

# Little Haiti Book Festival Offers "a Deep Dive Into Haitian Life Through Its Letters"

BY TAYLOR ESTAPE

THURSDAY, MAY 18, 2017 AT 8 A.M.



*Little Haiti Book Festival/Miami Book Fair*

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**Drive east on NW 59th Street toward the Little Haiti Cultural Center and you'll notice the murals and brightly painted building facades that echo the island of this neighborhood's name.** Unlike the arts district just south of it, Little Haiti is still resisting, with varying success, impending gentrification and the forced relocation of the immigrants that made the area what it is. You can go to the

Cultural Center during one of the countless fairs and markets that happen throughout the year to hear the blaring konpa and dancehall, or taste the decadent griot with fried plantains, but while you're there, you'll also see people who don't live there shooting out of Ubers and ducking into an art gallery or alternative performance space.

The Little Haiti Book Festival will have a more direct engagement with the neighborhood. Starting Saturday, May 27, at 6 p.m. and continuing through that Sunday, the event will feature workshops, literary panels, spoken word, and storytelling, most often in Haitian Creole or French with simultaneous English interpretation.

“Little Haiti is a neighborhood of families with a history of overcoming monumental odds in their home country. And yet these families and their neighbors still share a longing for home,” says MJ Fievre, who helped to create the festival programming. She's also a memoir and short-story writer. “The Miami Book Fair and Sosyete Koukouy, the two organizations behind the Little Haiti Book Festival, understand the importance of a cultural program that fosters awareness of Haitian people, their language, rituals and traditions, and their historical and artistic contributions to the diaspora.”

While the Miami Book Fair is co-sponsoring this year's festival, it was originally started by Jan Mapou, founder of Sosyete Koukouy, a nonprofit that seeks to promote Haitian Creole language, culture, and art. Lissette Mendez, director of programming at the Miami Book Fair, had known Mapou for years and helped with previous festivals before enlisting the resources of the behemoth MBF for the Little Haiti event.

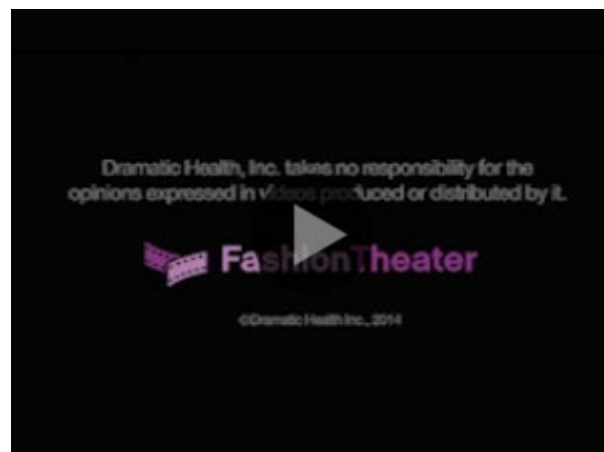
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“Literature in general is one of the important ways in which any culture transmits itself,” says Mendez. “As readers, we oftentimes can become closer to the emotional truth of a population or a country. This is also true about oral culture, but any kind of storytelling for me is about that – immersing yourself in the life of the other, whoever that other

is. It helps to explicate the history of where you come from, the history of the

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people who are your neighbors, in this case, and being able to take a deep dive into Haitian life through its letters.”

Talks and workshops cover topics ranging from writing your first draft with Fabienne Josaphat to modern slavery in Haiti. Non-Haitian writers and readers are encouraged to attend, but the festival is decidedly focused on the concerns and accomplishments of Haitian literature and art.

ADVERTISING







*Little Haiti Book Festival/Miami Book Fair*

“Literature has always been instrumental for Haitian people in their quest for resilience and sustenance,” explains Fievre. “So much so, in fact, that under the dictatorship of Papa Doc, Haitian citizens who showed too much interest in books were often accused of being agitators, enemies of the government.” That’s not rare for a dictatorial regime, but the practice isn’t widely acknowledged when it comes to Haiti specifically.

“There’s a perception sometimes, especially in South Florida, that there’s not much art-making in Haiti,” Mendez reflects. “There’s been political unrest,

poverty, the trauma of the earthquake, and natural disasters of other kinds. We see the terrible things that are happening or that have happened and we don't empathize as much with the rich literary and intellectual history that's there.”

The book festival serves as a kind of reminder of those traditions, but also as an entry for those already connected to them. Included in the programming are two workshops for children – one in which kid authors Edwin Bonilla (7), Kimbria Alfrear (13), and Phanesia Pharel (17) lead their peers in writing their own work. Free books will also be provided for kids in attendance.

### UPCOMING EVENTS

**Dollhouse Dance Factory: Bring It! Live**

Sat., Jul. 1, 8:00pm **TICKETS**

**FLO'pocalypse**

Sat., Jul. 8, 8:30pm **TICKETS**

**You're a Good Man Charlie Brown: Young ...**

Sat., Jul. 15, 2:00pm **TICKETS**

**Miami Curves Week Presents: Curves & C...**

Fri., Jul. 21, 9:00pm **TICKETS**

**Bill Maher**

Sat., Aug. 5, 8:00pm **TICKETS**

“I'm really excited about the kids who will get inspired. I think that's important for children growing up first generation or second generation,” says Mendez. “It serves as a reminder and as a reaffirmation of the divinity within us. That we are deserving of good things, that we create beautiful things just as much as other people do.”

*The Little Haiti Book Festival begins at 6 p.m. Saturday, May 27, and continues at noon on Sunday, May 28, at the Little Haiti Cultural Center. Visit [miamibookfair.com](http://miamibookfair.com).*



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