

A CONVERSATION WITH HOLLY LANGE ON FUTURE BOOK FESTIVALS

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Holly Lange of Jackson is the founder and executive director of the Mississippi Book Festival. A graduate of Millsaps College, she is known for event management, fundraising, volunteer coordination and public relations. Some of the projects she has been involved with include the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and Museum of Mississippi History, B.B. King Museum, Mississippi Museum of Art Centennial and Crossroads Film Festival.

When is the next Mississippi Book Festival scheduled?

“The next Mississippi Book Festival is scheduled August 21, 2021. The book festival is always scheduled on the third Saturday in August. We’re planning to be just in the state Capitol and on the lawn. Galloway Methodist Church is our partner, and if it’s safe we’ll be there.

“August and September is the cusp of when everybody will be vaccinated and people are expected to be more active. We’re going to keep our ears open and survey our friends and neighbors and see if they’re willing to move about and want to gather.”

When did you realize the 2020 Mississippi Book Festival would need to be cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic?

“We were scheduled to be in New York the week New York shut down in 2020. We called several publicists in New York, and they said, ‘We don’t think you should come.’ The next Monday the governor shut New York City down.

“Right then, I had a sense we weren’t going to have a book festival. There was a lot of fear. We waited until the end of April and the board decided it was best to postpone for a year.”

What virtual experience did the festival offer in 2020?

“We tried to do as many virtual experiences as possible, knowing there were thousands and thousands of virtual experiences made possible by authors and publicists.

“We have a podcast established with Mississippi Public Broadcasting. We recorded almost 30 virtual Zoom sessions and an additional 15 podcasts. We were able to keep the brand alive and our name out there and the partnerships going.”

When was the first festival?

“The Mississippi Book Festival, a nonprofit founded by literacy advocates, launched in August 2015 on the state Capitol grounds.”

How do you determine authors to invite to the festival?

“Having a book published within the calendar year is how we choose who participates. We will certainly invite many authors who didn’t tour with their books because of the pandemic.”

How do you put together the panels of authors?

“We have a Panelists Committee. We have someone who reads nothing but poetry and nonfiction. Someone else is focused on fiction. We have someone who loves mysteries and we have someone who loves comic books. We have two or three people who focus on young adult literature and we have two people who focus on children’s books. We meet once a month and communicate back and forth by email.

“We’re all committed to panels having good energy. Once we identify a panel that we think will work, we identify authors. Once we figure out a panel, we ask someone to moderate. We send books to the moderator and talk about the focus of the panel so it will be successful. A requirement is that the moderator read the books in advance and craft questions. Most moderators communicate with their panel about the focus of the panel.”

Why is the Mississippi Book Festival scheduled in August?

“The Mississippi Book Festival follows a couple of other book festivals, which means the authors are on the road and it’s not a burden for them to travel to Jackson. We’re not going to compete on Saturday with SEC football. We know it’s hot but we have air-conditioned rooms and the Capitol is cool.”

Why is the state Capitol always the location for the festival?

“Most people don’t visit the state Capitol except on an elementary field trip once in their life. It’s a beautiful building with beautiful architecture and everyone who works there is very accommodating. They work hard to help us produce this event. We felt like the Capitol is a neutral, iconic location to host the festival.”

What is Authors Alley?

“Authors Alley gives people who have books that are too old to be considered for panels or have been published on their own an opportunity to participate in the festival. They can buy a table for a nominal amount of money and sell their books.”

What’s unique about the Mississippi Book Festival?

“The festival is authentically Mississippi. We don’t try to mimic what other states are doing.

We try to make this a Mississippi experience, even if we bring authors who are not from Mississippi. We work hard to make it exciting and magical, to ensure that the panels have chemistry and that it's a fun, interesting day for everybody."

What kind of attendance has the festival had?

"When we started, the festival had just over 2,600 people in attendance. It doubled the second year, and the third year, it tripled. The fifth year, there were 10,000 people in attendance at the panels. We don't count foot traffic. John Evans of Lemuria Books believes there were 11,000 people downtown in the festival's fifth year."

What impact has the festival had besides drawing large crowds?

"We consider it book festival week. In 2019, almost 6,000 metro area schoolchildren, elementary to high school, were in downtown Jackson for multiple sessions with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor at Galloway United Methodist Church and with Dave Pilkey, the creator of the "Dog Man" and "Captain Underpants" graphic novel series, at Thalia Mara Hall on the eve of the fest.

"Each child received a book. For some that may have been their first book. To meet an author and receive a book can be a life-changing event.

"Forty percent of our audience at the book festival comes from outside the state. From a tourism standpoint, it does a lot to generate income for businesses. On a national level, it has drawn the attention of all of the major publishing houses and they love it. It generates income for them and they are happy to send authors to the festival. Our independent bookstores are rock stars and it promotes sales for them.

"We have a podcast called Write on, Mississippi!, that we record year-round in partnership with Mississippi Public Broadcasting. It had over 10,000 downloads between the end of August and the first week in December. Information about the podcast may be found at <http://writeonms.mpbonline.org/about>."

What are some top memories for you from the festivals?

"Meeting U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor in 2019 was special. Justice Sotomayor, the first Hispanic and first Latina Supreme Court justice, is also a bestselling author whose memoir "My Beloved World" and its adaptations for young readers have inspired people of all ages. She is remarkable. Her commitment to our country is remarkable. You have to be impressed by her commitment and dedication.

"Two years before Justice Sotomayor came to the festival, Carla Hyden, the 14th librarian of Congress, came to the festival. She is the first woman and African American to hold the post.

"Both women attracted crowds of diverse people. We had school buses and loads of people see Carla Hayden. Thousands of people came to see Sonia Sotomayor just to have the experience of seeing her. Those were two unique opportunities."

What books are you reading?

“I have a hodgepodge of books I’m reading. I just finished Richard Grant’s book on Natchez, “The Deepest South of All: True Stories from Natchez, Mississippi.” I’m also reading “Red Stilts,” a book of poetry by Ted Kooser, former U.S. poet laureate, and “I want to Be Where the Normal People Be,” a hysterical book by Rachel Bloom.

“I also have Barack Obama’s memoir, “A Promised Land,” and “Migrations,” a novel that is about a young woman who experiences lots of trauma and lands on a ship migrating birds as they track south, by Charlotte McConaghy.”

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