

# **TOURISM WRITING**



# **TOURISM WRITING**

**A New Literary Genre  
Unveiling the History, Mystery,  
and Economy of Places and Events**

**Mary S. Palmer**



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*Tourism Writing: A New Literary Genre Unveiling  
the History, Mystery, and Economy of Places and Events*

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# **DEDICATION**

*To all who helped me along the way  
on my own literary journey*



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Author's note: Although the examples used in this book refer to Alabama and surrounding states, similar types of less known unique places and events exist in all fifty of the United States, waiting to be sought out and revealed to readers. To appeal to all types of bibliophiles, instead of a didactic recitation, interviews and short stories illustrate why Tourism Writing is vitally important.

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# FOREWORD

*by Congressman Jo Bonner*

Once again, one of Mobile's most gifted authors has been tasked with the ultimate challenge, penning *Tourism Writing: A New Literary Genre Unveiling the History, Mystery, and Economy of Places and Events* in time for the celebration of Alabama's Bicentennial birthday in 2019.

When I was afforded the high honor of representing my home state in the U.S. Congress, I had the pleasure of co-chairing the bipartisan Congressional Travel & Tourism Caucus with my good friend, Representative Sam Farr, a Democrat from California.

Sam and I rarely saw eye-to-eye on most of the political battles of the day. But we were in complete agreement when it came to raising public awareness about the economic importance of travel and tourism, whether in his beachside cities on the Pacific Coast or on my more remote coastal communities along the beautiful Gulf of Mexico.

If you don't think tourism and travel are big business, just check out the number of travel magazines and books next time you are at the grocery store, local library or bookstore. The reason there are so many publications is because travel and tourism are really big business.

For instance, domestic and international travelers generated \$2.1 trillion in economic output in 2013, supporting a total of 14.9 million American jobs. The travel sector is also America's largest service export, fueling one in every nine U.S. jobs.

Therefore, it only makes sense that tourism literature is a vitally important way of introducing the reader to the splendors of a community; the really good writers are able to use their pen and paper to paint an inviting portrait of a place one must visit.

No one is better qualified to spark the imagination and talents of a whole new generation of future authors than Mary Palmer. Her book, *Tourism Writing: A New Literary Genre Unveiling the History, Mystery, and Economy of Places and Events* may well become the spark plug needed for an entirely new generation of writers. As they say, buckle up and have fun on the journey!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Bonner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jo Bonner  
U.S. Congressman (2003–2013)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# **A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF FAULKNER UNIVERSITY: MOBILE CAMPUS**

Dear Readers:

Recently, as I unlocked my office and entered, I noticed someone had slipped a paper under the door. It was a note from a student. He wanted to explain the reason that he walked out of one of his classes. He stated, "I was bored...." Although that may not have been justifiable it shows that students today need more than facts; they need adventure. Tourism Writing can fulfill that need and make education come alive.

Education is more than sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture or reading a textbook. Educating oneself can be discovered through the eyes of an adventurous tourist. This is true whether you choose to step out of your back door and enter into a world of knowledge about your local area, or opt to travel long distances seeking educational adventures.

Teaching students how tourism affects our economy and how it impacts our environment can help develop a higher level of understanding and possibly a desire to become involved. One of the assignments I gave my students was to pick a local event or attraction in our area and write a persuasive speech about it. The assignment became a great tool to promote tourism. Several of the students went to the attraction or event to learn more about it and came back with a new appreciation for our local area.

Years ago, a friend, whose husband's job required them to move frequently, told me that when they relocated to a new place she considered it a vacation. She took advantage of the opportunity to explore the area and visit as many of its interesting sites as possible. She commented that it surprised her how many people who had lived in that area most of their lives had not visited local tourist attractions.

As Nelson Mandela rightly noted, "Education is the powerful weapon which you can use to change the world (OBI CHINEDU BASIL, University of Calabar, Nigeria, FTMS Magazine, Maiden Edition). Education is the powerful weapon with which tourism development and sustainability can be achieved. Adding Tourism Writing to college courses can provide students with that weapon.

Diane Newell

# INTRODUCTION

*by Patrick Miller*

## WHY

The first question people usually ask me about the Southeastern Literary Tourism Initiative—SELTi for short—is how it all got started. The idea first crystalized after I entered one of my short stories into a competition for Southern gothic fiction in 2008. The inspiration for the story's setting had come many years earlier when I was fifteen and a friend and I had taken a short road trip to Cahawba, the ruins of Alabama's first state capital from 1820. The bustling river town had been abandoned in the latter part of the nineteenth century, leaving behind a mysterious place between the confluences of two beautiful rivers. We were fascinated by the powerful and sad inscriptions on the antebellum gravestones. One still stands out strongly in my memory: the message on a seventeen year-old's headstone: *Everything Bright Must Fade*. How could her grieving parents have known on the day of her burial that one day the town itself would become the neglected tombstone of a long-forgotten dream? There were stories to tell in this place, but many of those stories were lost forever.

One way to bring them back was through the vehicle of fiction. Many years later, when I learned about the Southern gothic writing contest, I wrote the short story inspired by Cahawba called “The Last Confession.” The story was accepted as one of ten that were included in the anthology *Southern Gothic Shorts* by PJM Publishing. I thought other readers might enjoy visiting the place that inspired the story, so I asked the publisher if he wanted to include an article about Cahawba on his website in connection with the anthology. He loved the idea, and we put it together, me writing the content and him producing the graphics for the article. I wrote a press release about the project, and two state newspapers ran a feature about how the fictional story could generate tourism to the real setting through the online article and web links.

Those newspaper articles were the first media attention my fiction received, and naturally I was pleased with the result. However, I kept wondering: wouldn’t it be great if there were a website that featured lots of different fictional stories written by lots of different authors about lots of different places to visit? After all, if the idea of directly linking fiction to tourism is good in Alabama, wouldn’t it also be good in Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, the Carolinas, and all the other Southern states? And if writers did produce stories like that all over the South, wouldn’t it be better if they were all linked together rather than being many different unconnected projects?

I researched whether a website or project like that existed and quickly found that it did not. The closest project was the Southern Literary Trail, but that was limited to classic twentieth century writers like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Harper Lee. What about something for twenty-first century writers?



The more I thought about the idea of tourism fiction, the more it all made sense. Readers would enjoy stories set in places they could visit versus places that didn't exist. If they visited the places, then they would talk about them more to their friends and family, which would sell more books. Selling more books would generate more profits for publishers, more commissions for agents, and more royalties for authors. Cities that were featured in stories would bring in more tourism dollars, which would mean more consumer spending in local hotels, restaurants, and retail shops on top of whatever attractions were visited. All that extra spending would also generate more tax revenue and jobs.

States and cities often spend huge sums of money trying to attract conventions for the tourism revenue. Why not spend a smaller portion of that amount on trying to attract fiction writers to feature their area's best attractions? Places like Cahawba were already ideal places for a story, so that would be an easy sell. All the writers had to do was set their stories in places that were really interesting and then, at the end, invite readers to visit. The cities and states that they wrote about would help publicize the books in ways that traditional fiction books never benefitted from. After all, what writer or publisher wouldn't want to benefit from the powerful marketing engines of a state and city tourism agency to help create buzz about a new book? And what state or city wouldn't want a commercial fiction writer to invite their readers to come visit their best tourism attractions that were just featured in a new novel or anthology? Given the choice between setting a novel in a real place and garnering that kind of extra publicity or setting a novel in a fictional or nondescript place and fighting it out in the competitive fiction market, most writers would choose the extra publicity.

The problem was that no cities or states were offering that extra publicity yet. No publishers or literary agents were asking for tourism manuscripts. In bookstores and Amazon, there were nonfiction travel sections but no “fiction travel” sections where all the novels were set in real places. There were no social media groups or chat rooms where readers conversed about their favorite tourism novels and even made plans for group tours. There were no bestseller lists for tourism novels because there were no tourism novels to be on a list yet. There were no financial incentives or grants for tourism fiction being offered by cities or states. There were no tourism fiction classes or writing programs being taught in college English classes, much less English degrees with a tourism fiction focus.

At the same time that none of this was happening, the publishing industry was going through painful upheaval by the arrival of tablet readers like the Kindle and Nook, both of which had the capability to embed tourism website links directly into a novel or short story anthology (although that wasn’t happening because there were no tourism novels yet). Also at the same time, the tourism industry was going through the painful upheaval of the Great Recession, where potential tourists were less likely to spend more money on travel. Cities and states that relied on tourism dollars for desperately needed revenue were slashing budgets and payrolls for important public services to try and survive the difficult economic climate.

My thought was that both the publishing and tourism industries could strengthen each other by becoming partners along with public tourism agencies and visitor bureaus. After all, if a tourism novel were to bring in an extra one thousand tourists, then that would be the equivalent of a convention of a thousand people. What if a tourism novel brought in an extra one-hundred-thousand tourists? That

would be the equivalent of one hundred conventions of a thousand people each! What city wouldn't want to benefit from that ramped up level of extra tourism dollars?

As I stated, however, none of the publicity or market infrastructure was in place yet to do any of this. Everything had to start somewhere. I had entered a contest and gotten my short story published in an anthology. The story had been featured in the media locally. What was the next step?

I did what many people were doing at the time: I started a blog. Although I had never used HTML code before, the new services made operating with it very user-friendly, much like computers themselves had become much more user friendly than in the eighties. I determined that every feature on the blog would include fiction or poetry set in real place. Each feature would also highlight the place with photos, links for readers to learn more, and especially a direct invitation for readers to come visit the place.

The first story published on the blog was "The Last Confession" with a longer online tourism guide than the one from the original contest. However, I quickly sought out other writers to contribute. Soon, a poet from Tupelo named Patricia Neely-Dorsey contacted me about publishing an excerpt on SELTI from her Mississippi-inspired poetry book. I had a great deal of fun working to complete that project with her, and we are still friends. She loved the tourism connection and her work has now earned her status as an official Goodwill Ambassador for the State of Mississippi.

I started seeking out published novels set in real places around the South and producing online tourism photo-features for them on SELTI, with links to the places and to the stores that sold the books. All of the features are still available online in the SELTI archives at <http://southeasternliterarytourisminitiative.blogspot.com/>.

One of the things I loved about novels was that they could introduce readers to multiple places rather than the one or two in a short story. None of the novels I profiled first on SELTI directly invited readers to visit the places or provided them with links at the end; the SELTI features were done after the book was published, so it was too late to add a tourism guide like that inside the novels themselves. Being intrigued by the new tablet readers and their Internet capabilities, I published my novel *Blind Fate*, set in Montgomery, on Kindle and included all the tourism links at the end with a brief tourism guide. Since no other novels had done that yet with a tourism focus, *USA Today* featured the novel in an October 2011 article. The *USA Today* article caught the attention of the Alabama Tourism Department, which plugged the article into their tourism newsletter. The development director of the University of Alabama Museums read the article from the state newsletter and contacted me about doing a project with her institution. And so began SELTI's—and the nation's—first tourism fiction contest, which would open up a whole new chapter in SELTI's future.

*Mission Statement: SELTI seeks to enhance the public reading experience while improving local economies by encouraging writers to compose works of tourism literature. Tourism literature is inspired by real locations and also includes an invitation and guide showing readers how to visit the settings.*

## WHEREFORE

I arrived at Moundville Archaeological Park in November of 2011 to meet Kelli Harris, the Development Director for the University of Alabama Museums, and Dr. Bill Bomar, Executive Director of Moundville Archaeological Park. Moundville had once been the capital city of a Native American river empire but was found abandoned by the earliest European explorer who found only large empty mounds. To this day, no one knows for sure why Moundville was abandoned by the Native Americans about five hundred years ago: the perfect mystery for fiction writers to try and solve.

As I gazed at the haunting mounds just inside the park's entrance gates, I felt the power of the place creeping into my soul and my imagination. If I were writing a fictional story about this place, I would have the tale begin with some archaeologists discovering something very intriguing—but what? Rather than write the story myself, I thought it would be interesting to open the challenge up to many writers and see what they came up with. I proposed a short story contest on this concept to Kelli and Bill, who agreed the idea was worth trying, especially since Moundville was connected officially to the nearby University of Alabama, a wealth of talent. The contest would be open to the public, free to enter, and require writers to compose short stories set in Moundville. The winning story would be published online at SELTI and include a short tourism guide with photos and links like the other features. Three University of Alabama English professors would judge the entries.

Like many Alabama natives, I had visited Moundville on a field trip during grade school. Since then, Kelli and Bill had overseen a multi-million dollar capital campaign for the park which resulted

in renovating the old 1930's building into a stunning new museum exhibit. Also, each October, a large Native American festival was held at Moundville with thousands of tourists and exhibitions of authentic Native American crafts and culture. All of this sounded perfect for the contest project. I was excited to experience the unleashing of creative writing applied to a specific tourism attraction like Moundville. The local newspaper, the *Tuscaloosa News*, helped to publicize the contest through an article.

Once the entries came in, I was amazed at the level of writing and how well it fit the purpose of promoting Moundville and bringing it alive through fiction. The stories were beautiful, powerful, and even evocative. However, one story's concept jumped out with genius. A woman named Kathryn Lang opened her story with two archaeologists discovering the body of a white female buried in the mound—the victim of a murder from only twenty years before. Two investigators were trying to figure out who the victim was and how she ended up buried in a mound that should have only held the remains of Native Americans from centuries—not decades—before. I would have never thought of that idea on my own, and it showed me the value of opening up these challenges to see what writers would create.

I wanted to shower publicity on Kathryn and the contest, so I developed the first SELTI Tourism Fiction Award, to be presented to Kathryn at the October Moundville Native American Festival. The presenter was Kathryn's state senator Clay Scofield, who also served on the state's Tourism and Marketing Committee. On the day of the award, a reporter named Stan Ingold from Alabama Public Radio came out to interview all of us, including myself, Kathryn, Dr. Bomar, and Senator Scofield. The interview is still available on APR's archives

online. Senator Scofield used his speech at the festival to ask all writers to consider promoting unique Alabama attractions through their fiction. This was the first time any politician in the nation had called for something like that and was an important first step.

Like the *USA Today* article, the radio interview caught the attention of someone else who wanted to participate in a SELTI project. Olivia Grider, who was starting a lifestyle magazine with her husband Randy featuring the Lookout Mountain area in northeast Alabama, heard the interview. She contacted me and asked if SELTI could cosponsor the next contest with their magazine, *Lookout Alabama*. Perfect timing for all of us. The winner of the Lookout Alabama contest would not only have their story published online at SELTI but also in the Grider's beautiful new print magazine. In addition, the Alabama Tourism Department offered to sponsor a first place prize of \$500. The two county tourism councils helped the magazine spread the word about the contest to the local community and through the media. The magazine got New York Times bestselling author Homer Hickam to help judge the contest, which helped gain more media exposure.

The winner of the contest, Natalie Cone, wrote a touching story featuring the scenic setting of Desoto State Park. She had also included as one her real settings a real bookstore and clerk in downtown Fort Payne, which was a wonderful touch. The magazine was launched in the spring of 2013 at Cook's Castle, a storybook location on its own that could have inspired a story. Senator Scofield presented the second SELTI Tourism Fiction Award to Natalie, this time with a check from the state tourism department.

There were five finalists in the Lookout Mountain SELTI contest. The finalists' stories were so good that the Griders published all

of their stories in separate monthly editions of their magazine. Moving forward, I found that reading several stories about the same area provided a deeper understanding of the area than just one story, a development that would prove true in every contest.

The third contest featured the Mobile Bay area, which included cities like those across the bay, such as Fairhope. The Baldwin and Mobile County governments helped to promote the contest to the media and community. Once again, the range of stories showed the many layers of tourism attractions in the area. The winning story was written by Mary Palmer, a local college English instructor who composed a story highlighting the family-friendly nature of Mobile's Mardi Gras parades. This time, the SELTI Tourism Fiction Award was presented by the local congressman, Bradley Byrne, at the colorful Mobile Mardi Gras Museum. Congressman Byrne also gave a short speech on the floor of Congress honoring Mary's story and inviting others in the nation to consider how the idea of tourism fiction could benefit their districts as well.

After the contest, another local English professor began challenging her students to compose works of tourism literature, which I then published online at SELTI. This was the first time this type of writing had been assigned and taught in a college class, another important beginning for the future genre. After all, what if someday every college English creative writing program in the country were training future writers how to promote tourism attractions in their fiction? What would be the ultimate impact of that on the tourism and publishing industries as some of those writers went on become national and worldwide bestsellers? We were taking the first steps in tourism fiction through SELTI, but the concept of tourism fiction



would grow far beyond us once it caught on. In order for that to happen, it had to start somewhere.

By the time of the Mobile SELTI contest, Kathryn Lang had joined the SELTI team and gave a talk to the crowd at the award presentation. Natalie Cone, a former SELTI contest winner, was one of the judges of the contest. I was staying in touch with each winner, and eventually, that would help with the formal organization of SELTI as a nonprofit instead of a blog. When it came time to nominate board members for SELTI, Kathryn and Mary Palmer were obvious choices.

The fourth SELTI contest featured the Huntsville area, home to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. I was sure Huntsville's high-tech culture would produce a winning story that highlighted the future, but it was actually a haunting tale about Huntsville's distant past that won the contest. Natalie Cone's short story "Haunted Identity" won, but the city judges had no idea who she was until after they had voted for her. I liked judging that was blind to any aspect other than writing talent. Natalie's story wound together Huntsville's historic district in a unique and ultimately touching way that defines so much of her writing. She was presented with the 2015 SELTI Tourism Fiction Award and \$500 prize at the Inaugural Rocket City Lit Fest, a gathering of many local writers, publishers, and readers.

The fifth SELTI contest focused on one of Alabama's—and the South's—most important historical towns: Selma. In 1965, a large group of Civil Rights protestors were severely beaten while trying to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the edge of Selma. Civil Rights protestors had been beaten before, but not so dramatically on national television by state troopers. The nation was horrified at