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TOP STORY

'Books are not dying': 20th Book Fest draws crowd despite missing headliner

By DON SERGENT dsargent@bgdailynews.com Apr 21, 2018



People talk with authors Saturday, April 21, 2018, during Southern Kentucky Book Fest at Knicely Conference Center. (Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Bac Totrong/Daily News

Courtney Stevens flashed smiles as she handed signed copies of her book, “Dress Codes for Small Towns,” to a number of eager teenage girls Saturday at Knicely Conference Center. She took time to ask most of them about their interest in reading and writing, as authors had done for Stevens in years past.

Stevens was on hand at the Southern Kentucky Book Fest for the third time as a published author, but she has a history with the event that encapsulates what the book fest is all about.

Sure, the event is a showcase of writers and illustrators of all genres; and it’s a rare opportunity for book lovers to meet writers face to face and come away with prized autographed copies of the writings they cherish.

But, as Stevens and others demonstrate, the SOKY Book Fest can also be sort of an author incubator.

A Ballard County native and former Bowling Green resident now living in Nashville, Stevens said she has been coming to the book fest “nine or 10” years, with most of those visits being for the sole purpose of soaking up knowledge that would help her become a writer.

“Every author I’ve ever met has made me want to do it (writing),” Stevens said. “Books have always been super important to me. Now I get to write them. That’s such a privilege and such an honor, and I don’t take it for granted.”

Saturday’s event was the 20th edition of the SOKY Book Fest, now sponsored by the Western Kentucky University Library, the Warren County Public Library and Barnes & Noble Booksellers. Two decades is long enough, it seems, for the event to morph from strictly a celebration of literature to a training ground of sorts that has given birth to the likes of Stevens and Bowling Green writer Teri Polen.

Also a writer of young adult fiction, Polen had her second book, “The Gemini Connection,” on display Saturday. She would never have had a seat among the more than 120 authors and illustrators if not for the lessons she learned during years of attending the book fest’s

workshops and presentations.

“I’ve gone to the writers classes on Friday (of Book Fest week) for eight to 10 years,” Polen said. “It has been a wonderful resource, and the classes are free.

“I met C.J. Redwine (a popular writer of fantasy fiction), who has been a huge influence. Any aspiring author can get great information at the book fest. I learned what I was doing wrong and learned the building blocks needed to craft a story.”

The dynamic that Stevens and Polen describe was evident again Saturday as those with their names on book spines mingled with fans and would-be writers. Despite the absence of headline author Daniel Handler (writer of “A Series of Unfortunate Events” under the pen name Lemony Snicket), Saturday’s event and Friday’s Teen & Children’s Day seemed well-received.

Sara Volpi of the WKU Library, book fest coordinator for the third straight year, said some 800 youngsters turned out for Friday’s event. As the large conference room at Knicely Center filled with book lovers Saturday morning, Volpi said: “We typically have 3,000 to 3,500 people turn out. We hope to get there again this year.”

Already working on next year’s book fest, Volpi said: “Authors love what they do, and it’s easy to work with them. They love meeting people who read their books.”

The feeling is mutual, according to one book fest veteran who has been attending for all 20 years.

Alecia Marcum, a retired elementary school librarian, was toting around a bag full of books Saturday as she took in her 20th book fest.

“It’s a way to share family time and share a love of reading,” said Marcum. “Families come year after year, and many authors come back every year. It’s a great way to connect them to our schools as well.”

A volunteer at the event, Marcum recalls picking up “Goosebumps” author R.L. Stine when he was the headliner for the inaugural SOKY Book Fest.

“I picked him up at the airport, and we became friends after that,” Marcum recalled. “He’s one of many big names we have had here.”



Along with such luminaries as award-winning author and illustrator Loren Long and Bowling Green writer David Bell, Saturday’s book fest had a well-known Kentuckian on hand.

Former Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear was drawing a crowd to his table on which he was displaying multiple copies of his new book, “People Over Politics.”

“I’ve been to several book festivals,” said Beshear, a Dawson Springs native. “They’re very enjoyable. People want to talk about their experiences with government. It’s fun meeting all kinds of people. That’s why I enjoyed politics.”

Beshear explained that his book, written with his former speech writer Dan Hassert, recounts his years in office and emphasizes the need to put partisan politics aside for the good of the state.

Published through the nonprofit A Stronger Kentucky Inc., Beshear's book is being sold to benefit various charities. Beshear said \$100,000 from A Stronger Kentucky has already gone to help fund efforts to combat the opioid drug crisis in Kentucky. He hopes the nonprofit can soon donate to breast cancer awareness.

Beshear's table drew a crowd Saturday as a steady stream of patrons filtered through the conference room. The turnout was evidence, said author Molly McCaffrey of Bowling Green, that the printed word is alive and well in an age when time for book reading must compete with technology and mobile devices.

“Books are not dying,” said McCaffrey. “E-book sales jumped a few years ago, but that has leveled off. They’re not going to replace books.”

Author Polen was likewise encouraged by the bevy of book lovers who turned out Saturday.

“Books will always be there,” Polen said. “I’ve heard people say they’d rather go without oxygen than without books.”

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