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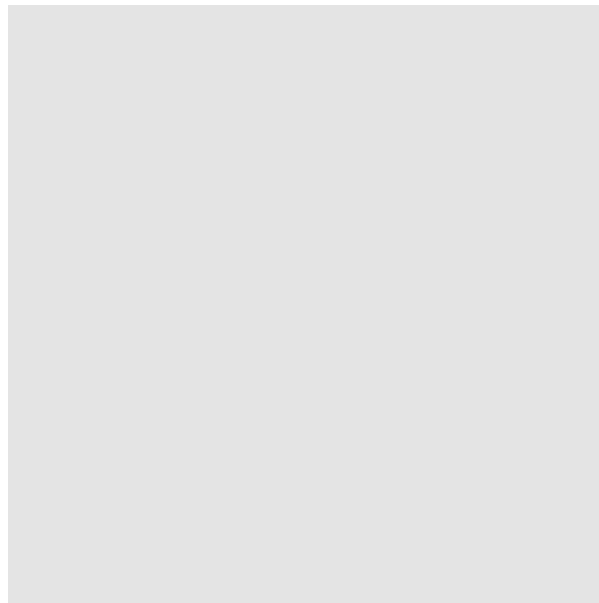
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WKU writing celebration will honor late professor

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 23 hrs ago



Mary Ellen Miller

Submitted

After her death in June, this year's Celebration of Writing at Western Kentucky University will honor the legacy of Mary Ellen Miller, WKU's poet laureate and longest-serving faculty member.

“This is a celebration of her work and her life,” said English Department head Robert Hale, who remembers Miller as a professor dedicated to her students during her 50 years teaching at WKU.

“She was just a wonderful person,” Hale said. “She had a great sense of humor. I would say a wicked sense of humor in the best way.”

The event will take place during Homecoming weekend at 2 p.m. Oct. 28 in the Kentucky Room of the Kentucky Museum and Library.

This free event is open to the public and will feature readings of Miller’s work, poetry about her and tributes to her influence as a writer and teacher. A reception and book sale will follow.

The event will include a poetry writing contest for WKU students for the honor of participating in a writers workshop with Cheryl Hopson, author of “Black Notes” and “Fragile” and an assistant professor of African American Studies at WKU. Ten finalists will be selected for the workshop and three monetary awards, will be presented to students at the event.

For more than 20 years, Miller organized the annual writing celebration to honor the memory of her husband, Jim Wayne Miller, a renowned poet, author and teacher who died in 1996.

Like his wife, Jim Wayne Miller became an eminent Kentucky poet and writer. He was named a state poet laureate in 1986, according to the Kentucky Arts Council.

After her death, Mary Ellen Miller’s colleagues in the English Department renamed the event the Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing to honor the legacies of both writers.

During her life, she earned acclaim as a poet and editor.

Her book of poetry “The Poet’s Wife Speaks” (2011) won the Old Seventy Creek Press Prize, and in 2014, Mary Ellen Miller and Morris Allen Grubbs edited “Every Leaf a Mirror: A Jim Wayne Miller Reader,” which won a Weatherford Award.

David Bell, an associate professor of English at WKU and an award-winning novelist, described Mary Ellen Miller as a constant source of support and advice for his own work.

“I always knew that if I had a question or a problem I could go to Mary Ellen and she would be open and frank and candid,” he said, adding she was the same way with students.

“So much of Mary Ellen’s identity was wrapped up in teaching and mentoring students,” he said.

Bell described Mary Ellen Miller’s work as direct and unafraid of openly grappling with her complex emotions and flaws. His favorite poem of Mary Ellen Miller’s is “Things in the Shape of Other Things.”

“This thing in me, shaped like a cat, poised for attack hissing, back arched, tail up – I don’t like that,” the poem reads in part.

It’s easy to see Mary Ellen Miller reflected in her poetry, Bell said.

“When I read this poem, I can’t help but think of her,” she said.

Along with being an accomplished writer, Mary Ellen Miller is known for her work to democratize poetry.

In 2015, she became a founding member of WKU’s Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing faculty. She created the Winter Workshop to bring in established writers from across the country to work with regional writers.

She also wrote and produced the award-winning “Poetry: A Beginner’s Guide,” a video that helped make poetry accessible, according to a news release. In addition, she helped create the Robert Penn Warren Center at WKU, dedicated to the Kentucky native who

became the nation's first poet laureate.

Students remain a big part of the annual writing celebration through the writing contest and workshop, Bell said.

To donate to the celebration, supporters may make gifts through the WKU Foundation at WKU, 292 Alumni Ave., Bowling Green, 42101, or at alumni.wku.edu/millerwritingfund.

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