



Val McDermid is one of many writers inducted into the Saints and Sinners Hall of Fame.

## Saints and Sinners Literary Festival

by Frank Perez

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The Saints and Sinners Literary Festival, an annual glbtq-themed literary festival held each May in New Orleans, has become one of the world's most influential celebrations of alternative literature.

Launched in 2003, the festival was created by the NO/AIDS Task Force as a means to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and also to bring together the glbtq literary community in New Orleans.

The name "Saints and Sinners" was suggested by mystery writer and NO/AIDS Educational Director, J.M. Redmann.

Within a few years, the festival grew in significance and now attracts about 250 glbtq writers, publishers, and readers from all over the United States.

The four-day festival typically features panel discussions, writing workshops, master classes, and public readings and performances. In the past, the festival has sponsored a full-length playwriting contest and currently hosts a short fiction contest.

Saints and Sinners founder and Executive Director Paul Willis, co-editor of the Lambda Award-winning anthology *Love, Bourbon Street* (2007), sees the festival as a means of promoting literature and its role in glbtq life.

As he observes, "Literature has long nurtured hope and inspiration, and has provided an avenue of understanding. A steady stream of GLBT novels, short stories, poems, plays, and non-fiction works has served to awaken lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons to the existence of others like them, to trace the outlines of a shared culture, and to bring the outside world into the emotional passages of GLBT life."

In the early years of the festival, fundraising dinners were featured where donors to the NO/AIDS Task Force could have dinner with visiting authors. The dinners became difficult to coordinate and to work into an increasingly crowded schedule and are no longer held, but they were a significant part of the program in the early years.

The New Orleans-based John Burton Harter Charitable Trust became a major sponsor of the festival in 2010. Their support is particularly important in underwriting the festival's annual short fiction contest. (The John Burton Harter Charitable Trust is a non-profit foundation that aims to preserve, publish, and exhibit the works of the late artist J. B. Harter, in addition to funding scholarships, exhibitions, and projects relating to the artist's lifelong aesthetic and philosophical interests and involvements.)

In 2011, a festival anthology was launched to publish the winning works and contest finalists of the short fiction competition. *Saints & Sinners 2011: New Fiction from the Festival*, edited by Willis and Amie Evans, featured the winning story, "Fishwives" by Sally Bellerose, as well as works by John Morgan Wilson, Felice

Picano, David-Matthew Barnes, 'Nathan Burgoine, J.R. Greenwell, Jeff Lindemann, Tasha C. Miller, Noel Alumit, Suzanne Hudson, Cecilia Tan, and Joe Formichella.

The 2012 volume, also edited by Willis and Evans, features ten stories, including the winner of the contest, "Wasted Courage" by Jerry Rabushka, and the two runners-up: "Pink Moon" by Pat Spears and "Wimpy and Rattlesnake Albert" by Jim Stewart.

The festival has also established a Hall of Fame. Inductees are chosen based on their contributions to the glbtq literary community through various avenues including writing, promoting, publishing, editing, teaching, bookselling, and volunteering.

Saints and Sinners Literary Festival Hall of Fame members include Dorothy Allison, Ann Bannon, Lucy Jane Bledsoe, Maureen Brady, Patrick Califia, Bernard Cooper, Jameson Currier, Mark Doty, Jim Duggins, Otis Fennell, Michael Thomas Ford, Katherine V. Forrest, Nancy Garden, Jewelle Gomez, Jim Grimsley, Tara Hardy, Ellen Hart, Kenneth Holditch, G. Winston James, Michele Karlsberg, Joan Larkin, Lee Lynch, William J. Mann, Stephen McCauley, Val McDermid, Tim Miller, Michael Nava, Achy Obejas, Felice Picano, Radclyffe, J.M. Redmann, David Rosen, Steven Saylor, Carol Seajay, Kelly Smith, Cecilia Tan, Patricia Nell Warren, Jess Wells, and Paul J. Willis.

Most of the Hall of Fame honorees have participated in the festival, as have such other notable authors as Michael Cunningham and Christopher Rice, among many others.

The Saints and Sinners Literary Festival operates as a subsidiary of the annual Tennessee Williams Literary Festival and is underwritten by the John Burton Harter Charitable Trust, private donations, and participant fees.

### **Bibliography**

Evans, Amie M., and Paul J. Willis, eds. *Saints & Sinners 2011: New Fiction from the Festival*. Hulls Cove, Me.: Rebel Satori Press, 2011.

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J. B. Harter Charitable Trust website: <http://www.jbharter.org/info/trust.html>

NO AIDS Task Force website: <http://www.noaidstaskforce.org/>

Saints & Sinners Literary Festival website: <http://sasfest.org/>

### **About the Author**

**Frank Perez** is a former Associate Professor of English and the author of numerous articles of literary criticism and rhetorical history. He has also co-authored a book on the history of gay New Orleans, *In Exile: The History and Lore Surrounding New Orleans Gay Culture and Its Oldest Gay Bar*. He currently lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans.