

Rancho Mirage Writers Fest feeds visceral and intellectual curiosities

Bruce Fessier The Desert Sun

Published 4:22 p.m. PT Jan. 30, 2017 | Updated 4:32 p.m. PT Jan. 30, 2017



Robert Wagner, Natasha Gregson Wagner and Manoh Bowman are introduced by Desert Sun reporter Bruce Fessier for a panel discussion at the 2017 Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun



Robert Wagner speaks on a panel at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, Sunday, Jan. 29, 2017. Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun

Jamie Kabler likes to call his Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, “Coachella For the Brain.” I’m not sure that’s appropriate for an event that crescendos with a talk by zany humorist Dave Barry. Kabler might also hear from Goldenvoice’s lawyer if he tried to use that phrase in his advertising.

The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival is a gourmet literary feast. It’s packed with lively conversation that entertains and informs – providing news you can use, as we used to say in the newspaper business.

It’s like Coachella in that it offers five stages providing diverse, stimulating attractions for festival-goers to nosh on simultaneously – sampling a top political figure here, a presidential historian there, a cutting-edge health advocate on one stage and an award-winning novelist or journalist on another. If a speaker or panel doesn’t grab one’s attention, the festival-goer moves on to another venue around the corner.

Milton Berle would have called the average age of most attendees “deceased,” but these book lovers stayed focused on often complex issues for more than nine hours a day Saturday and Sunday, and then partied with the speakers and moderators at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel.

Founding Chairman Kabler, executive director Debbie Green and the remarkable staff of the Rancho Mirage Public Library took the fourth annual festival to new levels by keeping the day-time events entirely in the library, adding a room to accommodate the record 1,200 attendees, and opening the library on a Sunday to make it a weekend attraction for people of all ages, including high school scholars who got to talk privately with the authors, thanks to a donation from Jeannette and Raymond Galante.

If I had one criticism, it would be that the festival didn’t leave enough time between events for people to bask in what they had just heard with other people. It provided only 10 minutes between speakers and that barely provided enough time to get people in and out of the 500-seat John Steinbeck Room (aka, the community room). Festival-goers had to rush down the halls to get in line for the next talk, and this literary event literally had people pushing and butting into queues. The lines to the book signings were significantly smaller than the line to hear about viruses.

An easy remedy: Provide 20 minutes for each intermission. Add an hour to the daytime activities and push the start of the evening program back to 7:30 p.m. A champagne and dessert party could start at 9 p.m. and everyone would have more time to digest the delicious literary menu throughout the day. I’d even add a big screen TV to the book-signing area to show video of the Steinbeck program and give people an incentive to meet the authors without missing a minute of the marquee event.

The festival’s only other challenge is to figure out how to continue to grow and remain “the best writers festival in a library in the nation.” It sold out at Coachella speed last year and is certain to sell out quickly again for 2018 when tickets go on sale March 1.

2017 highlights

C-SPAN taped the festival and will broadcast day one at 10:30 a.m. Friday with a re-broadcast at 9 that night. Day two will air at noon Sunday with a re-broadcast at 1 a.m. Monday. The Rancho Mirage city channel also will show the festival on a date to be announced. The highlights were:

“**The United States and the World: The Next 20 Years,**” by Bret Stephens, author of “America In Retreat.” Stephens, a conservative Wall Street Journal columnist who won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, was the star of this festival, making three appearances and creating the buzz of the festival with his headline talk Saturday night at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Ballroom.

Six hours before that talk, Stephens changed his address to reflect what was happening to visitors at airports across the country. He described how he brought his mother to see him receive the Pulitzer at the Lowe Library at Columbia University and she remembered once trying to enroll in a class there. She was told she could only enroll in English as a second language because she spoke with a European accent. Her family had been Jewish refugees from Russia and Nazi Germany who were finally allowed to emigrate to California from Italy. Stephens reminded the audience about the myriad innovative contributions made by immigrants and urged people to stop blaming and demonizing others. He ended by predicting that the child of one of the Hispanic workers at the hotel might be on his dais in 20 years.

I’m sure he was just using the 20-year number as alliteration and that he’d see no reason why a Latino immigrant couldn’t be on the dais in less time. Throughout the festival, Stephens remained true to his conservative beliefs on free trade and immigration (with regular vetting), in contrast to many the pundits who are supporting Donald Trump’s executive orders just to support their party. He also spoke eloquently in support of trade with China and in opposition to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanction) movement against Israel, which he called simply “anti-Semitism.”

“**2 Weeks to a Younger Brain,**” by Dr. Gary Small, author of a book by that name, in the Steinbeck Room. This was a popular talk in part because Small, director of the UCLA Longevity Center, is an entertaining speaker talking about a hot button issue. Yeah, you need exercise, a healthy diet and social engagement to keep all of your marbles. Small talked about how dementia is often caused by inflammation of the brain, so taking an anti-inflammatory can slow cognitive decline. Yet taking too much can cause brain aging. He said UCLA is having success using ultra-sound to stimulate neuro-connectors to improve cognitive skills, but he recommended playing the kind of online games they think are destroying their grandkids’ minds to save their own brains.

Interestingly, another physician, CBS medical consultant Dr. David Agus, told us baby aspirin may be the best anti-inflammatory medicine to take during his talk, “Are Our Hospitals Killing Us?” with Aubrey Serfling, CEO of Eisenhower Medical Center. He said 75 or 81 mg of aspirin is the right daily intake for people over 40 and 325 mg is too much. One Excedrin contains 250 mg of aspirin.

“Are Our Hospitals Killing Us,” held Saturday in the Steinbeck Room, was actually one of my least favorite talks. Agus and Serfling tried to have a conversation with the audience, but few people could hear the audience members. A helper got so frustrated with people asking questions before he could give them a microphone that he just walked out of the room.

Serfling called the name of the talk “ridiculous” because hospitals obviously save a lot of lives. Agus said hospitals do kill us by passing along resistant bacteria. Serfling said Eisenhower has an Infection Control Department, but Agus said the best way to avoid catching a staph infection is by telling doctors and nurses to wash their instruments and their hands. And beware of doctors wearing ties because bacteria can become embedded there.

I wanted to ask why hospital patients have to pay for infections they contract because someone didn’t wash his hands, but I didn’t get a chance.



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



The Desert Sun’s Bruce Fessier moderates a panel discussion with Nathasha Gregson Wagner, Robert Wagner and Manoh Bowman at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, Sunday, Jan. 29, 2017. Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun

“**Natalie Wood: Reflections On A Legendary Life,**” featuring Manoh Bowman, author of “Natalie Wood: Reflections on a Legendary Life,” Wood’s widower, Robert Wagner, and her daughter, Natasha Gregson Wagner, who both contributed to the book. I moderated this panel Sunday in the Steinbeck Room, but I think I can objectively say it was an engaging talk.

I asked if it’s possible for Wood to be remembered for the life she led instead of her death on that boat ride to Catalina with Wagner and Christopher Walken, and Natasha said she’s seeing that happen while promoting Bowman’s book and a Natalie fragrance she’s marketed. We discussed how there was a sense of destiny about Wood – from predictions a gypsy made to her mother, to her cursory attraction to Wagner as a 10-year-old, to the mysterious deaths of the cast of “Rebel Without A Cause” after James Dean said he and his colleagues might be cursed – and that’s led to a fascination about Wood.

We ran out of time before I could ask about the conspiracy theories surrounding Wood’s death, but it’s all over the Internet that Natasha thinks her mother’s death was accidental and theories linking Wagner to it are “preposterous.”

“**Florida: A Paradise of Scandals,**” with Barry and Carl Hiaasen. These two were hilarious Saturday in the Steinbeck talking about how Florida is just a fountain of comedy material for their writing. Hiaasen said the things that happen there are so unbelievable – like a guy who sued for the right to sleep with his two alligators or a 75-pound bale of cocaine falling out of the sky in the middle of a crime watch meeting – that he’s actually sent his editor clippings from Florida newspapers to show that his ideas for novels aren’t so far-fetched.

Barry said he made a bumper stick saying, “Welcome to Miami. We weren’t shooting at you.”

This was Barry’s third straight appearance at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival and I hope he’ll return in 2018.

Other interesting talks:

“**The Origins of Islam,**” featuring Tom Holland, author of “In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire.” Holland packed the small Walt Disney Room, but most people walked out before he made an inflammatory statement about Islam during his Q&A. He talked mostly on his theory that Islam didn’t develop in Mecca.

“**The Next Four Years,**” moderated by Van Gordon Sauter. Besides the piece Jesse Marx wrote for Monday’s paper about this, it was interesting to hear what books each panelist said they’d advise President Trump to read. They were: Sen. Barbara Boxer: “White Rage”; H.W. Brands: “Guns of August”; Douglas Brinkley: “Hiroshima”; Geoff Cowan: “Hamilton”; former Gov. Gray Davis: “Truman” (and other recent presidential biographies); Richard Reeves: “Democracy in America” (from the 1830s), and Evan Thomas: “All the Kings Men.”

“**The Story of Ebony and Jet,**” in which publisher Linda Johnson Rice (who has a home in Palm Springs) told an all-white audience that her Black-oriented publications are “more relevant than ever” in the Trump era with its growing online reach to millennials.

“**Growing Up With My Grandfather: Memories of Harry S. Truman,**” in which Clifton Truman Daniel said a BBC journalist asked him what his Democratic grandfather, the 33rd U.S. president, would have thought of Trump. He replied, “I don’t think we could use that kind of language on the air.”

“**Andrew Jackson,**” featuring H.W. Brands, who explained how Jackson was wildly popular during his lifetime for expanding voting rights, but he’s mostly known today for uprooting the Cherokee tribe.

“**If the United Nations Had a House Band It Would Be Pink Martini,**” which was fun for the way band leader Thomas Lauderdale got moderator Lucie Arnaz to sing a song she didn’t know all the words to.

“**Never Give Up. Never Quit,**” featuring Travis Mills, author of “Tough As They Come” and one of only five soldiers from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to survive quadruple amputations. He was witty and inspirational, and he left people in tears of joy.