

# RANCHO MIRAGE WRITERS FESTIVAL – BETTER AND BETTER!

BY HEIDI SIMMONS

The definition of a festival is: “a period of celebration.” With all the wonderful festivals in the Coachella Valley -- art, music, and film, the meaning is especially apropos to this year’s Rancho Mirage Writers Festival.

With a hunger and fervor, from early morning and into the night, the Fourth Annual Rancho Mirage Writers Festival captured the spirit, energy and freedom of the written word, celebrating for 48 hours, the intelligent expression and exchange of great ideas.

Fifty authors, 20 notable moderators and 1,200 readers moved about the beautiful Rancho Mirage Library to hear scholars, experts and creative minds share their knowledge, passion and writing process to an audience eager to listen and learn.

“This is our best year and it’s electric!” said David Bryant, Library Director. “We have a reved up audience and great content!”

Bryant is also a member of the amazing RMWF Steering Committee. “We look at authors carefully before we extend an invitation,” said Bryant. “Our speakers are animated, brainy and terrific conversationalists.”

With a mix of authors in nonfiction, fiction, that included Edgar nominees, Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award recipients, categories spanned from geo-politics to celebrities.

The Rancho Mirage Library was a constant buzz as five rooms simultaneously functioned as venues throughout the day. There were 76 events over the two days.

Evening programs were held at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Resort Grand Ballroom that included a lite supper on Saturday, and an ice cream social on Sunday.

Event programming was not only entertaining, but well organized. Scheduling was divided over Saturday and Sunday so Readers could see and hear speakers individually or in a discussion. If Readers missed an author the first day, it was easy to find that author in another event the next.

Bon vivant and RMWF Founder, Jamie Kabler, remains an enthusiastic contributor

and participant, but has long since retired his infamous whistle from the first year.

RMWF announced Galante Scholars, which provided talented CV students, along with their teachers, the opportunity to participate in venues and have private meeting with authors.

Bookseller Barnes and Noble returned with a thriving pop up bookstore. Box lunch was provided each day and Koffi ran a coffee bar to keep Readers alert.

Since its inception, the RMWF has tweaked and modified the Festival to better serve and accommodate those in attendance. Compliments, complaints and suggestions are taken seriously and changes are implemented!

With a helpful and friendly RMWF staff of nearly 100, the Festival was well managed and functioned smoothly throughout the event. Between talks, hundreds of people moved from venue to venue with relative ease and events began and concluded on time.

The authors were aided with time clocks, and had handlers escort them from events to the book-signing table.

A pleasant surprise and nice improvement was the new colorful, oversized, spiral-bound programs. Opening wide and flat, glossy pages included a quick glance overview with events titled for each hour throughout the day.

The 54-page program included a tribute and congratulations to CV resident Herman Wouk on his 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. Wouk addressed the Readers in a personal note. The program also served as a keepsake as some attendees had authors sign their “talk” or bio photo.

Maybe most importantly, organizers thoughtfully reconsidered and created more space, and added comfortable, high back -- even stylish -- *padded* chairs. No more sore bottoms!

Improvements from the year before were made in every venue and audiovisual technicians engineered presentations complete with state-of-the-art large screen television monitors.

New to the Fest was the Children’s Reading Room. It was remodeled with sound proof walls and glass enclosure to serve both the Festival and of course the kids who use the sunny space.

Appropriately named the Disney Room, it seated 250 people.

The Annenberg Reading Room, the northeast section of the library, was once again the London room with 275 chairs. Only this year, the dais was against the interior wall making it easier to see the panels and television screens.

Named in honor of the valley’s celebrity author Ann Rice, a room of 100 seats provided another intimate setting. The library’s periodical space became the Didion room, which sat 180.

The Community or Steinbeck Room held 350 attendees and was mostly full to capacity for several enthusiastic discussions and provocative panels.

At times, the staff had to deal with disappointed Readers who could not get into the largest venue. To gain entrance, people needed to line up early, and there was no special treatment for latecomers -- even for Angel donors who are the backbone of the Festival. Most Readers had no qualms and chose to attend an alternative talk.

The Community Room lost some seating when it was recently modified. Changes were made, not just for the Festival, but also to accommodate badly needed audiovisual equipment.

Prior to the change, the AV equipment was behind the stage and often caused technical difficulties since tech personal could not see what was happening. With some clever engineering, the space also provides safe storage for the library’s grand piano.

A significant addition this year was the covering of the RMWF by C-SPAN (the government cable channel), which operates the popular “Book TV.” This is a notable validation for the Festival and an acknowledgement of its high-quality content.

“Book TV” features major book events across the country and provides interviews with mainly nonfiction authors. It broadcasts 24/7 on the weekends. C-SPAN is certainly fortunate to have RMWF on its roster.

The events held in the Steinbeck Room will be broadcast on “Book TV” the first weekend



in February. All presentations were recorded during the Festival to show on Rancho Mirage’s channel 17.

Parking is not a problem at this Fest. It is valet only, and a young and energetic valet service moved cars swiftly -- no doubt running many miles each day. Where traffic was a problem last year, this year the Rancho Mirage Sheriff’s Department put out orange cones and monitored the signals.

Along with the list of amazing authors, there was a Who’s Who in the world of politics, power and entertainment. When it came to sharing the stage with bestselling authors, many of the moderators were as provocative and entertaining as the guest speakers.

Beyond the RMWF’s ability to adapt and improve, organizers continue to produce a high quality Festival by being smart, insightful and drawing on the clout of the community.

The caliber of the A-list writers and moderators reflect the tenacity, connections and significance of the great City of Rancho Mirage.

Yet, what’s truly best about the RMWF when all is said and done, is that those who put this event together every year have an unquenchable curiosity, genuine love and deep appreciation of and for books -- which they celebrate! 