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Mammoth Cave in Poetry: Davis McCombs' *Ultima Thule*

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Abstract

Davis McCombs, former Mammoth Cave park ranger, received the Yale Younger Poets Award for *Ultima Thule*, his collection of poems based on his experiences in and with Mammoth Cave, not only of his actual experiences as ranger and cave explorer, but also of the history of the cave, including poems in the voice of Stephen Bishop, cave explorer, cave guide, and also a slave. The detail of McCombs' examination produces what poet W.S. Merwin called "a grave, attentive holding of a light." In a sense, his poetry illuminates the cave the way ancient torches and modern lighting have done. This presentation might seem an odd choice for this conference, but the poetry of the cave is truly a part of it, and listeners can add a different dimension to what they already know to be a natural wonder. The purpose of this presentation will be to introduce the poems and their themes, to share the poems to the extent that time allows, and to connect the poetry with the history, science, and geography of the cave.