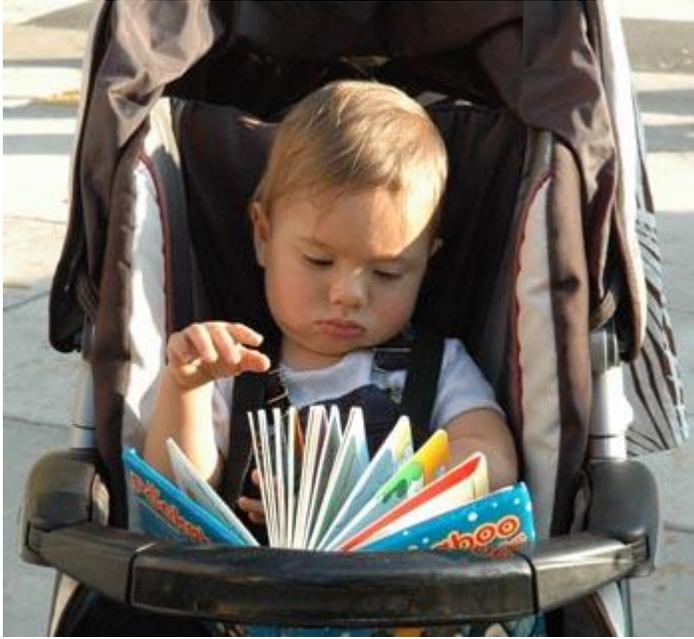


A Fair to Remember

Miami's premiere literary event turns 25

By Tina Koenig



It's never too early to start reading, as a toddler discovers at the Miami Book Fair International

Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde once said, "Life is never fair, and perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not." Alas, poor Mr. Wilde never got to visit Miami in November, where life is a fair of the literary kind.

This year the Miami Book Fair International celebrates five squared years of bringing books and the people who write them to downtown Miami. The event, which runs from November 9 through November 16, hosts day and evening events with more than 350 authors from the United States, Latin America, Caribbean, and around the globe. It is the flagship event of Miami Dade College's Florida Center for the Literary Arts, which, in partnership with independent bookseller, Books and Books, have been its sponsors since 1983.

Headlining the Book Fair's Evening With series is award-winning broadcaster and *New York Times* bestselling author, Tavis Smiley. Smiley along with Cornel West—one of America's most provocative intellectuals—will engage the audience in a discussion of America's changing social and spiritual crossroads. Other Evening With headliners include Gore Vidal, Russell Banks, and celebrity chef, Anthony Bourdain. Former U.S. Poets Laureate, Billy Collins, Robert Hass and Mark Strand, will also read from recent works. Free tickets are required for admission to Evening With presentations.

Supplementing author appearances and readings is the annual street fair, with its mantle of exhibitors counting fiction and nonfiction publishers, children's alley, literary presses and antiquarian book dealers. Adding edgy adventure to the pantheon of publishers this year is Comix Galaxy, a series of exhibitions and learning opportunities that organizers have billed as a universe's worth of comprehensive programs on the graphic novel.

Graphic novels are a relatively new literary category in North American publishing. With its roots firmly planted in the comic strip tradition, the term graphic novel has come to suggest a story told with pictures that has a clear beginning, middle and end, as opposed to a being strictly a sequential series. Unlike some classic comics of yesteryear, graphic novels are not necessarily humorous and frequently deal with mature themes. More recently, though, the form has expanded to include children's themes and multi-volume stories.



Tavis Smiley, one of the featured authors at the Book Fair's Evenings With... series



Local author James Grippando

in various South Florida venues.

Lissette Mendez, programming coordinator for the Center for the Literary Arts, and an avid comics reader, helped realize Comix Galaxy.

"Comics have a history of being considered low art," said Mendez. "I don't like to make a distinction between low art and high art. The distinction should be between good art and bad art. In traditional novel publishing, a lot of people make distinctions between genre writing and literary as if literary novels are somehow better than, for example, a crime novel or mystery. Just because a book is a literary novel doesn't mean it's automatically better than a good mystery."

To increase awareness of graphic novels and Comix Galaxy, Book Fair organizers asked artist Art Spiegelman to design this year's poster. In 1992, Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for his graphic novel, *Maus*.

Also fresh this year is the Cultural Fringes Festival. Designed to mirror Scotland's famous Edinburgh Fringe Festival, over 35 arts organizations have joined together to present opera and theater performances, photography, film and art exhibitions that will run concurrently

The Miami Book Fair International has come a long way since its inception in 1983, when, according to the much told anecdote, a New York publisher quipped: "They read in Miami?"

"I cannot tell you the number of people who have told me over the years that the Book Fair is the most wonderful cultural event in our community, that they look forward to it with more enthusiasm than any other," said President of MDC Dr. Eduardo Padron. "That says something about who we are—a community that values reading and literacy and the world of ideas and understanding. We should revel in that."

Authors and fair organizers alike have sentimental, amusing, and occasionally prophetic memories from the fair.

Marzi Kaplan, a resident of Aventura, (no relation to Books and Books owner Mitchell Kaplan) is a former member of the Book Fair's board of directors and a fairgoer and volunteer since its inauguration. Over the years, Mrs. Kaplan has squired around many renowned authors. Her most surreptitious assignment: monitoring the alcohol consumption and watering down the wine of a prominent writer who book fair organizers wanted to keep sober for his presentation.



Dave Barry, who has appeared at the Miami Book Fair as a writer and a musician



Susan Cumins and Roselyne Pirson at the Miami Book Fair International kick-off party in September Photo: Mary Damiano

"The fair draws a remarkable variety of very strong poets, political writers and humorists including Nobel Laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners," Kaplan said. Her most sterling memories include hearing the writers Czeslaw Milosz, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante as well as early feminists writers like Betty Friedan. Also unforgettable were the hordes of Night of the Living Dead look-alikes that vampire chronicles writer Anne Rice attracted.

Coconut Grove resident and writer Susan Cumins first got involved with the fair when Mitchell Kaplan opened the now legendary bookstore in Coral Gables, Books and Books.

"I was chairman of the cultural affairs committee of the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce. Mitchell joined the committee, proposing a book fair for the Gables. This was 1982 or '83," Cumins said. "Planning for the Gables event, which was held only once in Ponce Circle Park, and the fair at the Wolfson Campus of MDC, took hundreds of volunteer hours, but became the prototype for literary events that now span the country."

Cumins couldn't point to one particular fair as most memorable. "They're all equally exciting and equally exhausting." She did, however, share a few insider stories. "We do get divas sometimes. Connie Francis had to be picked up in a white limo; emphasis on white. Martha Stewart's publisher sent her to the street fair in the early '80s. She wasn't even among the presenting authors, just in the publisher's booth, ready to sign books. Nobody paid much attention to her that year."

Of the hundreds of writers who've graced the podiums, panels and author's lounges of the Miami Book Fair International, few have appeared as many times as Dave Barry.

The quadrennial presidential candidate and former *Miami Herald* columnist turned novelist has been to the book fair every year except one when his band, The Rock Bottom Remainers, played at the Texas Book Fair.

"My best memories involve the Remainers, who have played at 17 fairs, in many incarnations, with many guest authors and musicians, including Warren Zevon and Roger McGuinn," said Barry. "I remember standing on the stage trying to sing 'Louie Louie' with Art Buchwald, who kept shouting into my ear, 'What are the words?' I kept answering, 'Nobody knows!' Also, one year Carl Hiaasen played guitar with us, except that he was just learning the guitar, so he brought his guitar teacher on stage, to stand next to him. All night long we heard the teacher shouting chords at Carl— 'A! OK, next one is E! Now! OK, next one is A again!'"



Gore Vidal will appear during the Evenings With series



Sara McCranie and Lissette Mendez at September's Miami Book Fair kick-off party

With all the celebrities, it's not unusual for the authors themselves to get a little star struck. This year, Florida-native and fiction writer, Tim Dorsey, will be attending his ninth fair.

"Some of the best memories were from that first festival in 1999, when I had my first book out and got to meet many of my heroes such as Carl Hiaasen and Dave Barry. Edna Buchanan even came to my talk!...I hope the Fair never stops."

Preston L. Allen, a winner of a State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowship in Fiction and the Sonja H. Stone Prize in Literature, is the author of the novel *All Or Nothing*.

"I remember the first year I attended very well, 1996, because I got into a fender bender that delayed me for so long that I got there just in time for my reading," said Allen. "I had been there before in previous years, of course, as a fan and room host and/or introducer of other writers, so I knew how exciting it was. Throw all of that experience out of the window. There is nothing like having a room full of readers listening to your presentation and then coming up later to have you sign the book."

Looking back, Allen said meeting Gregory Maguire, author of *Wicked*, “ranks right up there at the top” as one of his best fair moments.

Carol Boyce Davies is a professor of Africana Studies, English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. She first attended the fair while teaching at Florida International University.

“My best memory is seeing and listening to Senator Barack Obama before he began his historic run,” said Davies. “He was promoting his second autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*. At that event, a young woman referred to him as Mr. President. How prophetic! Clearly Miami Book Fair was ahead of the game on this issue.”

Author James Grippando’s favorite moment was joining hundreds of other book lovers and singing “Miami Book Fair, OK” to the tune of “Oklahoma”, led by Garrison Keillor. His most bittersweet moment was in 1994, during his first book fair.

“The street fair was rained out. But even in a washout, Miamians came out to see their newest local author,” said Grippando. “The fair was just 10 years old, but with that kind of support I left happy, knowing that so many people loved the fair as much as I did, and knowing that the fair was here to stay.”

After serving the community for 25 years, the fair is a high point in Miami’s history.

“I remember the thrill at the very first Book Fair, watching from the wings, as James Baldwin spoke of his self-imposed exile in Paris,” said Fair founder Mitchell Kaplan. . “He was joined onstage by Heberto Padilla, a wonderful, recently exiled Cuban poet. The auditorium was packed with an audience which reflected the diversity of Miami, and everyone in the room felt that all of us in Miami had just crossed a literary threshold.”

After 25 years, there can be no room for doubt: As long as there are books, there will be a community of readers counting down the weeks, days and hours until the start of the next one.

“The legacy of that very first Fair can be seen in almost every aspect of the development of Miami’s literary reputation over the next 25 years,” said Kaplan. “We now live in a community filled with writers of every sort, we have a remarkable literary center in the Florida Center for Literary Arts, there are two vibrant



A young Miami Book Fair attendee enjoys the fun at the Children’s Alley

writing programs at FIU and UM, and Miami is now thought of very differently than it was back before the Miami Book Fair. It is widely acknowledged that readers here are as sophisticated as readers anywhere else; something we can all take pride in.”

The 2008 Miami Book Fair International runs from November 9-16. The weekend street fair runs from Nov. 14-16. Tickets are required for many of the evening events and are available free through the fair’s website. In past years, there has been a nominal entry fee of \$5 (parking is additional) to attend the weekend’s street fair and author readings. For the complete schedule of authors and programs, visit www.miamibookfair.com.

Have a comment about what you’ve read? E-mail letters@miamiartzine.com.