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Visiting author to WKU finds empathy through fiction

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 4 hrs ago



Author Katy Yocom reads an excerpt Sunday from her book, “Three Ways to Disappear,” at a Museum.

Ask award-winning author Katy Yocom what writing is for, and she’ll tell you it’s time travel, telepathy, immortality and “the world’s greatest magic trick.”

For Yocom, it’s also the closest anyone can get to seeing inside – and understanding – someone else’s perspective.

In other words, practicing empathy.

“For my money, that’s one of the most important qualities you can possess in our current culture, which tells us that there are only two ways to think about anything,” Yocom said.

That was the message the Louisville-based author delivered Sunday as the guest lecturer during the 23rd annual Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing at Western Kentucky University.

During her talk at WKU’s Kentucky Museum, Yocom read from her recently published debut novel, “Three Ways to Disappear,” and discussed the wisdom she’s gleaned from her journey.

Imparting her writing wisdom, Yocom encouraged young writers to hone their craft and to draw strength from their writing communities – even when anyone else would quit.

It also pays to be patient, Yocom said.

“You won’t enjoy hearing this, young people, but from the day I began writing my novel to the day it was published, 14 years passed. I hope you’ll be quicker about it than I was, but chances are it will take you a while, too.”

Set partly at a tiger preserve in India and partly in Louisville, Yocom’s novel chronicles a family’s struggle to confront its painful past. Writing her book took Yocom to India, where she observed tigers in the wild,

sought out pastoral villages and took in the sunrise at the Taj Mahal. Those years of work and her experiences along the way found their way into the pages of her book.

That's as it should be, Yocom said. "Talent aside, craft study aside, your writing needs you to develop life experience, perspective, maybe even wisdom," she said.

The annual Celebration of Writing at WKU takes its name from Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller, two beloved poets and professors at the university. Jim Wayne Miller taught German at WKU for more than 30 years until his death in 1996. His wife, Mary Ellen Miller, taught poetry and literature at the university for more than 50 years before her death in 2018.

During her talk, Yocom said she heard ardent praise for both professors from their former students.

"You could just hear the love," she said. "That's what it means to leave a legacy."

Among them was Tammy Oberhausen Rastoder, who remembers reading classics in 1985 in Mary Ellen Miller's class, such as Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" shortly after it was first published. Now, she's an English teacher at South Warren High School.

"She would sit in front of the room ... and just have a conversation with us," she said. "I just remember being spellbound the whole time."



Rastoder also remembers the support Mary Ellen Miller offered, encouraging her to keep working on her writing years afterward.

“She was the one that kind of kept me going all those years,” she said.

The event features a writing contest that allows students to vie for the opportunity to work with the visiting writer in a workshop. From those 10 workshop participants, the visiting writer selects three winning pieces for monetary prizes.

This year’s fiction writing contest winners include Alicyn Newman, first place; Ella Corder, second place; and Mikaila Smith, third place. The winners took home \$100, \$50 and \$25 prizes, respectively.

Newman, who previously won first place in 2017, this year submitted her piece titled “A Question of Stars.” In the workshop with Yocom, Newman said the writers were instructed to create side characters for their stories.

“That was really a great opportunity to kind of think through the story even more,” Newman said. “She gave a lot of great feedback for future drafting and revisions.”

To donate to the Celebration of Writing, supporters may make gifts to the WKU Foundation at 292 Alumni Ave. in Bowling Green or online at alumni.wku.edu/miller_writingfund.

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