

# Desert Sun.

## As the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival turns 10, founder says many talks now on YouTube

*A decade after its founding, the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival has featured over 300 writers and special guests in 600 speaking sessions.*

**Brian Blueskye** Palm Springs Desert Sun

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In 2014, Jamie Kabler put on the first Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Library and Observatory featuring big names such as Michael Childers, Jackie Collins, Richard Rodriguez and Linda Fairstein.

The festival's budget was \$90,000, some of which came from a grant from the city, and a third of it came from six \$5,000 donations. A week before the event, 382 passes had been sold at \$125. Kabler's partner, Helene Galen, also made a sizable donation.

"(Galen) wrote the first check, which changed my life for the better because it's given me 10 years of being able to talk to some of the smartest people I've ever met from all over the world. It gave me an entry into this whole world of thinkers, writers and leaders," Kabler said. "We've obviously grown and sustained it. We're also able to give the writers honorariums, travel accommodations, treat them like family and they love our readers."

A decade later, the festival has a \$3 million budget and has featured over 300 writers and special guests in 600 speaking sessions. One hundred and fifty New York Times bestselling authors, 14 National Book Award-winning writers, 45 Pulitzer Prize winners, two recipients of the Presidential Medals of Freedom and many other prestigious award recipients have been spotlighted at the event.



Former Desert Sun reporter Bruce Fessier (left) and Rancho Mirage Writers Festival founder Jamie Kabler during a multi-part evening celebrating Fessier's 40-year anniversary with The Desert Sun newspaper. Marc Glassman/Special To The Desert Sun

During the sold-out festival, running Jan. 31 through Feb. 2 at the Rancho Mirage Library and Observatory, authors such as Jon Meacham, H.W. Brands, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Jonathan Franzen, Anand Giridharadas and more will appear to discuss the subjects of their books or join conversations on social issues, current events and culture.

Even though Kabler said the festival sells out each year, meaning it could be expanded in a larger venue such as a hotel or convention center, it's crucial to him and the board to keep it at the library. In preparation for the festival, organizers transform the library into an event space, which requires moving 100,000 books and setting up audio/visual equipment.

"Writers always talk about what the library meant to them growing up and a library was my refuge when I was growing up," Kabler said. "We have to restrict it, but with the generosity of The Auen Foundation, we film many of the talks. Some writers will allow it and some don't, but 90% of the talks are filmed and we put them up on our YouTube channel. We've had millions of viewers and just got our first fan letter from Mongolia."

Past talks now available on the event's YouTube page feature Tom Hanks, Eleni Kounalakis, Barbara Boxer, Gray Davis, Jon Meacham and more. Visit [www.youtube.com/c/ranchomiragewritersfestival](http://www.youtube.com/c/ranchomiragewritersfestival) to explore all recorded talks and see which of this year's writers allow their talk to be posted on YouTube.

## It's not a book festival

Even though the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival has a bookstore on-site and writers are promoting books, it isn't a book festival or on the same scale as the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books and the Bay Area Book Festival.

One feature that sets it apart from others is it features panel discussions. Some of the panels in this year's program are "The Media Ecosystem and Presidential Elections" with news personalities John Avlon, John Harwood and Margaret Hoover; "Issues in U.S. Foreign Policy" with foreign affairs experts Anne Applebaum, Ambassador Ivo Daalder and General David H. Petraeus; "Why The Modern Male Is Struggling" with Richard Reeves, Matt Gutman and Bret Stephens; and more.

"It's about the ideas and the speakers," Kabler said.

There isn't a committee for selecting the speakers and panelists. The decisions are made by Kabler and Director of Programming Deborah C. Dejah. One panel Kabler wants to feature in 2025 is the cost of higher education.

"When I choose a writer, it's not because he or she has written a book, they also need to be a great speaker, entertain you and keep you interested during a talk," Kabler said.



People attend the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

## One writer inspired gifting books to attendees



Author and actor Tom Hanks in conversation with Maureen Dowd during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival opening event at the Annenberg Center in Rancho Mirage on Tuesday, January 29, 2019. Taya Gray/Special To The Desert Sun

Some of the highlights from previous years that Kabler discussed were Navy SEAL Admiral William H. McRaven discussing his personal story that he said "touched my heart," journalist Bret Stephens and former White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove about the importance of immigration in the U.S. and more.

But he was ecstatic when Tom Hanks appeared in 2019 and described the actor coming to the festival as "one of the great breaks I got." It also started the tradition of giving 8,000 to 10,000 books away to the readers attending the festival each year.

"I wrote a letter to Tom Hanks and said 'If you come and speak, I will buy 1,000 copies of your new book coming out.' Three months later, I got a call. I'll never forget where I was sitting when I got that call and heard 'This is Tom Hanks' office and he would like to come.' I had Maureen Dowd interview him. I followed up the next year with Sally Field, Cameron Douglas and his dad Michael Douglas."

Kabler said purchasing the books and giving them away has helped bring some writers to the festival, the organizers have also given away 10,000 books to the community through its Writer Series programming.



Diana Gabaldon, left, and Anthony Doerr sign books for attendees during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun



## A push for diversity

One area Kabler sees an opportunity for growth in the future is diversity. The festival has been criticized for inviting controversial political figures and a lack of cross-culturalism. Palm Desert resident Tod Goldberg, a New York Times bestselling author, was among five authors who addressed the lack of diversity at the festival in 2020

"We have attendees who come from all 50 states and fly in as they did for the Palm Springs International Film Festival, and we have writers who have come from Europe and Asia," Kabler said.

In September, Paul Bradley Carr, co-owner of Best Bookstore in Palm Springs with partner Sarah Lacy, wrote in a newsletter they wanted to put on their own literary event to be a competitor to the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. The Palm Springs Readers' Festival will take place Feb. 2 through 4 at Hotel Zoso. Carr and Lacy also criticized the festival for being too expensive to attend and said its lineup of authors lacks diversity.

"I think we've grown with diversity and I'm really proud of that," Kabler said. "Next year, we are going to have an Iranian writer for the first time, and we'll have a Pakistani writer too. I want to have more of an international flavor. Some festivals like to have new voices, but new voices would only work for us if they won an award, so I want the best of the new voices."



Fran Lebowitz and Jeffrey Brown have a discussion during a session at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 3, 2023. *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

## Valerie Biden Owens will appear at this year's event

One highlight of this year's festival is Valerie Biden Owens, President Joe Biden's sister and the first woman in U.S. history to run a presidential campaign. Owens also managed seven of his previous U.S. Senate victories. She will be discussing her memoir, "Growing Up Biden," about her family and growing up in Delaware with Lesley Stahl.

"I got a call from Valerie and she said 'I was just at the White House with Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jon Meacham, and they said I have to come to the festival. I said 'Valerie, I don't have an honorarium for you' and she said 'I'll come for free and want to be a part of this festival.' That's a sign we've come a long way. We're working on 2025, and no one is saying no to us."

There are two people Kabler has tried to invite to the festival in recent years, actor Gary Oldman and Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates. In 2018, Oldman purchased a home in Palm Springs and Gates is a part-time Coachella Valley resident.

"Both have written me great letters saying how proud they are of the festival, how much they would love to attend but are unable to," Kabler said.