

# Living and Writing in the Park

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**Long known** as a refuge for wildlife, the expansive Adirondack Park region is fast becoming a haven for writers inspired by the serenity, solitude and sheer beauty of the region. “The Adirondacks are a writer’s paradise. They offer stories and settings that can make great literature,” says Jim Gould, editor of “Rooted in Rock: New Writing from the Adirondack Mountains” (Syracuse University Press and the Adirondack Museum, 2001), a new anthology that will feature writing from professional authors who live some or all of the time in the Adirondacks.

In the past, much of the literature and nature writing about the Adirondacks has been done by outsiders, albeit some very famous ones, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Lewis Stevenson and James Fenimore Cooper.

That’s all changing. “Now people who live here are doing the writing,” says Gould, who teaches writing and literature at Paul Smith’s College, which is just north of Saranac Lake. “For the first time in history, we have evolved enough of a middle and leisure class so we can produce and support our own literature,” he says.

One of the most famous living Adirondack writers, Bill McKibben, author of “The End of Nature” (Random House, 1989), believes this shift from tourists to residents writing about the Park is a “watershed moment” in the region’s literary history.

McKibben shared his insights at the recent launch of the Adirondack Center for Writing, or ACW, held in May at Paul Smith’s Hotel Saranac in Saranac Lake. The ACW is a new nonprofit organization that offers programs, resources and networking opportunities for writers and readers.

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“People who live here have a story to tell,” says Nathalie Costa, who this summer was named the ACW’s new executive director. Trained as an archaeologist, Costa has lived and worked in the Adirondacks for five years—as a general manager of a garden center and as a contract writer and consultant for the Adirondack Park Agency and the Adirondack Nature Conservancy. She began her duties as the new ACW director Aug. 3. “We want to encourage all different kinds of writers. Writing is a scary thing. People can now plug into us and we’ll guide and encourage them,” says Costa, who hopes to rekindle the Adirondack tradition of storytelling.

This summer’s storytelling programs at the Old Forge Library are drawing standing-room-only crowds, according to Isabella Worthen, library director. Worthen and five other ACW steering-committee members worked for several years to develop the center and secure funding for it.

“We want to make the center a success,” says Worthen. “A lot of people are interested because of the need for cooperation, education and communication among writers and storytellers in the region.”

Housed on the shores of Lower St. Regis Lake on the scenic and secluded campus of Paul Smith’s, the ACW is offering its first programs this summer—a series of free workshops. The center has also published a newsletter and is working now on a resource book (similar to the National Poets’ and Writers’ directory) and a Web site.

The next step in the center’s evolution is to start a membership program and build its funding base, according to Ed Kanze, the ACW’s former director, who recently resigned to promote his own new book, “Kangaroo Dreaming: An Australian Wildlife Odyssey” (Sierra Club Books, 2000).

The mission of the organization, according to Kanze, is to be inclusive, and it is working to bring together diverse groups, such as senior citizens, children and unpublished writers. “There is a growing, vital arts community here,” says Kanze. “This organization was created, in

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part, to recognize what was already here. The more writers that are here, the more writers want to be here. You can have one foot in the howling wilderness and the other foot in a cultural hotbed.”

Saranac Lake, Lake Placid and Tupper Lake are the “hubs” of the literary community in the Adirondacks, according to ACW steering-committee member and Native American author Maurice Kenny. His recent work includes “In the Time of the Present” and “Tortured Skins and Other Fictions” (Michigan State University Press, 2000), and he is credited by many with making an early public plea for the financial support of Adirondack writers.

“We don’t get attention from the National Endowment for the Arts,” says Kenny. “It is important to have an organization here as a way of making writers more visible.”

Kenny recently ran an ACW poetry, short story and creative nonfiction writing workshop. “All the participants produced new writing: It was hugely successful,” he says.

The New York State Council on the Arts and Paul Smith’s College have been the center’s primary funding sources. “We want to support and encourage people to enhance their literature, which is a precious resource,” says Kathleen Masterson, director of the state council’s Literature Program. To date, the council has provided the conservancy approximately \$45,400 over a three-year period, including \$10,000 for literary activity in Lewis County.

Initial funding came through North Country Public Radio and Paul Smith’s College, which is also providing in-kind services, such as office space, equipment, a Web presence and other support valued at approximately \$10,000 annually. Funds were used to conduct a needs-assessment survey, hire an executive director and create programming.

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Reaching writers, would-be writers and readers in the six-million-acre Adirondack Park is both the greatest challenge and opportunity for the fledgling organization. “Isolation is a problem,” says Kanze. “It’s hard to coordinate programs over a wide geographic area.”

The arts council’s Masterson believes getting an audience, securing regular funding and generating publicity and marketing are also challenges. “It usually takes a number of years to develop a center,” says Masterson, whose organization also supports literary centers in Rochester, Buffalo, the Hudson Valley and New York City. Chris Lapham is a free-lance writer in Albany. FACTS:IF YOU GO Upcoming Adirondack Writing Center workshops include: Aug. 29—“Getting Published: Taking an Idea and Turning It into a Book” from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Northville Public Library. Sept. 13—“Writing Memoir” from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Old Forge Library. All programs are free. Call the ACW at (518) 327-6278 for registration information.