

MIAMI BOOK FAIR INT'L NOVEMBER 12, 2015

More than storytime: Miami Book Fair's Children's Alley brings reading to life

HIGHLIGHTS

Children's component of the Miami Book Fair begins Nov. 20 and ends Nov. 22

More than 15 authors will be present

Performances and hands-on activities planned



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Nicole Swift has a mission: Work on creating a literary theme park.

But as a force behind Children's Alley, the kid-centric component of the Miami Book Fair, she's pretty close.

Each year, Children's Alley teems with young students who bounce from corner to corner on the lookout for the next activity, performance or reading. It hosts back-to-back performances at its Once Upon A Time stage, author presentations within its "Generation Genius Authors" series and stamps "passports" at each of its six multiculturally themed Pop-Up Fun Rooms.

And like your run-of-the-mill theme park, Children's Alley has something for everyone — both kids and "adult kids," Swift said. However, the underlying goal remains: to groom the next generation of readers.

The program, which runs from Friday, Nov. 20, to Sunday, Nov. 22, began sparsely, as just a series of author visits to Miami-Dade public schools. Its increasing popularity prompted expansion and, over the years, evolved into a diverse, three-day extravaganza that seeks to engage young minds and inspire a love of reading.

More than 15 authors will make their way to Children's Alley this year, said Swift, who, as author programmer, spends more than 10 months scouting up-and-coming talent, researching literary trends and collaborating with publishing houses to compile each year's program.

"Generation Genius Authors" will include presentations by Miami Herald funnyman Dave Barry; Adam Mansbach, of *Go The F**k To Sleep* fame; *Captain Underpants* creator Dav Pilkey; and Sonia Manzano, who, for more than 40 years, played Maria on *Sesame Street*.

"I'm not looking to teach any lessons. I just want kids to know that something valuable can be made out of any life," said Manzano, whose memoir, *Becoming Maria: Love and Chaos in the South Bronx*, describes "a tumultuous childhood steeped in domestic violence and alcoholism."

"Highlighting any one author event in our program is like picking a favorite child — impossible!" Swift said. However, she added, the fair's partnership with the National Book Foundation is up there.

Next Friday, nearly 200 high school students will moonlight as journalists and have the opportunity to ask questions before finalists of the National Book Awards "Adult Literature" category in a news conference-style setting.

“It’s so exciting to be able to bring this experience to our students, and I can’t wait to see what they come up with,” Swift said.

Children’s Alley will also feature performances at its Once Upon A Time stage, including storytelling, breakdancing by the Grammy award-winning Lucky Diaz and the Family Jam Band, art collective Delou Africa, and the Greater Miami Youth Symphony.

Children also will have the chance to explore different cultures through art, music and hands-on activities in six tents dubbed Pop-Up Fun Rooms.

“These tents work on a passport system,” Swift explained. “As kids participate in an activity in different tents, they get their passport stamped. Once their passport is filled, they bring it to our information booth in Children’s Alley and receive a free book.”

Children’s Alley, Swift said, works to provide access to books and promote reading “for the pure enjoyment of it.”

This year, she predicts that more than 6,000 young students will attend the Miami Book Fair and more than 2,400 will be visited by the featured authors. The fair will also give away more than 5,000 books.

“I think access to books and to author presentations is the main factor when you consider impacting children’s views on reading,” Swift said. “Bringing the joy of reading outside of the classroom and in front of a child; giving a face to a name on a book, and having kids hear each author’s story about how they came to be a writer really affects how they view their own potential.”

“Through books, you escape to a world all your own, even through someone else’s words,” she added. “Someone’s words allow you to build worlds — what’s cooler than that?”



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