

The Washington Post

Friday, September 14, 2001

A Slammin' Book Festival Lineup

by Mary Quattlebaum

READING AND WRITING will rock next week in Fairfax with tall tales, teen poetry slams and presentations by authors for kids and adults.

The third annual Fall for the Book Festival opens Wednesday, with most programs for young people scheduled next Friday and Saturday in downtown Fairfax and at George Mason University. Goodies include puppet and magic shows, concerts and a chance to sip tea with "historic ladies." For eager young writers, the festival abounds with opportunities to create. Writing workshops led by Joan Leotta, the festival's roving storyteller, should prove a hit with upper elementary students next Saturday. Leotta welcomes dabbler and dedicated wordsmith alike to her 90-minute sessions, which explore oral and written aspects of story. "Kids get plenty of silent, individual writing at school," she says. "I hope to show that writing is also about communication and connection."

Drawing on 18 years' experience as a story performer and writing teacher, Leotta guides youngsters in fashioning short plays, story poems, fables and pourquoi tales (stories about why something came to be). "Playful writing can help children become more aware of their own creativity and of ways to shape their ideas," she says, then adds with a laugh: "And the kids have fun -- that's what's important."

Young people 11 and up can learn to strut their literary stuff at next Friday's poetry performance workshop. Says instructor Nancy Schwalb: "I try to help participants realize that the poem on the page is vital. It has to be powerful, to make sense. You can't just hope to dazzle the audience with your performance."

Schwalb speaks highly of her workshop assistant, 14-year-old Larry Robertson, one of her former creative writing students at Charles Hart Middle School in Southeast Washington. Now a freshman at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Larry is a prize-winning poet who can offer tips from his own experience.

Capping Schwalb's workshop is a Friday evening poetry slam that is open to the public. For those who've never experienced one, a slam can be a raucous, heady experience for both participant and audience. Forget demure reading. A slam is all about letting loose the poem's emotion. "It's sort of like an athletic competition but with poems," explains Schwalb. "Kids can act up with words -- and are celebrated for it." She believes those qualities appeal especially to an audience laced with kids. "Going to a slam is a terrific way to get young people interested in writing. They like the energy, they're curious. They want to try this, too."

While Schwalb's young poets promise panache, the Little Maids of History plan to spice up the old days with humor. Bonnie Fairbank and Pat Sowers use antique items and dress in reproductions of 18th- and 19th-century clothing for their interactive interpretations of the past.

"We're trying to bring history to life and teach children about their heritage and the early days of this country," says Fairbank, who, with Sowers, created the Little Maids concept about 10 years ago. The program has proven popular indeed, keeping the two former Woodlawn Plantation docents trotting to schools, museums, book events and TV appearances. Fairbank explains the program's draw: "Kids love to be part of the show. They learn something about history. And they may also come away with the sense that people long ago liked some of the same things -- like dances and stories -- that we still enjoy today."

FALL FOR THE BOOK LITERARY FESTIVAL -- Events take place at George Mason University, Fairfax campus, 4400 University Dr., Fairfax, or at University Drive and North Street in downtown Fairfax. 703/993-3986. Web site: www.fallforthebook.org. Free. For information on programs for adults call or check the Web site. The events below are geared toward kids.

SECTION: WEEKEND; PG. T51

LENGTH: 1018 WORDS