



A New Chapter



Story by
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A surge of live
storytelling
events has
rekindled
interest in
Roanoke's
literary scene



Lee Hunsaker, hair swept into a messy nest, rhinestones dripping from her ears, her neck, her arms, red bra boldly showing under her black dress, takes the mic to quiet the house.

TELLING TALES

Cara Ellen Modisett (top right) reads a piece to the December meeting of the Roanoke writers club Word3. Heather Quintana (middle) shares her story for the Hoot and Holler: Bad Dates Edition in February. Ashley Rhame looks at her list of people signed up to do story or poem reading during Soul Sessions in January.

PAGE 51 Lee Hunsaker, founder of Hoot and Holler, greets the crowd at a sold out show in February. "People seem to really have a need to express themselves," says Hunsaker.

"I'm going to go backstage and cry from joy and then we're going to get started," she shouts in her Texas-tinged drawl. "Get ready for a ride, y'all!"

Two rollicking hours of tales and laughter, of embarrassing moments and tender life lessons follow as six speakers take the stage at 5 Points Music Sanctuary to captivate a crowd of 200.

Welcome to Hoot and Holler, a live storytelling event modeled after public radio's popular Moth Radio Hour. Think comedy club, improv theatre and dinner party rolled into one.

When Hunsaker planned her first show on the patio at Sweet Donkey Coffee House in October 2016, 10 storytellers asked to perform and 150 people showed up to listen.

Hunsaker was floored. But she never looked back. Sixteen shows and some 80 stories later, she sees the event's continued strength as a sign of the times.

"People seem to really have a need to express themselves," says Hunsaker, with bright red lips and hair to match. "People just want to be in a room and connect with one another."

But as popular as Hoot and Holler has become, it's not the only place where local writers are shaking off their reserve, bringing the page to life and stepping outside the halls of academia.

Twice a month an eclectic mix of Hollins grads, rappers, actors and teens speaks their truths at Soul Sessions in downtown Roanoke. Another group of essayists, fiction writers and poets shares their work at Words Cubed events, staged in such varied venues as Roanoke Memorial Hospital, Altus Chocolate and St. John's Episcopal Church, and sponsored by Carilion.

Call this rise in performance-style readings the most recent iteration of Roanoke's storied literary scene. Or maybe it's a yearning for actual human contact after decades of social media and online connections. Or perhaps the bubbling up of these events over the last few years is telling a different tale.

Perhaps their presence indicates that just as Roanoke is building a name for itself as an outdoors town, a tourist

destination, an attractive place for Millennials to land, the Star City is also seeing its literary scene flourish.

"In my gut, I just feel like, yes, there really is something happening," says Douglas Charles Jackson, who works for the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development and last year launched a website, Book City Roanoke, as a virtual gathering place for "Our Things Literary," complete with a directory of book events and author profiles.

"These groups are consciously trying to bring in new voices and support the voices that are here."

STRONG LITERARY PRESENCE

Roanoke has long been an incubator of writers. Think: Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, Natasha Trethewey, Beth Macy, Roland Lazenby, Tom Angleberger.

Hollins University has functioned as the locus for this growth, offering degrees in creative writing, screen writing and children's literature, along with hosting cutting-edge theater productions and yearly literary festivals.

But for a small city, Roanoke's bookish offerings outpace its population in any number of ways: a Regional Writers Conference now in its 11th year, writers in residence at Carilion Clinic and a Writer on the Bus residency sponsored by the city. There's a strong library system, a handful of literary journals, several writers groups. Book City Roanoke lists 80 local writers, all of whom have a record of publication and a web presence.

"There are some cities who are ahead of us," says poet and essayist Cara Ellen Modisett, who leads Words, Cubed and is the communications director at St. John's Episcopal Church, where she also teaches writing workshops. "But there's a wonderful writers community here in Roanoke. We're in a region that nurtures and inspires writers."

The reading events are an example of that nurturing, says Hunsaker, but also evidence of a city coming into its own.

"Roanoke in the '80s was a really different town," says the Star City native who left for college and ended



up a costume designer in the film industry based out of Austin, Texas. "I never thought I'd be back here in a million years."

As a teen, she felt like a square peg. Now, she says, her hometown "feels like it has a really open mind, like it's a very accepting kind of place."

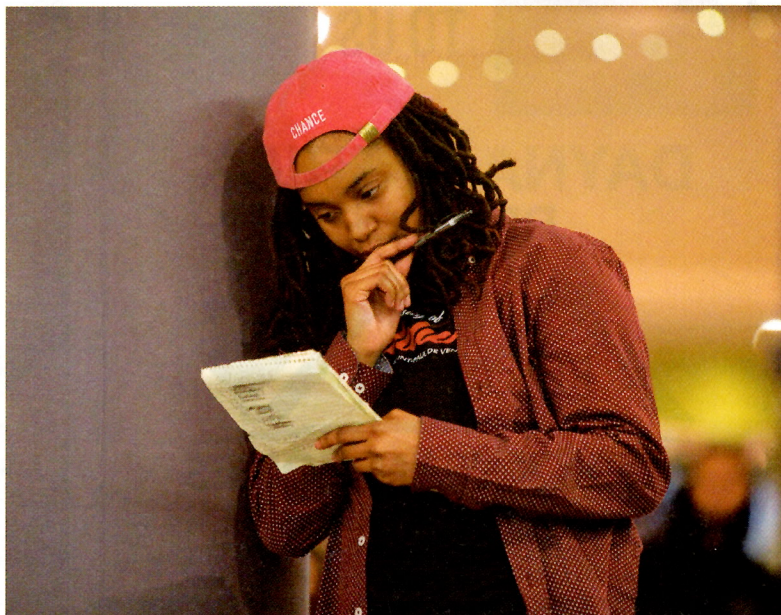
The kind of place where people flock to hear each other's stories.

"Coming into a room and listening to human beings tell their truth is the most beautiful way to save the world," she says. "I really believe that."

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

In the open space of 16 West Marketplace, Bryan Hancock unpacks his turntable and microphone and speakers. The Soul Sessions founder and leader has hosted an Open Mic event every other Wednesday for the past four years.

These gatherings are less theater and more living





room jam. No one has submitted his or her work for approval. There are no rehearsals. There is no program. There is no fee.

Natasha Oladokun, a Hollins visiting assistant professor of English, showed up to support a student and is considering reading her work. "I will if the spirit moves me," she says.

Writers scroll through their phones and proclaim poems, snippets, jokes. The audience snaps fingers softly to show their approval and claps loudly as each reader wraps up. Poet Ashley Rhame is curating tonight's event. She compliments every writer after he or she presents.

"I like people to learn from each other," Hancock explains. "That's what they're doing. They're building a bond."

Perhaps what the growth of these events says most of all is that Roanoke is ready to welcome storytellers of every kind. And that welcoming spirit engenders an atmosphere where creativity of all types can thrive.

"We're in the middle of this fertile ground, and we're all encouraging and inspiring each other," says Modisett.

Back at 5 Points Music Sanctuary, first-time storyteller Siobhan Haines has just relayed her tale of teen

love thwarted by teen drinking. She stepped on stage nervous, intimidated. She walked off, beaming.

"First-time tellers are the people who have responded to this the most," Hunsaker says. "They never thought they would stand up in front of an audience. Usually they are transformed."

Haines agrees. "I looked out at the crowd and they all related to me, they all commiserated with me."

Just like that, a writer is born. ★

CATCH THE SHOWS

Words3 (Cubed)

St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, Thursday, March 15, 6-7:30 p.m. Free.

Soul Sessions

16 West Marketplace, Roanoke, Wednesday, March 28, 8-10 p.m. Free.

Hoot & Holler

5 Points Music Sanctuary, Roanoke, Thursday, March 29, 7-10 p.m. Doors open 6:30 p.m. Tickets \$8-\$10.



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