

Writers festival mixes humor with jabs at Trump for a world-class reader event

Bruce Fessier Palm Springs Desert Sun

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The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival completed its quixotic mission Friday to turn intellectual thought into recreation and the city library into a playground.

The fifth annual event succeeded with stimulating conversations by the likes of George W. Bush policy advisor Karl Rove, humorist Dave Barry, New York Times columnist Bret Stephens and big-name fiction and non-fiction authors ranging from Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Colson Whitehead to actress-turned-nonfiction writer Suzanne Somers.

Geoffrey Cowan, the past president of the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands and chairman emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication at USC, praised co-founder and guiding light Jamie Kabler for bringing so many significant writers and thinkers to the desert.

“In five years, you’ve turned this into a major cultural event in the country,” he said Tuesday at a VIP preview at the Annenberg Center at Eisenhower Medical Center. “Very few communities could pull this off.”

The festival reduced attendance by 200 people, cutting off ticket sales almost 11 months ago at 1,000 people despite a capacity for 1,300 in the Rancho Mirage Public Library. That created space for what Kabler called “a movable feast every hour,” with programs running simultaneously in the library’s five various-sized rooms from 8:30 a.m. Wednesday through 11:15 a.m. Friday.

Programs were repeated with slight variations on subsequent days to give people more opportunities to hear their favorite authors.

As Barry put it with his talent for exaggeration, “The way they have this set up is, every author here talks with every other author at least six times. At breakfast, we all sit around with nothing to say.”

But the authors had no shortage of provocative things to say.

Stephens, a moderate conservative, criticized President Trump for promoting “white identity politics.

“We saw it in the widespread birtherism that Trump so infamously championed a few years ago,” he said. “We saw it in Charlottesville and the president’s unforgivable equivocations when it came to forgiving neo-Nazis. We saw it again in the president’s comments about people from ‘s-hole countries’ as opposed to those delightfully pale-faced Norwegians.

“Donald Trump has, like no American president in living memory, painted a political target on the news media and called us an enemy of the people.”

Elisabeth Rosenthal, an ER doctor from New York City who wrote the book, “An American Sickness: How Healthcare Became Big Business and How You Can Take It Back,” said, “Medicine has been basically hijacked by big business interests and for profit,” since she left her practice to cover health and medicine for the New York Times 30 years ago.

She told medical horror stories and tales of outrageously excessive pharmaceutical charges, relating, “In other countries, they say, ‘Why do you put up with this?’”

Ten economic rules she says the medical industry lives by include:

“A lifetime of treatment is preferable to a cure.”

“Amenities and marketing matter more than good care.”

“There are no standards for billing. There’s money to be made in billing for anything and everything.”

Among her remedies for the sick industry:

“Avoid hospital labs. Press your doctors for high-value radiology centers.”

“When checking in (to a hospital), don’t sign the form that says you’ll pay for whatever your insurance doesn’t cover. Add, ‘so long as it’s in my insurance network.’”

Barry and novelist Greg Iles offered a change of pace by not only having a conversation for laughs, but playing song spoofs to their own accompaniment on guitar. Both are members of a literary band, called the Rock Bottom Reminders, which also includes at various times, such musical authors as Stephen King, Mitch Album, Ray Blount Jr. and Amy Tan.

Barry sang “Proof-Reading Woman” about his love for a woman with a big vocabulary and a penchant for keeping every single comma in place, and Iles followed with a parody of James Taylor’s “Steam Roller Blues” called “I’m A Best-Seller Baby.” Barry concluded with a 12-bar blues he once performed at a Tupperware convention, ending with the line, “And I hope that when I die/Tupperware makes caskets, too.”

A festival hit was Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House” and a regular guest on television broadcasts such as “Morning Joe.” He said being introduced as “a reasonable pundit” was like being called “the best restaurant in a hospital.”

Meacham was at this festival ostensibly to promote his latest book, “Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush.” He spent 13 years working on the biography and, “It was supposed to be posthumous. But he just won’t die.”

He joked that Bush 41 “once shook hands with a mannequin,” but added, “Lyndon Johnson would have registered that mannequin to vote. God knows what Bill Clinton would have done with it.”

But he praised Bush as a man who had the qualities of one of the Founding Fathers in that he was raised with privilege, but was driven to serve. His father was Sen. Prescott Bush of Connecticut, but Meacham said he was driven to serve by the fact that he survived a World War II plane crash in which two of his crew members perished, and his only daughter died of leukemia before her 4th birthday.



Authors Dave Barry (left) and Greg Iles offered a musical interlude at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. *Bruce Fessier/The Desert Sun*



Overflow passholders at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival watch a video presentation from across the large John Steinbeck room of Susan Eisenhower interviewing Karl Rove, Douglas Brinkley and H.W. Brands. *Bruce Fessier/The Desert Sun*

Meacham turned interviewer in a conversation with Whitehead on “The Civil War, Slavery and the Underground Railroad,” letting Whitehead dodge his question, “How do you judge Lincoln?” Other festival historians said Lincoln almost always ranks at the tops of presidential polls, just ahead of George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt. But historian H.W. Brands, a history professor at the University of Texas, Austin, noted that presidents are invariably judged by how well they respond to crises. Lincoln benefits in the polls by having presided over the most significant conflict in the nation’s history while Franklin Roosevelt overcame two crises, the Great Depression followed by World War II.

Fellow presidential historian Douglas Brinkley said, among the most transformational elections of all time, Lincoln’s re-election of 1864 and FDR’s re-election of 1936 were important affirmations of their policies on emancipation and the New Deal. He also called Lyndon Johnson’s election of 1964 significant because it followed his championing of the Civil Rights Act the year after John F. Kennedy’s assassination.

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Kabler recruited 175 angels, including individuals, couples or entities who donated up to \$20,000. Eisenhower Medical Center was one of four Golden Angels giving the top amount. Nine Silver Angels gave \$10,000.

A down-side to the large number of angels getting preferential seating for the talks and lunches served in the parking lot was that some people felt the division between haves and have-nots more viscerally.

Nancy Lindsay of Palm Springs, who sat at the back of the large John Steinbeck Room as a \$500 general admission pass holder, said she completely understands the need to charge higher-priced VIP tickets to support a nonprofit organization. But she said turning people away when there are empty seats in the Angels section is a problem that should be addressed.

“They probably should talk about that,” she said. “They should probably release those seats five minutes before the thing starts and then empty them out somehow.”

The festival crowd has always been mostly retirement age, but the event was moved from primarily on a weekend to exclusively on weekdays this year to avoid the more expensive weekend hotel rates, said Kabler. That might have made it more difficult for younger people to experience the world class event, but Jennifer Lask, a 25-year-old broadcast journalist from the Milwaukee area, said she planned her vacation around it after attending the festival with her grandparents two years ago.

“I absolutely loved hearing from the historians when we attended the lecture that year,” she said. “When planning the trip to California this year, we knew we wanted to come in January in order to hear all the lectures and it’s been really exciting. One of the things I was excited about, I’ve started food writing, so, I got to see Tom Parker Bowles (a celebrated British food writer), which I loved.”

Lindsay said she was turned away from Stephens’ talk with Rove and Brinkley on the state of America Wednesday because the general admission seats in the Steinbeck Room were filled before she could get there. But she got to hear Stephens speak Thursday on a similar topic, and said, “He was absolutely fabulous. It’s really one of the best speeches I’ve heard.”

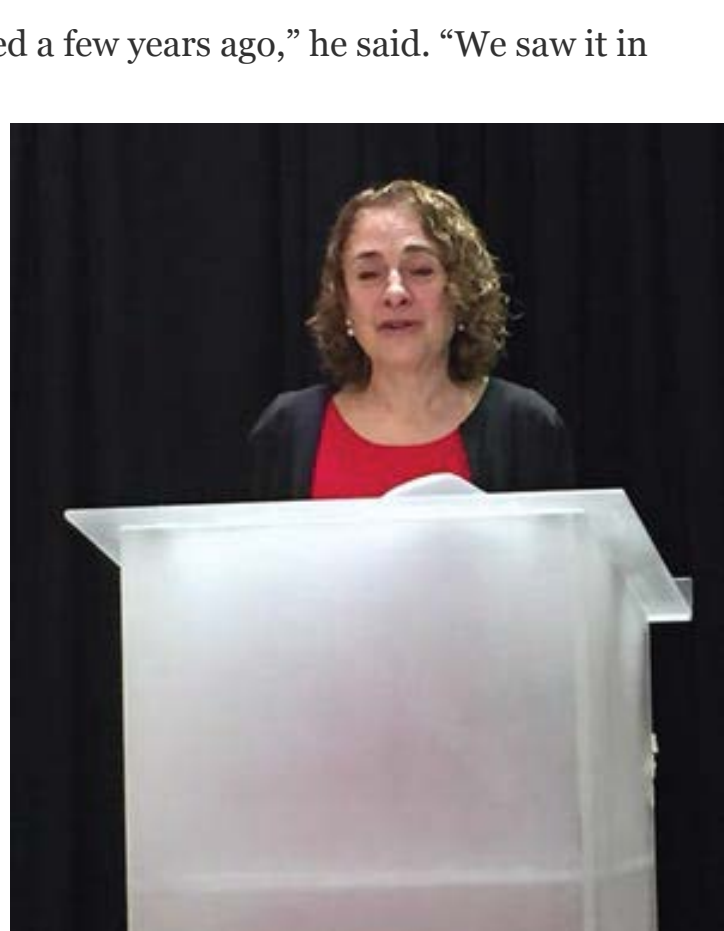
Stephens said the pursuit of happiness is now under attack from two quarters: “On the left by the coddlers, on the right by the trampers.”

“The coddlers want to protect people from the consequences of freedom,” he said. “As for the trampers... they are less interested in the freedoms that most need protecting in a democratic society: the rights of the political minority and the liberties of the individual citizen.

“I personally do not have too much sympathy for some of the political views of Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who was the first to take a knee during the singing of the national anthem. I would never do anything except stand for the national flag with my hand on my heart. But, when the president of the United States calls him a son-of-a-bitch and urges that he be fired, then I am going to take a stand with Kaepernick. That is, I’m going to stand with the claims of individual convictions and conscious, however much I may disagree with those convictions, against the threats of the powerful. That’s what America is about. To think otherwise is very simply is un-American.”



Bret Stephens delivered a scathing indictment of President Trump at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. *Bruce Fessier/The Desert Sun*



Elisabeth Rosenthal speaks about runaway costs in the healthcare industry at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. *Bruce Fessier/The Desert Sun*



Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Jon Meacham was a hit of the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival with his dry wit. *Bruce Fessier/The Desert Sun*