

William Kennedy

## The New York State Writers Institute: Albany's Literary Crossroads Turns 25

**T**wenty-five years since its founding by Pulitzer prize-winning author William Kennedy in 1984, the New York State Writers Institute has become a world-recognized literary organization.

In that quarter century 1,000 writers (some 200 of them with Pulitzer prizes and National Book Awards) have come to Albany to read their work and share their knowledge. Among that group are seven Nobel laureates; 18 recipients of the Writers Institute-administered New York State Author and State Poet Awards; and numerous winners of the Booker Prize, of Oscars, and Tonys, and Emmys.

The Writers Institute now programs 60 to 70 events a year on the UAlbany campus, celebrating filmmakers, historians, science writers, playwrights, journalists, composers, as well as the more expected writers, like novelists and poets. Events have always been free and open to University students and faculty, as well as to the general public.

In August, Kennedy was asked to recall how the Institute began, and he wrote:

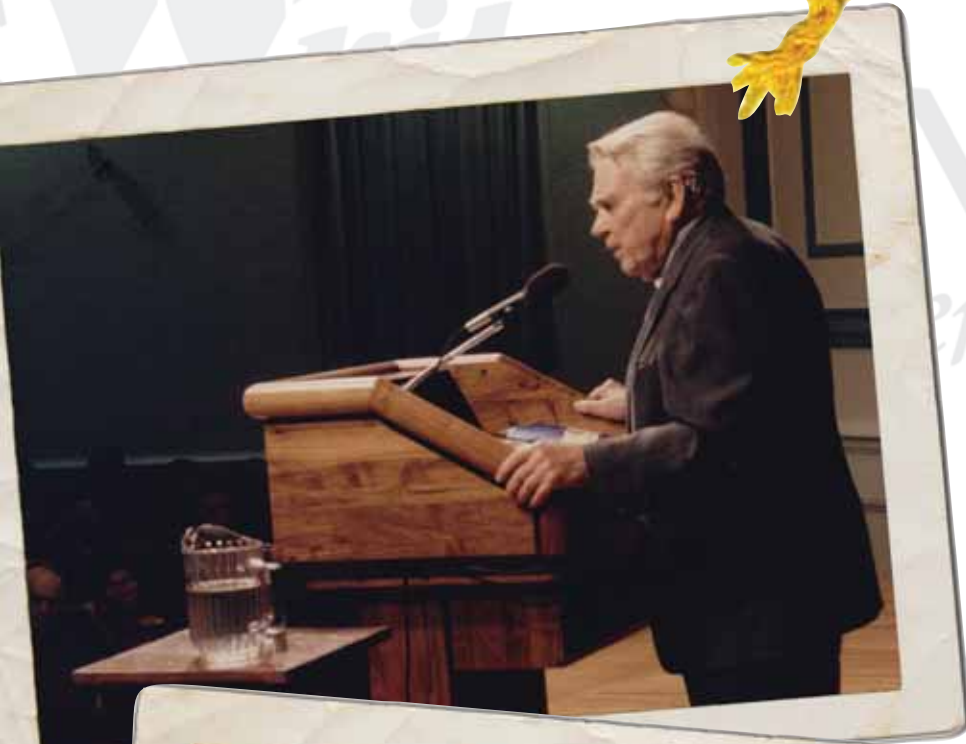
"The idea came after I was given a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1983. The MacArthur gives you a big chunk of money for five years, and at that time also gave a secondary grant – \$15,000 a year for five years – to any non-profit institution where you chose to work. I chose the English department at Albany, provided the money was used to bring in writers to talk with students. We had had a few major figures pass through, Isaac Bashevis Singer and E.L. Doctorow, but they were very rare events, one or two a year. Normally the department had

no money for visiting writers, not even \$150 for a wonderful novelist I wanted to bring in when he passed through Albany.

"The department chairman at that time, Bob Donovan, thought the \$15,000 was great but he wasn't sure he could control how it would be spent; and I had the same fear. But that was groundless. President Vince O'Leary not only loved the plan, he matched my grant, so from zero dollars we suddenly had \$30,000 a year for writers, and Vince said, 'Let's do something out of the ordinary.'

"So I got together with a colleague of mine in the English department, Tom Smith, a brilliant literary scholar, and we came up with what we called The Writers Institute at Albany. We would bring in writers to conduct seminars, for a week or a day, whatever was possible, and pay them what we could afford, plus expenses. And so we began – with the idea always being to have a continuing dialogue with the best writers in the world. We started off with Saul Bellow and it was an enormous success. People hadn't seen such a turnout for a literary gathering in a long time. Bellow, who knew me when I was a starving writer, said to me, 'You get a little money and you turn into a patron of the arts.'

"Even before the Bellow event an Assemblyman from Greenwich Village, Billy Passanante, read the news coverage on the new Institute, and he said to me one day in Albany, 'That's a great thing that's going on. Why don't we expand it? Because after the MacArthur grant disappears what are you going to do?' People at the University and in University Chancellor Cliff Wharton's office decided that they would design a bill to make it permanent. Governor Mario Cuomo loved the idea and the whole



Top: Andy Rooney, “60 Minutes” commentator and author, reading one of his essays

Bottom: Mary Gordon and Jean Valentine, State Author and Poet, respectively, for 2008-09, with (back row, left to right) New York State Writers Institute Founder and Executive Director William Kennedy, UAlbany Interim President George Philip, and Institute Director Donald Faulkner

## The New York State Writers Institute Fall 2008 Highlights

Events are free and open to the public, and take place on the University’s uptown campus, unless otherwise noted.

See the full program at  
[www.albany.edu/writers-inst](http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst).

**October 2**

**Anne Enright**

Major contemporary Irish writer Anne Enright received the 2007 Man Booker Prize, the British Commonwealth’s most prestigious literary award, for *The Gathering* (2007), a novel about the impact of alcoholism and suicide on a large Irish family.

**October 7**

**F.D. Reeve & Jazz Band**

The Three Blue Cats jazz band will present a musical setting for a reading by award-winning poet F. D. Reeve from his new volume, *The Blue Cat Walks the Earth* (2008).

**October 15**

**Major Jackson**

The product of a tough Philadelphia neighborhood, Major Jackson transforms the everyday artifacts and pastimes of urban life into rich and expressive symbols. His second poetry collection, *Hoops* (2006), was a finalist for the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literature-Poetry.

**October 16**

**Dexter Filkins**

Dexter Filkins, a prize-winning war correspondent for *The New York Times*, is a major contributor to America’s understanding of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Journalist Jeffrey Goldberg has called him “the preeminent war correspondent of my generation.”

# Writers Institute



thing happened in less than two months, with another \$100,000 a year. It went like a buttered bullet. And what we then had was the New York State Writers Institute of the State University of New York at Albany. But it had dimensions far beyond Albany.

“Our growth has intensified in recent years,” Kennedy said, “and we’re far more wide-ranging. Our new director, Donald Faulkner, a writer and scholar from Yale who took over in 1995 after Tom Smith died, has a great vision of what the Institute can be. Our agenda keeps expanding, as does our teaching of writing. And our schedule is astounding in its diversity and quality. Don moved us into the digital age, and we are now in the process of making our massive archive of past visiting writer presentations available on an extensive Web site in various formats, from transcriptions to audio and video clips.

The Institute now reaches out across the world.”

The Institute staff has grown considerably during Faulkner’s tenure. Suzanne Lance is assistant director and Mark Koplik is program fellow. There are now seven Institute Fellows, among them another MacArthur award winner, novelist Lydia Davis; and Rebecca Wolff, poet and editor of Fence Books and *Fence*, one of the nation’s renowned literary journals, now affiliated with the Writers Institute.

Others include Langdon Brown, artistic director of the Institute’s Author’s Theatre Program; novelist and short story writer Edward Schwarzschild, who also acts as liaison to the University’s Department of English; Lynne Tillman, winner of the Guggenheim Fellowship and author of a dozen works of fiction and nonfiction; and James Lasdun, poet and novelist, who was short-listed for the Booker Prize and whose stories were adapted for the screen by Bernardo Bertolucci.

In the fall of 2008, Sheila Curran Bernard joined the Writers Institute as a Fellow, and as director of Media Projects. She is the winner of two Emmys and a Peabody Award for her achievements in documentary film.

Those funds that William Kennedy donated and that the University matched may have turned out to be the best literary investment ever made. As the Writers Institute charts out its next 25 years, it looks to expand its work with international writers and writing programs, to open up its vast archive for easier access via the Internet and other media, and to forge new alliances that promise to enrich institute programming at what has become one of the great centers for the literary arts.

Visit the New York State Writers Institute  
at [www.albany.edu/writers-inst](http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst).

Top: Jane Hamilton, two-time Oprah Book Club author, known for the major bestselling novels, *The Book of Ruth* (1988) and *A Map of the World* (1994)

Center: Langdon Brown (left), artistic director of the Author’s Theatre program, with playwright Dava Sobel (second from left)

Bottom: Garrison Keillor, popular novelist and short-story writer best known for his acclaimed Public Radio Programs “A Prairie Home Companion” and “The Writer’s Almanac”