

1997 Recipient of Hobson Prize and Medal

McCorkle charms audience with talk of "home"

Drawing from vivid memories, acclaimed author Jill McCorkle opened her heart to the Hobson Lecture audience April 14 with tales of growing up in a small North Carolina town. Her intriguing storytelling follows a style she refers to as "the meandering method," and her narrative includes quirky characters and recollections that tickle the senses.

"I'm usually introduced as someone from 'the South,'" she began, "which implies that of course I've spent lengthy time in every Confederate state and am well versed in the history of each. Then it's up to me to erase those pictures of Monticello and Tara, New Orleans and the Everglades, Opryland and Atlanta, and lead them south of Williamsburg and north of 'South of the Border,' east of Tennessee and west of the Atlantic. I offer mountains, sandhills and the coastal plain, finally settling in the southeastern part of the state in my hometown."

"As to the question about my writing well, I find it hard to believe that I will ever, regardless of where I am, feel removed from my origin. We all have that place in memory that stirs emotions, inspires us to do whatever we do. And mine is North Carolina, more specifically Lumberton, still more specifically this region as it was in the sixties and early seventies. That's my fictional source, the backdrop I envision when creating characters and situations, and it's a place and time that offer me a smorgasbord of sensory images, images that never change; without them, I would never have felt the urge to write a word."

Her words painted a colorful portrait of landscapes, seasons, stirrings and activities that speak to the soul and carry readers into a world of "sweaters over sunburned skin . . . smells of cut grass and watermelon and chlorine from the local pool . . . tending thick rows of corn, the silks ranging from white to pink to a dark tangled brown . . . marveling at the funny accents of people who stop at the Texaco station on the corner."

The audience listened intently in the dim lecture hall as if hanging on every word. As she spoke, it was easy to relax and envision the scenes she described and it was apparent that traveling to a less complicated place was a comfort.

The acclaimed author has published five novels including, *July 7th*, *The Cheer Leader*, *Tending to Virginia*, *Ferris Beach* and her latest, *Carolina Moon*. *Crash Diet* contains a collection of short stories.

McCorkle's bright eyes sparkled with fondness as her former English teacher took the podium. Introduced by James M. Chamblee, chair of the Hobson Prize Nominating Committee, Allene Gane presented the affirmation.

President Stanley Lott offered appreciation to Charles M. Hobson III, son of Mary Frances Hobson, and the Hobson Family Foundation for granting Chowan the honor of hosting the prestigious event. Together, they awarded McCorkle the 1997 Mary Frances Hobson Lecture and Prize for Distinguished Achievement in Arts and Letters during the conferral program.

McCorkle received her bachelor's degree in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her master's in creative writing from Hollins College in Virginia. She has taught creative writing at UNC-Chapel Hill, Tufts University and in The Bennington Masters of Fine Arts program. Currently serving as the Briggs-Copeland Lecturer of Creative Writing at Harvard, McCorkle is also on the executive board of PEN New England. She lives near Boston with her husband and two children.

Special guests at the event included McCorkle's mother, Melba, friend Lucy Simmons and family pastor William Tuck, all of Lumberton.

The Mary Frances Hobson Lecture and Prize for Distinguished Achievement in Arts and Letters was established by the Hobson Foundation as a memorial to journalist and poet Mary Frances Hobson. The first two recipients of the award were Kaye Gibbons, a North Carolina Nash County native and Mark Richard of Franklin, Va.



A "junk food junkie" by her own confession, Jill McCorkle posed in Ward Parlor beside the bouquet of her dreams.



Below, Charles M. Hobson III (left) and President Stan Lott prepare to present acclaimed author Jill McCorkle with the Hobson Medallion.



Robert John, of Virginia Beach, Va., (right), relaxes with members of his family during the commencement brunch. John received a BS in business administration at the graduation exercises.