TITLE: Writing, in Good Company

INTRO: Every year, writers from across the world flock to Chattanooga in celebration of literature -- and literature’s collaborative spirit.

Writing is often considered a solitary endeavor, an exercise in introversion, a one-man job. A task or a hobby or a masterpiece best completed in hushed seclusion, in our own sphere.

But it’s not, really — or at least, it shouldn’t be. And thanks to people like Dr. Richard Jackson, it doesn’t have to be.

“If you’re writing to the wall, your writing is probably not going to take off in any direction,” says Rick, an English professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga — and a writer himself.

Rick has authored 13 books of poems, two books of translations, four anthologies and edited editions, and two critical books. His work has appeared in *The Best American Poems*, among other collections, and his accolades are sweeping: he’s been named a Guggenheim Fellow, Fulbright Fellow, Witter Bynner Fellow — the list goes on.

He’s also the reason that the Meacham Writers’ Workshop exists, and that it exists in Chattanooga. Launched in 1984 and sponsored in part by UTC, Meacham is a free, open-to-the-public program that provides support and critique for developing writers.

“Over the years, we’ve had Pulitzer Prize winners, National Book Award winners and internationally renowned writers,” Rick says. “All of the writers have come for less money than they usually get and are willing to spend extraordinary time with aspiring writers.”

Meacham happens twice a year, for a weekend in October and another in March. Unless someone is submitting work, there is no formal registration. Published writers come from across the country, and through Jackson’s international contacts — he won a major award for his work in the Balkan wars — the Meacham program has attracted writers from Israel, Czech Republic, Switzerland, the UK, Germany, Serbia and Slovenia.

Students and community members come together for readings, discussions and — what Rick deems most valuable — one-on-one time with the visiting writers.

“The biggest change over the years has been involving the writers to work more and more on an individual basis with students and townspeople,” Rick says. “It’s a chance for everyone to see how these writers think and work, and to see that they’re not demigods — they’re regular people. This increasingly informal aspect is central to the philosophy of the Meacham Conference.”

After receiving his Phd from Yale, Rick came to Chattanooga in 1976 to teach at UTC. There, he connected with Jean Meacham, an assistant dean who was nearing retirement. She donated funds to the university when she left, intended for a professorship for Rick. But Rick had other ideas.

“I talked it over with one of the administrators and told him the money would be better served as seed money for a writers’ conference,” Rick says. “He agreed, and so did Jean.”

Over the years, funding has ebbed and flowed, but the program has survived thanks to private and government grants, a partnership with Chattanooga State Community College, and most recently, help from The HART Gallery. Meacham’s success and enduring reputation is a testament to Rick’s commitment to the workshop, but also to the writing culture of the city and of the South — there’s a collaborative camaraderie here.

Meacham isn’t the only program that draws global attention to Chattanooga’s literary community. Presented by the Southern Lit Alliance, the Celebration of Southern Literature (CSL) is another decades-old conference that has grown a wide following since its start in the early 1980s.

“The Celebration of Southern Literature was created to fill a gap,” says Susan Robinson, the executive director of the Southern Lit Alliance. “There wasn’t a literary event in Chattanooga at the time, and we really wanted to showcase what it meant to be a Southern writer.”

CSL, a biennial event, hosted just five writers when it first launched; this year, in mid-April, more than 50 poets, playwrights, and fiction and nonfiction writers attended, including *New York Times* bestselling author Charles Frazier, past U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, and *Oxford American* editor Robert Hodge.

For three full days, the writers shared their stories and their craft, led group discussions and mingled with the public. Many of the authors hosted poetry and fiction writing workshops or participated in panel discussions, whose topics included “Southern Identity” and “Books to Film.” In the evenings, writers attended cocktail hours and dinner parties for more informal conversation with their readers.

“You see lots of conversation happening between these authors and the people who read their work,” Susan says. “This is a very intimate affair, and it’s a very important affair. It’s become part of the fabric of Chattanooga.”

CSL is a partnership event with the Fellowship of Southern Writers, an organization that was founded in 1987 by 26 writers — among them, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy and Shelby Foote. Members have been added along the way — Barbara Kingsolver is one of the latest to join — and their meetings are held in conjunction with CSL.

Taken together, Meacham, CSL and the many other writers’ events and conferences and workshops that are well-loved across the world speak to this: that words aren’t written in a vacuum. That the act of putting pen to paper may require a single hand, but what comes out of that pen was influenced by the world, and in turn, becomes part of it. That our essays and poems and novels and plays — they are created to be read and absorbed by one another.

“Readers like to connect with writers — and writers need to connect with their readers,” Susan says. “It’s a powerful experience on both sides.”