

New Orleans Chapter by Susan Larson

The Women's National Book Association of New Orleans grew out of a chance conversation after the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival in March 2011. Mary Grey James, then WNBA national president, appeared on a panel at the festival; afterwards, Susan Larson, host of WWNO-FM's "The Reading Life," asked her friend what was giving her the most satisfaction in retirement. "Easy," Mary Grey said. "My work with the WNBA." After listening to her extol the value of the organization, Larson was hooked. "We need that in New Orleans."

In June, 2011, a group of more than twenty women—librarians, booklovers, writers, publishers—met at the historic Latter Library on St. Charles Ave. to discuss forming a chapter. Mary Grey James came down for a meeting in July, and the chapter was on its way.

The first officers were Susan Larson, president; Amy Loewy of Garden District Book Shop, vice president; writer Christine Wiltz, secretary; and Peg Kohlepp of the Tulane University Bookstore, treasurer. Over the course of the first four years, Judith Lafitte of Octavia Books became vice president, Abi Pollokoff of Pelican Publishing became secretary, and writer/designer Karen Kersting became treasurer.

The chapter's mission has evolved over time. We support local writers and booksellers and literacy efforts. Most of all, we support one another.

Little Free Libraries have been a priority of the chapter from the very beginning, and Linda Prout, the leading advocate for the libraries in the New Orleans area, is a board member. Linda was the first person in our area to have a Little Free Library, and she has guided the movement in New Orleans, which now has approximately 80 of the little book-boxes in all areas of the city.

Literacy activists Kelly Harris DeBerry of STAIR (Start the Adventure in Reading) and Shannan Cvitanovic of the YMCA's Adult Literacy program, have spoken about their ongoing efforts to the membership.

After the death of founding member Diana Pinckley, the Pinckley Prizes for Crime Fiction was established by the chapter. There are two annual prizes of \$2,500 each. One recognizes a distinguished body of work; the other, a fine debut novel. The first honorees, in 2014, were Laura Lippman for her body of work and Gwen Florio for her debut novel *Montana*. The second honorees were Nevada Barr for her body of work and Adrienne Harun for *A Man Came Out Of a Door in the Mountain*. In 2016, WNBA-NOLA recognized Sara Paretsky for her distinguished body of work and Christine Carbo for her debut novel, *The Wild Inside*. The judges for the Pinckley Prizes are Constance Adler, Mary McCay, and Christine Wiltz; Susan Larson is the administrator.

A fund-raising event that has become identified with the chapter is the annual Art-of-the-Book contest and auction, which invites artists to submit their interpretations of book arts using recycled materials—everything from jewelry, to woven vests, to extraordinary altered books.

The chapter has also adopted the Metropolitan Women and Children's Center and conducts an annual book drive in December to donate much-needed reading material to the Center.

In 2015, WNBA-NOLA hosted the national board meeting, which included the presentation of the WNBA Award to VIDA founder and poet Amy King.

Programs over the last years have been many and varied. Among the more popular have been visits to libraries and archives. Charles Brown, executive director of the New Orleans Public Library, has kept the chapter up to date on local progress in the challenging post-Katrina years. Susan Tucker, curator of books and records for the Newcomb Archives and Vorhoff Library at Tulane University, gave a presentation on how to maintain personal archives and papers; Hortensia Calvo of the Latin American Library at Tulane University presented fascinating items in that book collection; Liz Williams of the Southern Food and Beverage Museum showed members the treasures of that culinary library. Member Sheila Cork introduced us to artists' books in the New Orleans Museum of Art Collection.

Other meetings have focused on writing. Member Steve Beisner provided an informative introduction to new software available for writers; Dianne de las Casas presented a program on social media for book marketing; Candice Huber of Tubby and Coo's Book Shop offered a PowerPoint primer on the use of social media in establishing

an online presence. Attorney Marie Breaux gave a fascinating lecture on the evolution of copyright law.

Programs have also focused on bookselling, including a look at the role of college booksellers and college bookstores with Peg Kohlepp of Tulane University. Elizabeth Barry Ahlquist of Blue Cypress Books and Maggie McKeown of McKeown's Books and Difficult Music (now closed, sadly) presented an amazing evening of tales from the antiquarian trade, right down to unusual items they've found inside books.

National Reading Group Month events have included a Sunday morning coffee panel of mystery writers at Newcomb College Institute; two Book Club Conferences at the New Orleans Museum of Art; and Readings Round the Bayou in conjunction with local independent bookstores.

Membership grew to 66 in our fifth year. Included in that number are published authors, librarians, publishers, booklovers, editors—and even a couple of men! We do everything with a New Orleans flair. We don't hold meetings in August in case of hurricanes. Wine flows generously at our meetings. We serve extraordinary food at our parties and have hosted some legendary potlucks to celebrate chapter anniversaries. Best of all, our chapter grew out of one enduring friendship between two women. And now there are countless friendships among the 66 of us!