

Book lovers converge at Rancho Mirage Writers Festival

Dr. Mona Khanna Special to The Desert Sun

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For the past 3 years, the last weekend in January has been heaven in Rancho Mirage for bookworms. 2017 is no exception. More than 1000 people flooded our resort city to attend the 4th annual Rancho Mirage Writers Festival to buy popular books and get them signed, hear world-renowned writers read passages and share insights on the mechanics of writing, and -- in **Sen. Barbara Boxer's** case -- sing.

Boxer, who sacrificed a relaxing 55th wedding anniversary celebration to be here that weekend to promote her book, *The Art of Tough*, regaled the crowd with stories of her political career. She told of how she balanced the somber reality of her day-to-day policy work and the cruel things that were said about her, through writing. When her initial request to open the Congressional fitness center to women was rebuffed, she wrote and sang a song to former Ways & Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski. The song was called "Can't everybody use your gym?" Yes, she got to use the gym!

Much to the delight of the crowd, presidential historian **Doug Brinkley** injected a current events tidbit into his panel discussion about Nixon. Brinkley recalled that Donald Trump liked to say that President Nixon called him and told him that his wife Pat had seen an appearance by Trump on the Phil Donahue show in the 1980s. According to Trump, Nixon told him that Pat predicted Trump would be president some day because "she's never seen someone do so great on the show."

Politics was only one of the subjects showcased at the Festival. Health was another favorite, and most of these sessions offered the wisdom of physicians on the intersection of science, research and technology. Cancer specialist Dr. David Agus (*The End of Illness*) spoke about breakthroughs in medical technology. "There's a reason the Apple Watch taps you every hour," he said. "It's a reminder to get up and move."

Religion, history, inspiration, race, self-help, personality profiles, photography and various works of fiction were also showcased. The question and answer periods were often the most fascinating parts of the sessions, with authors sharing their strategies of writing, telling the backstories behind their copy, and revealing inspirations for their works.



Actor-writer Robert Wagner and festival founder Jamie Kabler embrace after a moderated discussion of Wagner's work with Hollywood actresses including Bette Davis, Norma Shearer, Audrey Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Janet Leigh, Barbara Sinatra, and Joanne Woodward. *Dr. Mona Khanna, Special To The Desert Sun*



Crowds packed the sessions at the Festival to standing room only, including the Saturday opening talk by cancer specialist Dr. David Agus. *Dr. Mona Khanna, Special To The Desert Sun*

Authors attending included **Herman Wouk, Craig Carlson, Pico Iyer, Geraldine Brooks, Shalom Auslander, Hal Gershowitz, and Bret Stephens**. Local experts were included as moderators or panelists, including **Aubrey Serfling**, CEO of Eisenhower Medical Center, and **Lucie Arnaz**, daughter of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

English author **Tom Holland** (*The Origins of Islam*) has received death threats for challenging Islamic history. "There are quite a lot of elements from the Quran that point to its emergence from other religions," he said. "Moses is mentioned 137 times...the Virgin Mary, the history of the Roman Empire...there's even a mention of Alexander the Great."

Attendee **Matt Ceballos** traveled from Rancho Cucamonga with his girlfriend to attend. "There's something to be said about holding a book," he explained. "By the time kids today grow up, we may not have books anymore."

"It's a treasure trove of an experience," said Supporting Angel and Rancho Mirage resident **Nancy Stone**, who said she had studied to be a diplomat and was fascinated with history.

The Festival was ripe for networking as well as listening. Published author **Carol Frankel** of Ohio was promoting "Second Stories," her blog based on anecdotal evidence about issues that arise with second relationships. She plans its launch this spring.

Not only was attendance at an all-time high, but several sessions were recorded and broadcast on Rancho Mirage Television and C-SPAN. Sessions were first come, first serve and some, including **Evan Osnos** (*Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth & Faith in the New China*) and Tom Holland's filled to capacity quickly. Presidential descendants **Clifton Truman Daniel, Susan Eisenhower, Theodore Roosevelt IV** and **Susan Ford Bales** shared intimate insights of their famous families.



(L to R) Authors Geraldine Brooks, Karen Joy Fowler, Lauren Groff and LA Times columnist Pat Morrison listen to a question from an audience member during their panel discussion where they dished on topics such as writing while raising kids and overcoming writers block. *Dr. Mona Khanna, Special To The Desert Sun*



Staff Sergeant Travis Mills who survived three deployments to Afghanistan is one of only 5 living quadruple amputees. *Dr. Mona Khanna, Special To The Desert Sun*

Travis Mills, quadruple amputee veteran and author of *Tough As They Come*, received a standing ovation before he began talking. His incessant stream of jokes during his presentation helped soften some of the somberness of visualizing his traumatized body. "I don't wash my hands after I use the bathroom," he deadpanned. "I wash my hand."

Actor Robert Wagner who co-wrote one book on his late wife Natalie Wood and another on Hollywood actresses, and funnyman **Dave Barry** closed out the Festival on Sunday evening. Among Barry's hilarious monologue: "I love the diversity in this community ranging from rich white people in their 70s...to rich white people in their 90s." He also shared his pointed thoughts about the election. "Ointment vs. suppository. Suppository won."

A handful of lucky students and their teachers were invited to attend the Festival as Galante Scholars, sponsored by **Jeannette and Raymond Galante**.

The Festival was made possible by hundreds of supporters, including Festival Founder Jamie Kabler, Library Director **David Bryant**, Director of Programming **Deb Dejah**, Executive Producer **Debbie Green**, Executive Assistant **Tyrone Hofmann**, and Founding Angels **Helene Galen, Diane & Hal Gershowitz, Anne Holland, Lois Horvitz, Donna MacMillan** and **Madeline Redstone**. Also the RMWF Board of Directors which includes **Kabler, Galen, Redstone**, and **Bryant** as well as **Susan Davis, Iris Smotrich** and **G. Dana Hobart**, and the RMWF Steering Committee which includes **Bryant, Susan Cook, Davis, Aaron Espinosa, Dustin Ingham, Kabler, Valentine Llort, Bob Reku** and **Diane Sagan**.

The Festival traditionally sells out hours after tickets go on sale. General tickets for the 2018 Festival will become available March 1, 2017 for \$500. Another option to enjoying the weekend is to sign on as a Supporting Angel for \$5,000 which comes with two passes, special receptions and concierge level services throughout the weekend. For more information, go to rmwritersfest.org.