convinced her to begin the first notes on her memoir, "What's a Woman Doing Here?"



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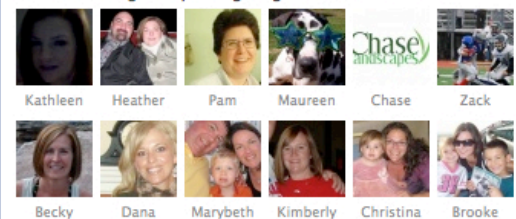
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Building community

Nowadays, in addition to the BCWW, the community includes an active poetry scene led by the director of the Bucks County Poet Laureate Program, Allen Hoey. Two members of the BCWW, Kurt Krumpholtz and Marsha Kroll, are past Bucks County Poet Laureates.

It also includes another venue and point of contact for writers—both locally and globally. The online publication, "Wild River Review," features a wide array of content including interviews with authors, blogs, essays, memoirs, short stories, book features and poetry, many of which are written by local scribes. Editor-in-Chief Joy Stocke previously worked with the now defunct Bucks County Writers Room, an organization that helped foster a resurgence of the Bucks County literary scene several years ago. But when printing costs for "The Bucks County Writer" became prohibitive and full-time volunteers harder to find, Stocke and her colleagues regrouped, forming both the "Wild River Review" and Writers Corner U.S.A, the latter of which is a literary consultancy that provides guidance and tutoring to writers. The staff includes corporate and financial writers, nonfiction and fiction writers, poets, bloggers and journalists.

Online media may very well be a savior for literature and new writing, as it allows writers a venue and exposure at a fraction of the cost involved in producing a print journal.

"The current transitional nature of the print media, as well as the poor economic climate, has put the literary world into flux," observed Swain. "I suspect the Internet as well as electronic publication will become dominant in the future."

Joy Stocke, who, in between finishing her second book, "The Cave of the Bear," pours over hundreds of submissions to "Wild River Review" each month, but only selects about 5 to 7, agrees that online media offers new opportunities for creative writing.

"We are in the midst of a big shift from print to a combination of print and online media wherein one now is reliant upon the other. How we do that is still being determined," said Stoke.

The important thing, she stressed, is that an online publication can be used as a tool to connect with writers and to build a community, locally and beyond. As Stocke works with her staff to assemble each issue, she looks first for local writers and visual artists to feature in an effort to highlight the bountiful talent in the area. But she also gives a voice to writers from around the country and even around the world, which then results in an even wider audience for Bucks writers than a small print publication could ever achieve.

"We try to think locally and act globally. But in order to do that you can never lose sight of your original location. Online publications give us a view of the world. We as individuals and as members of a community seek things that might inform us about the world and our place in it," suggested Stoke.

What is it about our portion of the world that seems so attractive to writers? Stocke has a theory.

She believes there's something in the water.

"I think we live in one of the beautiful places anywhere," Stocke observed. "I always marveled about how beautiful things are. The way the landscape is here—the light is beautiful. We've got a couple things going for us, including the water...the Delaware. There is something about the Delaware River, the way it winds down. I cross the river all the time from the Lambertville Bridge and each time it looks different. It reminds of how we can cross borders so easily."

"And we're close enough to major cities," she added. "One of the things I have found is that we need the cities...our agents are there, we give readings there, publishing industry there, art is there. But here, this gives us the space to create."

Stocke says plans are in the works to begin putting together collections or anthologies of works that have appeared in "Wild River Review."

"We will be 3 years old in March and we've been on a 5 year business plan. Within that is a plan to publish collections from the magazine," said Stocke.

The editors and writers of "Wild River Review" meet frequently to discuss content and story ideas. In addition, Stocke and company are planning a series of local readings for spring and summer featuring writers and artists whose work has appeared in the magazine. This, she says, is a great opportunity to celebrate the language and creativity of local artists.

Finally, Bucks residents can also familiarize themselves with their literary neighbors by visiting the local bookstore. Two independent establishments, which have become touchstones for the writing community in this area, are particularly (and delightfully) focused on featuring and selling the work of area authors.

At Farley's Bookshop in New Hope, the tradition has been going strong for over 40 years. Here one can find the complete collection of the Berenstain Bears series (The Berenstains are locals), the works of well-known names such as former resident Patricia Highsmith, who wrote the Tom Ripley series of thrillers and whose novel, "Cry of the Owl," is set in New Hope and due to become a film. Then there are the more recent names like Jonathan Weiner and Roxana Robinson whose work finds its way on the shelves at Farley's and over at the Doylestown Bookstore, where local authors frequently find the opportunity to introduce their new works via readings and book signings.

For more information about local writing activities, readings, discussions and opportunities to submit work, visit these websites:

Wild River Review
www.WildRiverReview.com

Writers Corner USA
www.writerscornerUSA.com

Bucks County Writers Workshop
<http://donswaim.com/buckswriters.html>

Angelina Sciolla lives in Philadelphia, PA.

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