

## The Miami Book Fair International celebrates its 30th anniversary when it opens on Sunday

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FILE--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, Nov. 17, 2012.

Thirty years ago — before Art Basel became a snowbird, before Ultra Music Festival's pulse throbbed across the Bay, before the Miami Heat proudly raised the banners in American Airlines Arena — 60 or so authors gathered at Bayfront Park to talk books.

No doubt it was a big day, thrilling and fresh, a well-aimed literary blow to the city's image as the crime-ridden, pastel-and-neon-saturated land of Miami Vice. But organizers couldn't have had a clue as to what their baby would grow into.

Sunday, when Miami Book Fair International's 30th anniversary edition begins, more than 500 authors will descend on downtown Miami for this year's rendition of one of the biggest and most successful book fairs in the country.

"Everybody wants to be at the fair," says Alina Interián, senior executive director for cultural affairs at Miami Dade College, the book fair's parent.

The fair's popularity with authors and publishers is a big part of what has helped the event not only stay afloat but also thrive over three decades of tremendous change in the industry — and the world. The number of authors attending has risen steadily. For the 25th anniversary, organizers doubled the number of "Evenings With ..." presentations from one to two sessions every weeknight because authors were eager to sign on, the idea being more authors lure more visitors.

Over the past couple of years, attendance has settled at around 250,000 over the course of the week, Interián says. It's a number that keeps the streets of the college's Wolfson campus bustling over the weekend and fills many indoor author sessions.

What's new in publishing has a big effect on how the fair is set up, says Mitchell Kaplan, chair of the fair's board of directors and owner of Books & Books. He co-founded the fair with Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami Dade College.

"We're not having to reinvent the wheel every year," Kaplan says. "We play with it in terms of adding new sections, like the graphic novel section, but the beauty of a book festival, like a film festival, is that it changes each year based on what books are being published. The freshness

of the fair is guaranteed with the new and interesting titles and new authors being made available.”

This year, author appearances range from bestseller Dan Brown ( *Inferno*, *The Da Vinci Code*), who kicks off the event on Sunday, to next weekend’s appearance by former Vice President Dick Cheney, who will talk about his new book on his heart transplant with his cardiologist. Erica Jong will discuss the 40th anniversary of her groundbreaking *Fear of Flying*. Actress Anjelica Huston will share her account of her charmed childhood with her famous director father John. Local heroes such as Carl Hiaasen, Richard Blanco and Edwidge Danticat are scheduled to appear.

Still, despite the wide variety of writers to appeal to many different readers, organizers have had to make adjustments to cope with rising costs, particularly post 9/11 — when more security measures were implemented. Changes have included charging admission to the street fair and for the “Evenings With...” events on weeknights, moves that drew little controversy among the fair faithful. This year, the price of an “Evenings With...” ticket rises from \$10 to \$15.

“It’s an added source of revenue,” Interián says. “The fair costs more to put on. We had to make adjustments.”

Keeping an eye on and mirroring publishing and cultural trends has also allowed the fair to expand its appeal. The addition of a graphic novel and comics component lures the visually oriented at a time when comics loom larger than ever on the pop culture landscape. An improved Spanish language program draws an increasingly culturally diverse crowd (this year, the fair will celebrate Spanish culture for the 500th anniversary of Ponce de Leon’s arrival in America).

“At one point in the beginning we had more international exhibitors [at the street fair], but because costs have escalated it has become difficult for some publishers to send books and send staff to man booths,” Interián says. “So we’ve seen less exhibitors, but we supplemented that with a larger number of authors in different languages. We started with a handful of authors — Carlos Fuentes from Mexico, Mario Vargas Llosa from Peru. This year we have 70 different foreign language authors in all different genres, well-known bestsellers but also writers who are well known in their countries but not so well known here.”

In answer to the rise of the celebrity chef and the popularity of TV cooking shows, the fair has also beefed up its cooking programs in conjunction with the college’s Miami Culinary Institute and Tuyo restaurant. The fair had dropped its Epicure Row outdoor cooking demonstrations — they weren’t practical and grew expensive, says Lissette Mendez, director of programs for The Center for Literature and Theatre at Miami Dade College — but the culinary institute offers a perfect venue for cookbook author presentations and special dinners. They will be hosted on Tuesday and Thursday by Norman Van Aken and will feature Scott Conant and Bruno Oteiza; tickets are \$135 and include dinner and the chefs’ books.

Mendez, who has been working with the fair since 2004, was instrumental in fine-tuning the Children’s Alley component as well as creating a more inclusive program for tweens and young adult readers, which comes at a time when the young adult market is booming. About 20 authors are coming in just for teen readers, and events for younger kids are more geared toward learning, thanks to community partnerships with such organizations as the Miami Science Museum and Miami Children’s Museum. The Friday programs for schoolchildren have expanded to Thursday as well due to popular demand.

“We were right all along,” Mendez says of the center’s aim of promoting literacy. “Kids need to be reading more and exposed to literary and book culture as much as possible. We always

knew that. So it's a sort of 'if you build it, they will come' thing."

That theory has worked for the fair overall because of an active and interested community, Kaplan says.

"We wouldn't have a book fair without the audiences," he says. "The community has allowed the fair to succeed . . . We realized in retrospect that it was counterintuitive to people's views of Miami, but I never had a doubt it would be successful. I knew what people were buying at the store. Now we have authors who live here, great writing programs — we're one of the more vibrant literary communities in the country."

Padrón agrees that creating the fair all those years ago was a no-brainer.

"We knew that Miamians were passionate about books, and we wanted to provide a gathering to feed that passion and to provide a festival that celebrate the arts," he said via email. "At the same time, we wanted the literary world to know that Miami was a dynamic city that had much to offer.

"The fair paved the way for all the arts-related events and activities we see today, and the vision and hard work that has driven us these 30 years ensures that it will continue serving as a cultural cornerstone for years to come."