



FEATURES

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Executive director of the Mississippi Book Festival, Holly Lange's had an idea of having a personal conversation with all the authors coming through Lemuria or in the state or at the Mississippi Book Festival. Ebony Lumumba will host the podcast Write On, Mississippi.

20 My Favorite Retreat

Mike Frascogna's personal library is also his home office, favorite retreat and man cave. The drums sitting right outside his office are his new favorite hobby and certainly send a signal: No shushing here. Good thing. The room's also a magnet for the grandkids.

26 Dates For Leukemia

Dates for Leukemia, a silent date auction to benefit The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training Program, will be Thursday, July 25, 7-11 p.m. at The Old Capitol Inn.

ON THE COVER: Mike Frascogna's favorite spot in his home is his office hideaway. Photo by Lonnie Kees.

THIS PAGE: Holly Lange and Ebony Lumumba prepare for the Write On, Mississippi podcast.

WRITE ON, MISSISSIPPI

BY SHERRY LUCAS

In flight, en route to the Bahamas, the notion hit Holly Lange like a sea breeze of inspiration: “We need a podcast!”

The executive director of the Mississippi Book Festival was on her annual solo trip to regroup and reload, and a spark hits the refresh button at 40,000 feet. Why? “We have all these authors coming through at Lemuria or in the state, and then at the book festival, of course,” Lange says. “From a storytelling and archival standpoint, I think it’d be really interesting to have a conversation with them — not necessarily about their most recent work, but about them personally.”

Ebony Lumumba, Tougaloo College assistant professor of English, avid arts and education supporter and wife of Jackson Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, was her pick to host the podcast, dubbed “Write On, Mississippi.” Her intellect, joy, curiosity and role as a teacher, all played a part, Lange says. “She has a gift for engaging in conversation, whereby the conversation becomes a learning experience, without you even knowing it.”

“I was really humbled that she had so much faith and confidence in me, to be able to not only represent the book festival, but really, Jackson and the state at large in terms of how we celebrate our literary artists,” Ebony says. A bit nervous, too, she was also thrilled about the idea and the chance to illuminate aspects of Mississippi culture that gets muted in the national and

even international eye.

“People know certain things about Mississippi, and not all of that is positive. Not all of it is true. So, I see this podcast as an opportunity to get the word out on what’s being produced right here in our state ... and the capability that we have to contribute to the art and literary community.

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Ebony Lumumba

I’m excited to be at the helm of a project like that.”

The Podastery’s Beau York (formerly of Jackson) helped them develop the podcast at the outset, summer 2018. “I give him a lot of credit,” Lange says. Scheduling busy professionals and visiting authors for a rendezvous at the mic proved more difficult than anticipated, but they managed. Recording four sessions at last year’s book

fest, including one with Salman Rushdie (“That’s off the bucket list,” Lumumba says), was a coup.

Write On, Mississippi first launched on the book festival’s website fall 2018. The convergence of Mississippi Public Broadcasting’s (MPB) offer to take it on, and York’s move to Houston, Texas, meant a new home and a pause to transition to a stronger presence, with more platforms for promotion and a straight shot to more listeners.

“It’s a natural fit for MPB,” says Gregg Mayer, chief operating officer, MPB. The podcast is just one component of their book festival partnership, which will include a Daniel Tiger appearance at the 5th annual fest August 17 at the State Capitol. “Hundreds of children make it out there to the book festival, and we really want to help them have as good a time as the adults do.” MPB will set up for podcast recordings onsite, as well as interview authors for TV.

Also a natural fit: the literary lawn party as a podcast setting. Lumumba’s breezy Write On, Mississippi conversations unfold with ease, where mental images of front porches and iced tea invite you to sit a spell and listen in. Laughs, insights and connection punctuate rich, captivating conversations.

In candid, free-flowing interviews with authors Angie Thomas, Jesmyn Ward, Jon Meacham, Kiese Laymon and more, Lumumba explores family, food, music, ideas,

Mississippi connections and wherever the conversation naturally leads. She's already checked some off her personal author wish list, "and I just want to be their personal friend," she says happily, "so, like Jesmyn Ward — I just want to be in her atmosphere."

She'd love to interview Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie ("I'm a fanatic for her work ... I feel about her the way that I think some folks feel about Beyoncé"). "Wishing big and long and wide, Toni Morrison would be phenomenal. I've also just worshipped at her literary feet for over a decade." There are a wealth of others, too, mostly international writers and some even deceased — "a difficult task," she concedes

— but still on the list, such as Nadine Gordimer and Gloria Naylor. She wants to know listeners' wish lists, too, of authors they'd like to hear from, and, "We'll try to make that happen."

Her first was with Jackson best-selling young adult novelist Angie Thomas. "She is just so easy to talk to, and so fascinating and brilliant, that she really set the tone," Lumumba says. "That really got me even more excited about what this podcast could do."

She's uncovered some rich gems in the process, such as Thomas' aspirations to help develop projects for young black writers who want to write in young adult fiction, connecting with Salman Rushdie on the

idea of the global South and discussing the merge between motherhood, writing and scholarship with Jesmyn Ward.

"So, folks should really be listening," she says, "because there's not only something for everyone, but there's just really engaging and interesting conversations. It's like you're amongst friends."

In that sense, it's a lot like the Mississippi Book Festival, with readers and writers in the same room with the walls down, learning from each other.

But, the book festival is only one day a year. Organizers want a year-round presence, and Write On, Mississippi can talk us right through it.

MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL LITERARY LAWN PARTY

The Mississippi Book Festival has built a sterling reputation since its 2015 debut on the State Capitol grounds, and the fifth anniversary edition ahead looks like another can't-put-down sequel.

Richard Ford, Joyce Carol Oates, Angie Thomas, Candace Bushnell, Karl Marlantes and many more will be on hand with conversation, stories and insights on a wide range of intriguing topics.

The literary lawn party, as the festival has been known since birth, is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. August 17 at the State Capitol, its lovely grounds, surrounding streets and venues at neighboring Galloway United Methodist Church. Last time out, the festival pulled 7,600 authors and readers to downtown Jackson to celebrate the written word and the great conversations it spurs in a fun, lively atmosphere of exchange.

With 150-plus authors, more than 40 panels, food trucks, music and thousands of books, the daylong festival turns into both an enlightening experience for those who come. The Community Foundation for Mississippi is the event's fifth anniversary sponsor.

On the festival's eve, select authors reach as many as schoolchildren as possible, giving kids the chance to meet them directly, receive a free book, be inspired and develop a love of reading, book festival director Holly Lange says.

MISSISSIPPI
**BOOK
FESTIVAL**
August 17, 2019
STATE CAPITOL

The family slant at the festival itself gets a boost, too, this year, with an appearance by the title star of the children's cartoon "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" as well as stations and activities from Mississippi Public Broadcasting that align with the network's children's literacy effort.

"The Path Between Us" author Suzanne Stabile, an internationally recognized Enneagram Master whose best-selling books on the personality types symbol and tool have led many to deeper insights, will be on a panel with author/activist/public theologian Brian McLaren at the festival.

"Sex and the City" author Bushnell will be there with her new wry and witty take,

"Is There Still Sex in the City?" that looks at related topics on the other side of age 50.

As well as dozens more draws, this year's edition expands options for smaller, more informal discussions. Several literary-based "On the Hour" sessions at the Capitol, separate from official panels, focus on issues of interest to writers and readers, including: a creative writing workshop; a focus on Harriet Pollack's "New Essays on Welty, Class and Race;" a freewheeling platform for artist/author Bill Dunlap and more.

The popular, engaging Thacker Mountain Radio Hour returns to Jackson to wrap the day with a festive bow on top, at a Duling Hall show recorded for later broadcast.

The festival's growth in panelists and interested authors as well as attendees mark goal-set success. "We started in hopes that we would get to the point that people would say, 'I really want to go to that,' and I think we have reached that point," Lange says. "And, whether they're attendees or panelists, both of those things are good things.

"I think we have finally found a way to wrangle all of our literary goodness into this one package and celebrate it, shining a positive light on what Mississippi does best."