

POET RICHARD BLANCO ON THE MIAMI BOOK FAIR: "IT'S TRULY INTERNATIONAL"

BY DANA DE GREFF

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2015 | 4 HOURS AGO



Alissa Morris, Courtesy of Miami Book Fair

You may know the Cuban-American poet Richard Blanco for his reading at President Obama's second inauguration, or more recently, the poem he recited in honor the reopening of the U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba. He has written poetry books and memoirs, and this year he's on the panel "Bridges to/from Cuba," and will also be in conversation with Edwidge Danticat for "We Are Extraordinary, Every One of Us!" during the Miami Book Fair. *New Times* spoke to the author about the fair, reunions, and what he's most looking forward to

this year.

***New Times:* What is one of your best MBF moments?**

Richard Blanco: The first time I went to the fair I saw Sandra Cisneros and I got to hang out with her afterwards and we've been friends till this day. That was probably about twenty years ago.

When was the first time you participated as an author at the fair?

It must have been with my first poetry book, *City of a Hundred Fires*. And I think I've presented almost everything I've published at the book fair since. The last couple of events have been very memorable, very special as well.

What will you be showcasing this year at the MBFI?

I'm presenting on two things. One is "Bridges to/from Cuba" which is a blog that I co-created with Ruth Behar. The title comes from a book that's now twenty years old and it was an anthology of writing that Ruth edited. So we're celebrating that and also the blog, which is a cultural bridge and cultural dialogue for artists, writers, and everyone really. We will have two guests invited from Cuba, one being Rolando Estévez, an artisan book maker who does amazing work and has done some of Ruth's books, and Liz Balmaseda, who is a South Florida Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist. We're also celebrating the US embassy poem that I wrote and recited at the reopening of the embassy in Havana, which is called *Matters of the Sea*. It's been issued as a chapbook in a completely bilingual edition with an extensive commentary by the translator, Ruth, and a preface by me. The other thing we're doing is we've collaborated with Dav Pilkey who illustrated *Captain Underpants* and who sort of came out of retirement to illustrate the inaugural poem word for word and I think it's just beautiful.

What do you think makes Miami's book fair stand out from others?

I think that the word international is not just a buzzword; it's the only book fair that I've been to in the United States that is truly international in that it goes to great efforts to present authors of the Spanish-speaking world. I think that publishers in the United States don't realize that there's a whole readership of Spanish speakers here that are not really being served. The other thing I've noticed is that it's really well organized; I've been to other fairs that are really a mess. As an author, I've never been treated so friendly and so accommodating as the book fair does.

What are you looking forward to the most this year at the fair?

Well, one thing I did this year was select Carlos Pintado for the Paz Prize for Poetry and he will be presenting, so he's part of the specialness that the book fair brings. I'm looking forward to seeing him and hearing him read his poetry. I also want to see Sandra Cisneros and catch up—it will be a bit of a reunion for us.

Richard Blanco

"Bridges to/from Cuba" panel on Saturday, November 21 at 2 p.m. and "We Are Extraordinary, Every One of Us!," Saturday, November 21 at 4:30 p.m. For more information visit miamibookfair.com

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