

A CONVERSATION WITH HOLLY LANGE ON MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL

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Book lovers rejoice. The author presentations and panel discussions that were an integral part of the Mississippi Book Festival are now online. Despite canceling the in-person festival in May, the event dubbed “Mississippi’s Literary Lawn Party” is going on via the festival’s website. The virtual festival was launched last week. Event Executive Director Holly Lange recently discussed the virtual festival with Sun Senior Staff Writer Anthony Warren.

When did you decide to go online?

“We canceled the physical festival in May. About mid-June, we had the opportunity to moderate, or participate, in virtual interviews with authors who were visiting virtually at Lemuria, and we thought, ‘if we did one of these, we could put together a virtual festival.’ Between Ellen Daniels, the literary director of the book festival, and Tonja Murphy, our community engagement coordinator, we put together several interviews on 15 or 16 topics that we thought would be interesting to people.”

Were these topics books that were supposed to be featured at this year’s festival?

“Yes.”

How did you choose which authors/topics to include in the virtual festival?

“Author availability. There were two panels we were going to host at the festival this year that we had commitments on what we thought would be interesting to the public: the 75th anniversary of Richard Wright’s book, ‘Black Boy,’ and ‘Book to Screen,’ a panel about how books get made into movies. That is a panel we’ve tried to put together for the last five years. The stars aligned with Michael Farris Smith and his producers, and they had a conversation together and we recorded it on Zoom.”

How long did it take to get all of these interviews together?

“About a month. We started outlining our plans in the middle of June and started recording the first of July. We finished two weeks ago, edited the videos, made sure our website was current and released the content on August 14. We will add to it and will be posting new videos this fall. That’s the great thing about it – we can extend the shelf life of these interviews. They’re not done in a day.”

The online event, will it include all of the authors that were expected to present at the festival?

“We usually average about 165, so there’s no way we could have included all of them and managed it. But we will try to get a lot of them and add them in the fall and maybe in the spring. And we’re hoping a few of them will come back for the 2021 festival.”

Are other book festivals doing something similar to what you’re doing here?

“They are. We are part of a group of about 20 book festivals from around the country, and we’ve had many a group call about going virtual. There were actually two festivals in May that managed to really pull off the impossible. They switched almost instantly to authors in-person to authors online. They were able to record faster and get the videos out there in time for the festival dates.

“It’s been a sharing process. We’ve learned a lot from each other. The other directors and I compare notes about online platforms, publishers and other good information so we can all be successful. The other thing we’re trying to do is cross-promote our festivals. Because they’ve gone virtual, you can see what’s going on with festivals in Minneapolis, Nashville and Atlanta.”

Will going virtual add another layer to what you do next year?

“Maybe. We are one of the few festivals in the U.S. which has already recorded panel sessions and posted them on our website. We already have video going in that regard. We may consider airing panel discussions live, recording them and posting them later. We’re going to wait until the first of the year to assess where we are and decide if we are going to pull off another festival.”

Is the future of another in-person festival in question?

“A lot of it will depend on if people are willing to gather in large groups. We have limited space at the capitol. If we have to put chairs six feet apart, it will limit the number who can attend. We have to determine whether we’ll do a virtual or a hybrid festival, but we’re open to it.”

How is the virtual event funded this year?

“We’re very fortunate that the Community Foundation for Mississippi has committed to being a presenting sponsor prior to the pandemic, and they have honored their commitment. Their funding, along with the Mississippi Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities, has allowed us to keep our staff in place and work toward having a mini festival. We have several funders who said they couldn’t do it this year, because it wasn’t a physical festival, and they have committed their funds to 2021, so we know we will have enough money to pull off a festival of some sort.”

In a typical year, how much does it cost to put on the event?

“About 300,000, a little bit more. It’s not cheap.”

About how many authors were slated to come to the festival simply to sell books?

“We have Authors’ Alley. We held off putting those applications online because we didn’t want to get into a situation where we would have to refund money. Normally, we have a capacity of 80 to 100 authors in Authors’ Alley.”

How important are these book festivals to authors, in terms of selling books and getting their names out there?

“In Author’s Alley, 80 to 100 come to sell self-published books. Between 160 and 180 participate in the panel discussions. They sell books and sign books in the tent. Last year, we had five releases at the festival. This year, we were going to launch Richard Grant’s book on Natchez. We were going to use the festival as a springboard for his book and help him promote it. Obviously, that didn’t work.”

Overall, are authors suffering because so many festivals have gone virtual?

“I don’t really know about that. I don’t know how book sales are translating now. In the pandemic, I’m reading a lot more at home. Lemuria has been able to stay open during the pandemic because they were considered essential. They were an access point for teachers and students for homeschooling and things like that. I think book sales look good. What authors are taking a hit on is not going on tours, not doing public speaking events and book signings. That has gone away.”

For more information, log onto <https://msbookfestival.com>.