

HOME PAGE FEATURED

Heritage and history afford Mississippi unique place in literary landscape

BY ANNA MCCOLLUM AUGUST 18, 2017



Photo courtesy of Mississippi Book Festival

Author Carole Boston Weatherford speaks about her book, *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer*, at a 2016 Mississippi Book Festival panel discussion. This year's festival will be Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.



(<http://mississippitoday.org/largoproject.staging.wpengine.com/files/2016/06/sip-culture-logo-light.jpg>)

This story is our weekly *'Sip of Culture*, a partnership between Mississippi Today and *The 'Sip Magazine* (<https://thesipmag.com/>). For more stories like this or to learn more about *The 'Sip*, visit [thesipmag.com](http://www.thesipmag.com) (<http://www.thesipmag.com>).

Take advantage of a special 2-for-1 subscription offer and explore a 'Sip of the South with *The 'Sip's* print edition. (<https://thesipmag.com/gift-sub/>)

An unsolved murder amidst one bloody riot. Crumpled notes smuggled from within Parchman prison. A controversial textbook that spurred a ban and lawsuit. These themes, centered on Mississippi history and heritage, will play out at the third annual Mississippi Book Festival in downtown Jackson on Saturday.

The festival will host 39 indoor panel discussions, from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., inside the Mississippi State Capitol Building, in the Galloway United Methodist Church Sanctuary and Fellowship Center and in The Foundery at Galloway. Live music, food vendors and children's activities will be offered on the Capitol lawn.

Two of the festival's panels focus specifically on Mississippi matters and authors: "Mississippi History" and "The Heritage of Mississippi Series."

“As our state celebrates its bicentennial, the festival offers a unique opportunity to look back at pivotal events in our history through a literary lens,” said Holly Lange, executive director of the festival.

“The moderators for these two panels are well-versed in our state’s history: Katie Blount, director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Pam Junior, director of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum.”

Blount will moderate “The Heritage of Mississippi Series” panel at 10:45 a.m. Saturday in the Old Supreme Court Room.

“We are telling all of our stories at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History — in what we collect, in our historic sites and museums, in our programs and outreach, and in our publications like the Heritage of Mississippi Series,” said Blount. “We are proud to publish the Heritage Series in partnership with the Mississippi Historical Society, University Press of Mississippi and the Phil Hardin Foundation. The Heritage Series authors weave these stories together using the latest scholarship and engaging narrative style. Our book festival panelists represent some of the rich and complex topics that the series addresses.”



Katie Blount

Those topics range from evangelism in Mississippi to the diminishment of the state’s Native American population to a look at the state’s unrivaled production of the nation’s literature. The lineup of authors includes James F. Barnett Jr., author of *Mississippi’s American Indians*; Timothy B. Smith, author of *Mississippi in the Civil War: The Home Front*; Randy Sparks, author of *Religion in Mississippi*; and Lorie Watkins, author of *A Literary History of Mississippi*.

For Watkins, associate professor of English at William Carey University, the inspiration behind *A Literary History of Mississippi* struck nearly 20 years ago when she was teaching the subject at Collins High School.

“I’ve always enjoyed seeing my students connect literature to their own lives, and that happened with some frequency that semester, even at the high school level,” said the Seminary native.

Several years later, after overcoming a battle against throat cancer for which doctors gave her a 30 percent chance of survival and after receiving a doctorate from the University of Southern Mississippi, Watkins took a job teaching at William Carey University.

“I wanted to teach teachers who would, for the most part, work in Mississippi’s classrooms, and this book is an extension of that teaching,” Watkins said.



Author Lori Watkins

She submitted a proposal for *A Literary History of Mississippi* in 2011 upon the urging of her former dissertation director, the late Noel Polk.

Watkins describes Mississippi as a state of contradictions and extremes, and she proposed examining why that has made for such fertile literary ground. Her book is a look at works, such as slaves' narratives and Civil War literature as well as that of renowned native sons and daughters — William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Richard

Wright, to name a few.

In order to cover such a vast topic, Watkins invited other authors and scholars to contribute their specific knowledge of Mississippi literature, making for a multi-faceted and comprehensive look at “the nation’s richest literary lode,” as the book has been promoted.

“I designed the book that I wish I’d had back in 1996 — one that makes Mississippi’s literary legacy understandable for all Mississippians,” Watkins said. “It’s something that we can be proud of, and I think that we often desperately need something to be proud of.”

The books represented in the “Mississippi History” panel discussion, beginning at 2:45 p.m. in the Old Supreme Court Room, share a common subject: the civil rights

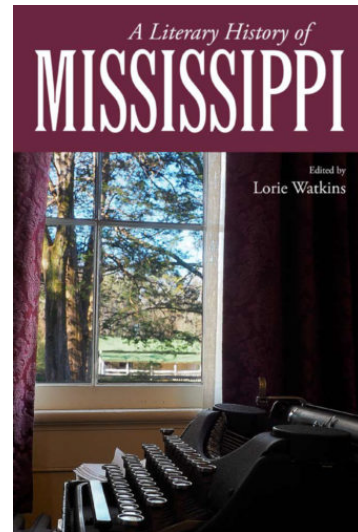


Photo courtesy of Mississippi Book Festival

Author Jesmyn Ward, second from left, moderates a panel discussion, called “Jesmyn Ward & The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race,” inside the C-SPAN Room of the Old Supreme Court for the 2016 Mississippi Book Festival. Pictured, from left, are Lela Salsbury, former director of the University Press of Mississippi, Ward, Garnette Cadogan, Honorée Jeffers, Kima Jones and Kiese Laymon.

movement in Mississippi. This panel — presented by the Mississippi Humanities Council in partnership with the Legacy of Race initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities — features books highlighting specific events throughout the state’s 200 years.

The lineup includes *Civil Rights*, *Culture Wars: The Fight Over a Mississippi Textbook* by Charles Eagles; *Hazel Brannon Smith: The Female Crusading Scalawag* by Jeffery B. Howell; *Sanctuaries of Segregation: The Story of the Jackson Church Visit Campaign* by Carter Dalton Lyon; *Freedom Rider Diary: Smuggled Notes from Parchman Prison* by Carol Ruth Silver; and *We Believed We Were Immortal: Twelve Reporters Who Covered the 1962 Integration Crisis at Ole Miss* by Kathleen Wickham.

Silver's work exposes never-before-published notes she made as a Freedom Rider imprisoned at Parchman for 40 days in the summer of 1961 when the Massachusetts native was only 22 years old. *Sanctuaries of Segregation*, on the other hand, is an analysis of the Jackson church visit campaign that lasted from June 1963 to Easter Sunday 1964. The student-led campaign to integrate white churches resulted in 40 arrests, the shutting out of countless African-Americans from churches and even, as Lyon discovered, a few white ministers and lay people openly rejecting segregation.

"Growing up in the church and being a person of faith, I just couldn't understand how a church could justify excluding African Americans or anyone," said Lyon, whose book grew out of graduate school research he did for a master's thesis and Ph.D. dissertation in history at the University of Mississippi. "Lucky for me, no one had really investigated and analyzed this event in its totality yet, so that's what I set out to do."



The Story of the Jackson Church Visit Campaign

CARTER DALTON LYON



Author Carter Dalton Lyon

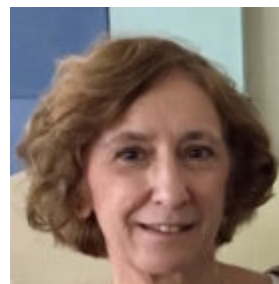
In addition to archival research, Lyon, originally from Lexington, Ky., conducted interviews with civil rights activists, such as the Rev. Ed King, Joan Trumpauer Mulholland "and other seemingly ordinary people who did extraordinary things," he said.

"I think those who are interested in religion or the civil rights movement would like the book, but I hope that it should have particular appeal or interest to Mississippians and to Jacksonians in particular," said Lyon. "I hold fast to Ida B. Wells' dictum, 'The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth on them.' I hope that this book will serve as some truth-telling in the ongoing process of reconciliation for the state and the city."

Wickham said the same of her book, which examines the role of the press during the 1962 riot at Ole Miss over the admission of James Meredith, the first African American to be enrolled in a public university in the state of Mississippi.

“It’s important for them to know the truth about the integration crisis and all its facets,” said Wickham of *Mississippians*.

We Believed We Were Immortal delves into the unsolved murder of Paul Guihard, a French reporter who was shot in the back on

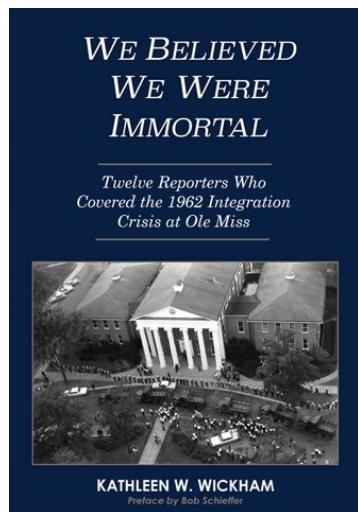


Author Kathleen Wickham

campus during the riot and who became the only known journalist killed during the civil rights movement.

“Our job is to represent the people, and we will do it no matter the risk to our life,” said Wickham, a professor of journalism at the University of Mississippi and former newspaper reporter in her native New Jersey. “Paul spoke to what the role of the press is, which is to give a voice to the voiceless, to challenge government, hold them accountable for its actions, to speak to what is right and just. Paul made that sacrifice. And, to me, he made it on behalf of all journalists and all of the public, too.”

Wickham’s book also includes the stories of other reporters involved that night in September 1962.



“I looked for diversity,” said Wickham, who strived to cover every aspect of the riot now 55 years past.

Stories like these — of events good and bad, of people, of talent and of sacrifice — will be told Saturday in Jackson. The “Heritage of Mississippi Series” and “Mississippi History” panel discussions are only two of a day’s worth taking place as part of the festival — a special one, according to festival director Lange.

“There are many ways the state is celebrating our 200th birthday,” she said. “And we are especially proud to be at the State Capitol with thousands of guests and hundreds of authors in hosting panels on our political, musical, literary, culinary and cultural history.”

Both “Heritage” and “History” panel discussions will be broadcast live by C-SPAN. More information and a schedule of events can be found at msbookfestival.com (<http://msbookfestival.com>)

