

# Desert Sun.

## Writers Festival features literary fantasy land

**Brace Fessier** The Desert Sun  
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Rancho Mirage Librarian David Bryant calls the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival "an intellectual village." But for its spearhead and co-founder Jamie Kabler, it's Disneyland.

Kabler is the former manufacturer of the Hollywood Diet products and the constant companion of philanthropist Helene Galen. He founded the festival last year with Susan Rosser and has proceeded on his own with the support of Bryant and the city of Rancho Mirage, whose library will host all daytime events for the festival running Wednesday through Saturday.

Evening talks will take place at the Annenberg Center for Health Sciences at Eisenhower Medical Center and the Helene Galen Performing Arts Center at Rancho Mirage High School. More than 800 attendees are expected to hear 40 authors speak.

Kabler has done most of the curating and fundraising. Last year, the festival was supported by six major donors, or "angels." This year, it has 34. The city of Rancho Mirage is the title sponsor, so Bryant says his staff takes care of all the logistics.

But Kabler has worked hands on without compensation since last January and he's already planning the 2016 event.

"Thank God I sold my business," he says effervescently. "I thought I'd work for two to three months. It's been a full-time job for a year!"

Kabler is naturally enthusiastic. Ask him his favorite book and he'll talk excitedly about tomes from Ayn Rand's "The Fountainhead" to Robert Caro's three-volume biography of Lyndon B. Johnson. The book that changed his life, he says, is Theodore White's biography of John F. Kennedy, "The Making Of A President, 1960." But he most recently read Neil Patrick Harris' "Choose Your Own Autobiography" and Anthony Doerr's novel about a blind girl, "All the Light We Can See."

He talks about this festival like a kid who just got off the Matterhorn. He's read every book the authors will discuss. He's personally talked to most of them, offering honorariums that make it worth their while to come from the East Coast and Europe even after travel expenses. His desire is to improve upon the Sun Valley Writers Conference he loves to attend in Idaho.

The festival has been sold out since last summer, but Kabler can't stop promoting the works of his favorite authors.

There's humorist Dave Barry, whose new book, "Father Knows Best," addresses the trials and tribulations of having and raising children. Kabler said, "I called him and made him an offer, and he said, 'I'm there!'"

There's Katy Simpson Smith, author of "The Story of Land and Sea," a tale of love, war, slavery and redemption among three generations of a family living on the coast of North Carolina at the end of the 18th century. Kabler sent a note to his angels saying, "The critics call it the novel of the year!"

There's Linda Fairstein, the former investigator for the Manhattan D.A.'s sex crime unit who is returning to the festival to promote her crime novel, "Terminal City." Kabler said via email, "Linda had such an amazing time at our first festival, she is telling all her famous writer friends that we have the best writers festival in the country!"

Then there's Nathan Filer, whose first novel about a character with schizophrenia, "The Shock of the Fall," won the 2013 Costa Book of the Year Award.

Kabler was a history major at the University of Virginia, so it's not surprising that most of the writers he selected to speak at the festival are authors of nonfiction books.

"The lineup is heavily nonfiction," said Bryant, "and I'm particularly pleased about that. It makes it more educational."

The Stanford Alumni Club has considered using the festival lineup as a reading list, he says. It includes five Pulitzer Prize winners.

Kabler doesn't see the nonfiction books in this festival as stodgy learning material. He only booked speakers "able to hold an audience," he says, and he's packed the festival with entertaining moments. A trailer to promote the memoir of author Gary Shteyngart even includes an appearance by the omnipresent James Franco.

Kabler's eyes light up as he mentions the authors of some of his favorite biographies and true history books. They include:

- Retired British Army Major Timothy Kilvert-Jones, the author of the 2002 book, "Omaha Beach: V Corps' Battle for the Normandy Beachhead (Battleground Europe)," who is coming from Normandy to open the festival in honor of the 70th anniversary of D-Day.
- Nathaniel Philbrick, author of "Bunker Hill: A City, A Siege, A Revolution," exploring the truth behind the mythic event that launched the Revolutionary War.
- Jonathan Darman, author of "Landslide: LBJ and Ronald Reagan at the Dawn of a New America," who will talk about the relationship between the powerful Democratic and Republican presidents from the post-World War II era.
- Nicholas Delbanco, author of "The Art of Youth," investigating the nature of artistic prodigies Stephen Crane, Dora Carrington and George Gershwin.
- Amie Parnes, a senior White House correspondent and author of "HRC: State Secrets and the Rebirth of Hillary Clinton," which the New York Times called "a guide to future messaging, an indication of what those closest to Hillary Clinton see as her strongest moments."
- Richard Breitman, co-author with Allan Lichtman of "FDR and the Jews," a well-documented analysis of how President Franklin Delano Roosevelt handled "the Jewish question" during World War II.
- Bob Colacello, author of "Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up" and a regular Vanity Fair contributor and New York party-goer who famously said, "I believe in going out, not coming out."
- Debra Tate, sister of Manson Family victim Sharon Tate who has written "Sharon Tate: Recollection" with a foreword by the slain actress' husband, Roman Polanski.
- Victoria Wilson, who wrote so much about the late actress Barbara Stanwyck that Simon & Schuster agreed to publish her autobiography in two volumes.
- Bill Dedman, author of "Empty Mansions: The Mysterious Life of Huguette Clark and the Spending of a Great American Fortune," about the daughter of a Civil War copper magnate who held a ticket on the Titanic and was still alive in New York City on 9/11 when Dedman discovered she had spent her last 20 years in an inauspicious hospital room.
- Jeff Chang, author of "Who We Be: The Colorization of America" a book about the post-Civil Rights era that has taken on greater importance with the recent racial unrest throughout the country.

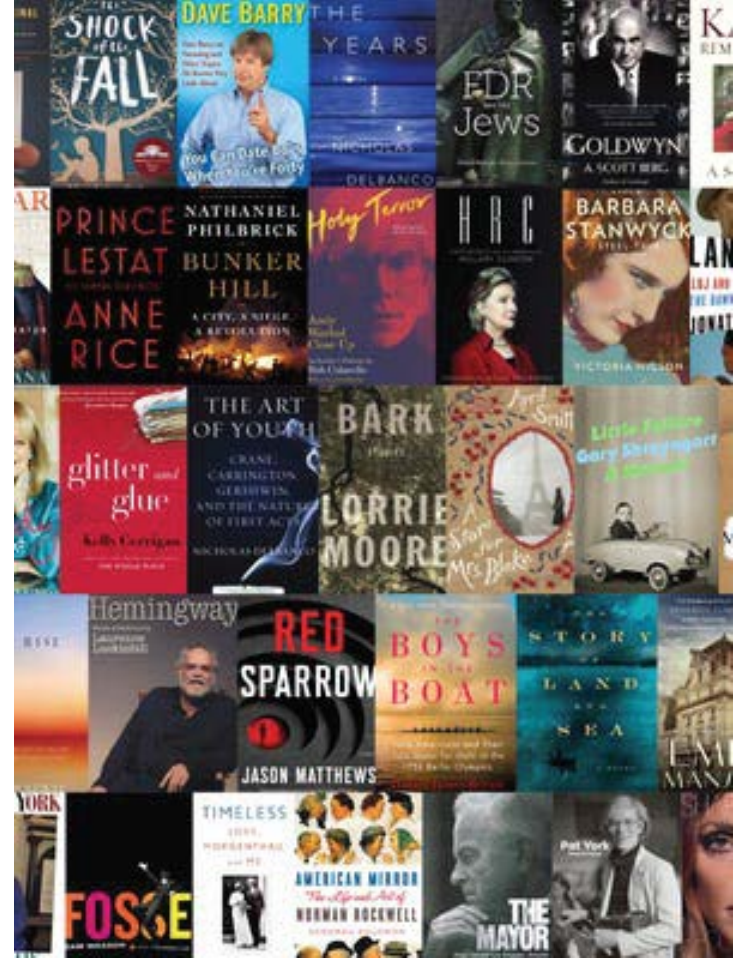
Each of the authors will participate in Q&As with notable moderators. Geoffrey Cowan, president of The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands, will follow Kilvert-Jones Wednesday night by interviewing A. Scott Berg, another returnee from 2014 who will discuss his books on actress Kathryn Hepburn and studio mogul Samuel Goldwyn.

Peter Bart, executive vice president and editorial director of Variety and a Palm Springs resident, will interview actor Michael York, author of the autobiography, "Accidentally on Purpose." No less than game show legend and Cathedral City resident Monty Hall will interview former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, author of "The Mayor: How I Turned Los Angeles Around After Riots, and Earthquake and O.J."

Hall perpetuates the local component begun at last year's festival with the appearance of crime novelist and former Rancho Mirage resident Joseph Wambaugh. Sen. Barbara Boxer is expected to attend the festival, and still another Rancho Mirage resident, Anne Rice, is scheduled to close the festival Saturday evening in a rare local appearance with her son, fellow author Christopher Rice.

In addition, comedy analyst Richard Zoglin will twice discuss the subject of his book, local legend Bob Hope, and Rancho Mirage resident Laurence Luckinbill will perform his one-man show, "Hemingway," to precede Anne Rice.

"Hemingway" is about the final two minutes of novelist Ernest Hemingway's life and Kabler said Luckinbill has cut the show in half to 45 minutes. But he did not, as Bryant jokes, trim it to the last one minute of Hemingway's life.



Authors from throughout the United States and Europe were featured in the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. Courtesy



Jamie Kabler, guiding the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Courtesy Photo