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A Book Fair That Grew, Propelling the Arts in Miami

By **LIZETTE ALVAREZ**

MIAMI — Three decades ago, the notion of a book fair in this city seemed wildly implausible.

Viewed as a town that had squandered its natural advantages, Miami was reeling and recovering in the early 1980s. The [Mariel boatlift](#) from Cuba had churned up its streets, and the 1980 riots were a recent memory. The Art Deco revival was years away, and the television series “Miami Vice,” a paean to South Beach style, was yet to make its mark. “Paradise Lost?” Time magazine had asked on its cover in 1981.

So in 1984, when Eduardo J. Padrón, the president of Miami Dade College, asked Mitchell Kaplan, owner of the fledgling Books & Books shop in Coral Gables, to help him start a book fair in Miami’s downtown area, the preferred ZIP code for prostitutes and vagrants, quixotic was a polite term for their vision.

Book fairs were scarce around the country. Only two major ones existed; one sold books, and the other held readings. Dr. Padrón and Mr. Kaplan proposed doing both and set their sights on at least one big name. They lured James Baldwin to the first one.

“Downtown was de miedo,” Dr. Padrón said in a recent interview, meaning a scary place. “But we had close to 25,000 people show up, and that gave us real impetus.” The next year Allen Ginsberg and Jerzy Kosinski arrived, followed by Joseph Heller and Maya Angelou in 1986.

Publishers noticed. “Miami historically has been famous for many things, but I’m not sure literary culture is among them,” said Paul Bogaards, a spokesman for Knopf Doubleday. “The book fair changed that.”

Now entering its 30th year, the [Miami Book Fair International](#), which opens on Sunday and runs for a week, is the largest and by nearly all accounts the most diverse public literary event in the United States. Authors appreciate the crowds and conviviality; readers appreciate the intimacy and the something-for-everyone offerings, including a children’s alley and a large gathering of graphic novelists; and publishers welcome the hundreds of thousands of dollars in book sales and the know-how of the people who run the fair.

“You have an expertise from the staff,” said Maggie Richards, vice president and director of sales and marketing for Henry Holt. “Not only are they involved in the book world, they know how authors should be treated, what publishers’ expectations are and how to match an author with an audience.”

From the start, Mr. Kaplan and Dr. Padrón set out to engage the community as a whole. They made the fair affordable, which made it accessible: This year’s top general admission price is \$8 (although some author events cost \$15), and there is no charge for children 12 and younger. They also introduced a street festival where adults and children could browse and mingle with writers downtown, and indoor readings at Miami Dade College and other locations. “We wanted to create the largest tent possible, so all of Miami could fit under it,” Mr. Kaplan said.

The novelist Russell Banks, author of “Continental Drift” and “Rule of the Bone,” who lives part of the year in South Beach, said he enjoyed the sense of community. “It’s the most enjoyable fair from a writer’s point of view, in the world really, partly because of the way the whole city gets involved,” he said.

And then there’s the diversity, he added: “There are all kinds of people there; some are readers, some are not. Linguistically, socially, racially, it’s all mixed and it’s there, out on the street.”

The writers, too, are a mix of the well known and less known, from across the literary spectrum. This year 500 are scheduled to appear, with Dan Brown, author of “The Da Vinci Code,” opening the festivities and Dick Cheney, the former vice president, who has a [book out about his heart troubles](#), attending near the end. The novelist Amy Tan and the thriller writer Scott Turow plan to be there, as do the historians Thomas Cahill and [Doris Kearns Goodwin](#) and the cookbook author Patricia Wells.

The fair’s continued appeal has served as a template for other book festivals across the country: There are now dozens, including the successful [Los Angeles Times Festival of Books](#), which began in 1996.

“The Miami book fair has been a cornerstone inspiration for us,” said Johnny Temple, publisher and editor in chief of [Akashic Books](#), a frequent exhibitor at the fair and one of the organizers of the [Brooklyn Book Festival](#). “The book publishing business has done a good job of making itself so elitist in orientation, all the while complaining that no one reads enough. But the Miami book fair is one of the few institutions that really bring books to the public rather than waiting for the public to come to the books.”

The fair also reflects the city’s Hispanic demographic: An array of Spanish-language authors

from Latin America and Spain address eager audiences in Spanish, engaging directly with a county that is 64 percent Latino.

That Miami is referred to, jokingly and less so, as the capital of Latin America is appealing for writers like Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes, past attendees. But the kind of entree the fair affords into the American market is even more important for lesser-known Spanish-language authors.

“It ranks along with the important Hispanic book fairs, like Bogotá,” said Rosa Montero, a writer from Madrid who appreciates the Spanish-language programming and is invited regularly to read from her work.

Caribbean writers like the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat are also fixtures. This year Ms. Danticat, author of the recent work of fiction “[Claire of the Sea Light](#),” will be [interviewed](#) at the fair by her editor at Knopf, Robin Desser.

The book fair’s success has also broadened Miami’s reputation as a city for culture. It may still be known for suntans, nonstop parties, look-at-me cars and not-so-subtle plastic surgery, but the city’s power brokers have long since concluded that the arts can survive there.

“You need these confidence-building moments, and the book fair was a key one for us,” said Michael Spring, the longtime director of Miami-Dade County’s Department of Cultural Affairs. “It showed that Miami had the stuff. It gave donors, civic leaders and politicians the courage to pursue the rest of the agenda.”

[Miami City Ballet](#) was founded soon after the book fair sprang up, followed by the New World Symphony and art museums. Since 2002, the Art Basel fair has set up a sprawling event in Miami Beach each December. “The fair proved that Miami wasn’t just a carnival on Calle Ocho,” Mr. Padrón said.

The fair has had its share of made-for-Miami moments. At a morning appearance in 1988, Mr. Kaplan recalled, Hunter S. Thompson opened an event with a question of his own for the audience: “Does anyone have any Wild Turkey?” Two men in the audience dashed out and then returned to thrust a bottle at him.

Wrapping up the event, Mr. Thompson, by then shirtless, dove into the Cadillac fishtail convertible of the two men who had fetched the bourbon. Mr. Kaplan said his last glimpse of the writer was of legs thrust skyward from the Cadillac’s back seat.