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A day for kids, adults and political junkies at Miami Book Fair

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MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Daniel Handler, creator of the Lemony Snicket book series, left, shows four young volunteers Liv Steinhardt, Martin Chang, Pablo Castro and Varanasi Buscher how to express themselves while reading "the secret note," Monday, Nov. 12, 2012, at The Miami Book Fair International at Miami Dade College.

Lemony Snicket didn't make an appearance, but his stand-in Daniel Handler did. Junot Diaz and Chris Hayes were there, too. Two of the three got in some good jokes about Florida's finally, finally finishing up its ballot count. One told an excited room full of kids: "I don't know why anyone would lie to children. Although it's fun."

Monday was one of those special days at Miami Book Fair International, with three packed events for readers aged 8 through 80. The day started off with Handler telling a crowd of kids, teens and parents — and some possibly addled adults who showed up without kids or teens — that "A Series of Unfortunate Events" creator Lemony

Snicket would not, in fact, be coming to the fair because he'd been . . . bitten.

Instead, Handler introduced the first of a new four-part series, *Who Could That Be at This Hour?*, Snicket's authorized biography, and ended his frenetic presentation with an even bigger untruth: "Thanks very much for coming. I'm sorry it was such a disappointment."

A diverse group of adult literature lovers convened at 6:30 p.m. to hear the riveting Pulitzer Prize-winner Diaz, author of *This Is How You Lose Her* and a MacArthur "genius" grant winner, talk eloquently about his writing and why he is bound to his protagonist Yunior. The Dominican-born author, also nominated for a National Book Award, joked about the presidential election ("Guys? What about that election? Cubans voting for a Democratic president!") and read from his earthy, provocative work, often in language that would not have been quite appropriate for the Lemony Snicket crowd.

The rapt audience cheered Diaz, who also spent some time discussing serious matters, like race and culture in America, the painful history of rape and incest in his family and in the Dominican Republic and why male writers write female characters so badly.

In the culture he grew up in, he said, boys are taught “that women aren’t fully human.” Overcoming that, he said, depends on knowing you’re at a disadvantage going in.

Silence, what’s not said, is what inspires him. “The silence around Latinos in a country that can’t survive without them drove me to become an artist,” he said.

As the gracious Diaz headed off to sign books, where he talked at length to eager fans, MSNBC’s Chris Hayes, editor-at-large of *The Nation*, stepped onto the stage in the Chapman Conference Center to a slightly older and decidedly liberal full house.

Democrats were afoot: They applauded almost every mention of the recent presidential election. The mere mention of the name “Nate Silver” caused a frenzy, and the pollster wasn’t even in the house.

“It’s rowdy down here in Miami,” Hayes laughed.

After encouraging the audience to applaud again (for themselves for staying in line to vote on Election Day) he talked about his book, *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*. The book examines the country’s slipping faith in institutions — government, Wall Street, corporate America — and how the failure of the idea of meritocracy has been largely responsible for that change.

“Inequality makes people at the top worse,” he told the crowd.

But whether they wrote about arm-chewing or love gone wrong or the failures of the 1 percent, all three authors and their fans would agree that Monday was truly a series of fortunate events.

Miami Herald Staff Writer Hannah Sampson contributed to this report.

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