

For The
Literary Enthusiast

Our Q&A with four prominent authors featured at the Mississippi Book Festival.

BY MAGGIE SMITH

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL

Now in its third year, the Mississippi Book Festival has established itself as a premiere showing of all Mississippi has to offer to the literary world. Often hailed as the birthplace of greats like William Faulkner, Alice Walker, Richard Wright and Eudora Welty, it is no secret that Mississippi has a rich literary history. However, it can be easy to forget that Mississippi is still producing talented and varied writers – and producing them consistently. It can also be easy to forget that great writers find themselves drawn to the state of Mississippi. Writers find here a second home, whether that is by relocating permanently or making it a continual stop on their many travels.

To give you a taste of what the Mississippi Book Festival has to offer, PORTICO has interviewed four prominent writers who will be making appearances at this year's festival. Their genres vary widely, from young adult to mystery to literary fiction to short stories to poetry. Their connections to our great state vary as well; some were born here, some have since relocated, some split their time between a number of places, and some have set down permanent roots. However, all have established themselves as prominent voices in the literary world, and all of them share a powerful connection to our great literary state of Mississippi. We ask them about their work, about their inspiration, and of course, who they are most looking forward to seeing at this year's Mississippi Book Festival scheduled for Saturday, August 19th. The festival is free and open to the public.



© Anissa Photography

Angie Thomas

MS: Your debut novel *The Hate U Give* has been an instant success critically and commercially. What has it been like to become an international best-selling author almost overnight?

AT: It has been amazing, and surreal, and better than I could have ever dreamed. There's also a lot of pressure that comes with it, and at times it can get chaotic, but I'm blessed to have a great support system to get me through the harder parts.

MS: After such a fantastic debut novel, I think everyone in the book world is eager to see what you'll do next. I saw on Twitter you said you're working on two very different books right now. Anything you can share with us?

AT: I can't share a lot at the moment, but I will say that my second book is set in the same neighborhood as *The Hate U Give*. However, it is not a sequel or a spin-off. It features a totally new set of characters. I call it my ode to hip hop.

MS: As someone who's no longer a teenager and has a lot of bookish friends, I often encounter readers who are dismissive of the YA genre. What would you say to them?

AT: I would tell them that they're missing out! YA goes where

adult books are sometimes afraid to go. Also, there is so much variety to YA — we're not all *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*.

MS: Who are a few of your favorite authors?

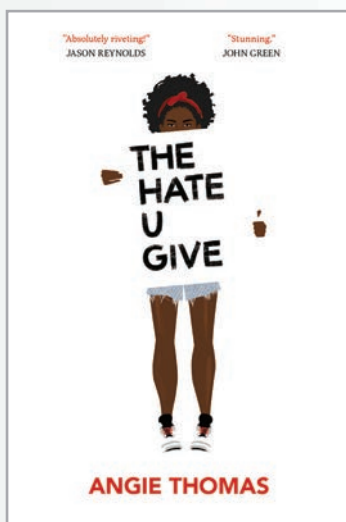
AT: Jacqueline Woodson and J.K. Rowling are my literary heroes, by far.

MS: Why do you feel that the Mississippi Book Festival is important, to you personally and to the state of Mississippi?

AT: Mississippi has such a rich literary history, and we don't celebrate it nearly enough. Even more so, we don't celebrate the present state of literature in Mississippi. The festival allows us to celebrate both. For me personally, it's a great way to let people in Mississippi even know that I exist. What I mean by that is that if a kid can see me and see that I came from the same place as them, maybe it'll let them know that they can chase their dreams, too.

MS: You're a writer, but I think it's safe to assume you're a reader as well. Is there anyone in particular you're looking forward to seeing at this year's Mississippi Book Festival?

AT: Marshall Ramsey. I'm a huge fan of his work and have yet to meet him.



Richard Ford

MS: Throughout your lengthy career as a writer, you've worked in numerous forms - the novel, the short story, memoir, sports writing and editing, just to name a few. What would you say you've learned from these different writing experiences? Is there a fine line between growing as a writer and simply trying to innovate to remain relevant? How do you tread that line?

RF: What I suppose I've learned (something I decidedly did not know when I was young...through no fault but my own) is that to do anything well I have to do it as hard as I can. No half measures will work. When I do things less than that, it shows, garishly. Most of the tasks that come my way are either quite similar or related to writing; so over time, while nothing about writing is really natural to me, I have grown accustomed (I wouldn't want to say "comfortable") to what sort of effort is required. If these attitudes don't keep me "relevant" nothing's going to. But to be truthful, I've never thought about remaining relevant. Little does for long.

MS: I understand you're a passionate advocate for independent bookstores. As an independent bookseller, I greatly appreciate that. For those who are perhaps unaware of the importance of independent bookstores, could you explain why you are such a passionate supporter of them?

RF: Let's just say independent booksellers: 1, know what a book is; 2, have read lots of 'em; and 3, have thought about who they're purveying books to. In other words, they like me — they're readers, and have dedicated most of their lives to that.

MS: What do you enjoy most about being a writer? What is it you enjoy most about writing? Perhaps both answers are the same, but maybe there is something you enjoy about the profession of a writer and something you enjoy merely from the act of writing?

RF: First, I don't think about being a writer as a "profession." It's more an amateur enterprise, with no specified upward-tending set of skills to learn. It's more related to the rhythms of one's life than to some separate skill-set or profit motive. What I like about it is that it beats working. And I get to deal with words all the time and at my own pace, which I enjoy. And sometimes I have the fleeting sensation that I've done something that others can use. I don't know if this sounds enjoyable, but it's occasionally close.

MS: As previously stated, you've worked in various capacities as a writer and in different genres, as well as produced work that covers a variety of themes and topics. I



would imagine the work you read varies just as much. Who are a few of your favorite writers?

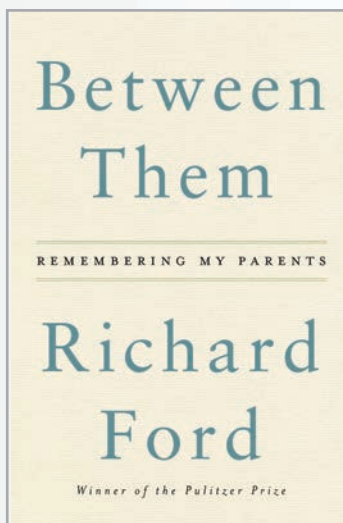
RF: I don't have favorite writers. There's nothing native to me about "favorite" anything — except women, where my wife wins the dubious prize. All writing has to do for me to appreciate it is be good. And plenty of writing is.

MS: Why do you feel that the Mississippi Book Festival is important, to you personally and to the state of Mississippi?

RF: Well, most states have little enough to boast about (not that this stops them). But Mississippi has had some good writers to somewhat even the score against its many, well-earned bad marks. When I think about the Book Festival — especially happening on the highly ambiguous Capitol grounds (where I was a kid) — my chief response is 'What a gigantic relief! Finally something good's happening up there, and not just the usual bone-headedness.' Remember, I was a page in the Mississippi Senate in 1957. It's nothing new.

MS: You're a writer, but I think it's safe to assume you're also a reader. Is there anyone in particular you're looking forward to seeing at this year's Mississippi Book Festival?

RF: My experience in meeting the authors of books I admire is highly mixed. A writer's books usually represent the best of him or her. I'm happy with that being true and enough. It's demonstrably true of me.



Ellen Gilchrist

MS: As someone who has been writing for most of her life, what do you think is the greatest thing you've gained, from writing for pleasure or from your profession as a writer?

EG: It's just fun for me! I've done it all my life. There wasn't any television or telephones. People were in desks reading books or writing letters or articles. I thought being a grown person was reading or writing. I just loved stories and my mother would read me books over and over again. I asked to hear the same stories every time. I just memorized my favorites and I learned how to read that way. Writing, it's more than just a profession or something I do to make money. Ben Johnson, Shakespeare's close friend, said, "Writing maketh an exact man." In other words, the way you learn is by writing it down.

MS: In selecting authors and curating panels, the Mississippi Book Festival focuses on southern literature, as the state has contributed greatly to the genre over the past several decades. What, if anything, do you think sets southern literature or writing apart from other genres or forms of writing?

EG: You know, it's warm down here and we all talk all the time. With people like William Faulkner and Eudora Welty being from here, we think, "I'm from Mississippi, I could write a book!" We just have so many writers and so much to offer.

MS: You currently teach creative writing and contemporary fiction at the University of Arkansas. Besides trying to hone their skills as writers, what do you hope you impart to your students?

EG: I want them to get flu shots. No, I tell them to find Ernest Hemingway's *On Writing* because there's nothing I can teach them that isn't said or said better in that book.

MS: Who are a few of your favorite writers?

EG: I adore Faulkner. And always and forever, William Shakespeare is number one. Cormac McCarthy. Many poets – Edna St. Vincent Millay. All the American and English poets of the past hundred years. I was a poet for a long time, I never dreamed of being a fiction writer.

MS: Why do you feel that the Mississippi Book Festival is important, to you personally and to the state of Mississippi?

EG: I just think it's a wonderful place for people who wish they

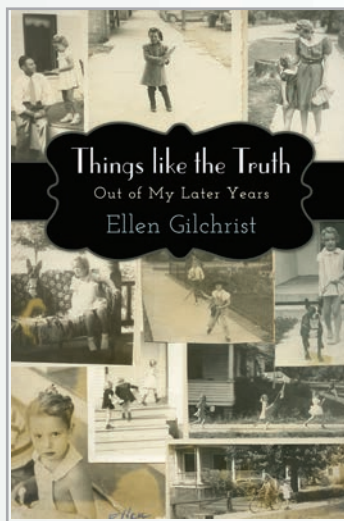


were writers or people who are beginning to write. You find out that writers are just normal people like anybody else. It's important for the state of Mississippi and all our great writers and our great literary history. Besides that, I'm a Mississippian. I have a home on the coast and I live there every minute that I can. I'm a Mississippian and I don't want anyone to forget it. I'm proud of my heritage.

MS: You're a writer, but I think it's safe to assume you're also a reader. Is there anyone in particular you're looking forward to seeing at this year's Mississippi Book Festival?

EG: I think that there'll be wonderful surprises. Last time I was there, Julia Reed was on my panel and I hadn't seen her in so long! I met her because I read one of her articles in *Vogue*, and I laughed so hard I nearly choked on an apple. So I wrote a letter

to the editor and we started talking and we became great friends. So it is always wonderful to see her.





Greg Iles

MS: The conclusion to your best-selling Natchez Burning trilogy, *Mississippi Blood*, came out in March, and I know your readers are already itching to get their hands on whatever you write next. Is there anything you'd be willing to share about what you might be working on?

GI: Right now I'm working on a novel set at Ole Miss. It's a noir story like *Body Heat* or *Double Indemnity*. I think Mississippi readers will get a real kick out of it.

MS: You've been publishing books since 1993. That's twenty-four years in the same profession - longer than I've been alive! How have you been able to continually produce quality fiction and keep yourself from getting burned out?

GI: Despite all the pressures of the publishing industry to write in only one genre, I've always written about whatever interested me, regardless of what genre it might fall into. Thus, I've written about the South, about World War II, about artificial intelligence and about several other fascinating subjects.

MS: Again, you've been doing this a long time, and I imagine you've read a lot of fantastic writing. Who are a few of your favorite authors?

GI: There is an Irish writer named Ken Bruen I like. I just finished Don Winslow's *The Force*, which is a tour-de-force, no pun intended. And next, I'm going to read Angie Thomas's book, *The Hate U Give*.

MS: You were a featured guest at the inaugural Mississippi Book Festival in 2015. How do you hope the Mississippi Book Festival will continue to grow and evolve, this year and in years to come?

GI: Literature is one of the very few areas in which Mississippi can not only hold its own with the rest of the states in America, but actually surpass them. So long as the book festival continues to showcase both veteran and exciting new writers, it's the best possible PR that Mississippi could get.

MS: You're a writer, but I think it's safe to assume you're a reader as well. Is there anyone in particular you're looking forward to seeing at this year's Mississippi Book Festival?

GI: I look forward to hearing Angie Thomas speak. She's a vital new voice for young people, and Mississippi needs to give her the biggest platform possible. The nation has already discovered her, but Mississippi natives need to pay attention as well. You can't fix this state until you understand and face what's wrong with it.

