

THINGS TO DO

‘A Netflix for books’: A free Miami Book Fair goes virtual in COVID-19 pandemic

BY CONNIE OGLE

AUGUST 20, 2020 06:00 AM , UPDATED AUGUST 20, 2020 10:37 AM



The familiar tents and book-loving crowds won't converge on Miami Dade College this fall.



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This year, the colorful tents won't spring up overnight on the streets lining the college campus. Swarms of authors, readers and students won't flock to downtown Miami for the busy street fair weekend, lining up for signings and loading up tote bags with books.

The Miami Book Fair is not coming to [Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus](#) this fall. But that doesn't mean there won't be a book fair.

Mendez envisions it as “[Netflix](#) for books” accessed through a new and upgraded website. You’ll sign in with your email and create a password, and the site will take you to a list of programs, panels and conversations that you’ll view the way you view your Netflix catalog. Click on what you want to see, and the link will take you to a YouTube-like page where you watch the event.

The fair, which runs Nov. 15-22, kicks off with Margaret Atwood (“The Handmaid’s Tale,” “The Testaments”). More than 171 English-language authors have signed up so far and 80 Spanish-language authors have signed up, with more to be added over the next few weeks. The website is expected to go live sometime in September, at which point you can create a watch list of the events you’re hoping to see and sign up for emails letting you know when new authors have been added.



Crime writer Greg Iles sings a solo with Dave Barry, Carl Hiaasen and other Rock Bottom Remainers at the 2019 Miami Book Fair at Miami Dade College.

Aside from a fundraising chat between novelists Ann Patchett and Emma Straub, both of whom also own independent bookstores, the events will be free. That’s great for book lovers but financially rough for the fair. Not having to fly authors to Miami from around the country saves the fair some money. But the loss of ticket sales for “Evenings With...” events and the street fair and losing sponsors due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been costly.

“One of our biggest sponsors is Royal Caribbean,” Mendez says. “Other sponsors haven’t been able to commit or can only commit half the amount they usually do. The story on the financial hit is not finished yet. There are still grants and proposals outstanding that could help us. But we’re down 50 percent from what we would usually need. At the same time we’re making sure that the technology is where it needs to be, and that is not without cost. It’s expensive, as anyone who has ever put together a website knows.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has done what 9/11 and Hurricane Andrew couldn't do: It forced the fair, which began in 1984, to cancel its annual weeklong book frenzy at the college for the first time in 37 years. But the show will go on virtually — and it will go on for free.

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The transition from live to virtual fair, which will feature programs in English and Spanish, has been a painstaking process, says program director Lissette Mendez.

"I feel like I'm building the bridge across the Grand Canyon as I'm walking," she says. "It's like: Put the board down, take a step, put the next board down, take a step. ... It's a work in progress."

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So what will an online book fair look like? Mendez says she and her team have benefited by learning from fairs that had to cancel events earlier this year. That means a blend of pre-recorded events and livestream, possibly recorded interviews with authors and live Q and A sessions. Some events will be available on the website for one night only; others may linger online longer.

All the usual genres will be represented — fiction, politics, history, memoir, comics, poetry, Caribbean works with a focus on Haiti — in addition to robust children's programming.

Still, despite the complications, Mendez says the upgraded website will be useful for the next in-person fair, which will hopefully return in November 2021.

“We could use it in the future to highlight authors for a much larger audience, people who aren’t able to travel or come to Miami or leave their homes,” she says. “Getting the tech for this website is going to help us expand our reach in the future.”

Mitchell Kaplan, fair chair and co-founder, says he’ll miss the fair, especially seeing so many kids there. But he’s looking forward to the opportunities a virtual fair presents, like the ability to pair writers from different time zones and countries.

“We’re going to do it as best we can given the circumstances,” he says. “We’ve learned so much. Most every literary event has gone virtual since the pandemic happened. But my sincere hope is that this is the last year we’re virtual. I really want to get back into the physical world of the fair so we can bring people together under one tent.”

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Connie Ogle loves wine, books and the Miami Heat. Please don’t make her eat a mango.

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