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Literary festival 'invaluable' teaching tool for WCU professors, students

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Samantha "Sam" Gampel, a sophomore at Western Carolina University, wants to write novels and earn her living as a professional writer.

So in Gampel's book, there's nothing quite like rubbing shoulders with real working-for-a-living writers such as the ones headlining this year's literary festival at the university. This is learning in action for students such as Gampel, and the festival, she said, hugely enriches her experience of attending school in Cullowhee.

"I think it is amazing to get all of these writers to come here," Gampel said. "And it really opens your eyes to some you hadn't heard of before."

WCU's literary festival runs April 3-7. The Visiting Writers Series has 13 authors featured this year, providing an opportunity to combine hands-on learning with classroom teachings that excite not only students such as Gampel, but professors at WCU, too.

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"It's invaluable," said Deidre Elliot, an associate professor in the university's English Department and director of the professional writing program.

That's because professors can assign readings by authors, then — tah-dah — students can meet and talk to the authors firsthand. They can ask questions, and learn directly about both the craft of writing and how some writers successfully make livings practicing their craft.

"It is totally enjoyable (for a student) to see the real person who was in a textbook," Elliot said.

Catherine Carter, a fellow associate professor of Elliot's at WCU and director of English education, said there are a variety of ways she and other faculty incorporate the festival into teaching students.

"The most usual are that we assign students to read some of the authors' works and discuss them in class, and encourage — or, on a few occasions, beg, bribe or threaten —

students to come to readings,” Carter said. “This is good not only because there’s something kind of cool about authors who are still alive and who are right there in the flesh ... but because the etiquette of reading itself is worth teaching.”

The etiquette being such niceties, Carter said, as refraining from texting or playing games on cell phones while the authors read.

Carter also likes to encourage local teachers to bring students from the area high schools. “We had a class down from Summit (charter school in Cashiers) last year, and that was really nice,” she said.

In fact, WCU will reserve local classes and their teachers some seats at the readings, particularly those held during the day, to encourage participation in the festival.

Mary Adams, a WCU associate professor who oversees the literary festival, said whenever book orders for classes are due, she pins fellow professors down on which attending festival authors’ books they’ll teach.

“Sometimes it’s just a matter of trying to find a theme that works,” she said.

This year, for example, an English class is focused on the figure of the vampire in literature and popular culture — poetry, fiction, nonfiction, television, film and the Internet. One of the books being read is Elizabeth Kostova’s “The Historian,” a tale of three generations of historians on the track of the original Dracula. Kostova’s book was the fastest-selling debut novel in American publishing history, and the author is set to speak Sunday, April 3.

Meeting and hearing the authors they read in class, Adams said, “makes a huge difference” for students, “and it is very moving to the authors.”

This is a big reason why the literary festival, which has a fairly small budget, is able to attract well-known writers, she said. The authors can depend on the university to pack in interested and engaged audiences.

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