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“Celebrating Kentucky Literature” with the Kentucky Literary Awards
By Jonathan Jeffrey

On 11 April 2003 the Southern Kentucky Festival of Books honored two outstanding Kentucky authors with the inaugural Kentucky Literary Awards. Bobbie Ann Mason received the non-fiction award for *Elvis Presley*, and Silas House was given the fiction award for *A Parchment of Leaves*. In her acceptance remarks, Mason acknowledged festival organizers and the Literary Awards judges and noted: “I am pleased that the awards will be given annually in recognition of Kentucky writers and themes. It’s a great idea for these awards to bring notice to writers in Kentucky, and I join in celebrating Kentucky literature.” Mason captured the true intention of the awards which is the celebration of Kentucky’s literary talent. Each author received a handsome commemorative plaque and a $1000 check.

The Southern Kentucky Festival of Books (SKFB)—which began in 1999 and is now the Commonwealth’s largest literary event—supported creation of the Kentucky Literary Awards. Three partners share administration of SKFB: Western Kentucky University Libraries & Museum, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, and the Bowling Green Public Library. In 2002 the festival’s board contemplated the implementation of a statewide, non-discipline specific literary award. Organizers determined that a cash prize would be the best method to insure that the award would be taken seriously. To enhance the award’s integrity, the board determined to not charge an entry fee for nominated works. Naming the award presented an interesting task. This was to be a statewide honor, so a title with a regional name (i.e. Southern Kentucky) did not seem appropriate even though the SKBF was sponsoring the award. The title Commonwealth Literary Award was considered, but it seemed that this moniker might be mistakenly associated with one

of the nation's other states known as commonwealths. The board finally approved the "Kentucky Literary Awards" as the simplest and most explanatory title. With 2002 being the award's inaugural year and with the burden of raising funds for the awards pressing, the SKFB board determined to give only two awards but expressed its desire to potentially expand the categories to include children's books and poetry.

A small committee established guidelines which clarified the types of books that would be eligible for the awards. Only books written by Kentuckians or which had a substantial Kentucky theme would be considered. A Kentucky author was defined as a writer meeting one or more of the following qualifications: a native-born Kentuckian, an author living in the Commonwealth, or an author whose permanent home address is Kentucky but who does not at present live in the state. It was also determined that written nominations would be accepted from any individual, organization or company. This could be done through a manually completed form or via an electronic nomination form found on the SKBF website (www.sokybookfest.org). Books must be published within the calendar year of the award. Because the festival was held in April 2003, judges had sufficient time to read any last minute 2002 nominations. The publishing industry is retail dependent, so it is geared toward the Christmas market. Consequently the judges were deluged with last minute nominations which had to be submitted by 15 January 2003.

The committee publicized the awards by issuing press releases to Kentucky community newspapers, statewide magazines, journals specific to writers, and to publishers. Nominations began almost immediately. Organizers had hoped to receive at least 15 nominations; eventually over 39 books were considered for the two awards. After receiving a nomination, organizers contacted publishers for adjudication copies. This is a

common process is the publishing industry, and many publishers have personnel who handle complimentary copies for adjudication purposes. Books were promptly mailed to the judges after they were received.

The five-member adjudication panel was selected from a variety of fields. Some potential judges declined to serve when they realized the amount of time the process would incur. The stalwart souls who agreed to judge were: Dr. Bob Darrell, professor of English at Kentucky Wesleyan College; Keith Runyon, *Courier-Journal* book page editor; Terri Kirk, Reidland High School librarian and past-president of the Kentucky Library Association; Jesse Mountjoy, Owensboro attorney and self-professed bibliophile; and chair, Jonathan Jeffrey, Special Collection Librarian at Western Kentucky University's Kentucky Library.

Once the deadline passed, the panel chair requested that the judges submit their top four choices in each category by 15 March 2003. Each judge submitted a ranked listing, with 1 being their top choice for the award and 4 being their fourth choice. Each ranking was assigned a numerical value in descending order:

Rank	Points
1st	4
2nd	3
3rd	2
4th	1

The points were totaled for every title the judges submitted. The two works receiving the most points in each category were re-submitted to the judges for the final decision.

Making the decision was difficult but kinetic. “This is so exciting. I feel I’m on the Academy Awards committee,” one judge effused.

The first Kentucky Literary Awards were presented at the “Meet the Authors” reception held for writers attending the SKFB. This event allows book festival organizers and the community to mingle with nationally recognized authors. The Kentucky Literary Awards presentation was the crowning moment of a stellar evening.

Everyone involved in the development of the honor felt that this was a rewarding process. Follow-up evaluation has led to some potential changes in next year’s process:

1) Organizers plan to expand the categories to include awards for children’s books and poetry.
2) A separate panel of judges will adjudicate each category. Each panel will be consist of three judges.
3) To draw more attention to the awards, organizers are contemplating that a separate event (i.e. an awards luncheon) be held during the festival.
4) Nominated authors should be utilized to make presentations in the community and particularly to classes at Western Kentucky University while in town for the festival.

The success of the awards is dependent on nominations. During the next year if you know of a book that meets the criteria for an award in one of the four categories, please seek out the festival’s website (www.sokybookfest.org) and make that nomination. Participate in this “celebration of Kentucky literature.”