

# Miami Herald

## In its 31st year, the Miami Book Fair International keeps finding ways to grow

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Book lovers enjoyed a beautiful day looking through hundreds of books at the Books and Books booth, during the 2012 Miami International Book Fair, taking place at MDC Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami on Saturday, November 17, 2012.

PEDRO PORTAL / EL NUEVO HERALD STAFF

Not all love affairs last more than 30 years. Time passes. Interests change. People move on. But Sunday, as the 31st annual Miami Book Fair International kicks off with ambitious new elements that reinforce the city's legacy as an arts and cultural mecca, we're reminded of why this relationship is a lasting one — and what it signals for Miami as an arts community.

“The book fair has become such an integral part of the community, and the only way that can happen is if the community responded, and it did,” says Mitchell Kaplan, the fair's chair and co-founder. “We have a large national spotlight. People want to do things with us. They understand there is an audience and a literary community down here that is very receptive. The success of the book fair mirrors the cultural maturation of South Florida.”

This year the fair, never content to be simply the biggest and most famous in the country, is bursting with innovation. As always, there will be appearances and signings by hundreds of intriguing literary figures (such as Joyce Carol Oates, Richard Ford, Larry McMurtry) and celebrity authors (Andy Cohen, Sheila E, Questlove, John Waters, Norman Lear, Jason Segel and John Cleese).

But there are new and notable additions, aimed at keeping the fair relevant, solvent and reflective of its hometown. Kaplan and Co. have struck up a groundbreaking partnership with the National Book Foundation that brings National Book Award winners and finalists to Miami on Friday, two days after the winners have been announced in New York (the foundation honored Kaplan with its Literarian Award for Outstanding Service to the American Literary Community in 2011). The fair has created a partnership with the prestigious Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize that will bring honoree Nathan Mackey and five up-and-coming poetry fellows to Miami for a presentation. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation is funding both partnerships.

New sponsors the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation will support special panels at the fair, a tribute to James Baldwin on the 90th anniversary of his birth and "Critics in the Cloud," which will examine the shifting landscape of criticism in the digital age. Another first: Thanks to support from the Knight Foundation, Detroit Public Television will livestream select events on PBS.org and affiliates, joining the efforts of C-Span, which has broadcast from the fair for 17 years.

Perhaps the most exciting development is the birth of The Swamp, a homegrown pop-up lounge that won a Knight Arts Challenge. The brainchild of Lissette Mendez, programs director for the Center for Writing and Literature at Miami Dade College and the fair, The Swamp will showcase Florida stories not just through poetry and prose but also music, dance, film, history and art. You can cheer on Miami writers squaring off with counterparts from Orlando in a "who's better?" bout, watch artists at work or view play readings from City Theatre or short films from Miami's film collective the Borscht Film Festival. You can sample a craft Florida beer from the Biscayne Bay Brewery and listen to Haitian- and Caribbean-inspired band Kazoots. You can experience all facets of Florida all week long. You can even play bocce.

"We are the one event that happens in this city that's really all about books and reading and the life of the mind," says Mendez, who describes The Swamp as the love child of the old Jimbo's Place seafood restaurant and the Delano Hotel. "That reading of stories, that

makes us human. We tell each other stories. We've always told each other stories. And there are so many great people telling different stories in different ways. There's a whole different art movement that has emerged here. Maybe it took its cue from New York or London, but ours has emerged in its own way. We wanted a space that reflected that as much as possible. ... Book fair is about stories on paper, but it's also about other kinds of stories. We can be open to different types of storytelling."

Such diversity helps the fair attract new funders, says the Center for Writing and Literature's new executive director Tom Healy, who has also experienced the fair from a writer's point of view (he's author of the poetry collections *Animal Spirits* and *What the Right Hand Knows*).

"Miami is really on the literary map, not just for writers but also the whole larger critical community of publishers and reviewers and readers, so there's a potential for us to take that strength and do more," says Healy, formerly chairman of the Fulbright Scholarship Board. "We've got the ability to hit the ground running to provide opportunities for people in companies and foundations to support us further. I don't think we've even begun to see the kind of generosity we'll experience, because people love this city and this book fair."

That high profile is also what drew PBS to livestream the fair, working in partnership with local affiliate WPBT.

"I came out of the publishing world; I worked at Borders and C-Span, and I've watched as Miami Book Fair has become the premiere literary event in the country," says Rich Fahle, executive producer of Miami Book Fair International on PBS. "Publishers send their best authors, and there are more visitors every year. The energy is unparalleled in terms of books, and it's a perfect example of what books can bring to people's lives. ... Miami is a truly diverse gathering of voices, one of the most diverse you'll find."

The fair is also an inspiration for other cities looking to engage with their own literary communities, according to National Book Foundation executive director Harold Augenbraum.

"It's the best community-oriented book fair in the United States," he says. "Book fair organizers look to Miami as a model for developing themselves. I was told the Brooklyn Book Fair organizers used Miami as a model."

In the end, though, what matters most is the way the fair and the arts it promotes build bonds in the community, says Alberto Ibargüen, president of the Knight Foundation.

“We want people to know the work our grantees are doing to build a community,” he says. “I think the book fair builds community. It allows people who come from different places to have something in common. ... It really is critically important in a town like Miami that we fund things that create the opportunity for us to come together.

“In the end my inspiration for all of this is the last paragraph of James Joyce’s *The Dead*. It says, ‘Yes, the newspapers were right: Snow was general all over Ireland.’ I want people to say nationally, ‘Art was general all over Miami.’”

## IF YOU GO

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**What:** Miami Book Fair International

**When:** Sunday through Nov.23

**Where:** Miami Dade College, 300 NE Second Ave., downtown Miami

**Full schedule and tickets:** [www.miamibookfair.com](http://www.miamibookfair.com) (<http://www.miamibookfair.com>)