

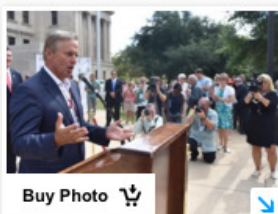


Book Festival attendance outpaces projections



best selling author John Grisham returned to the Mississippi Capitol grounds for the first time since he served in the Legislature for the inaugural Mississippi Book Festival. (Video by Jacob Threadgill / The Clarion-Ledger)

 **Jacob Threadgill, The Clarion-Ledger** 7:52 p.m. CDT August 22, 2015



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(Photo: Rick Guy/The Clarion-Ledger)

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Before the inaugural Mississippi Book Festival, organizer and Lemuria Books owner John Evans said he hoped it would be a day Eudora Welty could look down from heaven and smile upon.

The turnout for the event, which featured over 100 writers appearing on panels around the state Capitol grounds, far exceeded estimates by the state, but none was more attended than a seminar held at Galloway United Methodist Church in Jackson with authors and Mississippi natives John Grisham and Bill Ferris on Saturday afternoon.

"Nobody would be more pleased by this gathering than Eudora Welty," said Katie Blount, executive director Mississippi Department of History and Archives. "She would've loved seeing all of her friends over at the Capitol, a building that meant so much to her in here at Galloway, which was her church."

The 700-seat church was standing room only when Grisham, Ferris and moderator Jerry Mitchell of The Clarion-Ledger took the stage.

The entire day was a celebration for Mississippi's rich literary history, and the panel wanted to get to the heart of why the state has produced so many prolific writers.

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"Why do so many stories, as Willie (Morris) said, come from this tortured locale? I think it is because there are so many damn crazy people here," Grisham said, making the audience break out in laughter. "Great fiction comes from great conflict, and great fiction comes from pain."

Ferris founded the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at Ole Miss and is now the director for the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina. Ferris quoted Clarksdale native Tennessee Williams by calling Mississippi "a climate of genius."

He said that while he was at Ole Miss, the center published four volumes of Mississippi writers: fiction, nonfiction, poetry and drama.

"If you look at the literary history, no state can match Mississippi," Ferris said. "You look at California, they are a nation-state economically, but let's look at their literary product, and it is a small fraction of what this state has produced."

Grisham, who wrote his first two books in the state Capitol while serving in the House of Representatives, said he has toyed with the idea of returning to Mississippi to write.

"There are so many racial issues that we will still have to confront," Grisham said. "I still struggle how much do you beat up Mississippi? I don't want to be the bad guy. This is my state, and I want it to progress."

The standing-room-only crowd in Galloway mirrored the attendance for the entire event. Festival director Holly Lange said that 2,500 to 3,500 people were in attendance for the event. An initial state economic impact survey was done projecting 1,000 people in attendance.

"In my greatest hopes and dreams, it is exactly what I expected," Lange said. "We know the lines were long, the rooms were small and we couldn't accommodate everybody. As Gov.(Phil) Bryant said as he was leaving, 'This is just great. We need to build you a bigger building.' "

Author William Boyle, who participated in the short story panel, said he has attended a book festival where every seat in every panel was filled.

"As writers, we're conditioned to speak in front of rooms with five or six people, so this was amazing," Boyle said.

During an opening ceremony on the south steps of the Capitol, the Jackson State University marching band, The Sonic Boom of the South, performed before state leaders took the podium. Bryant and Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves hoped the festival will inspire a new generation of writers.

"This festival is an enormous success in its first year, but 10 years from now there is going to have be a much bigger venue," Ferris said. "When you read, you travel around the world without leaving your chair."



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