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Kathleen Kent, a Texas-based historical novelist turned crime writer, is a featured speaker at this year's Gold Rush Writer's Conference.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHLEEN KENT

BY RACHEL LEIBROCK / rachel@newsreview.com

Mining for inspiration

The annual Gold Rush
Writer's Conference
helps writers forge
literary mettle

Fourteen years ago, Antoinette May experienced a literary epiphany. The Foothills-based writer had recently sold her first novel, *Pilate's Wife: A Novel of the Roman Empire*, securing a sweet advance.

It hadn't been an easy path to publication.

While May had already enjoyed success with the New York Times bestselling nonfiction book *Adventures of a Psychic*, she struggled to find a publisher for her debut novel. When she finally signed with HarperCollins, she knew she needed to help demystify the writing and publishing process for others.

"I thought: 'If that can happen to me, it can happen to other people,'" May said in a recent phone interview. "I wanted to share my story."

She had hosted mini sessions in her house, but now it was time to expand. In 2005, May launched the Gold Rush Writers Conference in Mokelumne Hill, a rustic '49ers-era community, 11 miles south-east of Sutter's Creek.

The 14th annual Gold Rush Writers Conference takes place May 3-5 at the Hotel Leger and includes panels, workshops and lectures with poets, novelists and memoirists.

That first conference was small, about 25 people, May says. Now, she expects many times that number, including returning attendees.

Compared to other writing conferences, the Gold Rush conference is intimate and laid back, following the same format each year: An afternoon party, a picnic supper, poetry in the library, workshops and readings and a Sunday brunch. This year, May, who recently became emeritus director, will focus on leading a master class workshop limited to seven students.

The conference's continued growth means it can attract marquee speakers such as this year's headliners, Joe Quirk, a science writer and novelist, and Kathleen Kent, a Texas-based historical novelist turned crime writer.

Kent says she's looking forward to the conference's rustic, intimate setting.

"It's a small group [that's] passionate about learning the craft, so I'm on board," said Kent, whose most recent book, *The Dime*, was short-listed for an Edgar Award in 2018.

As the Saturday night after-dinner speaker, she plans to discuss the craft of contemporary crime writing, including pacing, narrative voice and engaging the reader.

"Some of these things I learned along the way and it took me a while," Kent says. "When I wrote the first 100 pages of my [first crime novel] and turned them in, my editor's feedback was that it needed to be better."

In short, she says she hopes she can help others avoid the same pitfalls she initially faced. "I was learning how to jump and swim upstream," she says. "I'm going to be talking about my mistakes."

It's that level of frankness and guidance, among other elements, that sets Gold Rush apart, May says. Unlike other conferences, there are no agents present—which means less pressure to network and wrangle deals.

"There's TLC," May says. "It's not competitive; it encourages people to exchange ideas, to learn what's new." □

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Antoinette May
founder, Gold Rush Writers
Conference

The Gold Rush Writer's Conference takes place May 3-5 at the Hotel Leger, 304 Main Street in Mokelumne Hill. Registration is \$215. Visit goldrushwriters.com for more information.