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Mississippi Book Festival Attendance Reaches 7,600

JACKSON, Miss. — The Mississippi Book Festival bounded past the 7,000 attendance mark for the first time in its four-year history. About 7,600 people flocked to the State Capitol complex on Saturday to hear from 240 authors, buy books, get them signed, hobnob with fellow fans and celebrate the written word. The festival's 2017 edition drew about 6,400 attendees.

The kickoff celebration for the daylong literary lawn party honored Mississippi authors. The first two markers of the new Mississippi Writers Trail, recognizing the work of Pulitzer Prize winner Eudora Welty and two-time National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward, were unveiled to onlookers' cheers and standing ovations in a poignant ceremony at the festival's start.

"The love of the book binds all of us, readers and authors, and gives us a common ground," said Holly Lange, Mississippi Book Festival director. "In a time when finding common ground is so important, we are proud that the Mississippi Book Festival brings thousands together, and for one warm day, Mississippi is at the top of everyone's list."

Packed crowds squeezed into the sanctuary at Galloway Memorial United Methodist Church to hear moving insights by Ward, the whip-smart exchanges of Jon Meacham and Karl Rowe, and the engaging words of Salman Rushdie as he shared a journey from his Bombay roots to a lunch in London with Eudora Welty.

Rick Bragg held listeners in his grip, yanking them along on the wild ride of stories from his Alabama upbringing. Children sat rapt as teen actress/author Quvenzhane Wallis read excerpts from her book series on the Capitol lawn in a session so packed, organizers added another one to accommodate the interest.

"This represents just a fraction of the thought-provoking fodder and light-hearted fun book fans of all ages and backgrounds found at the festival's latest outing," Lange said.

This year, 200-plus volunteers kept the festival on track, as 160-plus authors tackled a spectrum of topics on 40-plus official panels at the Capitol and Galloway church. An additional 84 authors and artists populated Authors Alley. Music, 14 food trucks and 13 independent book sellers fed a festive appetite for entertainment, sustenance and the written word.

Leading up to Saturday, author school visits and book signings on the Gulf Coast Thursday reached more than 1,000 readers. Friday sessions with children's book authors and Jackson Public School students engaged 1,500 4th graders, and each received a book as a gift from the festival.

"As the fourth annual Mississippi Book Festival comes to a close, we continue to be so appreciative of the support for this event," Lange said. "Each year, the enthusiasm among guests, authors, book sellers and exhibitors grows and the magic created on the lawn of the State Capitol strengthens our resolve to continue our efforts."