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Richmond Times-Dispatch

Published: December 05, 2010

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We All Benefit in a Community Where Writing Thrives

By VIRGINIA PYE

With all the talk of budgets these days, it's helpful to remember that the wealth of any city is its people. Are we vibrant? Are we thinking? Are we challenging ourselves and our community to aspire artistically, commercially, and intellectually? If our region's literary community is any indicator, we're getting richer every day.

Virginia is in the midst of a literary revival. Virginia-based authors David Baldacci, John Grisham, Adriana Trigiani, and Barbara Kingsolver have topped the best-seller lists in 2010. VCU Assistant Professor Kathleen Graber is a National Book Award finalist in poetry.

In recent weeks, Richmond hosted enough literary luminaries to light up the night sky. Nationally known authors made appearances to enthusiastic crowds all over our area: David Sedaris of NPR fame, Virginia's own Lee Smith, and award-winning children's book author Jacqueline Woodson, just to name a few.

Virginia Arts and Letters Live once again delightfully put on display stories by Virginia authors, performed by Virginia actors and accompanied by Virginia musicians. Anyone can see by the glow of these events that Richmond is embracing the literary arts as never before.

This is terrific news -- and not just for those of us who are bookish by nature. It's good news for everybody: for kids, for senior citizens, for the guy in accounting, too. Why? We all benefit from living in a community where writing is alive and well.

It turns out, you don't have to be a Baldacci or a Grisham to have an impact on the place you live. When there are enough of us reading and writing, sharing what we think and experience through the written page, our region becomes collectively more knowledgeable about who we are and what we aspire to be.

Young people develop stronger voices as students, as workers, and as citizens.

Seniors add their experiences to our collective cultural memory.

We raise the whole level of our literacy. Our shared stories create a rich patchwork of interconnections and aspirations -- a key to moving us forward.

As board chair of James River Writers, I have had a front row seat at this exciting time. Everywhere there is evidence that a growing number of Virginians are picking up their pens.

Our James River Writers Conference is now in its eighth year and growing in national reputation. Our monthly Writing Shows at the Children's Museum routinely draw a wide cross-section of people hungry to learn the ins and outs of writing and publishing.

More than 100 manuscripts by aspiring Virginia writers are submitted to James River Writers' and Richmond magazine's Best Unpublished Novel Contest. And each year, we partner on exciting programs for young people like

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Trailblazers Essay contest or a photo essay project with the Steward School's Latino Education Advancement Program.

All over town, young and old are bowed over their computers, creating, imagining, and finding their voices. It's our honor to help them.

James River Writers is, of course, only one of the many organizations encouraging Richmond to find its voice.

The energetic Richmond 'Zine Festival brought in more than 300 participants for its unique book workshops. VCU celebrated its prestigious Cabell First Novelist Award, and UR's Writer's Series shares internationally known authors with us.

Author David L. Robbins and the Podium Foundation began a third year of helping Richmond high school students produce their own top-notch literary magazine. Art 180, the Visual Arts Center, and Valley Haggard's Richmond Young Writers each use writing to reach young people in the community. And perhaps most significant, author Dean King and Mary Beth McIntire of the Library of Virginia staged 10 days of excellent programming as part of the first Virginia Literary Festival.

Countless local individuals champion the written word, too.

Our independent bookstores such as Fountain Bookstore and Chop Suey Books offer exciting author readings. Ward Teft and his Books on Wheels project provide free books, bike parts, and bike repair to Richmond.

Through the Library of Virginia, Carole Weinstein's Poetry Prize honors a Virginia poet each year, while Whitney and Scott Cardozo award the best Virginia children's book author. Fantastic school librarians host authors for their students, and the Appomattox Regional Governor's School runs a Writers' Festival for teens.

Yes, the Richmond literary renaissance is in full swing, and it's a sign that our community is thriving. I invite you to join in. Become a member of a writing organization or show your support.

Sure, there are serious political battles being waged and potholes in the streets to be filled, but with writing and reading to enrich our lives, we're better able to cope with the challenges of a complex society. And, we're having a great time as we do so.

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