

The 33rd-Annual Miami Book Fair Adds a New Focus on Caribbean Literature

BY ELIZA DEWEY

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Yamila Lomba/Courtesy of Miami Book Fair

If one of the joys of reading is that it takes you to a different world, this year's **Miami Book Fair** does the reverse: It brings the world to you. Now in its 33rd year, the annual celebration of literature, creativity, and community-building through the written word will debut a new element in its programming: Read Caribbean, an initiative to showcase authors and topics from Miami's closest international neighbors.

"One of the things I wanted to do was to really highlight the literary output from the Caribbean," says book fair programming director Lissette Mendez, who conceived of the idea. "It became evident we weren't really giving it as much space as the Spanish-language programming. There

was a hole that we really needed to fill."

Read Caribbean will include about a dozen discussion panels centered on current events, politics, and literary traditions from across the region, as well as some 80 authors with Caribbean roots representing works in English, Kreyol, and Spanish. Mendez says that although Caribbean authors and themes have been woven throughout the fair from its beginning in 1984, this initiative represents a new page in the fair's focus and intentional planning.

To make it all come together, Mendez gathered a team of advisers to help design a series of interesting and novel panels. They included friends and colleagues who directed the Bocas Lit Fest in Trinidad, and others who worked on the Calabash International Literary Festival in Jamaica. Local planners include Jan Mapou – owner of the Libreri Mapou bookstore in Little Haiti – and Haitian-American author M.J. Fièvre. Mendez says they have worked over the past nine months to ensure a wide range of discussion topics that will highlight both the area's diversity as well as shared experiences and overlapping political, historic, linguistic, and social ties.

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Many of the planners have been involved with Miami Book Fair initiatives throughout the year to foster a love of reading and bring people together beyond the November event. Mapou, for instance, runs a nonprofit literary organization in Miami called Sosyete Koukouy, which helped design Read Caribbean and has also worked each year with the National Endowment for the Arts to implement the city's Big Read program, in which participants read the same book and meet to discuss it.

"South Florida occupies a unique space in the literary world by virtue of its Caribbean population," Mapou says of Read Caribbean. "[This program] offers a remarkable opportunity for meaningful cultural exchange, exposure to literary works from authors of various national backgrounds, and significant exposure of the reading public to excellent written works."

Miami Book Fair will run this year from November 13 to 20. It will span 18 venues and an outdoor plaza for socializing, relaxing, and enjoying performances. The eight-day fest includes a wide range of readings, panels, and group discussions with noted authors, as well as activities and social events to help foster a sense of community around a shared love of literature and creativity. The fair has been a part of the Center for Writing and Literature at Miami Dade College since 2001, through which it produces literacy programming throughout the year.

The book fair has generated considerable excitement this year owing to some of the big names who will present at the fair's popular "Evening With" reading sessions, including Delany Dine

who will present at the fair's popular evening with reading sessions, including Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Geraldine Brooks, *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah, actor Alan Cumming, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, and culinary personality Padma Lakshmi. These talks given by famous writers are consistently among the more popular aspects of the November fair.

Another highlight is the annual Street Fair, which includes the Festival of Authors, featuring more than 450 writers presenting and speaking about their work. The fair also offers books for sale from scores of booksellers and publishers, as well as activities such as arts and crafts for children.

The book fair also has a strong tradition of Spanish-language programming. Past editions have included creative writing workshops, a literary brunch, presentations from authors from across the Spanish-speaking world, and games, music, and activities in Spanish for kids.

If you're raring to go and don't want to wait until November, a string of events this fall will lead up to the big shebang, including a host of creative writing workshops, many of them free and sometimes even with wine included. Visit miamibookfair.com.

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