
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Tale of Two Book Festivals

Chiwan Choi · Wednesday, April 16th, 2014

Now that we've gone through the gauntlet of two book festivals in three weeks, I want to take a little time to share our experiences from each event, comparing and contrasting a little bit, to give a fuller picture of where things are for indie publishers and for Writ Large Press.

First –

2ND ANNUAL GRAND PARK DOWNTOWN BOOKFEST

The 2nd Annual Grand Park Downtown BookFest was pretty much everything we'd hoped it would be. The turnout was about double last year's. We made great use of the main (and only) stage. We sold a great deal of books.

But most importantly, we really succeeded in stamping it with the ethos we'd been working so hard to instill on not just the festival, but on all the work we do.

One of partnerships and collaborations, not one of exclusion and competition.

PUBLISH! & Poesia Para La Gente



Two of the elements we added this year to our BookFest were a PUBLISH! tent, where the public were given a chance to write, edit, and publish a book. The other was Poesia Para La Gente, lead by the one and only Jessica Ceballos. For the festival, PPLG brought a whole gang of poets who stationed themselves all over the park and wrote poetry on demand for free.

The biggest impact these two projects had on the festival overall (aside from making many people very happy) is that it blurred the line between “writers” and “readers.” With PUBLISH!, everybody who participated was a writer and had a book in their hands to prove it. With PPLG, by sitting on the same ground as the public, the poets literally experienced the day on the same level as the audience.

The Stage



The first two hours of the main (and only) stage were dedicated to kid-friendly performers, Story

Pirates and Birdie's Playhouse.

It was followed by three hours of the most eclectic programming you will find on any main stage at any book festival. There was an all female YA Authors line-up curated and hosted by Cecil Castellucci, featuring Lissa Price, Sherri L. Smith, and Sonya Sone. They were joined on stage by teen writers from Get Lit and 826LA.

Next was Read/Beats (pronounced Red/Beats), a project conceived by Peter Woods, where we asked four writers from different parts of Los Angeles—Jessica Ceballos, Steve Abee, Billy Burgos, and Gia Scott-Heron—to perform original pieces as a jazz trio led by Emile Porée improvised behind them.

It was so amazing that we asked the band to stay for the next set, the UNION STATION 75th ANNIVERSARY readings. We watched as David Kipen of LIBros Schmibros read from his iPhone (kids these days) with a perfect music accompaniment.

To close it out, we had another genre grouping, this time mystery/pulp writers of color, and all from Los Angeles. The segment was called *Lament in the Night*, in honor of the unique novella written by Sh?son Nagahara. It was hosted and curated by the Edgar Award-winning author Naomi Hirahara, and featured Gary Phillips, Steph Cha, Desiree Zamarano, Rachel Howzell Hall, and a young writer named Ruben Rodriguez.

Because of the great job in designing the space by the Grand Park staff, the public remained engaged for all the presentations and all the authors.

The DT•LAB Pop-Up Bookstore



Over 30 LA based indie publishers sent us books to sell at the pop-up. In addition, we brought in Seite Books from East LA and Gatsby Books from the LBC. The store stayed busy all day. We sold twice as much as we did last year, about \$2300 of books. Not bad for a store that was open for 5 hours and had nobody trying to push anything on anybody.

One thing we realized though is we need to do a MUCH better job of finding and bringing in LA-based children's book publishers. If you are one or know of one, please leave a comment!

It was an absolutely perfect day. The weather was great. The vibe was just right. We wrapped up pretty much on time. We capped off the night with dinner at Umami and drinks on the rooftop bar of The Ace Hotel.

Perfect.

And then –

LA TIMES FESTIVAL OF BOOKS

The festival was both better and worse than I'd expected. First the good.

Good

Kaya Press, whom we partnered with this year on their Smokin' Hot Indie Lit Lounge, which they've been doing now for 3 years at the LATFOB, absolutely *killed* it with the design of the booth. They managed to get one of the professors from USC's theatre department to design and build the set to be both functional as a DIY bookmaking area and as a living room/lounge.



I doubt there was a more beautiful booth in the entire festival.

Although it wasn't an official PUBLISH! project, we set up different stations where people could experience the different aspects of making a book: writing, editing, designing, and publishing a book. It was a big hit with children, although the adults got into it too.

There were various authors who dropped in and hung out at the lounge throughout the two days—Edan Lapucki, Janet Fitch, Steph Cha, Ruth Ozeki, Joseph Lapin, and Luis Rodriguez, who gave an impromptu reading from his first poetry book, currently reissued by Tía Chucha Press. They mostly sat, talked, played cards, Boggle. Just like our approach at the Grand Park Downtown BookFest, we wanted to demystify the author and publishing by allowing the public access to the people involved.

Book sales were good. A little less than half of what we did at Grand Park. But we had less books there due to space limits.

Overall, I didn't expect to have so much fun. It helped that my dear friend Zoe Ruiz kept visiting from the Rumpus booth to trade “soft drinks” with me.

Bad

No matter how awesome our booth was, it was still one of hundreds of booths. Which means that it was “come check us out” attitude permeating throughout the festival. It's not easy eliminating that, but we did it at Grand Park, and it had a huge impact on the way people experience a book festival.

Granted, LATFOB is not going for what we were going for in Downtown so there's no reason for them (or any other book fair) to change the way they do things.

However, this brings up a big question for me:

What is it exactly that the LATFOB is trying to be?

Maybe it was just me, but the already corporate feel of the event felt even more so this year. It didn't help that they made an unannounced deal to partner with Amazon. But even that I can brush off as something that happens outside the event itself, not affecting the people who come to USC each year to discover publishers and books and authors.

What I *can't* excuse is the types of booths that have been multiplying over the past couple of years. Yes, the Scientologists have *always* had a presence at the LATFOB by using their “books” like *Dianetics* to masquerade as a publisher. But it has gotten out of hand.

A young white guy (there's a reason I specify he's white) followed a person all the way into our booth from his, Destination something or another that sounds like a travel book publisher. But he didn't come into our booth to sell a book. He followed a person in to finish signing up a customer

for a TIME SHARE pitch. Yes. This booth was selling time share, suckering people in with a “guess how many toys are in this box” scam that promised prizes.

Time share hustles at a book festival. What’s the purpose, LATFOB? Explain.

Ugly

Oh that time share guy. Yes, he was white. I mention this because when he saw my (RED) Square card reader, he said, “Oh, what, you love Africa or something?”

No, I didn’t kill him.

I also hear that West Hollywood Book Fair is canceling this year. I don’t know how permanent this is and if not, what kind of changes this will lead to. And from my experience at the LATFOB, it appears that they too are going through some sort of philosophical shift, maybe away from books (and into time share!) or something.

This both saddens me and excites me, because even as we lose a little of our annual literary events, we also established something at Grand Park that the community universally loved.

There was joy in the park. There was community. One-ness.

photos by Luke Gattuso, Grand Park, and Keith Martin

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