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Common things, uncommon ways

By James E. Thomas

Rheta Grimsley Johnsons' keen, intelligent eyes stare back at the audience gathered on the landing of the Edward M. Chadbourne Library on Pensacola State College campus on the cool Wednesday afternoon of Mar. 15 as she begins to speak about her latest book.

“Write about the common things in uncommon ways.” she says, putting her own spin on a famous quote by Booker T. Washington, as she gives some advice to those gathered; knowledge she's learned over her long and illustrious career as a journalist and author.

Her eyes are framed by small, horn-rimmed glasses, and her curly, silvering, brown hair frames her face in the afternoon light that shines in through the large windows of the library. Her appearance and her light Southern drawl only adds to the modern day Southern-lady air she gives off as a small smile curls up the corners of her lips, accentuating the well-earned wrinkles around her eyes as she continues.

Johnson is an award-winning reporter and columnist best known for her work for “The Atlanta Journal & Constitution”.

However, Johnson now spends her time writing a weekly column for “King Features Syndicate”, and writing memoirs; her most recent of which is “The Dogs Buried Over The Bridge: A Memoir in Dog Years”.

Johnson has spent much of her life traveling all over the country, especially her native South.

During her career she's lived everywhere in the South from Atlanta, GA, to Memphis, TN, the Cajun country of Louisiana to Montgomery, Ala. and most places in between in her search for stories and the truths of life.

Johnson's writing has always been motivated by finding the common truths in everyday people and events, and this shows in the authors and musicians that she draws inspiration from.

"He stuck with things that never changed. With love, and loss, and jealousy, and the human condition basically." Johnson recalled while speaking about famous cartoonist Charles M. Schultz, creator of the Peanuts cartoon strip; who's biography she also wrote.

Much of Johnson's inspiration is also drawn from Hank Williams, who she is a self-professed fan of.

"Hank William's songs are the same way. He knew the same things Charles Schlutz knew. Sixty-four years ago he died, and people are still singing his songs... And why? Why is that [his music] such powerful stuff? It's the same reason "Peanuts" has survived; it's because he sang and wrote about the verities."

For Johnson the verities [irrefutable truths] and the language are what writing is all about, and for her Hank Williams' music perhaps portrays those two things the best.

“In three minutes and thirty-nine seconds he [Hank Williams] wrote the most powerful love story that you will ever read or that's ever been written in the song “Cold, Cold, Heart”... He packed a punch by using the right words, not too many words. And as a writer he's one of my heroes, because that's what writers strive to do every day. Song writers do it [writing] best.”

It's this kind of truthful, evocative, to-the-point writing that Johnson strives for in her own works. As she says, “In my work I have 550 words to tell some pretty complicated stories... You have to use evocative language. You have to use the right words. You have to use strong verbs, and you have to grab 'em by the lapels and pull them in to your story. You don't have time to mess around.”

Perhaps more people should try to see the world through the eyes of a writer like Johnson, and her words are certainly ones to be remembered, a verity in their own right for sure.