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# Teresa Miller ready to turn a new page after 25 years teaching writing

She is retiring after 25 years of teaching writing to give full-time focus to her own writing.

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Teresa Miller is stepping away from teaching writing to focus on her own work. Miller is about a third of the way through the first draft of a novel she has titled "Provenance." "It's a book about bearing witness — and the courage it takes to do that," she said. MIKE SIMONS/Tulsa World

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By JAMES D. WATTS JR. World Scene Writer | 0 comments

Teresa Miller had not planned to tell the students in her Advanced Fiction Writing class at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa that the May 5 session was more than just the last class of the semester.

"I always like to have a potluck dinner for the final class — it's something that's been ingrained in me by my Southern grandmothers," Miller said. "I hadn't intended to say anything, but I was just struck suddenly by what a turning point that moment would be in my life.

"I've truly adored my students — they've challenged me to be a better person and a better writer," she said. "So, in just the last few minutes, I mentioned that this had been



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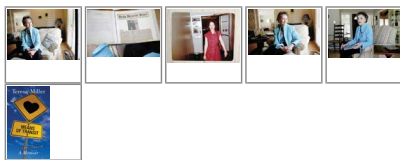
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the last class I would ever teach.”

Teaching writing wasn't what Miller set out to do — she laughingly refers to her career in the classroom as “a 25-year detour.”

But her teaching career led to the creation of the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers, which Miller founded in 1994 and has brought writers as diverse as Maya Angelou, Pat Conroy, Dennis Lehane, Anne Lamott, Frank McCourt, A.R. Gurney, Dave Barry and Neil Gaiman to Tulsa.

It also led to “Writing Out Loud,” a weekly TV program in which Miller would interview writers from around the country, airing Mondays on KOED, channel 11.

“I think Teresa Miller is one of Oklahoma’s most valuable natural resources,” said Cindy Hulsey, adult service coordinator for the Tulsa City-County Library. “She is a dynamo and has consistently produced excellent

programs which have raised the level of Tulsa’s literary profile. She makes it look easy, but I know how much heart and soul she pours into each event.”

“I think it’s impossible to gauge the significance of Teresa Miller’s impact on Oklahoma writers and writing,” said Rilla Askew, whose award-winning novels include “Fire in Beulah” and “Kind of Kin.”

“Teresa has helped put Oklahoma on the literary map, of course, by bringing America’s premier writers to Tulsa,” Askew said. “In fact, she’s been one of the primary forces that has helped the larger world to become aware that there is such a thing as Oklahoma literature.”

Miller’s writing classes also have helped shape the talents of a number of published writers, most notably the best-selling novelist P.C. Cast.

“I owe Teresa Miller a debt that is impossible to repay,” Cast said. “Her excellence in teaching and unflagging enthusiasm for my writing helped me finish my first manuscript more than 15 years ago. She helped me hone it into a publishable piece of work and introduced me to my agent, Meredith Bernstein. And Teresa Miller has continued to be my friend and my mentor.”

But now, Miller is leaving the classroom behind to pursue the career she intended.

“It feels like my life is coming full circle,” Miller said. “I started out with the goal of being a full-time writer, and that’s what I intend to do from now on.

“That’s why I don’t want to say I’m retiring,” she said. “The way I see, I’ve just changed jobs, because that’s what being a full-time writer is. It’s a job, and you have to devote yourself to it if you’re going to accomplish anything. At least, that’s how I feel about it.”

Miller is about a third of the way through the first draft of a novel she has titled “Provenance.” Set in Miller’s hometown of Tahlequah, the story revolves around a missing child, and the one person who witnessed the crime.

“She doesn’t realize what she saw at the time,” Miller said. “She also has to come to terms with some of the secrets in her own life that she has also witnessed, and that she has allowed to remain hidden for too long.

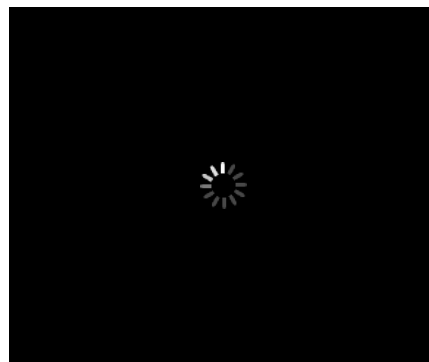
“It’s a book about bearing witness — and the courage it takes to do that,” she said.

Miller said “Provenance,” like her previous books — the novels “Remnants of Glory” (1981), “Family Correspondence” (2000) and the memoir “Means of Transit” (2008) — draws a great deal from her personal history.

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"And a lot of that history was so painful that I wasn't willing to process it creatively," Miller said.

That includes the death of her mother when Miller was just 2 years old, a trauma that she dealt with in her second novel, and several years when Miller was being pursued by a stalker, a terrifying episode she relates in "Means of Transit."

"I was basically on the lam for several years because of that," Miller said. "When you're focused on your day-to-day survival, when you know that something terrible could happen at any moment and there was no way anyone might stop it, it's difficult to think of anything else."

One person who has been encouraging Miller the most to devote herself to writing is the novelist Pat Conroy, whose friendship with Miller began when he took part in the 2006 Celebration of Books.

"We talk by phone all the time, and he's really helped me understand about drawing on one's personal history," she said. "Pat's been so encouraging — he's even offered to be my editor for this book."

Miller plans on recording a final "Writing Out Loud" show that will air in September.

As for the fate of the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers itself, Raj Basu, vice president for academic affairs at OSU-Tulsa, said in a statement that the university plans to put together a search committee to find a new leader for the center, and the "Writing Out Loud" program "will be evaluated once the search is complete and the new individual is in place."

"I would love to see the center continue, of course," Miller said. "But, for me, if I have to leave it behind, then the event we just had with Neil Gaiman is a great thing to out on. Seeing that kind of turnout for an author — that was one of those you live for when you host events."

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