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SOKY Bookfest brings inspiration, personal connection

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1 of 14



Visitors of the annual SOKY Book Fest chat with other readers on Saturday at the Knicely Conference Center.

Photos by Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

The Knicely Center conference room is silent, save for the hum of the building and the scratching of pen on paper. It's Saturday morning, at the 24th annual SOKY Bookfest, and a group of about 30 writers are building worlds and the characters that live within them.

New York Times best-selling author Sharon Cameron guides them in the brainstorming exercise, leading them through setting, character, motivation and plot.

"It's great to watch everyone thinking," Cameron says, breaking the quiet.

It's much louder across the building, in the ballroom. Hundreds of readers and aspiring writers flock to booths featuring stacks of books and their authors, ready to offer their advice and signatures.

A line to talk to Wil Wheaton, a Star Trek actor and author, stretched across one side of the ballroom. In his speech, Wheaton spoke against recent attempts to "ban books" and the importance of protecting access to truth.

Bex Hall and Nikki Watt, SKYCTC students, came together to see Wheaton. Hall said she didn't know what to expect, since it was her first book festival, but that the experience was cool.

As she waited, Watt wrote what she wanted to tell Wheaton in a note on her phone.

“Your speech was refreshing and made me cry,” the note said. “I loved you on TableTop, Critical Role, and on The Guild. Thank you for everything.”

Melinda Whitfield also stood in the queue. She said she loves reading and writing, although she hasn’t published any of her creative writing. Whitfield was motivated by Crystal Wilkinson’s poetry session at the book fest.

“I always get inspired when I listen to the authors’ talks to write more,” she said. “It makes you feel like you can do anything.”



Others attendees waited to talk to Silas House, a prolific writer known for his novels on Appalachia, family and nature.

House gave a talk alongside Kevin Wilson, whose recent novels include “Nothing to See Here” and “Now is Not the Time to Panic.” The pair talked about how their books are

outgrowths of their own life experiences in a way and the at-times frustrating assumptions people make about them and their work because of their rural backgrounds.

“It’s rare that there are two people who talk like us on a single panel, and I think part of that is every time I’m in a larger panel, I feel like they think I’m representative of the South,” Wilson said. “I’m representative of a very small segment of it. ...What makes me love the place where I came from is that there are multitudes of experiences within the regions where I grew up.”

House said he loves expanding people’s notions of Appalachia or the South. In the literary world, he said, there are not many people with working class or rural backgrounds or that have an understanding of that. In fact, some people associate his accent with poverty or bigotry, he said.

“I really like that in my work there are mechanics and coal miners and waitresses, but there are also teachers and principals and people who work in doctor’s offices,” he said. “Sometimes the literary world has a problem with that. It doesn’t fit into a box neatly.”

The SOKY Bookfest was House’s first book festival, in 2001, the year he published his first novel. He’s been back every year since. He said people from his first year still come back and tell him that they’ve read his most recent novel.

“I’m always glad to be here, mostly because the library system is so wonderful in Warren County,” House said. “Bowling Green has always been really good to me. The people of Bowling Green always come out for my events, they’re supportive.”

Liz Miller, a librarian, came all the way from Nashville for the event.

“I really think when you hear an author talk about themselves and their books and the backstory, it’s like a backstage tour, and it really connects you to them on a more personal level,” she said. “I think that just takes the whole reading experience to the next level.”

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