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Kentucky poet laureate to visit WKU for writing celebration

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Aspiring writers at Western Kentucky University will get a chance to work with Kentucky Poet Laureate Frederick Smock at the 21st annual Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing this month.

“He’s a splendid poet,” said WKU Poet Laureate Mary Ellen Miller, who described Smock as having “one of the keenest eyes I’ve ever known in poets.”

Each year, Miller organizes the Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing to honor her late husband, who taught German and literature for more than 30 years at WKU before he died in 1996.

This year’s celebration is at 2 p.m. Oct. 15 in the Kentucky Room of the Kentucky Museum. The event is free and open to the public. A reception after the event will serve refreshments.

“My hope is that they will remember with gratitude some of the poems he reads,” Miller said of students who will attend the event.

Along with sharing some his poetry with the public, Miller said Smock will also work with 10 students who've competed for spots in a workshop through a writing competition. Following the workshop, Miller said Smock will choose three students to receive monetary awards for their writing.

David LeNoir, a professor and the director of composition for WKU's English Department, said the writing workshop has been a valuable experience for students over the years by offering them the chance to get critiqued by a prominent writer.

"It's a good way to get the students involved," he said.

Smock is the author of 10 books of poems and essays, four chapbooks and is currently working on two more books, according to his biography online at the Kentucky Arts Council's website.

Smock is an award-winning writer, winning the 2002 Henry Leadingham Poetry Prize, the 2003 Jim Wayne Miller Prize for Poetry, Bellarmine University's 2005 Wilson Wyatt Faculty Award and the 2008 Kentucky Literary Award for Poetry.

Growing up in Louisville, Smock was inspired by Kentucky writers James Still and Jesse Stuart, who are known for their writings about Appalachia and coal mining.

He once wrote to Stuart while working on a book report for school. In the last letter Smock received from Stuart, the writer wished him well, writing "I hope you get an A," according to Smock's bio.



As a writer, Stuart has said he's inspired by nature.

"I find myself drawn to nature," a quote from Smock's bio reads. "When I was 6, we moved to Fern Creek (in Jefferson County) where my father built a house on a hill in the midst of a forest. Those years were spent wandering fields and forest mostly on my own. It was laying my imagination on that landscape and drawing from that experience. I can't say I direct my mind that way. The inspiration comes to me, but those sources give me a lot to work with."

Miller said Smock's observation skills are apparent in his poetry.

"He looks at the world very clearly and very definitively," she said. "He knows what he's doing."

Along with his skills as a poet, Miller said Smock will bring his teaching skills to WKU when he coaches students on their writing.

"He has a winning way because he knows what he's talking about, because he respects their talents," she said.

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