

Miami Herald

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A literary love affair

Miami Herald Editorial

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The Miami Book Fair International, which began in 1984 as a modest event called Books by the Bay, has grown into a celebration of the written word that is now the largest literary festival in the Western Hemisphere. The fair, which began Sunday and continues all week, is a feast for book-lovers of every kind that draws authors, celebrities and members of the reading public from all over the world.

South Floridians tend to take the event for granted. Who wouldn't want to come to Miami in November, where the weather at this time of year is usually balmy, when the rest of the country is feeling the first chill of winter? Isn't this a grand setting for a book fair, amid the palm trees and the inviting beaches, and isn't this a perfect time?

Well, yes, but back when it started Miami seemed an unlikely place to host such an event. It was the era of Miami Vice, unfairly maligned as crime-ridden and disreputable, not one that brought to mind the pleasures of reading and the joy of literature. But thanks to a dedicated cadre of energetic and committed promoters the fair has grown and prospered. These include, principally, Mitch Kaplan, chair of the fair's board of directors and owner of Books & Books, and Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami Dade College.

Thanks to the dedicated army of people who make it happen, the book fair has grown from 1984's two-day street fair into an eight-day book party that attracts some 250,000 enthusiasts. One of the big draws, of course, is the number of authors who read from their works, answer questions from the audiences and talk about the art — and the pain — of writing.

At the beginning, some 60 authors attended the book fair. That was enough to make people want more. This year more than 500 authors have signed up to participate. So many authors have expressed interest in the fair that five years ago organizers had to double the number of "Evenings With . . ." from one to two every week night — luring more visitors.

Along with renown writers, the book fair has also become a destination for celebrities from show business to politics who have written books. That includes Barack Obama — before he became president — and former Vice President Al Gore.

This year, actress Anjelica Huston will share her life story and growing up in Hollywood, and former Vice President Dick Cheney will discuss his medical history and his battles with heart disease. Also on tap: best-selling author Dan Brown (The Da Vinci Code), who kicked off the event on Sunday night, and prominent local writers Carl Hiaasen, Richard Blanco and Edwidge Danticat.

Too busy to attend? Nonsense. If people can take time from their busy schedules to come to the fair from other parts of the country and other continents, surely it's worth a trip across town.

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