The Library of Virginia: Start Your Affair with Books

by Jan Hathcock

For 175 years, the Library of Virginia (and its predecessors, the Virginia State Library and the Virginia State Library and Archives) has been known in the academic community as a center of research and scholarly discussion. Librarians and writers across the country knew that there was a priceless resource waiting for those well-skilled few who could access its treasures. In the past few years, however, the library has discovered another way, another path we can tread to reach out to new audiences.

We are demonstrating that the library is not just a place to research and write your book; it can be where you come to start your affair with books.

In the past few years, our halls have echoed with the laughter of children meeting storybook characters, with warm applause for a deftly turned phrase about *Mr. Jefferson's Women* or *Rhett Butler's People*, and with the percussive ring of Bob Carlin's Virginia banjo.

For an old institution, one of the first state agencies created by the Commonwealth of Virginia, the transformation has been very quick. Many factors played a role, but the opportunity for such a shift occurred with the move to our new location on Broad Street in downtown Richmond. Finally, the library had not only the public spaces for programs but also free parking for visitors.

One of the first steps on this new path was to build on our commitment to preserving Virginia's history and heritage by honoring the contributions of Virginia writers. The Virginia Authors Room in our new building already was a magnet for visitors to the library. We knew that Virginia was home to legions of talented individuals whose books filled our collections and those of libraries around the state. We decided to initiate an annual award for the best writing by a Virginia author—or in the case of nonfiction, by a Virginian or on a Virginia topic.

New relationships with the literary community have been forged through the awards.

The success of the 1st Annual Library of Virginia Awards Celebration Honoring Virginia Authors and Friends far exceeded our expectations. As renowned American Civil War historian James I. "Bud" Robertson, winner of the first nonfiction prize, said in accepting the award, "The award means so much more when it comes from your home state." The prestige of these awards has grown through the years and has reinforced the Library of Virginia's place in the preservation of our written heritage. New relationships with the literary community have been forged through the awards. Area book clubs routinely ask for the list of nominated books so they can make their reading selections. Publishers, authors, and readers eagerly submit nominations for the awards. Through the literary awards program, the public began to identify us with Virginia authors and literature.

With the literary awards we made the first steps toward a new image that built on the library's mission, moving it from a place revered by a few to its current position as one of the most visited cultural sites in the metropolitan Richmond area.

How did we make such a major shift? In 2005, we realized that the Library of Virginia itself was a great asset in telling our story and reaching new audiences. We had marvelous space, so we began to plan for programs with a broader appeal that still maintained the strong connection to our mission and past. We began to solicit authors of fiction and poetry as well as respected nonfiction authors. Now we feature talks not just by histo-

Jan Hathcock *(Jan.Hathcock@lva.virginia.gov) is public information and policy coordinator for the Library of Virginia. She has been with the library since 1988. Prior to joining the library, she worked at the Department of Labor and Industry, the Office of the Attorney General, the General Assembly, and the Secretariat of Commerce.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIERRE COURTOIS

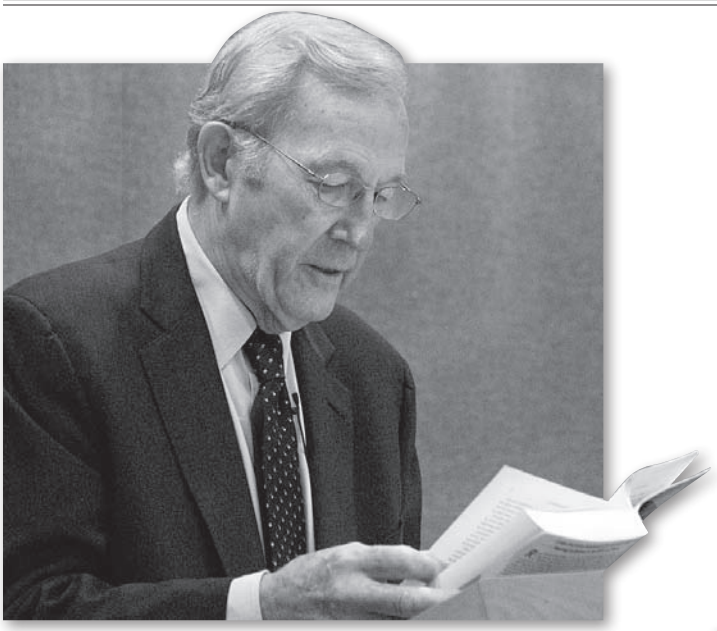
rians whose research offers fascinating and valuable insight into the lives of our founders or the aftermath of the civil war, but also writers with a more popular bent speaking about the first female pope or life as an award-winning broadcast journalist.

A key factor in our success has been the financial support of the Library of Virginia Foundation, which has allowed us to mount a targeted marketing program and stretch our advertising budget. Our foundation regularly communicates with donors about upcoming events. These efforts have resulted in greater attendance and enthusiasm for our programming. Visitors have the opportunity to hear an author speak and a chance to learn more about the Library of Virginia. Many become members of the foundation as a result of attending a book talk and signing up. More

Above left, Tony Horwitz at the book signing after his talk on his new book, A Voyage Long and Strange.

Above, Woody Holton discusses Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution *at a noon talk at the Library of Virginia.*

Left, author Eleanor Herman signs Mistress of the Vatican: The True Story of Olimpia Maidalchini, the Secret Female Pope.



Left, retired broadcast journalist Roger Mudd reads from his memoir, The Place to Be: Washington, CBS, and the Glory Days of Television News.

Below, Governor Tim Kaine chats with Tom Wolfe, recipient of the Library's Lifetime Achievement Award, at the 10th Annual Library of Virginia Literary Awards Celebration.

than a few come back to visit our Virginia Shop or tour an exhibition. They come to take pride in the library and its outstanding collections and programs.

In 2004, there were 11 book talks at the Library of Virginia, attracting 528 visitors. Warren Billings, Catherine Clinton, Dean King, and Warren Hofstra were among the authors who discussed and signed their books at the library.

This year, in the first eight months, those numbers have blossomed to 24 book events, with more than 2,034 in attendance. Among the authors making appearances at the library in 2008 were Woody Holton, Larry Sabato, Tony Horwitz, Eleanor Herman, Gene Hackman, and Roger Mudd. These authors—building on the foundation of all the wonderful writers who helped us establish the book talk program—have attracted large and enthusiastic crowds. Now, publishers and authors are coming to us to hold book signings and launches. The library has truly become a stop on the literary map, not just for authors, but for book lovers as well. ■