

The Virginia Writers Club: A Resource for and User of Libraries

by James W. Morrison

Founded in 1918, the Virginia Writers Club (VWC) is believed to be the oldest existing writers club in Virginia. It may also be the second oldest writers club in the United States. The VWC, its chapters, and its individual members are potential resources for libraries in Virginia. They are also friendly and grateful users of libraries.

The VWC is the only statewide writers club in Virginia serving writers of all genres. Clubs such as the Poetry Society of Virginia and the Virginia Romance Writers are limited by genre, and membership in clubs such as the James River Writers is concentrated in specific geographic areas. (Some members of the VWC are members of other clubs. The current president of the Poetry Society of Virginia, Patsy Anne Bickerstaff, is a past president of the VWC.)

When the club was first founded and for many years thereafter, its members and activities were concentrated in the Richmond area. Author James Branch Cabell served as the club's first president. During his tenure from 1918–1921, the club met in his home in Richmond. Twenty-five other writers have served as president since Cabell. The last five presidents have resided in parts of Virginia other than Richmond, reflecting the geographic expansion of the club.

In the 1990s, the club began accepting local writers clubs as VWC chapters. To date, charters have been awarded to ten chapters:

Blue Ridge Chapter (Charlottesville, Staunton, Waynesboro, and nine area counties); Chesapeake Bay Writers (Williamsburg, West Point, and twelve area counties); Hampton Roads Chapter (Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach); Hanover Writers (Hanover and two adjacent counties); James-York Chapter (York County, including Jamestown and Yorktown, along with Poquoson, Hampton, and Newport News); Northern Virginia Chapter (Arlington, Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudon, and Prince William counties); Richmond Chapter (Richmond and surrounding areas, including Chesterfield, Henrico, and Hanover counties); Riverside Writers Chapter (Fredericksburg and the counties of Caroline, King George, Louisa, Spotsylvania, and Stafford, and portions of adjacent areas); Traveler Chapter (Chester, Colonial Heights, Emporia, Franklin, Hopewell, Petersburg, Smithfield, Suffolk, and thirteen area counties); and Valley Writers Chapter (Roanoke, Salem, Christiansburg, Fincastle, Radford, Rocky Mount, and area counties). The club is interested in establishing chapters in other areas of Virginia and will work with local writers' groups to help them receive chapter charters.

The club's objective is to support and stimulate the art and craft of writing, striving to:

- give writers opportunities for personal and professional association with other writers;
- strengthen skills in the art, craft, and business of writing;

- advocate the literary arts in the broader community; and
- serve as a statewide supporting and coordinating body to assist its chapters and members in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The VWC is open to all who are interested in writing and who support the objectives of the club. It is a nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) status under IRS rules.

The VWC and many of its chapters hold meetings in public libraries. In years past, the club has held

James W. Morrison, who is retired from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, has served on the VWC Board of Governors for ten years. He served as vice president for four years and as president in 2003–4. He is currently chair of the VWC Speakers Bureau and president of the Valley Writers Chapter. He also heads the Lake Writers at Smith Mountain Lake, where he lives. In addition to two books on international affairs published by the National Defense University, he is the author of *Bedford Goes to War: The Heroic Story of a Small Virginia Community in World War II*. From sixty nonfiction books nominated for the 2005 Library of Virginia Literary Awards, his book on Bedford, which was self-published, was selected as a finalist for a People's Choice Award. He has given over fifteen presentations on his Bedford book at libraries in Virginia. He serves on the Franklin County Library Foundation Board, the library's book festival planning committee, and the capital campaign committee for the branch library at Westlake.

its annual meeting at the Library of Virginia and at other libraries in the Richmond area. More recently, the annual meetings have been held at venues where meals can be readily served. At least four chapters hold their regular monthly meetings at libraries: the Hanover Writers meet at the Mechanicsville Library; the Northern Virginia Chapter at the Tysons-Pimmit Regional Library in Falls Church; the Riverside Writers Chapter at the Salem Church Library (or, during renovations, the Snow Library) in the Fredericksburg area; and the Traveler Chapter at the Enon Library in Chester. Other chapters meet regularly in bookstores, churches, or other venues.

Chapters vary in the conduct of their regular meetings. Most meet once a month; some, twice a month. Some meet to exchange information on writing opportunities and then let members read for ten minutes or so each and receive critiques from fellow writers. Others have guest speakers at their meetings. Some organize special critique groups by genre. Members of the public are generally welcome to attend one or more of these chapter meetings, particularly if they are interested in writing and possibly joining the chapter or VWC.

Several of the chapters have formed close associations with libraries and their staffs. Many chapters post notices, flyers, or brochures in local libraries to attract those interested in writing. Librarians often find it helpful to refer any patrons expressing interest in writing clubs and activities to the local chapter.

Some of the chapters present programs for the public at local libraries, including readings, workshops, and panel discussions. Individual members of the VWC have given presentations and conducted book signings at libraries. Some chapter members help organize and par-

ticipate in annual book festivals at local libraries. The club maintains a Speakers Bureau list with details on a wide variety of writers who are willing to collaborate with libraries or community groups in presenting various types of programs.

The club holds quarterly, statewide meetings hosted on a rotating basis by the ten chapters. The quarterly meetings usually begin on a Saturday morning with a business meeting of the VWC Board of Governors and end with an afternoon program on writing, which is open to the public. Many of these quarterly meetings are held in libraries, and the afternoon programs may attract many people to the libraries.

The Valley Writers Chapter, based in Roanoke, may serve as a good example of collaboration between a chapter and libraries. In recent years, the chapter has held at least two writing workshops for the public at the Roanoke County Library Headquarters. One was on techniques of writing, and the other was on getting published. Chapter members have also done group and individual readings at libraries. Some chapter members have served on planning committees for book festivals at the Bedford County and Franklin County Libraries, and some have performed readings at these festivals. When it has been the Valley Writers turn to host a quarterly meeting of the VWC, it has held these meetings in libraries in Bedford and Roanoke Counties, with afternoon presentations open to the public.

The club's annual luncheon meetings, usually held in November, have included in recent years guest speakers such as renowned Virginia authors David Baldacci, Sharyn McCrumb, Martin Clark, and Virginia Poet Laureates George Garrett and Carolyn Kreiter-Foronda. (Poet Laureate Garrett, recently deceased, and Laureate Joseph Awad have been active

members of the club, and Baldacci, McCrumb, and Kreiter-Foronda are honorary members. Other well-known writers with Virginia connections who are or have been honorary members include Russell Baker, Annie Dillard, Earl Hamner Jr., William Styron, and Tom Wolfe.)

The VWC issues a quarterly newsletter called *The Virginia Writer*, sponsors writing contests, occasionally organizes writers conferences and workshops, and encourages and supports student writing through the Young Virginia Writers Club.

Club members range from associate members who have not yet published to seasoned writers with many publications. Some have publishers and some have self-published. Two of the most prolific members are L. B. Taylor Jr. of Williamsburg, who has had some twenty books published on ghosts in Virginia, and A. B. Feuer of Roanoke, who has had published a dozen or so books and over five hundred magazine articles on military history.

Several VWC members have participated as panelists in the annual Virginia Festival of the Book in Charlottesville, and the club usually has a welcome table at the festival.

To learn more about the VWC, visit the club's website, www.virginiawritersclub.org. The website contains background on the club; news of upcoming events; membership and contact information; a Speakers Bureau list of members who are willing to speak, present programs, and do readings; information on chapters; and information on the Young Virginia Writers Club. The website also includes links to the chapters and to some individual members. Specific questions may be addressed to the author, James W. Morrison, at EZWriter@att.net or (540) 721-1991. VI