



MICHENER CENTER FOR WRITERS

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

*J. Frank Dobie House • 702 East Dean Keeton Street • Austin, TX 78705
(512) 471-1601 • Fax: (512) 471-9997*

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JAMES MAGNUSON, MICHENER CENTER FOR WRITERS DIRECTOR, TO RETIRE AFTER 23 YEARS

This May, James Magnuson—the longest-serving director of any creative writing program in the country—will retire as head of the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. The Michener Center is a three-year multidisciplinary Master of Fine Arts program, and after its inception in 1993, it quickly became one of the country's most selective and prestigious writing programs.

“James Magnuson made the Michener Center a powerhouse of creative writing,” says award-winning writer Geoff Dyer. “That success is a matter of verifiable and enviable record. But what needs to be stressed as well is the way that the center glowed—and continues to glow—with the generosity and limitless warmth of his character.”

The program originated with best-selling novelist James Michener's gift of 20 million dollars to create an innovative interdisciplinary program in fiction, screenwriting, poetry, and playwriting that would, in his words, “train professional writers, not simply create more teachers of writing.”

Magnuson, a successful writer who was already on the English Department faculty at the University of Texas, was tapped to be the Michener Center's first full-time director in 1994 and oversaw its meteoric rise among more established programs over the next few years. Creative writing program rankings are a much-debated index, but the Michener Center is routinely considered among the top two or three nationwide. Today, as many as 1,000 candidates compete for the 12 fellowships that are awarded annually. (Each fellow receives an annual stipend of \$27,500, in addition to tuition, making the Michener Center the most generous writing program in the country.)

James Michener first arrived in Texas to research his novel about the state in 1981 and remained a resident until his death. An orphan from birth, the Pulitzer-prize-winning author went on to publish over 50 books and become the world's most successful novelist. Raised in the Quaker tradition by his adoptive mother, Michener later gave away almost all his wealth—165 million dollars. Magnuson knew Michener well, and made sure the program he endowed never strayed from its original and bold purpose: the creation of new generations of working writers.

Magnuson's vision to bring the best writers in their fields to work with MFA candidates was responsible for building a distinguished visiting faculty that has included J. M. Coetzee, Colm Tóibín, Denis Johnson, Ben Fountain, Geoff Dyer, Margot Livesey, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Naomi Shihab Nye, Marie Howe, Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Richard Ford, Louise Gluck, Peter Carey, and Paula Vogel, to name only a few.

During Magnuson's tenure, Michener Center graduates have published over 115 titles, and have been nominated for national and international prizes. Among them: Philipp Meyer, Pulitzer Prize finalist for *The Son*, which he adapted into a miniseries for AMC; poet Kevin Powers, whose debut novel *The Yellow Birds* won the PEN/Hemingway Award; prize-winning Australian novelists Dominic Smith (*The Last Painting of Sarah De Vos*) and Fiona McFarlane (*The High Places* and *The Night Guest*); National Book Award finalist Karan Mahajan (*The Association of Small Bombs*); PEN/Faulkner winner James Hannaham (*Delicious Foods*); and Jake Silverstein (editor-in-chief of *The New York Times Magazine* and author of *Nothing Happened and Then It Did*). Poetry alumni include Roger Reeves (*King Me*), Donika Ross Kelly (*Bestiary*), Michael and Matthew Dickman (twin poets with eight books between them), and National Poetry Series winners Steve Gehrke, Carrie Fountain, and Sam Sax. Among the screenwriting graduates are Kieran Fitzgerald (*Snowden*), Beau Thorne (*Max Payne*), and playwright Abhijat Joshi, now one of Bollywood's leading screenwriters. Playwriting alum George Brandt's *Grounded* won the Lucille Lortel Off-Broadway Award for solo performance by Anne Hathaway, who has optioned the play for film.

James Magnuson is the author of nine novels, including *Famous Writers I Have Known*, a high-spirited comedic novel inspired by Magnuson's friendship with Michener and his years as director of MCW. In the 1970s and 1960s, Magnuson wrote a number of plays that were produced as part of that era's street theatre movement and was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University. More recently, he has been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for fiction and a winner of the Jesse Jones Award from the Texas Institute of Letters.

"A big part of my life has been trying to honor Michener's intentions," says Magnuson. "We live with them, and we think a lot about them. What he did was extraordinary, and I feel like he has never gotten the credit for having such a profound impact on future generations of writers."

A nationwide search for Magnuson's replacement is currently being conducted by the Graduate School at the University of Texas. Retirement celebrations in his honor will be held on Friday, March 31st and Saturday April 1, 2017, at the University of Texas.

For more information, please contact:

Marla Akin, Assistant Director
(512) 471-1601
akin@austin.utexas.edu