



Literature

Sanderia Smith Is on a Mission to Bridge Dallas and SMU Through Literature

Professor Sanderia Smith kept Dallas in mind for this year’s literary festival at SMU, which is headlined by Nikole Hannah-Jones of the 1619 Project.

By Taylor Crumpton | March 17, 2022 | 3:00 pm



Bret Redman



Sanderia Smith wants to build community through literature. She lived that idea when she moved here in 2005, finding comfort at the Tulisoma Book Fair in South Dallas.

The late Dallas City Councilman Leo Chaney, Jr. partnered with Dr. Harry Robinson, the founder and CEO of the African American Museum, to start Tulisoma—which is Swahili for “we read”—in 2003. They wanted to bring culturally relevant programming to South Dallas, bringing people together around the written word.

Nearly two decades later, Smith, who is an author and a professor at SMU, is using that same ethos in organizing the Dallas Literary Festival, which kicks off on Friday with four days of programming that will take place at venues across Dallas.

Her most basic goal for this year's selection of cultural, political, and social programming is to inspire attendees to "pick up a book." National Book Award finalist David Treuer will be on hand for a conversation about the true history of Indigenous people in the United States. New York Times opinion columnist Charles Blow will discuss the influence of misinformation on the public as well as how poor representation in American newsrooms impacts news delivery. The headliner is Pulitzer Prize winner Nikole Hannah-Jones, who will deliver a keynote on America's origins and its future, which she brought to the forefront with her 1619 Project.

Smith centered authors of color in the lineup, including panels on diversity in book publishing, how stories and memoirs take on justice, understanding mental health, and the role small publishers play in American cities.

"What I've done with the literary festival is take that initiative and take literature into the communities that could be served from it," she says. "My thought process in doing this was the school to prison pipeline, and how most inmates are illiterate."



According to the [Literary Project Foundation](#), three out of five people in U.S. prisons cannot read. Smith is also the co-leader of PEN America's Dallas-Fort Worth chapter, a national literacy organization that provides [contests, workshops, and fellowships for incarcerated people](#).

The programming is Smith's way of building on her employer's initiative to bring SMU into Dallas, expanding beyond the borders of University Park. SMU President Gerald Turner and Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson have both supported marketing that places billboards of student athletes in the neighborhoods where they grew up. SMU has gone even deeper in recent years, partnering with Dallas ISD to [create a STEM school in West Dallas](#) for K-9 students. SMU is also offering continued education for Dallas ISD teachers.

Smith sees the Dallas Literary Festival as an extension of these efforts. It's not just at SMU. It's at the African American Museum, the South Dallas Cultural

Center, and at Dallas Public Library facilities. Her vision has the support of the student senate, as well.

Last summer, she presented her initial list of keynote speakers to the group, a list that included poet Amanda Gorman and New York Times bestselling author Angie Thomas, among others. But the student senate unanimously approved Hannah-Jones.

The timing was important. Gov. Greg Abbott had just signed into law House Bill 3979, which banned the teaching of “critical race theory” in K-12 classrooms. In many ways, the 1619 Project was at the center of that controversy.

Smith sees the student senate’s decision as similar to what happened in 1965, when the senate again invited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to SMU. In 1963, King’s planned speech at SMU had been canceled at the behest of the mayor, police, the FBI, and the school’s president. But they invited him once more, two years before Dallas public schools began integrating. On March 17, 1966, King spoke to a standing room-only audience in McFarlin Auditorium.

“As a senate, we have always stood about bringing conversations, bringing speakers, and bringing topics to our campus, to our students, that allow for each student to decide what they believe and what they think is right”, says Austin Hickle, president of the student senate. “By bringing someone like Nikole Hannah-Jones, we are allowing that conversation to flow, and continue much past the festival.”

Menu

Subscribe



That’s why I get so excited about this festival, because it’s a spark for long-term conversations and solutions to what we can do within the senate, within SMU, within Dallas, and in our larger nation and world.”



Courtesy of SMU

The keynote closes the festival on March 22. Before that, there are more than 100 sessions scheduled with local and national authors. Those include Dallas creatives like Morgana Wilburn and Ilknur Ozgur of the performance arts group Artstillery. Author Jim Schutze will be in discussion with commissioner John Wiley Price, focused on Schutze’s *The Accommodation*. D Senior Editor Zac Crain will chat with fellow authors Alex Temblador, Dalia Azim, and Sophia Terazawa.

“What I’ve been trying to prove is that we have good talent here locally, and we match up to the national talent,” says Smith.

She also hasn’t forgotten what she learned by attending Tulisoma.

“I want the African American community to feel welcomed to literature. And it’s the reason why I wanted to start out in the communities to say you are welcome here,” she says. “Because it’s one thing to say come, it’s another thing to say you’re welcome.”

The Dallas Literary Festival is free to attend. All you have to do is register. [Here’s the schedule.](#)

Get the FrontRow Newsletter

Get a front row seat to the best shows, arts, and things to do across North Texas. Never miss a beat.

Email*

Author



Taylor Crumpton

[View Profile](#) →

Taylor Crumpton is the former online arts editor for FrontRow, *D Magazine’s* arts and entertainment blog. She is a proud...

;

in (12/02/21)

is arrived in the U.S. as Biden's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for healthcare
a federal judge.

in (08/31/21)

dents to get vaccinated. Pandemic unemployment benefits to end next