

As Miami Book Fair International celebrates 30 years, 'it's all about literary culture,' co-founder Mitchell Kaplan says



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The book publishing industry has been turned on its head, but Miami Book Fair International is stronger than ever.

With more than 250,000 attendees and about 500 authors in eight days of events, the fair is a strong reminder that people have a passion for the written word in physical form.

Many of the big nonfiction author events are featured on C-SPAN, and journalists from all over the country cover it. Buses full of readers come from Palm Beach and Naples. Some visitors even fly in, as this could be their only chance to meet their favorite authors.

"It was a forerunner of the arts in Miami," **Miami Dade College** President Dr. [Eduardo Padrón](#) said. "It was the first event to get a national and international reputation, and to be the largest fair in the country. Many other cities come to see how we did it."

How did one of the country's largest book fairs emerge in Miami, and what has it done for our culture?

It started in 1983 when the main Miami-Dade County Library, which at that time was in Bayfront Park, wanted to hold a book fair, and approached Miami Dade College about borrowing tables, Padrón said.

"I went to Barcelona and Buenos Aires, and was impressed by book fairs, but we didn't have book fairs like that in America," he said.

Padrón met with a group from the library and [Mitchell Kaplan](#), who had opened Books & Books only a year earlier. The college raised the money, including corporate donations, and the literary

experts brought in the authors and organized the event.

"We started the fair the first year and, to our amazement, it grew to 25,000 people," Padrón said. "It was very difficult because who wanted to come to Miami? We weren't known as being a place for serious readers. At that time, we had to beg publishers to bring authors. Now, the publishers beg us to include their authors."

Kaplan said he was confident the fair would be a success from the very beginning because Miami has a sophisticated group of readers. Once publishers saw the turnout at the first fair and how it kept growing, it was easy to get big-name authors, he said.

"Miami was a place that was having an identity crisis," Kaplan said. "It put Miami on the map. There are so many interesting writers who came down and saw Miami for what it was."

Books & Books' staying power

Books & Books is the only remaining bookstore of the three that organized the fair. It's the official retailer for books by featured authors, including signed copies. Kaplan chairs the fair's board of directors and has been instrumental in landing big authors, who are often making their first visits to Miami.

"To me, it's all about literary culture," Kaplan said. "I'm not a merchant at heart. As much as we can expose people to the great writers of the last part of the 20th century and the early part of this century, we've done our jobs."

Miami's book fair is the most influential in the nation, not just because of its large attendance, but because of its inclusivity, Kaplan said. It includes books in Spanish, Portuguese and Creole, with authors flying in from Latin America and the Caribbean.

[T.D. Allman](#), who first spoke at the fair in 1987 for Miami: City of the Future and will appear this year for Finding Florida, his book on the state's controversial history, said the fair has taken advantage of Miami's position between North America, South America and Europe to become a global event. He marvels at how well the event is organized, given the busy schedule.

"The book fair represents what people in Miami do best: They take nothing and make it into something," Allman said. "One of the indications of Miami's emergence as one of the most accomplished cities in America is this book fair."

Reaching thousands of children

It also includes one of the largest children's programs at any book fair. More than 9,000 children participate in the book fair, some bused in for events during school hours and some have authors visit their schools and give them free books.

[Lissette Mendez](#), director of programs at the book fair and parent Florida Center for the Literary Arts, said the fair has almost doubled the number of authors since she joined in 2004, and much of the growth is in children's authors and programming.

"The Miami Book Fair is the best in the world in their commitment to children's programming," said

[Johnny Temple](#), publisher with Brooklyn-based Akashic Books. "It is very sophisticated in the depth of their programming for kids, not just at the festival, but at schools, as well."

The book fair also added comic books and graphic novels, which will have their own space at the fair, Destination: Comics. Kaplan suggested their inclusion five years ago, pairing traditional literature readers with fans known for colorful conventions.

"What I love about the Miami Book Fair is it's very diverse," said [Charles Kochman](#), editorial director of comics at New York-based Abrams Books. "You're getting a demographic across all lines. It's an indication of what real people are reading as opposed to a targeted demographic."

Abrams Books, best known for the "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" series, has gone to the Miami Book Fair for eight years. This year, it's sending three authors, as well as Kochman, who will discuss The Art of [Rube Goldberg](#) with author [Jennifer George](#). He's most impressed with the sustainability of the fair, as a large book fair in New York didn't last this long.

Akashic Books has had a booth at the Miami Book Fair for nine years, making it one of a handful of events where it turns out in full force, Temple said. The fair a great fit for its focus on Caribbean authors.

"We sell a large amount of books, but it took us some years of going back to get to that level," Temple said.

Akashic Books is one of 250 vendors with booths at the Nov. 22-24 street fair. There have always been bookstores and traveling booksellers, but in recent years, there have been more self-published authors and independent publishers, Mendez said.

"In the past, we would never allow a one-author booth," she said. "Authors are having to be more and more responsible for their publicity, and you are doing all the legwork."

Self-publishing has exploded because e-books have brought down the cost.

Response to digital

E-book sales accounted for 14 percent of consumer spending on books and 30 percent of unit sales in the first half of 2013, according to Bower Market Research. However, their growth is much slower than in the prior year. Sales of paperbacks are holding up well, while it's the more expensive hardcover books that are taking a beating. Borders went out of business, and **Barnes & Noble** has been struggling.

"If you judge by the number of people who continue to come and books that are sold, the fair doesn't seem to show any decline in the book industry," Padrón said.

Many e-book authors have had difficulty capitalizing on events like the book fair, but some innovations are cracking the door open. The Rock Bottom Reminders, a garage band of all-star authors including [Stephen King](#), [Amy Tan](#) and [Dave Barry](#), are playing at the event to promote their e-book Hard Listening: The Greatest Rock Band Ever (of Authors), which is a charitable tribute to their late founder, [Kathi Kamen Goldmark](#).

Since there isn't a physical book to sell, Mendez said the book fair would sell post cards with QR codes that link to an e-book download.

Books & Books is also embracing digital. Visitors to its website can download books onto a Kobo e-reader or app, with part of the proceeds going to the store, Kaplan said. Kobo, an exhibitor at the fair, has signed many partnerships with independent bookstores.

Books & Books recently started exclusively broadcasting the author signings at its store on its website.

"There are so many wonderful events that some people can't catch, so we wanted to give them an alternative," Kaplan said. "The more ways people get to our website, the better off we are. The more they buy books at our website, the better off we are. We also have signed books we can sell online."

NOTABLE BOOK FAIR EVENTS:

See www.miamibookfair.com for locations. Some events require paid tickets.

Nov. 17

7:30 p.m.: [Dan Brown](#), author of *Inferno* and *The Da Vinci Code*

Nov. 18

6 p.m.: [Joe Scarborough](#), co-host of MSNBC's "Morning Joe," talks about the future of the GOP

Nov. 19

7:30 p.m.: Dinner with chefs and cookbook authors [Norman Van Aken](#) and [Scott Conant](#)

Nov. 20

8 p.m.: [Carl Hiaasen](#), author of Florida thrillers and **Miami Herald** columnist

Nov. 22

6 p.m.: Congressman [John Lewis](#) talks segregation and pursuing civil rights with March co-authors [Andrew Aydin](#) and [Nate Powell](#)

8 p.m.: Academy Award-winning actress [Anjelica Huston](#) discusses her memoir

Nov. 23

10 a.m.: Authors [Dave Barry](#), [Brad Meltzer](#) and [Roy Blount](#) Jr. talk about their books

10 a.m.: Books on Florida's history with [Bill DeYoung](#), [Terry L. Howard](#) and [John Dos Passos Coggin](#)

11:30 a.m.: Wildlife in Florida with [Rick Kilby](#), [Jeff Klinkenberg](#) and [Lynn Waddell](#)

4:30 p.m.: [T.D. Allman](#) discusses Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State

6 p.m.: Band of all-star authors the Rock Bottom Remainers perform with [Roger McGuinn](#)

Nov. 24

11 a.m.: U.S. Bankruptcy Judge A. Jay Cristol on The Liberty Incident

1 p.m.: Author [Edwidge Danticat on Claire](#) of the Sea Light

2 p.m.: Congresswoman [Debbie Wasserman Schultz](#) on For the Next Generation

4:30 p.m.: [Andrew Kaufman](#) discusses I'm in Miami Bitch!: Street Art of Wynwood

5 p.m.: [Chris Matthews](#), anchor of "Hardball" on MSNBC and host of "The [Chris Matthews](#) Show"

THE DETAILS:

Business Journal reporter to speak about his book

I've been to the book fair many times as a reader, but this will be my first time there as a featured author.

My novel Mute, which was released by Silver Leaf Books, blends science fiction and a murder mystery as a Florida policewoman tries to protect a voiceless child, but it has a deeper meaning. I'll explain how the themes of the story are a metaphor for my life.

See me, along with authors [Jacinto Pires](#) and [Preston Allen](#), on Nov. 24 at 4:30 at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus, Building 8, Room 8303.

Brian Bandell covers banking, finance, health care and education. [Get the latest banking industry news here.](#)