

PAMELA
DUNCANKATHRYN
STRIPLING BYER

JAMES APPLEWHITE

JAKI
SHELTON
GREEN

Charles Frazier

DORIS
BETTSKaye
GibbonsFred
Chappell

Robert Morgan

THOMAS
WOLFE

Lee Smith

Jill McCorkle

PAUL
GREEN

Charles W. Chesnutt

Reynolds
Price

Why We Are “The Writingest State”

BY ED SOUTHERN

Notes contributed by the NCLR staff

*In this state,
writers – by and large –
are gracious and supportive.*

*Even our most celebrated authors
evinced a down-home humility, a
refusal to get too far above
their just-folks raising.*

“You’re so nice. You’re not good, you’re not bad. You’re just . . . nice.”

—Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods*

“The North Carolinian believes in niceness as both a practice and a veil, as an expression of Christianity and democratic values, and as a disguise.”

—Will Blythe, *To Hate Like This Is to be Happy Forever*

Lordy, but we are nice in North Carolina – even the writers. Everyone says so.

In many places, I am told, writers are the snipingest, whiniest, envy-est collection of malcontents, weirdos, and conceited sons-of-bitches one could find. In this state, writers – by and large – are gracious and supportive. Even our most celebrated authors evince a down-home humility, a refusal to get too far above their just-folks raising (even if that humble raising itself is a bit of authored imagination).

We have been this way for some time – long enough for the practice to count as tradition, as characteristic, long enough to have examples that take on the tone of legend. Georgann Eubanks, author of the three-volume *Literary Trails of North Carolina*, often tells the story of the successful, elegant author Frances Gray Patton coming to visit the promising young writer Doris Betts, who was raising three small

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COURTESY OF THE SOUTHERN HISTORICAL COLLECTION, LOUIS ROUND WILSON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY, UNC CHAPEL HILL

children in a cramped Chapel Hill apartment. As she rose to leave, Patton slipped Betts a check so that the younger author could hire someone to help her at home, giving her more time and energy to write. Patton explained that her latest title had just been named a Book of the Month Club selection, and she wanted to use that extra money to help a fellow writer. Betts could pay her back, Patton said, by doing the same for some other young writer when Betts had written a Book of the Month Club selection herself. (Betts did, and did.)¹

Decades later, after she had become one of the state’s preeminent authors, it was Doris Betts who first called North Carolina “the Writingest State.” Others have said one cannot spit, piss, or throw a rock in the Old North State without hitting a writer. Writers are – rather than seem to be – thick on the red-clay ground.

Since I became Executive Director of the North Carolina Writers’ Network in 2008, I often have been asked what makes North Carolina so fertile for writers. I always answer honestly: I do not know. I can speculate and theorize for minutes, hours, years (and have), but I do not know, not with any certainty, and I am not sure that I ever will.

Few states have anything like the Network. Formed in 1985 by a grassroots collection of writers, the NCWN “connects, promotes, and serves the writers of this state” and beyond. Membership is open to all writers, working in all genres, at all levels of skill and experience, all over the state, nation, and world. We believe “that writing is necessary both for self-expression and a healthy community, that well-written words can connect people across time and distance, and that the deeply satisfying experiences of writing and reading should be available to everyone.”²

That we are a *network* – and not a center, an institute, a guild, or even an association – is significant. We exist to connect. “Network” is active, a verb as well as a noun. Despite our growth and all the attendant compromises (as of this writing, the Network has more than 1,400 members, and operations are run by two full-time and two part-time employees), we remain a grassroots collection of writers as best as we can. Our trustees come from the literary world, not the donor class. We seek to remain a community, not a clique. To teach and lead, we invite our neighbors, new and old (those writers one cannot spit without hitting), rather than hiring “bigger” names from elsewhere. Most of the state’s established writers feel that leading a workshop or giving a reading for the Network is not just a paying gig, but an honor. After thirty years of the Network’s existence, we have not yet run short of established, acclaimed North Carolina writers qualified to teach others.

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COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS’ NETWORK

ABOVE TOP **Frances Gray Patton, a native of Raleigh, NC, and author of *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (1954)**

ABOVE BOTTOM **Doris Betts at a North Carolina Writers’ Network conference**

¹ *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 225–26; see review of this volume in *NCLR* 2011). The three volume series was published in partnership with the North Carolina Arts Council. The other two volumes are *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Mountains* (2007; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008) and *Literary Trails of Eastern North Carolina* (2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014).

² “The Network’s Mission,” Mission Statement, *North Carolina Writers’ Network*: web.