

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Festival of People, With Books

Chiwan Choi · Wednesday, March 13th, 2013

It's been almost two weeks now since we took part in Los Angeles's first Grand Park Downtown BookFest. Of course, I was going to write all about it last week, all high on the success of the event and all, but instead I ended up getting sick (like everyone else) and was too curled up on the floor moaning in pain to write anything. Thank sweet baby geebus though for allowing me to get through the festival because it really was one hell of a day at the park.

When the park first told us the date of the festival, we were concerned, because March has seen such unpredictable weather. It could be perfectly sunny and blue or it could rain for days. It turned out there was no reason for concern...barely. It was a perfectly sunny day, in the mid-80s, a day when even if there were no books or DJs out there, families would have still come out and played in the fountain and rested on the grass.

It also turned out to be the last sunny day for a little bit as the skies turned gray the following day and remained brisk well into the following week. So going forward, as beautiful as our day turned out, we might have to consider moving the date to a more predictable month.

But I'm picking at nits!

The fact is that it was everything we'd hoped it would be. The writers were happy. The publishers were happy. The public was happy. The staff at the park was happy.



Instead of giving you a full play by play, here are a few things that really stood out for us:

- We sold a lot of books. On our end, we sold about 120 new books from local small presses. And The Last Bookstore sold about 150 of the used books they brought out. So that's around 270 books sold in one afternoon at a park. Damn awesome.
- It was one eclectic line-up of writers and that was great. By not highlighting any one writer over another (okay, one. Eloise Klein Healy kicked it off for us as our city's first poet laureate), the readings became about the audience. We didn't even really introduce any of the readers. Just one writer after another reading 5 minutes each. The whole thing became a gift to the people in the park, instead of making the audience feel like they were being forced to admire some writer because of his/her level of stardom.
- We (meaning Writ Large Press and our pop-up) wanted to experiment with NOT selling books. What I mean is, we wanted to get rid of the vendor mentality. I was encouraging writers to not worry about their books, not worry about trying to get people to buy, and instead to be out there talking to the crowd, interacting. And guess what? It works! There were various writers (and couple of publishers) who kept getting behind the tables trying to push their own books and it

didn't improve sales much.

- There wasn't one type of book that sold more than others. We had both \$5 poetry chapbooks and beautiful \$30 books sell out. And in a bit of a surprise, there was no need to discount books. It was enough just to make it an easy number, either by rounding down or rounding up to the nearest dollar.
- Most non-writers in attendance were completely surprised that there was this world of small presses in our city. I was surprised at their excitement. And once they realized there was, they wanted to support it by buying books!
- We're going to do it again next year.

I am grateful for all the publishers and writers who put their trust in us to not only sell their books, but to take care of the books and trusted that what we were doing was a good thing. This is as valuable to us as anything, that our peers respect what we do and how we do it.



A special shout-out to Mike the Poet, who did a walking tour and also let us use him whenever we needed a boost in energy; to our partner-in-crime, Kaya Press, who not only helped us but helped The Last Bookstore on their table of used books; and to the wonderful people of the LBC, who came up to participate with us, especially Zach Nelson-Lopiccolo and PJ Santos of Bank-Heavy Press for helping organize the Long Beach writers and publishers. I love them.

You know what? I think we just created a book festival for locals, a literary event for our neighbors, an event that lets people in our community know that there are writers and books and publishers among them working hard to not only create art, but to contribute to the city we all share.

I am telling you. You should have seen some of the reactions when I first explained to people that the books were from about twenty different small presses, all in Los Angeles.

It was like they'd just found out there are superheroes in their midst.

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