

Tribute to the Charlotte Writers' Club

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge Dede Wilson, a fine poet and former president of the Charlotte Writers' Club, for providing much of the history that follows. Thank you, Dede!

In our collective imagination, North Carolina appears to have two literary centers. One is located in an area within 25 to 30 miles of Hillsborough, incorporating Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh; the other in the City of Asheville and surrounding mountain communities. Many of our greatest writers have lived in these two favored areas. But today I would like to make the case for a third important locus of literary influence: the greater Charlotte region.

The Charlotte Writers' Club was founded in 1922, 97 years ago, by Adelia Kimball, a new arrival from Lowell, Massachusetts. She arrived in the Queen City in 1920, perhaps as a result of the boom in textile manufacturing at that time. This was the era just after World War I, when the flu epidemic was over, women could vote, and they no longer wore girdles! Ms. Kimball felt homesick for writers and immediately started teaching a variety of writing classes, which met at the Carnegie Library and formed the nucleus of the Charlotte Writers' Club in 1922.

Since that time, CWC has become one of the longest-standing literary organizations in North Carolina. The speakers series at Lenoir-Rhyne is older, and I have heard of one book club that began in the late 19th century and still meets. But the Charlotte Writers' Club is arguably

the oldest North Carolina organization of its kind, spreading literary influence for almost a century.

Ms. Kimball led the Club for six years, and during its first decade, the Club grew quickly and changed rapidly. Members included not only poets and novelists, but also writers of pulp fiction, journalists, biographers, historians, and authors of children's books. Just ten years after its founding, members of the Charlotte Writers' Club established the North Carolina Poetry Society, of which I have also served as president, a vital organization thriving today, after 87 years, with over 400 members state-wide and beyond.

In the 1970s, the CWC seemed to hit a low point financially, with only \$10 in the treasury. But in the early 1980s, a powerhouse named Nona Butterworth raised more than \$1800 for the Club and began publication of *Laurels*, an anthology of prize-winning poetry and fiction issued for five years. In the later 1980s, Tony Abbott, subsequently president of the North Carolina Poetry Society, served as president and obtained an Arts and Sciences Council grant to host the North Carolina Writers Conference meeting in Charlotte.

Irene Honeycutt was president in the early 1990s, during which time she founded the annual Literary Festival at Central Piedmont Community College, bringing in such luminaries as Anne Lamont, Dana Gioia, Jane Hirschfield, Josef Komunyaka, and Lee Young Li. This wonderful festival, now in its 36th year and called Sensoria, featured Carolyn Forché this past spring, among many other artists, musicians, dancers, actors, and lecturers.

The Writers' Club even had a blind president from 1998 to 2000, Katherine Barr! In 2007, CWC spawned yet another literary organization, a partner group called Charlotte Writers' Club North, headquartered in Davidson. Principal movers were Tony Abbott and especially

Louise Rockwell, who spearheaded many of the gatherings and insisted on cake after every reading. She died at a tragically young age in 2011, but her legacy lives on in the dedicated leadership of Caroline Kenna and her colleagues, who organize readings, book signings, workshops, and other activities in the north Charlotte suburbs.

Recent years have witnessed a wholesome degree of change and greater inclusion. When I was president from 2011 to 2013, four African-American members served on the Executive Board. Today's monthly readings and presentations have become ever more diverse, though I do wish we had greater Hispanic representation.

Over the years the Charlotte Writers' Club has met in a variety of locations but, following an ancient tradition, almost always with food and drink! At times members met at the Chamber of Commerce building, but more often at eateries like the fabled S & W Cafeteria, Barclay's Cafeteria, or Quincy's Steak House. And in any case, there were always *banquets*—at the City Club, the Top of the Tower, and other reputable establishments.

The Charlotte Writers' Club and its sister group CWC-North has counted among its members many illustrious writers, far more than time permits mention of today. But I am happy to report that Dannye Romine Powell, this year's conference honoree, started the CWC newsletter. And back in the day she gave a presentation on her role as book editor of the *Charlotte Observer*, confessing that in 1973 she published an article in *True Confessions!* Novelist and poet Ruth Moose was program chair for four years before Internet and email. She and her cohorts met for a while in an atmospheric bar.

The Charlotte Writers' Club and Charlotte Writers' Club North have become more varied over the decades and together encompass some 280 members of every persuasion. Both groups

are thriving, presenting not only monthly meetings with writers, but also readings at coffee shops and bookstores, literary contests, workshops, outreach to local jails, schools, and retirement homes, liaisons with other literary groups, and programs for young people. This two-handed organization remains one of the pillars of literary life in Charlotte and our region of the Carolinas.

And let me mention *yet another* offspring of the Charlotte Writers' Club: The Charlotte Center for the Literary Arts. This endeavor began barely three years ago under the leadership of CWC Board members Kathie Collins and Paul Reali, renting space in the International Center on Central Avenue. Charlotte Lit (as we call it) sponsors workshops, brings in nationally-known authors, and offers an actual physical location to meet or just "chill out" and be creative. Charlotte Lit has already established itself as a distinguished regional venue for writers and for writing.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to recognize the Charlotte Writers' Club, along with Charlotte Writers' Club North, not only as the seed of the North Carolina Poetry Society, the annual Sensoria Festival of the Arts, and the newly established Charlotte Center for the Literary Arts, but also for its own merits as a self-renewing source of language, ideas, culture, and creativity. This double-winged organization continues to foster and empower literary excellence in the greater Charlotte area, radiating across North and South Carolina and beyond. Thank you, Charlotte Writers' Club!