

## At writers festival, Tom Hanks jokes about being president, offers advice on American politics

**Bruce Fessier** Palm Springs Desert Sun

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New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd proved a Q&A doesn't have to be more than a series of questions and answers when you're on stage with Tom Hanks.

The two friends launched the 6th Annual Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Tuesday with a Q&A that never quite turned into a conversation. Hanks looked at the capacity crowd in the newly refurbished Helene Galen Auditorium at the Annenberg Center at Eisenhower Medical Center, and joked, "We gotta put on a good show, Cher. I'll be Sonny and you be Cher," sparking a light exchange portending to an evening of quick, snappy repartee.

Hanks noticed the Olivier Award-winning British actor and director Derek Jacobi in the front row and credited him for being a reason he became an actor. He observed cable news contributors Douglas Brinkley, Jon Meacham, Karl Rove and Bret Stephens sitting down house left, a veritable Mt. Rushmore of expert commentators, and inspired a sense that the audience was in for a night of serious dialogue, too.

Then Dowd began reciting a series of preconceived questions unrelated to Hanks' Oscar or Emmy Award-winning career or his new reputation as the author of a collection of uncommonly good short stories, titled "Uncommon Type: Some Stories," which had been distributed to donors for free on this "Angel Night 2019."

Hanks began in top form, answering Dowd's question about the first thing he'd do if elected president by quipping, "I would order the change of the name Fred Waring Drive to Tom Hanks Drive." Then he seriously said he'd rebuild America's infrastructure.

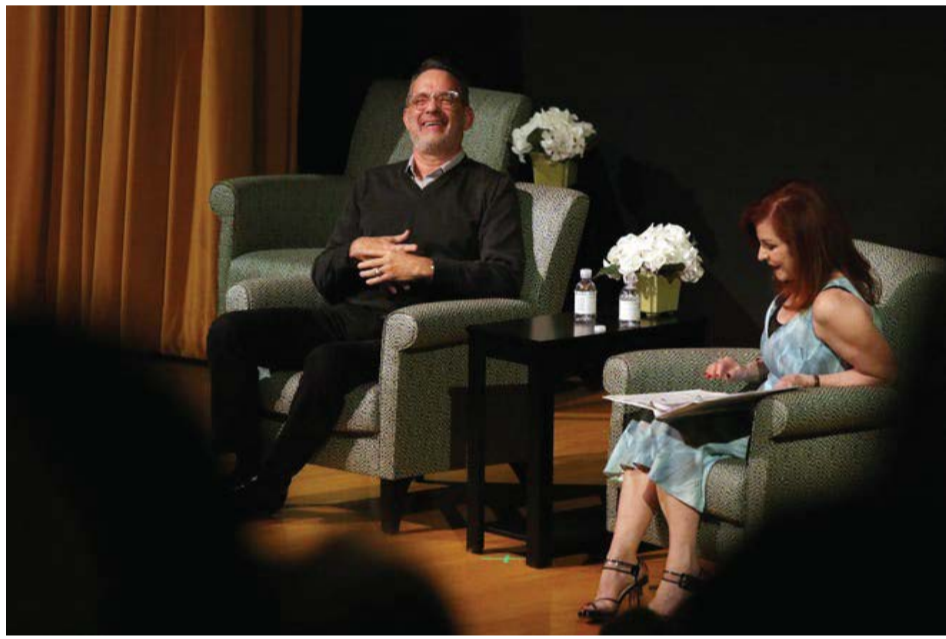
Soon, however, he was slipping into smart-aleck defense mode, retorting that a question was "above my pay grade" when in fact he was impressing the crowd with his intellect. When the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist apologized for asking long questions, Hanks responded, "I'm not sure they're questions, Maureen."

Aware of the cable news and Shakespeare royalty in the front row, he begged the news channels to quit bringing Watergate into every conversation about White House politics, and he imagined President Trump substituting a line from "Richard III" with a golf phrase: "A course, a course, my kingdom for a course!"

When Dowd complimented Hanks on his book and said she wanted to talk to him about it, Hanks joked, "I'm glad because we have 90 seconds." Then he compared his process as an actor to the work he put into his short stories.

"The work that I do, I do it and I love it because it demands a kind of introspection and a journey that sometimes I'm attracted to," he said, "and other times I'm dragged kicking and screaming into the reality of the emotion that you have to do."

"The stories in the book I would say — outside of Nazi soldiers in one of the stories — there's no bad guys in it because life is just goofy this way. The best people in the world can let you down."



Tom Hanks in conversation with Maureen Dowd during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival opening event at the Annenberg Center in Rancho Mirage. Taya Gray/Special To The Desert Sun



New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd and Tom Hanks sat down for a Q&A at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. Taya Gray/Special To The Desert Sun

The theme of this writers festival, continuing through Friday at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, is a celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Normandy landings in World War II. Besides talks on the subject by presidential historians Brinkley and Meacham, the festival features discourses on the war by fellow historians Rick Atkinson, Sir Antony Beevor and H.W. Brands. Dwight D. Eisenhower's granddaughter, Susan Eisenhower, will interview author Anne Sebba about Parisian women in World War II on Thursday afternoon and Emily Yellin will discuss her book, "Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II" on Friday morning.

Festival founder Jamie Kabler asked Dowd to query Hanks if the lessons of World War II could be forgotten, and the star of "Saving Private Ryan" and the producer of "Band of Brothers" and "The Pacific" responded thoughtfully that history is constantly forgotten.

"No one is good at remembering those lessons," he said. "In the history, there's always been some knothead who said, 'I know what's best for my people,' and he goes out and conquers the entire world, his world, and brings what's best for his people. Then, as soon as he dies, it all just falls apart."

"It's going to happen again. It's happening in some version of what we're looking at now. There's a bunch of knotheads everywhere that can put together just enough members of a Parliament or a government to hold sway for a while, but it doesn't last. It can't last because cracked vessels don't hold water."

"There's an election coming up around the corner. It's in two years and it's not just about who's going to be president of the United States. It's going to be about who's taking Sonny Bono's place, who's going to be the water commissioner, who's going to run the library, who's going to be the congressman and who's going to be the senator? That is going to be the wheel of change that is not going to solve every problem, but it will get us along to whatever the next step is, and that's why the greatest concept that has ever been put down on paper is one that we have become bored with and take for granted."

Hanks then recited the preamble to the Constitution to great applause. Emmy Award-winning producer and author Geoffrey Cowan, moderating the next conversation with those Mt. Rushmore figures from cable news, asked, "How many people think Tom Hanks should run for president?"



Authors and attendees listen to Tom Hanks in conversation with Maureen Dowd during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival opening event at the Annenberg Center in Rancho Mirage on Tuesday. Taya Gray/Special To The Desert Sun



Tom Hanks shares a laugh with Maureen Dowd during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival opening event Tuesday at the Annenberg Center in Rancho Mirage. Taya Gray/Special To The Desert Sun

Cowan stimulated an interesting conversation with Brinkley, Meacham, Rove and Stephens. One revelation was Meacham's acknowledgement that he read the eulogy he delivered last month at George H.W. Bush's funeral to the 41st president in July.

All the panelists agreed that the spate of books about Trump in his first two years in office is surprising, but not terribly meaningful to history. Brinkley noted that the rule of thumb is it takes 25 years to have a clear perspective on the historical performance of a president. He said books on Presidents Eisenhower and Harry Truman prompted public re-evaluations of their performances and they're now considered among the 10 best American presidents in history.

Stephens called the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival "nationally important" and Kabler called this year's lineup of authors its "strongest ever."

The festival is sold out through the final talk by Sally Field on Friday afternoon, but videos of every presentation will be available at dates to be announced on RMTV, Channel 17, the festival's website at [rmwritersfest.org/videos](http://rmwritersfest.org/videos) and its YouTube channel at [youtube.com/c/ranchomiragewritersfestival](http://youtube.com/c/ranchomiragewritersfestival).