

# Writers and Libraries: A Symbiotic Partnership

by Jinnie Y. Davis

**T**he American library has long held a special place in the hearts and minds of writers who remember its enduring effect on their lives. As the writer Anne Rockwell eloquently expressed it, she learned as a child that the library is "a powerful place. I soon discovered it was miraculously alive with the thoughts of people I would only know through their books... Through reading I learned to journey out of myself and back again, but on the return voyage I brought riches and power in the form of thoughts to last a lifetime. It was impossible to be lonely there."<sup>1</sup> Even beyond offering the wealth of its collections, however, the library as an organization is able to form special ties with writers, which can work to their mutual benefit. Many public libraries, especially those in large cities, have wonderful and well-established writer programs. Academic libraries, on the other hand, have not fully exploited this opportunity. This paper chronicles two examples of writer-library collaborations at the North Carolina State University (NCSSU) Libraries.

The Friends of the Library (FOL) of North Carolina State University has an array of programs featuring authors. For example, the Spring Dinner is the FOL's primary public relations event and has been in existence since 1969. Each year, writers of national repute are invited to speak or to read from their works. Past speakers included Doris Betts, William Leuchtenburg, and John Ehle. The Fall Luncheon, inaugurated in 1981, high-

lights authors among NCSU's own faculty. It offers the audience a glimpse into the fertile intellectual life of the campus community, with talks on such diverse topics as the Latin American gaucho, the excavation of the 2,000-year-old Roman port of Aila, or the Indonesian *tiwah* burial ritual. In addition, the FOL sponsors several special lectures and readings by authors over the course of the academic year. During the NCSU Libraries' centennial in 1988/89, the library administration created two new programs that sought to focus specifically on writers in this state: the Author of the Year and the North Carolina Writers Series.

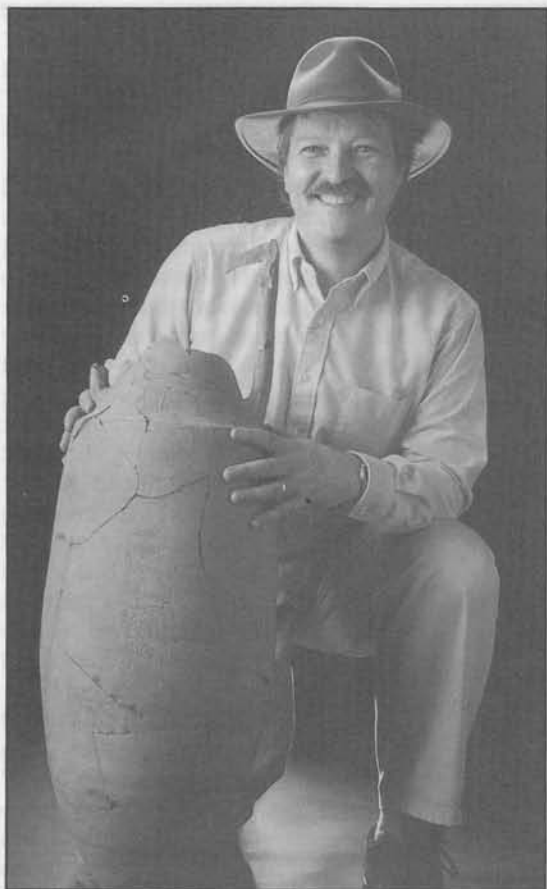
Now in its eleventh year and renamed the Author-in-Residence, the Author of the Year is probably the oldest program in this country that ensconces a writer in a formal relationship with an academic library. The most innovative aspect of this arrangement was the formation of a rich symbiosis between a writer and the library. Its origins were serendipitous: Susan K. Nutter, the new director of the NCSU Libraries in 1987, had long been aware

of the state's literary fame. As native North Carolinian Manly Wade Wellman had written years ago:

Every state has its pretensions [to a literary reputation] ... But North Carolina has made its claims valid. Elsewhere in the country, one meets with a sense that North Carolina is a natural breeder of creative writers ... I, myself, have known aspiring young students of creative writing, who have seriously and honestly felt that, if only they could come to North Carolina, their careers would blossom and become fact. Oddly enough, that has happened, with more than one such [individual]. The designation of "North Carolina Writer" has become a coveted one, and a flattering one, within recent years.<sup>2</sup>

Nutter considered the library a perfect organization for nurturing writers, especially young authors who had some affiliation with the university, and hoped to rejuvenate the FOL with a new

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*Professor S. Thomas Parker describes his excavations at the Roman city of Aila at the 1995 Fall Luncheon.*

program based on the writer-library bond. She asked the library staff for ideas about potential candidates and was pleased to hear from Ron Simpson, head of the library's Technical Information Center. Simpson mentioned that Kaye Gibbons, a former student assistant of his, had just published her first novel at the age of 25. *Ellen Foster* was garnering critical acclaim, both nationally and internationally. Nutter was intrigued and attempted unsuccessfully to reach Gibbons. She was surprised one day to find that Kaye Gibbons had come to her. Having heard that the library director was looking for her, the author decided to find out what Nutter wanted, and the two spent the rest of the afternoon in conversation. Gibbons talked about her student days, when she had spent so much time haunting the D. H. Hill bookstacks that she called herself "the phantom of the library." She also mentioned her current difficulties, in the absence of an institutional af-

filiation, in finding a quiet place away from home to concentrate on her writing. Nutter knew that she had found the ideal match for a unique public relations and development program under the sponsorship of the Friends of the Library, the Author of the Year.

From the start, the Author of the Year program was designed to establish the reputation of the NCSU Libraries as an environment highly supportive of writers. Recognizing that writing is essentially an activity conducted in solitude and that young authors often must struggle to make a living solely through their writing, the library wanted to foster the careers of promising young, local writers. As a research library in a land-grant institution renowned primarily for its science and engineering programs, but building a reputation in the humanities and social sciences as well, the NCSU Libraries hoped to strengthen its role as a literary center in the state. This ambition was actually a natural

one for a university with a well-respected creative writing program and an active humanities extension program. The Author of the Year was seen as a concept that could enhance the NCSU Libraries' public relations and fundraising programs, thereby highlighting its extension and public services role within the university. Moreover, by acquiring copies of the author's books, the libraries could expand its collection of autographed first editions. The library also hoped that the Author of the Year program would provide the FOL with a regular source of speakers for its events. Finally, the opportunity for library employees to work closely with authors would help the staff better understand the creative writing process, out of which emerges the collections that are at the core of any library.

The author would receive tangible benefits in turn. A one-year faculty appointment as visiting lecturer (without salary but with faculty privileges) would give the appointee both an institutional base and a place to work. The NCSU Libraries designated an individual, locked study room in the main library for the exclusive use of the Author of the Year.

The library also offered unlimited access to its collections' resources, free database searching, use of the staff lounge, and library borrowing privileges at NCSU, Duke, and UNC-Chapel Hill. Both library and FOL functions provided the author with many public-speaking opportunities, as well as publicity and sales opportunities throughout the year. In addition, the Friends of the Library bestowed honorary life membership on the Author of the Year.

Nutter secured the backing of the FOL Board of Directors and university administration to inaugurate the program, and Kaye Gibbons was installed in 1988 as the Friends of the Library's first Author of the Year. Early on, the NCSU Libraries set several measures whereby the success of the program might be gauged. They included primary and secondary measures:

- completion of arrangements for physical facilities,



*Amy Tan autographs books at the 1990 Spring Dinner.*

equipment, and services for the Author of the Year

- attendance by the Author of the Year at Friends events
- increased attendance at North Carolina Writers Series lectures and other FOL events
- increased publicity about the NCSU Libraries and its Author of the Year Program
- increased involvement of the NCSU local and regional communities with the Author of the Year Program
- improved library programming sponsored by the FOL
- closer personal ties between the Author of the Year and the NCSU Libraries' staff
- increased Friends membership
- increased contributions to the Friends

The program got off to a splendid start and, by all measures, was deemed a success. The NCSU Libraries and the Friends did their part in creating a supportive community for Gibbons, with both the environment and resources that would help to promote concentrated work. The room selected as the Author of the Year's study held special significance because its previous occupant had been the late NCSU professor Richard G. Walser, a long-time champion of North Carolina literature. As a student, Gibbons had enjoyed seeking out Walser's company to talk with him about Thomas Wolfe. The FOL also purchased a computer workstation and printer for Gibbons's use.

In return, Gibbons agreed to participate without honoraria in several library events. In the first year alone, she spoke at the FOL's North Carolina Writers Series and delivered another lecture open only to members of the NCSU Libraries staff. At lectures by other speakers, Gibbons introduced her fellow writers. She participated in a library-sponsored Faculty Book Fair and held autographing sessions for her fans at various library events such as the Spring Dinner and a reception for graduating seniors. In sum, she contributed her talents as a speaker, her popularity as an author, and her literary contacts to enhance the library's public relations efforts, and the Libraries gained a well-known, effective advocate for its broader goals. Beyond the formal aspects of the Author of the Year program, both partners were enriched by closer personal ties. In her 1991 novel *A Cure for Dreams*, Gibbons acknowledged the

support of Susan Nutter and the Friends of the Library.

News of the Author of the Year program received national attention when *Library Journal* featured a cover photograph of Kaye Gibbons in the bookstacks of the D. H. Hill Library. The journal hailed the NCSU Libraries' Author of the Year program as "perhaps the most exciting example of author involvement with libraries."<sup>3</sup> The "Author of the Year" title was soon replaced by "Author-in-Residence" as both the NCSU Libraries and Kaye Gibbons grew comfortable in their mutually support-

ive roles.

Ten years later, Kaye Gibbons is still the FOL's Author-in-Residence. Now the author of six novels and numerous essays, she is in demand as a speaker who is entertaining, moving, and profound. In December 1997, Gibbons catapulted to national celebrity status when television talk show host Oprah Winfrey announced her selection of two of Gibbons's works, *Ellen Foster* and *A Virtuous Woman*, for her influential book club. At the same time, a television production of *Ellen Foster* appeared on the Hallmark Hall of Fame. Gibbons's fame,



George Plimpton (right), 1993 Spring Dinner speaker, enjoys a laugh with NCSU coach Les Robinson and his wife.



Author-in-Residence Kaye Gibbons (left) and Jinnie Y. Davis (right) with the 1995 Spring Dinner speaker, Joseph Heller.



however, rests upon solid literary credentials. The literary merit of her works has been recognized in a steady stream of honors. They range from individual prizes, such as the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, to awards for her corpus of works, such as the *Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres* (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) from the government of France, an honorary doctorate from North Carolina State University, and the prestigious North Carolina Award in Literature.

Kaye Gibbons's ties to the NCSU Libraries remain vigorous. The library continues to offer regular venues for the Author-in-Residence's works, including readings and autographing sessions. The preface to Gibbons's latest book, *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon*, again acknowledges the support of the Friends of the Library. Now an *ex-officio* member of the Friends' Board of Directors, Gibbons still actively supports the Libraries. For example, she used the literary contacts developed over several years of book tours to help attract writers of national prominence to Raleigh. In her first year as resident author, Gibbons personally recruited best-selling novelist Amy Tan to speak at the FOL Spring Dinner, and has since helped bring in authors such as George Plimpton, Dominick Dunne, Christopher Buckley, Joseph Heller, and John Grisham. Grisham, who attracted a sellout audience of 1,000, made special mention of the fact that he had come to Raleigh "quite simply, because Kaye Gibbons asked me." Like the other authors, he also participated in a fundraiser hosted by Gibbons in her own home to help raise money for library endowments.

The Libraries also has reaped unexpected benefits from its association with Gibbons. With her husband Frank Ward, Jr., she established The Mary Alice Ward Endowment to support the Libraries' collections, and she is a regular contributor to the Friends. Recently, she announced the establishment of an endowment in honor of her husband. It is also noteworthy that Gibbons has chosen to donate her pa-

pers to the NCSU Libraries' Special Collections Department. These records document the author's editing and writing process and will prove an invaluable resource for future literary researchers.

Among the secondary measures of

success were indicators of the overall growth of the Friends of the Library as an organization that exists to support the Libraries. The achievement of these goals also reflected the success of the Author-in-Residence, N.C. Writers Se-



(Left to right) Frank Ward, Jr., and Kaye Gibbons at the 1996 after-dinner fundraiser with John Grisham and Lee Smith.



NCSU Poet-in-Residence Gerald Barrax autographs a book after speaking in the 1994 N.C. Writers Series.

ries, and other FOL programs. Membership in the Friends of the Library has grown from around 250 a decade ago to 1,400 members today. Annual gifts during this period increased nearly fourfold. The library endowment has grown an average of more than 30% annually in the last ten years, and the number of individual endowments leapt from one to over 40, established not only by FOL members and supporters, but also by N.C. State's own faculty, students, and staff. Their actions have clearly been affected by the library's growing public relations program.

Concurrent with the Author-in-Residence program, the NCSU Libraries created the North Carolina Writers Series. The idea again grew out of library director Susan Nutter's conviction that, in a state blessed with an abundance of literary talent, the library is a natural partner in promoting that talent. Even self-designated "literary carpetbaggers" like professor and writer Robin Hemley could exclaim, "For God's sake, what other state has the number of writers striking hardcover deals or a publisher like Algonquin? Or the number and quality of literary maga-

zines? Or an organization like the North Carolina Writers' Network?"<sup>4</sup>

In spring 1989, the Friends of the Library initiated an annual four-lecture series spotlighting authors with an affiliation to North Carolina, who were invited to read from their works or to give talks. The first year featured Author of the Year Kaye Gibbons, NCSU English professor Lee Smith, N.C. poet laureate Sam Ragan, and humorist Roy Wilder, Jr. For each event, the library made arrangements with a local bookseller to have copies of the author's works available for purchase. Audience members enjoyed the opportunity to meet the writers and have their books personally autographed at a wine-and-dessert reception.

The heady literary ferment of that inaugural year culminated in June 1990, when the NCSU Libraries cosponsored with Gibbons's publisher—the imminently North Carolinian Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill—a reception at the American Library Association's Annual Conference in Chicago. The by-invitation-only event was attended by 200 librarians, writers, publishers, and media representatives. The rollicking evening of readings by four of Algonquin's star authors was cited in the library literature as a "[p]eak experience: Listening to North Carolina writers Kaye Gibbons, Jill McCorkle, Clyde Edgerton, and Larry Brown read from their own work in the lovely setting of Biggs Restaurant."<sup>5</sup> Later in the year, *Library Journal's* cover story on the North Carolina writers' renaissance described North Carolina as "a state that regards its writers not as celebrities but as part of the landscape."<sup>6</sup>

Since then, the N.C. Writers Series has featured nearly 35 novelists, poets, and nonfiction writers. One factor in its success was the timing of its inception. In the late 1980s, author readings were not as common in the Triangle area as they are today. With increasing interest in the arts and the advent of major bookstore chains, events featuring writers have become routine occurrences. The series now strives to maintain its freshness with a deliberate attempt to incorporate individuals of diverse backgrounds, who write fiction and nonfiction, poetry and prose. The library continues to collect autographed first editions of all its speakers' works and one slot in the series is always reserved for the Author-in-Residence.

While writers and libraries may be a good fit, programs such as the ones described come about only with a great

deal of hard work. At the NCSU Libraries, they have succeeded because of the commitment of the library administration and the resources allocated to the enterprise. A full-time librarian serves as director and is aided by a full-time program assistant and part-time student help. Strong support also comes from the Board of Directors, comprised of more than 25 individuals who volunteer their time and energies to help meet the organization's mission of support for the NCSU Libraries. In particular, the Program Committee helps to identify and attract speakers for the N.C. Writers Series. Its members are now considering ways of refocusing the series to attract a wider audience while continuing to publicize the work of writers of all kinds.

In the case of the Author-in-Residence program, a decided factor in its longevity is the popularity of the incumbent. The NCSU Libraries was fortunate to find a person whose writing has elicited praise from the likes of Eudora Welty, whose unforgettable phrase "the life in it, the honesty of thought and eye and feeling and word!" appears on the book jacket of *Ellen Foster*. Kaye Gibbons is a remarkable individual who, like her own characters, has overcome extreme hardship to achieve a hard-won personal happiness and professional success. The enormously popular *Ellen Foster*, for example, reflects elements of Gibbons's own childhood as an orphan and has been selling 3,000 paperback copies a month. Its inclusion in the syllabi of literature classes across the country reflects its appeal and accessibility to a wide range of readers. In *Sights Unseen* and *Frost and Flower*; *My Life with Manic Depression (So Far)*, Gibbons reveals her personal battle with a crippling illness. Her works appeal to an audience who respond to her in an intensely personal way. As Robin Hemley noted in 1994, "when Kaye Gibbons left North Carolina for California..., the state seemed to go into shock. I thought a day of mourning might be declared. But then a miracle occurred [sic] — she came back home again!"<sup>7</sup>

The NCSU Libraries' experience with its Author-in-Residence is encouraging for other academic libraries that wish to follow suit. There is no shortage of writers, particularly beginning authors who can benefit from the support of an established organization like a library. Libraries should investigate creative ways in which to cultivate special relationships with writers. At the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, the

Hodges Library's newly established Writer in Residence program exemplifies another notable writer-library relationship that emphasizes aspects specific to that locale. According to the first Writer in Residence, Brian Griffin, during its one-year pilot the position offers him fully equipped office space in the Hodges Library, the support of the library organization, and a small stipend. In return, Griffin is committed to writing a book during his tenure and to serving as a literary liaison with the local community. He keeps the library informed about promising writers in Tennessee and the Appalachian area, and makes authors aware of the library as a resource (e.g., as a place to host their readings or as repository for their publications).<sup>8</sup>

As evidence of the NCSU Libraries' success in fusing the thought of Kaye Gibbons with her library role, when an announcement about her selection for Oprah Winfrey's book club appeared on the Web page of *Library Journal*, the author was prominently described as the NCSU Libraries' Author-in-Residence and a "library devotee." Finally, it is heartwarming for library staff to hear the eloquent testimony of their own Author-in-Residence: "The NCSU Libraries is my haven, the staff a blessing. I have rested my spirit there on the bounty of words."<sup>9</sup>

## References

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Elleman, comp., *Books Change Lives* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1994), [37].

<sup>2</sup> Manly Wade Wellman, "On Being a North Carolina Writer," *North Carolina Literary Review* I (Summer 1992): 149-150.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Hoffert, "Writers' Renaissance in North Carolina," *Library Journal* 114 (November 1, 1989): 47.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Hemley, "Yankee Writers in North Carolina: Literary Carpetbaggers?" *North Carolina Literary Review* II (Spring 1994): 129.

<sup>5</sup> Graceanne A. DeCandido, "Alarums & Diversions," *Library Journal* 115 (August 1990): 24.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffert, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Hemley, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Griffin, telephone conversation with author, February 25, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Kaye Gibbons, [advertisement], *NC State* 71 (Winter 1999): 56.