

Authors from Miss., beyond, excited for book festival

Margaret McMullan and Scott Naugle, Special to The Clarion-Ledger 5 p.m. CDT August 15, 2016



(Photo: Special to The Clarion-Ledger)

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It was an idea first kicked around by a few far-sighted individuals on a conference call. That was in 2013. Two years later in August of 2015, the Mississippi Book Festival debuted on the grounds of the state Capitol in Jackson.

Jere Nash, who now serves as president of the festival's board of directors, organized that first conference call. "The festival aims to celebrate Mississippi authors and Mississippi readers, to promote literacy, to encourage a free expression of ideas, and to share the joys that come from reading

a good book," said Nash, co-author of "Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976 – 2008."

This year's book festival is Saturday.. Meeting rooms in the Mississippi State Capitol are deployed for authors to speak or participate in panels throughout the day. Dozens of tents line the Capitol grounds for publishers and authors to meet attendees. A designated tent is set aside for authors to sign books. Throughout the day, C-SPAN II broadcasts live from the Old Supreme Court Room in the Capitol.

"We have (more than) 150 authors and 100 exhibitors, and this year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Pulitzer Prize and the 75th birthday of Curious George. It is free and open to all," said Holly Lange, executive director of the festival.

National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward will lead a discussion on her latest collection of essays, "The Fire This Time," to be broadcast live on C-Span II. Rheta Grimsley Johnson, a nationally syndicated columnist and author of "The Dogs Buried Over the Bridge," will participate in a panel on writing memoirs. Other participating authors include "Treme" writer Tom Piazza, Chris Offutt, Rick Bass, Roy Blount Jr., Trent Lott, Jay McInerney, Stuart Stevens, Ellen Gilchrist, Julia Reed and Pulitzer-Prize winners Jon Meacham, Robert Olen Butler and Richard Ford.

Author W. Ralph Eubanks will be coming in from Washington, D.C. He recalled the opening night garden party last year at Eudora Welty's house. "(It) made me think about how much Miss Welty would have liked to have been there. It was almost as if she was there, given the camaraderie I felt with all the writers, particularly fellow Mississippians."

Eubanks added that the Jackson State University "Sonic Boom of the South" marching band let the crowd know this was no staid literary affair. "Mississippi is a state with a strong literary heritage and a link to the arts. My great hope is that the book festival will help strengthen Jackson's connections with arts and culture, which I think are important for enlivening the civic life of the city."

Author Brad Watson will be driving to Jackson from Laramie, Wyoming, ending his book tour for his stunning and well-reviewed new novel "Miss Jane," set in a fictional town much like his hometown, Meridian. "Mississippi is important to me, always will be," Watson says. "I don't think I'll ever not reach back to write about it, to set stories and novels here." Watson looks forward to seeing old friends, meeting writers, eating

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Author Brad Watson will be driving to Jackson from Laramie, Wyoming, ending his book tour for his stunning and well-reviewed new novel "Miss Jane," set in a fictional town much like his hometown, Meridian. "Mississippi is important to me, always will be," Watson says. "I don't think I'll ever not reach back to write about it, to set stories and novels here." Watson looks forward to seeing old friends, meeting writers, eating good food, and picking up a ton of new books.

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"This festival is important because it's Mississippi," Watson said. "We have long been a literary center, maybe even a mecca of sorts. I expect this festival will become one of the biggest and most interesting annual literary events in the country. Looks like it's off to good start."

Among the panel topics are historical fiction, Southern cooking, civil rights history and book club picks. A complete schedule is available at msbookfestival.com.

This year the festival added an extra day for young readers. On Friday, award-winning author Kate DiCamillo ("The Tale of Despereaux," "Because of Winn-Dixie") will speak to approximately 750 public school third-graders in the sanctuary at Galloway United Methodist Church, just a block away from the Capitol. Each student will also receive a free copy of her new book. DiCamillo is the current National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, appointed by the Library of Congress.

On Saturday, there will also be three author and illustration panels for picture books, young adult books, and books for middle grade readers.

"It's such a pleasure to have a festival now in Mississippi that is dedicated to literature and the power of stories to grow us and heal us and take us into the future," said award-winning young adult author Deborah Wiles, whose books are mostly set in Mississippi.

"The writer Patricia MacLachlan says, 'What you know first stays with you.' That's how I feel about Mississippi. To have a festival in our state, surrounded by stories for young people of what they knew first, says everything about how important literature is to Mississippians," Wiles said.

Miss. Book Festival details

When: Saturday, August 20; panels from 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Where: Mississippi State Capitol (400 High St.) and Galloway United Methodist Church, Jackson

Indoors: Panel discussions; exhibits from Library of Congress and Smithsonian; tours of the Capitol every 30 minutes

Outdoors: Book signings, food vendors, live music; children's activities along West Street

Parking: Free on all public streets, and in garages of the Woolfolk and Walter Sillers buildings the day of the festival

Cost: Free

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