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2009 Florida Writers Conference

by Chrissy Jackson, Conference Director and FWA vice president

October 23-25, 2009 will be the 8th Annual Florida Writers Conference. Each year when we begin to plan, we wonder how we will ever top the last year, yet each year it does get better and better. This year is no exception. A quick trip to our website will give you an opportunity to peruse the workshops available this year, meet the agents/acquisition editors/publishers who are coming, and, of course to register early for the discount rate! You can also download the forms to sell your books in the conference bookstore, organized again by A. J. Robinson, who always does a great job.

Another large part of conference planning is paying attention to member input, questions, and demands. We do an evaluation at the end of the conference, asking for ideas to improve the conference, and last year, we also asked the faculty for their thoughts. Invariably, this produces not only great suggestions, but also queries about why certain things happen. Here are some of the most common inquiries.

How much money does FWA make off the conference each year? FWA views the conference as a membership benefit, and strives for a break-even situation. Some years we lose a little [\$2,000], some years, we lose a lot [\$10,000], and some years we make a little [\$2,000]. Our goal is never to make a lot of money, just to break even. The registration fees are set as low as we can possibly set them and cover minimal expenses.

Why are there sponsors at the conference? That's one of the ways we're able to continue holding down your registration fees . . . by looking for other sources of income. Sponsorship monies help us pay the costs of the conference . . . hotel rooms for the faculty, meals, faculty travel, printing, etc. If we didn't have sponsors, the registration fee would be above \$300.

Why do we have to pay for an appointment with an agent/acquisition editor/publisher? FWA pays travel expenses, provides a complimentary conference registration [including all conference meals], and pays for the full hotel for all of these VIPs. We do that so you, the attendee, may have access to them to pitch your work, ask questions, or make a proposal. By charging a nominal fee, we are able to recoup a little of our expenses in bringing these folks to you. We also ensure that only the folks who are serious about an appointment and ready with their work are booked.

Why do we only get ten minutes to talk to an agent/acquisition editor/publisher? Their purpose in meeting with you is to hear about your book, your marketing plan, or your proposal. If you have practiced your pitch, you should be able to do it in five minutes or less, using the balance of the time to answer any questions they may have.

But what if I need more time for my appointment, can I run over?

That's not an option. There is a timer for each interviewee to take with them to the table when they meet with the agent/acquisition editor/publisher. Each timer is set for ten minutes, and when the timer goes off, the interview is over. Knowing that ahead of time, you need to practice until you can say what needs to be said in that length of time. Running over takes time away from the next person. No one who follows you wants less than their ten minutes of time.

Instead of paying for an appointment, why can't I just talk to whoever I want by sitting at the table with them?

When they are in the Interview Section, they're ready to hear your pitch, focused on your body language and your message. When they're eating or sitting in a workshop, they're enjoying a break from the high pressure arena of pitches. They appreciate your respecting their "down time."

Why were all the front tables in the General Session where we ate always filled with folks who clumped together? It looked like a clique of some sort. When there are folks who will be coming to the podium during the General Session, we ask them to sit in the front row to cut down the time it takes them to walk up. We invite our faculty to sit in the front row as a matter of courtesy, so they can visit with one another and catch up on industry news and other mutual friends. However, as long as there is no "reserved" sign on a table, you are welcome to sit anywhere.

Why do we have a box lunch if we're eating in the General Session room? We did that last year on Friday during the Signature Workshops because some of the faculty members wanted their attendees to bring the meal back to the room to work. In 2009, there will be no box lunches, as we've completely restructured the time table for the conference.

Things are at too fast a pace. I feel like I hardly have time to go to the bathroom, and don't get to visit with FWA friends I only see once a year. This year, we're making huge changes to the schedule to allow time for networking—both with exhibitors and FWA friends. We'll still have our traditional breaks morning and afternoon, but part of that time will be set aside specifically for networking.

Why wasn't there coffee or soft drinks at the breaks? Water just didn't get it for me, and it was extremely difficult to get a cup of coffee at the restaurant or bar. We're changing that this year. There will be water coolers in each of the three halls with cups—by the conference office/registration area, by the General Session doors [Ballrooms D & E], and by the Orchid Ballrooms. Additionally, for the morning breaks at 10:15, we'll have soft drinks and coffee brought into the Grand Hall where exhibitors are set-up. For the afternoon breaks at 3:15, we'll repeat this and add cookies for munching.

The food last year was so good! It was so unlike conference food. Can we expect the same this year? Yes! Abba-so-lutely, you can. The award-winning chef of the Orlando Marriott Lake Mary is still on staff, creating mouth-watering dishes to tempt your taste buds again this year.

Why is the registration fee so high? When we compute what we must charge for registration, we must first cover the cost of meals. We're providing breakfast, lunch, and dinner for Friday plus two breaks. On Saturday, it's breakfast, lunch, and an Awards Banquet Dinner, plus two breaks. On Sunday, it's breakfast and a break. For each individual attendee, that total comes to nearly \$250 per person. The Orlando Marriott Lake Mary, like most hotels that host conferences, allows us to use the meeting space for free, provided we buy our meals there. Their meals are much less expensive than other venues where we've had the conference in the past. The balance of the registration fees cover the cost of faculty travel and lodging, as well as the conference registrations for the dedicated volunteers [but no travel excpts for these folks] who spend all weekend working at the conference.

What is a dedicated volunteer? A dedicated volunteer is someone who agrees to work the entire conference weekend in a particular area. They receive a complimentary conference registration [which includes their meals] and the conference budget pays for half of their hotel room. That means each dedicated volunteer you see working [and there will be twelve of them this year] are not only working their entire weekend, they're paying for half of their hotel room in addition! It is because of their volunteer hours and dedication to FWA and the conference that we can keep our registration fees as low as they are.

Why is it being held in October this year rather than November like before? Holding our conference in November was a direct conflict with the Miami Book Fair for the past several years. That huge event made it harder for us to get agents/acquisition editors/publishers to attend our event, and also was an enormous conflict for our members in the southeastern part of the state. Moving it to October enables us, for the first time in years, not to be in conflict with that event.

Why can't we have real food at breakfast rather than just carbs and fruit? This year, we'll have continental breakfasts again on Friday [because folks need to get their registration packets, eat, and still make the first workshop at 9 am] and Sunday [because folks will be picking up their Silent Auction items where they won the bids, eating, and trying to get to the first workshop], but on Saturday—the biggest, longest day of the conference—we'll have a “real” breakfast with a huge buffet to allow each attendee to have as much or as little of whatever they want. You'll find the table loaded with juices, eggs, bacon, sausage, breads, jams, bagels, fresh fruit, and more.

How much will the sleeping rooms at the Orlando Marriott Lake Mary be this year? Part of our contract negotiations with the hotel resulted in them allowing us to keep the same room rate--\$115 per night—as last year. And, there's free wifi in all rooms, in the lobby, and the bar area.

Last year, two of the workshops I wanted to attend were standing room only, and I went to a different one. Will that happen again this year? No, absolutely not! It has always been really hard to guess which faculty member needs a large room and which needs a smaller room. This year, we've eliminated that guess work, and provided for four equal-sized workshop rooms, each holding about a hundred people.

Several of the presentations each year give handouts and I want to take notes, but it's awkward without a table. We've fixed that! Each of the workshop rooms will have tables set up the entire weekend.

I loved the genre breakfasts last year. Will you do that again this year? Abba-so-lutely! The super-popular Genre Breakfasts will be back on Saturday and Sunday mornings! There will be a stanchion in the center of the table with a genre on it. Find the genre you write, or one you always wanted to write, and join the folks seated there for some interesting conversation.

Years ago, FWA used to offer manuscript critiques at the conference by a qualified person who would review some of our writing, then meet with us at the conference and share insights, including how to make the book stronger. Will you bring that back? Abba-so-lutely! We are! This year, we have two professors from Edison State College, Dr. Doug Houck and John Pelot, winner of the 2009 NISOD award. They will be offering critiques for fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in twenty-minute sessions at the conference. In order to take advantage of this incredible offer, you must mail the first fifty pages of your fiction or nonfiction work, or twenty pages of poetry, along with your check for \$50 made payable to FWA, to Chrissy Jackson, P. O. Box 66069, St. Pete Beach, FL 33736. I will forward your manuscript to them, and our Registration Chairperson, Karleen Tauszik, will schedule you an appointment at the conference.

When will I know what time my appointments are at the conference? Due to so many changes in the conference workshop schedules and last minute happenings, we never confirm appointments until the last minute. When you pick up your materials at the Conference Registration Desk, we will hand you a packet with your name badge, a list of times for your interviews and who they are with, the Conference Schedule of Events, and any other information you'll need to make a big success of the weekend.

Each year, there are so many great workshops, I can't get to them all. How do I know which one to pick? Do I have to pre-register for the workshops? Can I go to all of them? When deciding which workshop to attend, select the one that you think will benefit you the most. There are four concurrent workshops during each workshop slot. You don't have to pre-register for them, just go to the one you prefer. You can go to all of them, by leaving one and going to another, but this is sometimes disrupting to others in the workshop. We suggest you sit in the back of the room if you think you will be leaving, or in an aisle seat. By jumping from one to another, you sometimes miss the gist of the workshop, and end up not really benefiting from any of them.

Last year, you had handouts for all of the workshops on a table. I really enjoyed picking up ones for the workshops I missed. Will you do that again this year? Abba-so-lutely! We will have a table in the main exhibit hall for handouts. As soon as a workshop ends, the room monitor will put all remaining handouts on the table, and you may pick one up.

Why do I need to be a Florida Writers Association member to attend the conference? FWA's Board of Directors sees the conference as a benefit of membership. It is offered at or below cost each year. It wouldn't be fair to pass this incredible opportunity on to a non-member.

FWA has open enrollment though, and paying just \$45 for the annual membership would allow you to attend the conference as well as participate in all of our other benefits. You can even join online: http://www.floridawriters.net/Becoming_a_Member.html

How do I check in to the conference? Follow the signs in the lobby to the FWA registration desk: left out of the hotel lobby, past the restaurant. Give your name, and our volunteers will issue your conference identification badge and your goody bag.

Do I need a receipt or any ID to check in? You should not, but bring it just in case. If you are paying by credit card, we will need the complete billing address for the card. If you are paying by check, it must be your personal check. We cannot accept third party checks. If you have pre-registered, your stop at the registration table should be less than a minute.

How late can I register for the conference? You may obtain a registration form on our website and register by mail, or register online with a credit card through our online store. You may register as late as October 9, 2009. After that date, you should bring your registration form with you when you come to the conference, so nothing gets lost in the mail. Registrations are accepted each morning of the weekend at daily rates, or on Friday for the entire conference.

What forms of payments are accepted at the conference for registration or at the bookstore? We accept cash, personal check, MasterCard, Discover or Visa.

If I've already sent in my conference registration, can I sign up for a mentoring or interview session? Yes. Just mail your check and the interview form to Karleen Tauszik, at the address on the registration form. You may download another registration/interview form at any time. If you have any problems, please send an e-mail to Chrissy Jackson at chrissyj@earthlink.net. All interviews are booked on a first come, first served basis.

What if I have a question about the conference while I'm there? Go to the conference registration desk and ask a volunteer. This is the heartbeat and center of the conference, and they will have answers to everything, or will be able to find someone who does.

What are those little slips of paper I get at each workshop? Please fill out these evaluation forms when the session is over and tell us the impression the speaker made on you in terms of delivery and interaction, knowledge of topic, addressing your questions, etc. FWA needs your help to evaluate each speaker for quality of content and presentation.

Where do I turn in the evaluation forms? Evaluation forms are returned to the box set up at the end of the Exhibitor's Hall, near the Interview Area. For each evaluation you turn in, you will receive a ticket and be entered into the door prize drawing.

Do I need to be present to win these door prizes? Yes, or someone else can have your ticket for you. We draw for door prizes at each scheduled break, beginning Friday afternoon, continuing Saturday morning and afternoon, with the final on Sunday morning. The grand door

prizes will be part of the closing ceremonies Sunday morning. The drawings are part of our networking opportunities. We don't throw away any door prize tickets, except the winners, until the entire conference is over. If the winner is not there during the break when their number is called, their ticket goes back into the bowl. So, a door prize ticket you received on Friday when you turn in your evaluation may well be the winning ticket drawn Sunday morning for one of the grand door prizes, if that particular ticket has not been a winner before.

Can I win more than one door prize? Yes. Each door prize ticket you have is an opportunity to win. There is no limit.

How many mentoring/interview sessions can I have? There is no limit. You may sign up and pay for as many as you like.

What do I do if I can't make my mentoring/interview session? You should make every effort to attend the scheduled session. These sessions usually sell out, and we may not be able to re-book you to another time. If at all possible, we will try to re-book you, but there is no guarantee.

How do these one-on-one sessions work? This session is a chance for an in-depth conversation with one of the faculty members to find out more about their area of expertise. Interviews with publishers and agents at our conference give you a chance to make a personal pitch about your work.

Are the guest agents and publishers open to receiving submissions at the conference? Absolutely! That's why they're here! They want to meet with our attendees during scheduled interview times to hear your query and your pitch. Each year, many contracts are given either at the conference, or immediately following. Part of the process the Faculty Chairperson goes through in selecting those agents/acquisition editors/publishers we invite is to make sure they are buying manuscripts.

Is it permissible to leave a workshop to go to my mentoring/interview session? Yes. All faculty members are aware of interviews taking place, and know their attendees may be leaving during the presentation. Please leave as discreetly as possible, and be sure to turn in your evaluation form for that workshop, even if you don't get to stay for the entire time.

Will there be informal networking sessions other than the meals? Yes, there will be a Welcome Reception Friday evening prior to dinner. Later that same night, will be the Annual Open Mic session. On Saturday evening, before the Royal Palm Literary Award Banquet, there will be a Royal Palm Literary Award Reception. And, part of the thirty-minute scheduled breaks on Friday afternoon, Saturday morning and afternoon, and Sunday morning will be dedicated time for networking with other attendees and exhibitors in the Exhibitor Hall where beverages will be served.

May my spouse join me at breakfast and/or lunch, or for workshops? If you purchase meals for your spouse, they will receive a registration badge that allows them to enter the room for meals only. The volunteer door monitors will know what to look for on the badges. If a spouse wants to attend workshops with you, you must register them for that day of the conference.

What is there for a spouse not attending the conference to do? We're a short hop from Disney, SeaWorld, Universal Studios and all the other wonderful Orlando attractions. The conference hotel has a pool and fitness center. For more ideas, visit the Orlando Marriott Lake Mary website: <http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/mcoml-orlando-marriott-lake-mary/>.

What is the Royal Palm Literary Award Competition? It is our annual writers' contest, culminating in awards given out Saturday night at the Royal Palm Literary Award Banquet. Complete information about the RPLA can be found on the FWA website.

Is there a separate charge for the banquet? No, the banquet is included with your registration for the conference, as are all other conference meals.

What is the dress code for the banquet? There is no set dress code. Some folks come in formal dress, others in semi-formal and still others in casual. The important thing is for you to be comfortable and to celebrate being a writer among your fellow writers.

How do I volunteer to work next year's conference? Complete one of the "I Want to Help" forms found in your registration packet to offer your time, and let them know which area interests you most.

Why don't you have some way to identify the lines at the Registration Desk, especially on Friday morning when it's so busy—separations by alphabet letters, or something? Well, there is no room on the table to put signs and if we did, no one could see them. If we tape them to hang down in front of the table, again, no one could see them. If we hang them from above, there is a \$25 charge from the hotel for each hanging. We feel the best way is just to move the line quickly through. Bear in mind, that if you are pre-registered, you should be able to stop at the first person, pick-up your registration packet, and get busy enjoying the conference. If there is a problem with your registration for any reason, or if you are registering at the conference, you will be directed to the next person behind the table, so as not to delay everyone else.

Is there anything for nonfiction writers? Is there anything for children's writers? Is there anything for stage/screen writers? Abba-so-lutely, there is! This year, for the first time, we'll have workshops for all of the above, in addition to memoirs, fiction, publishing, legal ramifications of contracts, PR and promotion, and several on various aspects of the craft of writing. Also new this year are three early morning writing workshops which should spur your creativity . . . writing from word or picture prompts.

Sometimes the speakers don't talk loudly enough for me to hear. I hate to miss what they say. Is there anyway to get a microphone for some of the more soft-spoken faculty? This year, because the meeting rooms are so large [each will hold over 100 people seated at tables] there will be a microphone in every workshop.

Open Mic Night is a great thing, but five minutes is so long to listen. Can it be shortened to three minutes? The length of time permitted generally depends on the number of folks who want to read. We want to give everyone who wants it an opportunity, so sometimes it is three minutes, sometimes it is five minutes.

It would be great if author signings and the bookstore in general would be open to the public. It would increase our traffic and potentially our sales. That's a really great idea. However, implementation isn't that easy. Since we are the only group in the hotel for the weekend, there are very few members of the public around. And, since everyone who goes past the Registration Desk must have a registration badge, it's not possible for the general public to get to the bookstore. We agree it would be nice, but we're struggling with logistics.

The hotel was so cold – can you warm it up? We will try. We would suggest that you plan for cool rooms and bring a sweater or light jacket. Normally, convention hotels keep the meeting rooms cooler than normal to account for the increased number of people in a smaller area [generating more body heat] and for many of the attendees who wear a suit or sport coat.

I loved meeting with an agent at the conference, but the interview process was a little awkward. Can you smooth it out a little? Abba-so-lutely! We have done that! First, we're moving it to a more private area at the very end of the Exhibitor's Hall. That puts it closer to the workshop rooms. We're also going to have a tent card with the agent/acquisition editor/publisher/faculty member's name in large letters for easy identification. Finally, we'll have a timer for each interview session. When you arrive for your scheduled session, you'll be given a timer to take with you to the table. When it goes off, your time is up. It allows both you and the person with whom you have your appointment to stay on track. We also will have three dedicated volunteers for the Interview Area this year. They will work to make sure all faculty knows of their appointments as well as help facilitate people coming and going. We'll also have chairs in that area for you to sit down if you're a few minutes early for your appointment.

I was so impressed with the quality of the door prizes, and loved being able to choose from among a group when my ticket was drawn. Will you do that again? We will! Additionally, if the person who donated the door prize is in attendance, we will allow them to draw the winning ticket for their item. That allows the recipient to thank them directly for their donation.

I know it was the first year for the Silent Auction, but it seemed a little complicated and disorganized. The items were jammed too close together. Picking up my items was not smooth, either. I was impressed with the quality of the donations, though. More signed books would be nice. There was a huge variety and I liked that I did some of my Christmas shopping there! We are already hard at work on the Silent Auction for the 2009 Conference. This year, though, we're going to do a much better job of organizing the donated items. We will be grouping like items together in baskets or boxes to make it easier to bid on them. We also feel some of the confusion last year was simply because it was our first stab at a Silent Auction and the first one for attendees, too. We've initiated some smoother paperwork procedures behind the scenes to make cashing out go quicker, and will open earlier on Sunday morning to facilitate everyone. Check out the Silent Auction website and see what's been donated so far this year . . . then go back often, because Karen Lieb, Silent Auction Chairperson and Florida Writers Foundation President, keeps updating it as new items are donated.
<http://fwa2009conference.blogspot.com/>

I attend several writers conferences each year, and yours is one of the most organized and well-run I've seen. Everyone seems so happy. Please keep it that way. I've already decided

that FWA's conference is on my very short list of not-to-be-missed conferences every year!

Thank you. We have a really great group of super dedicated chairpersons and dedicated volunteers who work together to give you the best conference ever – then do it all over again next year! We know that the conference is for you, and we want you to get the most out of it and have fun while you're learning more about your craft, pitching to an agent/acquisition editor/publisher, and networking with other FWA members. We're here to make your weekend something to remember!

Some other conferences put the genre on the name tag. That made it easier to identify other writers with whom I'd have something in common. Will you consider that? We used to do that, but it became very cumbersome. It's amazing how many genres are out there, how many variations of each, and it was just too much for the registration chairperson to keep up with. Additionally, if we put too much information on the badges, it has to be so small, it's hard to read. So, we opted instead for the Genre Breakfasts to allow those writers of like genres to meet, exchange contact information, and mingle.

The conference was so great, I really enjoyed it, but I'd like to know if it's possible to have name badges that hang around the neck. Not all shirts are easy to clip a tag on. You're right, and we've already secured a sponsor for this year who will be providing lanyards for our name badges.

The conference team was wonderful. They shared, constantly showing what a close team they were and how much fun they were having. That just drew everyone more into the entire event and made it better. It was one of the strongest conference committees I've ever witnessed at any type of conference. Thanks. We work very closely together for most of the year just to make this one weekend happen and make it a success. So, we are a closely knit bunch. Camaraderie is all part of "Writers Helping Writers" which is the FWA motto, and we try to exemplify it in everything we do.

I loved the meals, but I really would enjoy hot tea with my meals. I was able to get it, but it took time. Could you do anything to make this easier? Well, we'll certainly try. The goal of the kitchen and wait staff, obviously, is to get hundreds of multi-course meals out while they are hot, and in a reasonably short amount of time. This means they don't have as much time to bring hot tea, or coffee, or even a glass of milk until all meals are served. That said, however, if you mark this request on your conference registration under "special dietary restrictions" as a request, we'll do all we can to make it happen in a more timely fashion for you.

When setting up the workshop rooms next year, please consider a smaller center aisle with a narrow aisle at each side. I sat near the wall, and when I had to leave for my interview appointment, it was difficult. This year, that should be no problem. There will be tables and chairs in each meeting room, with a center aisle and side aisles. In the large general session room, Ballrooms D & E, there will be round tables, but still, there will be plenty of room to walk around them.