

The Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Announces Winners

The Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters is pleased to announce its 2020 award winners, presented annually to artists, writers, and musicians for excellence in works published, performed, or shown in the previous year. Winners are selected by out-of-state judges who are specialists in their fields. The awards are usually presented at a gala banquet held in different venues around the state, but this year's celebration has been postponed until 2021 as a result of the Covid-19 health crisis. The works of the 2020 winners clearly demonstrate that storytelling in all its styles, genres, and variations is alive and well in Mississippi.

The Noel Polk Lifetime Achievement Award

This year's recipient of **The Noel Polk Lifetime Achievement Award** is **Ann Abadie**. Born in Greenville, South Carolina, she received her bachelor's degree in English and History from Wake Forest University in North Carolina and her PhD in English from the University of Mississippi. She was on the planning committee that created the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and since its inception has served in crucial roles and in many capacities, including associate director. She is also associate editor of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* and the *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, and coeditor of numerous scholarly collections from the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference. For much of the Center's history, she has served as lead grant writer and project manager. A founding director of Southern Foodways Alliance, she is the 2019 recipient of their Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award. She is past president and a longtime board member of Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters. She was instrumental in organizing the Elizabeth Spencer memorial celebration sponsored by MIAL on February 15, 2020, in Carrollton, Mississippi. Ann lives in Oxford with her husband, Dale Abadie.

Special Achievement Award

Winner of the **Special Achievement Award** is the **Mississippi Delta Tennessee Williams Festival**, an annual three-day event in Clarksdale held every October. The festival was envisioned by **Panny Mayfield** of Clarksdale and **Kenneth Holditch** of New Orleans. It was implemented in 1992 through a NEA grant to its founding institution, Coahoma Community College under the leadership of Dr. Vivian Presley. Initially a celebration to honor Tennessee Williams and his childhood home, it has grown to international acclaim and become a showcase for the playwright's works. The festival is hosted by Coahoma Community College and supported by the Mississippi Arts Commission, the Mississippi Humanities Council, the Rock River Foundation, as well as local businesses and donors. Along with live music and regional food, it features a literary conference at Coahoma Community College with top scholars and literary figures from across the country. Site specific porch plays and live drama showcase the Clarksdale community's unique relationship to the setting of so many of Williams' plays. These plays, and related ones, are acted by famous stars, regional theater professionals, and student actors. When lead organizer Panny Mayfield stepped down in 2017, Karen Kohlhaas and Jen Waller became co-directors. Kohlhaas is a New York theater director, teacher, Williams scholar, and founder and curator of the Tennessee Williams Rectory Museum. Jen Waller is director of the Coahoma County Higher Education Center/Cutrer Mansion and curator for the museum. For this year's October event, Jen Waller is the project director and Matt Foss is the artistic director. The celebration offers an introduction to and deepened understanding of Williams's plays

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Citation of Merit

The **Citation of Merit** is given to groups that have made significant contributions to the literary life of Mississippi. This year the honor goes to **Lemuria Bookstore** in Jackson, Mississippi. Mel and John Evans opened Lemuria in 1975 in a converted apartment in the Quarter. The bookstore moved to Highland Village a couple of years later, and then in 1988 it moved to its present location in Banner Hall. According to Evans, the initial vision was to provide books that were hard to find in those days, on such subjects as psychology, art, metaphysics, spirituality, and new age. Despite stiff competition from chain stores and internet offerings, Lemuria has flourished by offering “real books” and along with them a “real” community of writers and book lovers who gather in the store. In 2000 Evans expanded by buying an adjacent building and creating an event space he calls a “book juke joint,” where shelves are lined with first editions, beer is sold, and authors take the stage for readings. Lemuria informs its customers about new books and authors through an online newsletter. Writers from all over the country come to Lemuria to give readings. According to Evans, “The excitement that I feel from other young booksellers trying to figure out where their store is going may be the greatest thing happening in our industry right now.”

Visual Arts

In **Visual Arts**, the winner is **Stacey Johnson** of Pass Christian for her sculpture exhibit, *Storytellers*. Johnson, a Yazoo City native, grew up playing in cotton trailers, making mud forts, and riding horses, which were important influences on her storytelling in clay. She says, “Each sculpture is a chapter in a book that I edit, color, and scribble upon . . . like a diary of unspoken

thoughts, remnants of dreams.” She works in clay because it is a “forgiving, expressive medium” and works with female figures because women have always been storytellers and “keepers of wisdom.” The clay figures, full of vivid personalities, push against stereotypes and portray bold, complex figures. Johnson holds an MFA in ceramic sculpture from the University of Georgia and a BFA from Loyola University. She is a two-time recipient of a Mississippi Arts Commission artist fellowship. She is a member of Local Creatives, a networking group on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Photography

Will Jacks, a Cleveland native, is winner in **Photography** for *Po’ Monkey’s: Portrait of a Juke Joint*. Jacks spent ten years patronizing and photographing scenes from the last rural juke joint in the state, owned and run for over fifty years by Willie Seaberry, who died in 2016. Begun as a place for farm workers to gather, it soon drew travelers and blues purists from all over the world. His book contains more than seventy black-and-white photographs and an essay by award-winning writer Boyce Upholt. Jacks said, “I went in search of a story, but what I found was so much more. I found a home. I found friendships, and I found the most unexpected mentor. Willie Seaberry, known to most as Po’ Monkey, was one of my greatest teachers.” Jacks received a BA degree from Millsaps College. After receiving a graduate degree in Journalism from the University of Mississippi, he opened a photography studio in Cleveland and taught at Delta State University and the University of Mississippi. In 2013 *Time* magazine recognized his Eudora Welty exhibit in his regional photo gallery as one of the top thirty ways in the world to experience photography offline. In 2020 he received an MFA degree from the Maine College of Art.

Poetry

Winner in the **Poetry** category is **C. T. Salazar** of Columbus for *This Might Have Meant Fire*. The title comes from the full line, “God promised light, but this might have meant fire.” The meaning, according to Salazar, is “the possibility or potential consequence of getting it wrong. That not everything is what it looks like, or how deadly interpretation can be.” His newest collection, *American Cavewall Sonnets*, is forthcoming from Bull City Press in 2021. When asked what led him to become a poet, Salazar said it was growing up in Mississippi. He said, “I love this absurd state, and I’m forever wanting it to be better.” Salazar received his BA and MA degrees from Mississippi University for Women and is pursuing an MA in Library and Information Sciences with an emphasis in Archiving from the University of Southern Mississippi. Salazar is a Latinx poet and translator. He was a children’s librarian for four years and currently serves as senior librarian at the Columbus Air Force Base. He is editor-in-chief of *Dirty Paws Poetry Review*. The 2017 AWP Intro Journals Poetry Winner, his poems have appeared in *32 Poems*, *Grist*, *Tampa Review*, *Noble Gas QTRLY*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and *The Matador Review*, among others. He is in the process of learning the Navajo and Nahuatl languages.

Classical Music Composition

The winner in **Classical Music Composition** is **Steve Rouse** of Louisville, Kentucky, for *The Bird, the Bee, and the Bear*. Rouse also won MIAL awards in this category in 2009, 2013, and 2019. He was trained as a modernist composer but also explored a wide range of world music and prefers freedom to compose whatever he chooses without boundaries or restrictions and

loves to integrate diverse styles. Rouse was born in Moss Point, Mississippi, but spent the first six years of his life in Escatawpa before the family moved back to Moss Point. He felt a strong connection to the land in both places and considered them an exotic influence. He began composing and improvising at age five. As a teenager, he played bassoon in Gulf Coast Symphony for four years. After studying with Luigi Zaninelli at the University of Southern Mississippi, he earned his MM and DMA degrees from the University of Michigan. He has been a professor of music composition at the University of Louisville School of Music since 1988. His many awards include the Rome Prize, a Meet the Composer residency, an NEA Composition Fellowship, two awards from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He is included in the millennium edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Classical Music*.

Fiction

Minrose Gwin, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Austin, Texas, is the **Fiction** winner for *The Accidentals*. She is a native of Tupelo. One reviewer called *The Accidentals* “the most powerful and also the most lyrical novel about race, racism, and denial in the American South since *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” Another said that Gwin is “one of this generation’s great novelists.” Gwin has been a writer all of her working life, starting out as a newspaper and wire service reporter and working in Mobile, Atlanta, Nashville, and Knoxville. As an undergraduate, she attended Mississippi University for Women and the University of Tennessee. Since receiving her PhD at the University of Tennessee, she has taught at universities across the country, most recently the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and led creative writing workshops at the University of New Mexico Writers’ Conference in Taos and Santa Fe. Her first novel, *The Queen of*

Palmyra, was chosen a Barnes & Noble “Discover Great New Writers” pick, a finalist for the John Gardner Fiction Book Award, and an IndieBound Notable Book. Her second novel, *Promise*, was shortlisted for the Willie Morris Award in Southern Literature. She has also written a memoir, *Wishing for Snow*, and four books of literary and cultural criticism, most recently *Remembering Medgar Evers: Writing the Long Civil Rights Movement*. She is coeditor of *The Literature of the American South*, a Norton anthology.

Nonfiction

Margaret McMullen is the winner in **Nonfiction** for her memoir *Where the Angels Lived: One Family's Story of Exile, Loss, and Return*. While visiting the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, McMullen discovered a relative, Richard McMullen, who was killed during the Holocaust. Because so little was known about him, she felt a responsibility to find out about him. The book came out of a Fulbright cultural exchange that made it possible for her to teach at a Hungarian University and travel to Pécs, the land of her mother's Jewish lineage, to research her ancestor. Born in Newton, Mississippi, McMullen earned a BA degree in Religious Studies from Grinnell College and an MFA in Fiction from the University of Arkansas. She served as Chair of the English Department at the University of Evansville. She is the author of nine award-winning books. Along with the Fulbright, McMullen is a recipient of a 2010 NEA Fellowship in literature, the National Author Winner of the 2011 Eugene and Marilyn Glick Indiana Authors Award, and many other awards. In 2007 she was the Eudora Welty Visiting Writer at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. She won the MIAL Fiction award in 2005 and 2008. She lives and writes in Pass Christian, Mississippi.

Contemporary Music Composition

The winner in **Contemporary Music Composition** is **Bark**, (**Susan Bauer Lee and Tim Lee**) for *Terminal Everything*. Bark is the collaboration between a husband-and-wife vocal duo, with Susan on drums and Tim on a Fender Bass VI, a hybrid bass and guitar. Launched in 2014 Bark is based in Knoxville, Tennessee. *Terminal Everything* on the Striped Light label is Bark's fourth release. It has been described as "a lo-fi post-punk garage-rock combo inspired by American blues and roots revisionists." The Lees named their band Bark because of their love of dogs, particularly basset hounds. According to one reviewer, in this release they've stripped down their music to its bare essentials while incorporating the juke joint blues from their native Mississippi. The album was the result of a period of loss for both of them when Susan lost her father and Tim his mother in the same week. In "Big Ol' Party," they imagine throwing a party that crosses over into the afterlife. In "Apocalypse Shimmy" they suggest throwing a party at the end of time to dance the world away. As a reviewer noted, "This is music that celebrates life despite its necessary pains and setbacks." Susan was born in Gadsden, Alabama, but grew up primarily in Mendenhall, Mississippi, and considers it her hometown. She majored in art at Millsaps College and graduated with a BA in 1988. She is a designer for *Living Blues*, the *Southern Register*, and designs posters for MIAL. The son of a Methodist bishop, Tim attended seven different public schools in twelve years, but grew up primarily in Jackson and considers it his hometown. His Jackson-based band, the Windbreakers, won the Icon Award in 2018. Tim has been playing music since he was a teenager, but since Susan started playing (first bass guitar, now drums) in the early 2000s "the entire process (writing, playing, recording, touring) has become more enjoyable for me."

Youth Literature

Winner in MIAL's new category, **Youth Literature**, is **Angie Thomas** for her bestselling novel, *On the Come Up*. The main character, a sixteen-year-old rapper named Bri, aspires to become a rapper like her deceased father, an underground rap legend. The novel is Thomas's homage to hip-hop, which was her own path until she began to write. The novel has already been optioned for a film. One reviewer said that Thomas is "an author in complete command of her own voice." Another said, "The text challenges its readers to think deeply about white privilege, police brutality, and the circumstances designed to break the spirits of young people of color." Thomas, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, received a BFA degree from Belhaven University, the first Black teenager to graduate in creative writing. She received a Walter Dean Myers Grant in 2015. Her first novel, *The Hate U Give*, debuted at number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for young adult hardcover books and became a motion picture. It has won many awards, including the William C. Morris Award, the Michel L. Printz Award, and the Coretta Scott King Award. Inspired by the rap music of Tupac Skahur, Thomas said, "What society feeds into youth has a way of coming back and affecting us all." Thomas, who, at a young age witnessed multiple instances of gun violence, sees writing as a form of activism because it promotes empathy.