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Neufeld's column: International, regional authors to mingle at Cullowhee festival

Rob Neufeld

Columnist

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Gish Jen, one of the most in-demand authors in the country today, is coming to Western Carolina University this week for its fifth annual Spring Literary Festival. She's joined by a stellar cast of writers.

Mary Adams, WCU creative writing professor and festival organizer, said that four years ago she decided to combine a year of scattered author visits into one four-day extravaganza. It has made all the difference in terms of community excitement and financial support.

"There's a lot of interest in writers of the region," Adams says, "and I use that to also highlight culturally diverse and internationally renowned authors."

Wednesday's slate features Gish Jen in the evening and Tanure Ojaide, an award-winning African poet, in the afternoon. Farnoosh Moshiri, a widely read Iranian expatriate novelist, reads from her work Thursday after participating in a panel discussion on "The Writer's Craft" with Ojaide, Minneapolis-born rising star Charles Baxter and resident poet Catherine Carter.

The mix provides exciting opportunities for people who wish to appreciate the increasingly diverse world in which they live.

Mix mastery

Gish Jen is a writer about American ways, not just Chinese-American ways. Her America is one in which children work themselves free from Old World cultural boundaries, find friends and lovers in diverse circles and forge New World identities.

Jen's first novel, "Typical American," will be featured in April in a PBS series titled, "Novel Reflections ... The American Dream." Her second novel, "Mona in the Promised Land," portrays a first-generation Chinese girl — Mona Chang — who converts to Judaism. Her friends jokingly call her Changowitz.

"I like it that you tell everyone to ask, ask, instead of just obey, obey," Mona tells her rabbi. "I like it that people are supposed to be their own rabbi, and do their business directly with G-d" (Jen spells it with the dash).

Two generations after women were freed from traditional gender roles in modern fiction, the Third World's people are breaking from their isolation from American ideals — often by no choice of their own. They and we all must ask: What's the new identity?

"It may be helpful to realize," Jen said in an interview with the Citizen-Times, "that there are a lot of Old World voices that say, 'You are who you were born, or you are your station.' ... Then it's helpful to realize that you have some inner essence, and that it's your job on Earth to discover and to realize that. ... A book like 'Mona,' I think, provides some perspective, particularly on ethnic identity and how quote natural unquote it is."

At first, I thought that "Mona" was a first-person memoir written in the third person. I was wrong. The novel is an ambitious work of fiction and goes through many changes. It becomes a saga of the 1970s, a social comedy and a

comedy of errors. It sheds light on traditional Chinese people in America, African-Americans, New York suburban Jews and the country club set.

Here's Jen's comic description of a country club matron: "Eloise's stepmom (is) meticulously assembled ... her outfit is whimsically nautical. Anchors abound. Moreover, she is herself tall and spindly as a mast. Proudly she breasts the great lobby, albeit with a slight limp. The family luggage follows behind on a bellboy-powered barge."

Rob Neufeld writes about books for the Citizen-Times. Contact him at 768-BOOK or RNeufeld@charter.net. Visit his blog, "The World and Books," at CITIZEN-TIMES.com/booksblog.

FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

Western Carolina University's Spring Literary Festival runs Monday through Thursday. All events take place in the UC Theater at WCU, are free and open to the public. Call 227-3269.

Monday

2 p.m.: Works Progress Administration talks, films and readings. Ties in with upcoming book by Nick Taylor.

7:30 p.m.: Readings by Fleda Brown, poet laureate of Delaware; and poet Catherine Carter, WCU professor and author of "The Memory of Gills."

Tuesday

2 p.m.: Reading and talk by R.T. Smith, award-winning short story writer and poet.

7:30 p.m.: Reading and talk by best-selling writer Nick Taylor, whose upcoming book is about the Works Progress Administration.

Wednesday

2 p.m.: Reading and talk by Tanure Ojaide, renowned African poet.

7:30 p.m.: Reading and talk by Gish Jen, author, most recently, of "The Love Wife."

Thursday

Noon: Panel discussion on the writer's craft featuring Tanure Ojaide, Farnoosh Moshiri, Charles Baxter and Catherine Carter.

2 p.m.: Reading and talk by Iranian novelist Farnoosh Moshiri, author of "At the Wall of the Almighty" and "Against Gravity."

5 p.m.: Reception.

7 p.m.: Reading and talk by fiction writer Charles Baxter, author of "The Feast of Love," a National Book Award finalist.