

L.A. Times Festival of Books, aka Bookchella, Shines a Light on City's Leading Literary Role

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Tyler Malone

April 24, 2018



Over the April 21-22 weekend Los Angeles celebrated that most precious of magical artifacts: the book. Though L.A. is one of the literary capitals of the world, it still isn't given enough credit. Despite the wealth of iconic L.A. writers — including Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, John Rechy, Christopher Isherwood and Joan Didion — and recent, celebrated writers such as L.A. poet laureate Robin Coste Lewis and Pulitzer Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen, the city's vibrant literary scene remains underrated, with a perception that "nobody reads in L.A."

"There's an unkind stereotype out there that Angelenos are loath to crack open a book," wrote Jessica Roy last week in the *L.A. Times*' book coverage revving up for the annual bookfest. "If that's true," she asked, "how do you explain the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books?" It is, after all, the largest book festival in the country.

Hundreds of authors took part in the 23rd Festival of Books on Saturday and Sunday at the University of Southern California: reading, speaking, signing and selling their books — everyone from Jorge Ramos to Joyce Carol Oates, Patton Oswalt to Reza Aslan, Ed Asner to Walter Mosley, Gabrielle Union to John Scalzi, Junot Díaz to Carmen Maria Machado. But

perhaps the most important thing to note is that an estimated 150,000 readers came out to support book culture, proving the stereotype wrong: Los Angeles does read. We are not loath to but actually long to crack open a book.

John Rechy accepts the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement on Friday night.

The event kicked off on Friday evening with the *L.A. Times* Book Prizes, where beloved L.A. icon John Rechy was honored with the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement. Rechy's debut novel, *City of Night*, published by Grove Press in 1963, became an instant sensation due to its controversial subject matter. The novel, which chronicles the lives of gay hustlers across the United States, has become a seminal work in both queer and Chicano literature. Rechy has gone on to write 12 more novels, including *After the Blue Hour*, released last year. There was a particular irony in Rechy receiving this prize because Robert Kirsch, the critic for whom the award is named, gave Rechy's debut a critical drubbing upon its release, refusing even call to it a book and instead calling it "a thing."



Literary superstar Joyce Carol Oates, who won the Mystery/Thriller Award for *A Book of American Martyrs*, and YA writer Jason Reynolds, winner of the Young Adult Literature Award for *Long Way Down*, both gave stirring speeches. The final award of the evening, the Innovator's Award, went to Glory Edim, creator of the Well-Read Black Girl literary blog, book club and conference, "for her work honoring black women writers and creating a vital new space for literary discussion and engagement." She was visibly moved by the award. "When young black



women read and study their work, they're able to imagine new possibilities for themselves; they're able to become the storytellers in their right," Edim said, pausing with emotion. "What we're trying to do is really collectively create portraits of our black lives and to discard the word 'minority.' Our stories have never been minority."

The other award winners were Mohsin Hamid for *Exit West* (fiction), Patricia Smith for *Incendiary Art* (poetry), Dan Egan for *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes* (history), Laura Dassow Walls for *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (biography), Nancy MacLean for *Democracy in Chains* (current interest), Robert M. Sapolsky for *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (science & technology), Leslie Stein for *Present* (graphic novel/comics), Jenny Zhang for *Sour Heart* (Art Seidenbaum Award for first fiction) and Benjamin Taylor for *The Hue and Cry of Our House: A Year Remembered* (Christopher Isherwood Prize for autobiographical prose, given in collaboration with the Christopher Isherwood Foundation).

Rows of tents lined USC's campus Saturday and Sunday, like the encampments at a booming mining town in the Wild West, with all sorts of exhibitors hawking their literary wares. There were tents from booksellers Skylight Books and Vroman's, indie publishers Unnamed Press and Two Lines Press, publications *Bookforum* and *L.A. Review of Books*, author organizations the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library and the Ayn Rand Institute, nonprofits 826LA and the National Wildlife Federation, as well as radio and TV stations, writers groups and self-published authors.

Natashia Deón, who has become a major force in the L.A. literary scene thanks to her reading series the Table and Dirty Laundry Lit, was out at the Counterpoint Press tent on Saturday signing copies of her debut novel, *Grace*. When I asked her why she loves coming to the festival, she said, "Books are the greatest arbiters of our thoughts, ideas, our history and our present. And for book lovers, books are the place where we wrestle with ourselves and decide who we want to be ... this time. The *L.A. Times* Festival of Books is filled with wrestlers who are both readers and writers."

Repeat exhibitor Dan Smetanka, Counterpoint's vice president and executive editor, who is also considered a literary leader in Los Angeles, said he cherishes "manning the booth, having the authors sign their work and meeting all the people attending the festival" and "seeing so many writers that we love in their element, discussing their work on panels and reveling in the sense of community the festival engenders."



Patton Oswalt talks books with *L.A. Times* books editor Carolyn Kellogg.

David G. Marks for L.A. Times Festival of Books

One of the highlights of the weekend was Patton Oswalt discussing his late wife Michelle McNamara's true-crime book, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, with *L.A. Times* books editor Carolyn Kellogg. It was an hourlong roller-coaster conversation that touched on everything from the evils of the Golden State Killer to Oswalt's age-old mockery of *Salon* think pieces, from the Harvey Weinstein #MeToo accusations to the *Creature From the Black Lagoon* Easter egg in the movie *Jaws*. There was a great revelatory moment where Oswalt seemed to stumble upon the perfect metaphor for his wife's obsession when Kellogg asked him about Universal horror films. He decided a specific scene in the *Creature From the Black Lagoon* — in which the beautiful woman swims along the surface and she is paralleled by the creature in the darkness swimming below — presaged the work his wife ended up doing with these serial killers, and specifically the Golden State Killer, highlighted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*.

After worrying that he wasn't doing a great job selling the book onstage, Oswalt explained that because of the subject matter, it's not a book that makes you go, "Yeah! Life!" Instead, after reading it, he claimed readers would probably say, "That was a great book ... and fuck everything." He quickly added, in a mock joyous tone: "So go get your copy today!"

The beleaguered 45th president, Donald Trump, was a looming presence at the event this year, with many authors noting his chilling war on the media and the importance of political engagement in times like these. After a member of the audience reminded Oswald that he had once compared Bush and Cheney to the lead characters in *Dukes of Hazzard*, he asked to whom Oswald would compare Trump and Pence. Not Saruman and Sauron because they actually have plans, the comedian joked. Instead he decided upon a more obscure reference: Peter Haskett and Raymond Huffman from *Shut Up Little Man!*



Joy Ofodu

Wandering from stage to stage, a festivalgoer could have witnessed actress Gabrielle Union discussing her road to becoming a survivor and the steps it took to get to the therapist's door, as detailed in her book *We're Going to Need More Wine: Stories That Are Funny, Complicated and True* with *L.A. Times* film reporter Tre'Vell Anderson; watched as Viet Thanh Nguyen spoke with Alexander Chee, author of *The Queen of the Night* and *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*; heard *L.A. Times* deputy editorial page editor Jon Healey explain that he thought "surprise" is the quality that makes for the greatest editorials; seen Juan Felipe Herrera, the first Mexican-American poet laureate in the United States, read from his book *Jabberwalking*; listened to novelist Junot Díaz as he argued that "the more specific you are, the more universal you are"; or laughed along with the crowd as writer Victor LaValle's son cutely giggled through parts of his dad's panel.

LaValle, whose most recent novel, *The Changeling*, has been getting rave reviews, told the crowd he dislikes when his work is categorized as "literary horror" or "literary fantasy." The addition of "literary" makes him feel as though the reader is saying, "I don't usually like this

nonsense, but I like your nonsense.” He felt it bespeaks a lack of inclusivity on their part.

There was a thread throughout the festival of this type of emphasis on community. Though the festival did indeed have in-depth intellectual discussions, it was not a pretentious affair. It was inclusive in many ways, trying to offer as wide-ranging a conversation as possible about books and the arts.

Though books were certainly the focus of the event, an addition to this year’s festival was a zone called Newstory, which spotlighted “creative storytelling beyond the book,” as Clint Schaff, the zone’s producer, explained. In Newstory, artists including Moby, Jon Cryer, Lucinda Williams and KRS-One discussed and performed other forms of storytelling, including film, television, music, podcasts and virtual reality.

It was an invigorating weekend full of fun and fandom, political engagement and nuanced conversation, penetrating intellectual inquiry and inclusive community building. The *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books is one of those rare annual celebrations where these “72 suburbs in search of a city” — allegedly Dorothy Parker’s description of L.A. — come together in dedication to words, stories and books. If you missed it this weekend, don’t make the same mistake next year. Mark your calendars now.