



Mississippi Book Festival: A first for state

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Book groupies, clear your calendars: Aug. 22 will usher in a whole new chapter in Mississippi's literary history.

Get ready for the first Mississippi Book Festival, described by organizers as "a literary lawn party" that will celebrate authors and their contributions to the culture of literacy, ideas and imagination. Among those on the lineup are John Grisham, Greg Iles, Bill Ferris, Ellen Gilchrist and Rick Bragg.

Set inside and on the grounds of the Mississippi State Capitol in Jackson, the free festival is designed to be one the entire state can claim.

The festival was established in 2013 as a nonprofit by those who believed it was high time a state with a literary heritage as deep as Mississippi's joined other states and cities around the country in highlighting its great authors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, educators and others.

Among the many characters who have had a hand in authoring the festival are Jere Nash, chairman of the Mississippi Book Festival Board of Directors; and Holly Lange, the event's executive director.

Nash is a native of Greenville who has been involved in research, writing and political campaigns in Mississippi since 1978. He is co-author of "Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2008" and "Mississippi Fried Politics: Tall Tales from the Back Room."

Lange is a professional event planner, fundraiser and community volunteer. Some of her past projects include the opening of the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola; Jubilee!JAM, Trustmark's Red Beans and Rice Celebration, the Crossroads Film Festival and the Mississippi Museum of Art centennial.

In 2013, Lange received the award for the Governor's Initiative for Volunteer Excellence. She was included in the "Top 40 Under 40" by the Mississippi Business Journal in 2006 and is a graduate of Leadership Jackson.

A native of Austin, Texas, Lange, who lives in Fondren with her husband and two children, is a graduate of Millsaps College.

How did the Mississippi Book Festival come about?

Nash: A small group began meeting informally in the spring of 2013 to explore the possibility of launching a book festival in Mississippi. The idea was hatched over lunch between Leila Salisbury, director of the University Press of Mississippi, and me. It gained enthusiastic support from John Evans, owner of Lemuria Books, and was given initial support and funding from Malcolm White, Tourism Division director with the Mississippi Development Authority.

The initial group came together at Lemuria and included Salisbury and Marketing Director Steve Yates from the University Press of Mississippi; Tracy Carr from the Mississippi Library Commission; Diane Williams of the Mississippi Arts Commission;

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Mari Irby with Mississippi Public Broadcasting; Sarah McCullough and Mary Margaret White from the MDA's tourism office; along with Peyton Prospere, Emily Gatlin, John Evans and myself. From there, the planning effort expanded with the creation of a broader board of directors and advisory board, the hiring of Holly Lange as executive director, and associating with the Community Foundation of Greater Jackson to handle all accounting and financial responsibilities.

What is the goal of the festival?

Nash: To recognize authors and the books they produce and to celebrate literacy, writing, reading and our cultural heritage. Mississippi is home to an astounding number of published writers, and it's time we had a statewide event that recognizes their craft and connects them with their readers while creating interest in reading and literacy.

Why did the planners of the Mississippi Book Festival choose to make this a statewide event?

Lange: The location of the Mississippi Book Festival is critical to its success. Since we are recognizing writers from all over the state, it seemed fitting to host the state book festival at the Capitol. This location will serve as an architectural backdrop to some of the region's finest authors.

Tell me about the budget and funding.

Lange: Partnerships are important to the success and growth of the Mississippi Book Festival. For 2015, the majority of our funding comes from Visit Mississippi, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the Mississippi Legislature, along with generous contributions from the Mississippi Humanities Council, Straddlefork Foundation, Bomgar Foundation and BankPlus. It is important to note that most state book festivals are housed and funded within a state organization, but we are a stand-alone, nonprofit organization and are raising much of our operating funds privately. Our operating budget for the upcoming festival is \$150,000. We always welcome sponsorships, especially as we are already planning for 2016.

You will be bringing together Mississippi authors with independent booksellers, publishers and other groups for panel discussions and book shopping. How were the authors selected, and how many are there?

Nash: A major component of any book festival is having authors talk about their books and interact with their readers. We are facilitating this through a series of panel discussions that feature the broad variety of books written by Mississippi authors. We could have doubled the number of panels, but for our first festival decided to limit the event to one day, which meant imposing a limit on the number of panels.

Nevertheless, we have been able to recruit more than 70 authors to participate in 18 panel discussions. We invited authors to participate who had published a book in the last 12 months or had a book coming out this fall. There will be opportunities to talk with authors and get books signed before and after each panel.

What categories of books are included?

Nash: We cover the literary landscape and include panels about history and biography; short stories; Civil War; comics and cartoons; Southern fiction; books for young readers; civil rights; poetry; romance; literary fiction; African-American history; children's illustrated literature; Eudora Welty and Margaret Walker Alexander; cooking and food; and sports and outdoors.

Are you working with other groups or organizations to produce this event?

Lange: This is a very collaborative project. Everyone across the state and beyond wants to be a part of this festival and help it succeed. Our board reflects librarians, educators, administrators, publishers, independent bookstores, authors and program specialists.

We have partnered with the Mississippi Humanities Council for grants for author expenses; the Mississippi Library Commission for programming, content and



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house, has jumped in with creative content guidance. Baker Donelson contributed all of the legal work. Mississippi Public Broadcasting is helping with promotion and will have a presence with its own literacy program. Really, it's amazing to me that so many different organizations are willing and supportive of this event.

Describe some of the special events.

Lange: In addition to panel discussions inside the Capitol, the Mississippi Library Commission will have a 3-D printer experience on the second floor of the Capitol. On the lawn, various nonprofits and foundations will have tents promoting their organizations. The Library of Congress is bringing special exhibitions from Washington.

On Mississippi Street, there will be rows of tents, under which independent bookstores, self-published authors, book organizations and other vendors will be selling goods. We will have a stage with live music throughout the day and, hopefully, a food truck presence.

The Welty Foundation is involved in almost every aspect and offered the use the Welty House and Visitors Center for a reception the evening before the festival. The William F. Winter Building will serve as the backdrop for an author-only breakfast Saturday morning, where guests can get a sneak peek on the progress of the two new museums going up in downtown Jackson. The Children's Museum is organizing a wide variety of activities for children and teenagers.

Can you estimate how many are expected to attend? Who do you hope to attract?

Lange: Since this is our first one, we have no idea how many people will attend, but the event is free, and everyone is welcome! With John Grisham, Greg Iles, Bill Ferris, Ellen Gilchrist and Rick Bragg added to the festival lineup, we expect several thousand attendees.

In addition to the authors we have officially invited, more than 50 other writers and authors will be on hand to greet their fans and introduce their books. The Friends of the Jackson Libraries will be selling used books.

There is a myth about book festivals that it is for academic book lovers only. This book festival celebrates the reader. You can listen to your favorite author talk about his or her new book; you can attend a panel with former Gov. Haley Barbour and hear him talk about Hurricane Katrina; you can stroll through the Capitol grounds and enjoy live music. You can take a tour of the Capitol and see its (renovation) progress.

Do you still need volunteers? How can they sign up?

Lange: Currently, we have a need for approximately 200 volunteers. Our website has a link to our volunteer signup site at www.msbookfestival.com. Positions, times and directions are listed there. Volunteer needs range from welcoming guests at the gates, making sure rooms are ready to go and cleaned up for each panel, to pointing guests in the right direction along the Capitol grounds. There is truly a job for everyone.

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