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TOP STORY

## Kentucky poet laureate coaches WKU students

By AARON MUDD [amudd@bgdailynews.com](mailto:amudd@bgdailynews.com) 3 hrs ago



Kentucky poet laureate Frederick Smock speaks to students Sunday during the Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing at the Kentucky Museum at Western Kentucky University.

photos by Austin Anthony/[photo@bgdailynews.com](mailto:photo@bgdailynews.com)

When Kentucky poet laureate Frederick Smock teaches students to write and appreciate poetry, his advice is simple: Don't overthink it.

Smock – an associate professor of English and director of creative writing at Bellarmine University in Louisville – shared his writing and his experiences teaching young writers at the 21st annual Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing on Sunday at Western Kentucky University.

When new students walk into Smock's classroom, he starts by debunking misconceptions, such as the focus on interpreting hidden meanings.

“There's no such thing. It doesn't exist,” Smock told an audience of students, faculty and others at the Kentucky Museum. “Where would you hide the meaning of a poem? Poems don't come with attics and basements and secret drawers. It's just the words on the page.”

Each year, WKU poet laureate Mary Ellen Miller organizes the Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing in the memory of her husband, a WKU professor who taught German and literature for more than 30 years at the university before he died in 1996.

The event also includes a writing competition that allows students to compete for 10 slots in a workshop hosted by the guest writer, and ultimately, money awards for the top three students chosen by the writer.

This year's finalists were Michaela Miller, Delaney Holt and Alicyn Newman.

Newman took first place and won \$100 for her poem “Mother Tongue,” which explored the theme of language and love.

“I wasn't expecting to place actually,” said Newman, a sophomore from Scottsville.

In her poem, Newman said she wanted to explore how a person's first experience of love is through their mothers and their actions.

For Newman, poetry is a fairly new interest and she discovered it by accident while writing short story snippets and reimagining them as potential poems. She describes her poetry writing process as spontaneous.

“Most of the poems that I feel good about, they just happen,” she said, adding that revision can come later.

That instinctive approach to reading and writing poetry is what Smock said people should embrace rather than the clinical approach they’ve been taught. Smock shared anecdotes about finding poetry in the wording of an elevator plaque.

Smock said he’s seen the natural instinct children have for poetry by watching his young son play make believe.

“That joy of poetry seems to evaporate,” Smock said, referring to the sterile way poetry is often taught.

As an elementary school teacher, Smock remembers going to the grocery store to buy strange fruits for his students to write poems about, imaging their perspectives. He’ll never forget what a 10-year-old girl was able to come up with after he handed her a coconut.

“ ‘I never have to go on vacation because I carry the waves inside me,’ ” Smock said, quoting the student. “They got it.”

When Smock teaches his students to appreciate poetry, he encourages them to bring whatever the poem stirs inside of them. A teacher sitting on their own privileged interpretation of a poem kills any opportunity for new creative insights from their students, Smock said.

“I tell my students we are all reading the same poem, but we are all different people,” he said.

Smock also hates it when students are asked by their teachers to interpret the author’s intent. He once read a news story about a Texas poet who took the state’s high school standardized test to get a better understanding of the educational system. While working her way through the questions, she stumbled on two asking about the intentions in her own work.

“She missed both those questions,” Smock joked.

Along with sharing his teaching experiences and poetry philosophy, Smock also read from two, short essays and several poems.

One essay, called “In praise of slowness,” explored how fast-paced people’s lives have become and how reading and writing can only be enjoyed by taking one’s time.

“There’s a deep pleasure that comes from meaningful reading and writing,” Smock said, reading from the essay. “Why should anyone want that pleasure to be hastened?”

Smock also shared a poem called “Luminary” commemorating the upcoming inauguration of Susan Donovan as president of Bellarmine University.

“The scholar abides in her chamber, reading with delicate eyes and the fingers of a goldsmith,” Smock read.

Adrian Sanders, a senior studying creative writing, said she appreciated the poetic meter in Smock’s writing and its content and images. This year’s writing celebration was the first she’d attended, and she enjoyed how it brought writers together.

“Having them together in one room to talk about writing is so special,” she said.

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## **Aaron Mudd**

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.