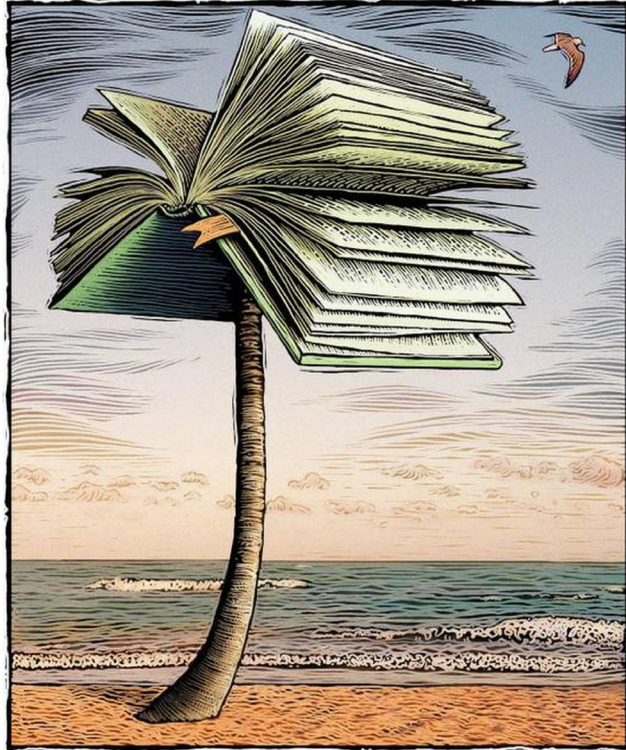


Miami Herald

Book Fair's story keeps getting better and better

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A blink. November 1984, 30 years ago, but it could have been yesterday, the memory is so vivid. Eduardo Padrón, the young president of the Wolfson Campus of Miami Dade College, and me, a newly minted bookstore owner of two years, standing at the intersection of Northeast Second Avenue and Fourth Street, brightly colored tents everywhere, thousands of people browsing booths filled with nothing more exotic than books.

Yes, thousands of Miamians filling the streets of a very unglamorous downtown Miami for nothing more than the promise of books and authors. The very first Miami Book Fair International, and already a success. We all built it and they came. Eduardo and I stood in the middle of the crowd with smiles bigger and broader than Biscayne Bay.

Before *Miami Vice*, before the models, before South Beach, before Art Basel, and just after Mariel, just after Time magazine proclaimed "Miami: Paradise Lost?" and just after a series of riots and strife that rocked the city, there we were, witness to something so counterintuitive and jarring that it would change the way an entire community saw itself.

"There's no cultural life down here." "Nothing serious about Miami." "A book festival, you've got to be kidding. No one reads in Miami." In one weekend, all of these "truths" were shown to be false. The thrill of what became hundreds of thousands of people shopping for books and filling rooms to hear the likes of James Baldwin, Allen Ginsberg, Isaac Singer, Maya Angelou, Mario Vargas Llosa, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison and Hunter Thompson made everyone to smile that weekend.

And, the Fair gave heart to others who wanted to start ballet companies, performing arts centers, new art museums and film festivals.

Visiting authors were taken by surprise, too. They went back to their own communities and countries and wrote about this magical place on the water where buildings were cheap and people came out in droves for all things literary.

And, the diversity. Miami looked like no other American city, and since the Book Fair's identity was rooted in the notion of something for everyone, that diversity was in full view under the big tent that was the Fair. Programs and books in Spanish and Creole, young and old weaving in and out of each other's way, black and white finding common literary ground, the well-off and those who weren't, all drawn to downtown Miami that weekend. Something for everyone – not always the prevailing theme of Miami back then, but a mantra that would allow our Book Fair to thrive for the next three decades.

That, and the unwavering support and vision of that other man with the smile, a true community treasure, my friend and colleague, Eduardo Padrón, now president of the entire college and its eight campuses, several outreach centers and 165,000 students. As we are about to embark on our 31st Book Fair, it's incumbent on me, one who has been there from the beginning, to acknowledge the achievement of Miami Dade College's remarkable commitment to growing and nurturing our literary community and to promoting literacy, while supporting ways to ensure the next generation of readers.

And, of course, I must acknowledge one of its most extraordinary gifts, the gift of the Book Fair. Starting Sunday, more than 600 authors will come to the Wolfson Campus, more than 300 exhibitors will be selling their books and thousands of people will fill the streets of a booming downtown. This year will find some new, innovative initiatives. PBS, here for the first time, will be joining C-SPAN, giving us extensive coverage and live streaming from the Fair; we will host a majority of the nominees for The National Book Awards during the weekend; and we are introducing The Swamp, where you'll find uniquely Florida presentations of authors, music and art. (All of these are made possible through the generous support of The John and James L. Knight Foundation.) And, we've even extended the Fair another evening, as we'll be presenting this year's Man Booker Prize winner, Richard Flanagan, on Monday, Nov. 24.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. After all these years, there is still something for everyone. So, grab your Fairgoers guide, check out our website, make your own schedule, and head to The Fair. When you do, you just might see two guys standing in the middle of it all, slightly grayer, slightly older, but still with the biggest smiles you've ever seen.

MITCHELL KAPLAN IS THE FOUNDER OF BOOK & BOOKS.