

Sold-out Rancho Mirage Writers Fest preparing for controversy

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Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Chairman Jamie Kabler poses for a photograph at the Rancho Mirage Library, Wednesday, January 25, 2017. Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun

Extra security is expected to be on hand Sunday for a talk by a controversial British author launching the second day of the sold-out Rancho Mirage Writers Festival.

Tom Holland, 49, will discuss his book, “In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire,” at 9 a.m. in the Rancho Mirage Public Library. Holland is an award-winning author of ancient Greek and Roman history, but his 2004 BBC documentary, “Islam: The Untold Story,” provoked death threats. A 2015 essay for the New Statesman showing the Islamic roots of ISIS added fuel to the controversies around him.

The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival is paying him to make his first trip to the United States to speak on “the origins of Islam.”

“He’s written a book about, if Muhammad lived, yet it takes 200 years to write about it... he feels it (could be) all made up,” said festival founding chairman Jamie Kabler. “It’s a story that needs to be told. So, we’re having extra security because, when he speaks in England, he gets death threats.”

Holland isn’t the main draw to this fourth-year event, opening to the public at 9 a.m. Saturday and running through Sunday at the Rancho Mirage Library and the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel Ballroom. Van Gordon Sauter — a founder of the Sun Valley Writers Conference in Ketchum, Idaho — is moderating two panels at the festival and calls its lineup of authors and presenters “staggering.”

The marquee attractions are actor Robert Wagner, former Sen. Barbara Boxer, former California Gov. Gray Davis, the descendants of four U.S. presidents and historians discussing 10 U.S. presidents from Andrew Jackson to Ronald Reagan. The bill includes humorists Dave Barry, Shalom Auslander and Annabelle Gurwitch, pundits Dennis Prager and Pico Iyer, health authorities Dr. David Agus and Dr. Valter Longo, twin poets Michael and Matthew Dickman, and songwriter Thomas Lauderdale of Pink Martini, who will speak on “music as storytelling.”

“I don’t think it has anything in common with any other writers festival,” said Sauter, the former president of CBS and Fox News. “First of all, this thing started four years ago and is now one of the major writers festivals in America. It just went from a dead start to really prominence. It has a remarkable collection of writers this year.”

Sauter said what’s most unusual about the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival is that Kabler has developed it almost single-handedly. He founded it with Susan Rosser, who left the second year to develop the Palm Springs International Film Festival’s Book to Screen series, and he relies heavily on the staff of the Rancho Mirage Library. Booking agent Debbie Green serves as executive producer and Deborah Dejah is listed as director of programming.

Kabler — who was married to Leonore Annenberg’s daughter, Elizabeth, at a VIP-studded wedding at Sunnylands and now is philanthropist Helene Galen’s steady companion — acknowledges he selects the authors and panels based on his own taste. He also recruited 400 “angels” and sponsors to help pay speakers healthy honorariums. The event’s success could be measured by the fact that it sold out 600 passes at \$400 each in four hours on March 1.

“This wasn’t the normal civic uplift that began in some dismal meeting room,” Sauter said. “This was just one guy. He has created it, financed it; he is the guy who determines what happens. Most of the other writers conferences are fundamentally run by committee. Jamie reads the newspapers, reads books, talks to people and becomes obsessed with an author and says, ‘That guy is going to come to Palm Springs.’ And that is totally unprecedented. It’s almost like an old-fashioned book publisher where one guy made all the aesthetic decisions. He in effect has a publishing house out of the 1920s and this writers fest is the manifestation of his personality, his taste and his curiosity. Fortunately, he’s a really interesting guy.

“Sun Valley does not provide honorariums,” added Sauter, whose wife, former California Secretary of the Treasury Kathleen Brown also is a founder of that conference. “It provides comfortable travel for the writer and a partner/spouse whatever. It’s quite different in that sense.”

The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival isn’t listed on Publishers Weekly’s annual schedule of “select book conferences, festivals and fairs.” The Wizard World Comic Cons in Sacramento and New Orleans are mentioned and Sun Valley and the well-respected Pebble Beach Authors & Ideas festivals are not. The Authors & Ideas Festival, like Rancho Mirage, was inspired by Sun Valley, which calls itself “a four-day literary house party.”

A difference between Rancho Mirage and Sun Valley is that Sun Valley has a balance of fiction and non-fiction writers as part of its goal of introducing readers to “our generation’s finest writers.” Kabler says Rancho Mirage features some major prize-winning novelists, but his authors are “primarily writers of biographies, memoirs and history.”

Kabler is expecting 1,200 festival-goers, counting people who have purchased 100 rooms at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel with package passes. They’ll move around to hear speakers in five rooms with capacities of up to 250 seats, but they’ll stay in the library for up to eight hours a day. Kabler was concerned about keeping them comfortable and entertained, so he imported new seats, an upgrade from last year’s folding chairs, and went to some length to make sure all 50 authors are good speakers.

“We have a great speaker in every room,” Kabler said. “I watch the writer in a video to make sure that, not only can they write about a book, they can talk about it. Every person we’ve selected is an entertainer, as well as a great writer. They have to be able to tell a story.”

Sauter, a fan of detective novels who is writing a pictorial history of the Sunset Strip, said “It’s my sense that most of the book festivals have a far higher participation of literary figures” than Rancho Mirage. He said Kabler’s interest in nonfiction will probably translate to more interesting conversations than fiction writers talking about their novels.

Kabler said he wants to reflect current events.

“Because it’s the week after the inauguration, I thought it would be interesting to invite as many presidential historians as we have,” he said. “So, Saturday night, we have a presidential panel talking about the next four years and Bret Stevens, who is a journalist for the Wall Street Journal, will talk about the next 20 years of American foreign policy (both at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Omni).

“Then we have Presidential pedigree. I’ve invited Susan Ford Bales (daughter of Gerald Ford), Susan Eisenhower (granddaughter of Dwight Eisenhower), Clifton Truman Daniel (grandson of Harry Truman) and Theodore Roosevelt IV, and they’re going to talk about their heritage. I think it will add some color to the festival.”

Barry, the leading syndicated newspaper humorist for more than 20 years, is returning for his third straight year to discuss his book on his home state of Florida, titled “Best. State. Ever.” He’ll be joined by another Miami newspaper columnist, Carl Hiaasen, who has written the humorous novel, “Razor Girl.”

A serious matter being addressed is the BDS (Boycott, Divestment & Sanction) of Israeli products movement, Desert-based novelist Hal Gershowitz will moderate “BDS & Anti-Semitism on American College Campuses.” Sauter will moderate a panel featuring Congressional Medal of Honor winner Col. Jack Jacobs, titled “Make America Safe Again.” Lawrence Wright, author of a book on Scientology that was made into an award-winning HBO documentary, will give a talk titled “Scientology: Fair Game.”

Holland also will talk on one of his original areas of expertise in “Caesars and Whores: The Politics of Gossip and Imperial Rome.”

“It’s his first trip to America and I have him going to the Getty Museum and the Getty Villa, and he’s all excited,” said Kabler. “His big thing now is saving Stonehedge from a highway going nearby. He’s going to talk about the horrors of Rome — the debauchery — and the good of Rome. It’s fascinating. The aqueduct system came from the mountains and transferred water (to Rome) a half-inch every mile. They had a sewage system. A million people lived in Rome, so Tom Holland writes about all of this.”

If you go:

“Natalie Wood: Reflections on a Legendary Life” with Manoah Bowman, Natasha Gregson Wagner and Robert Wagner, moderated by Bruce Fessier. John Steinbeck Room, Rancho Mirage Public Library, Sunday at 2:40 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

“Robert Wagner in Conversation with George Schlatter.” Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel, Sunday at 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Tickets for the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival are sold out, but there is a waiting list and the entire festival, Saturday and Sunday at the Rancho Mirage Library and the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel, will be broadcast on C-SPAN Feb. 3-5

For more information on other festival events, go to <http://www.rmwritersfest.org/schedule/>.