

2015 Wisconsin Book Festival Report

Submitted by Conor Moran, Festival Director
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Events & Attendance

The 2015 Wisconsin Book Festival took place from Thursday, October 22nd through Sunday, October 25th. The four-day celebration was comprised of 73 events, taking place primarily at Madison's Central Library and surrounding venues. The Festival hosted 40 of these events at Central. The events over festival weekend featured more than 95 authors and performers. This year's festival presented works of fiction, economics, history, biography, art, poetry, performance, and food. Over the course of 4 days, 7,801 people attended author events, representing a steady increase over the past three years (5,500 in 2013, 6,694 in 2014, 7,801 in 2015). We continued our support of various book sales throughout Madison with an additional 2,700 people taking part.

The year round nature of the festival continues to grow in both attendance and prestige. We had an ambitious goal to match our 2014 total of 28 programs in the second year of the Wisconsin Book Festival Events Series. Due to overwhelming audience and publisher support, we ended up hosting 45 stand-alone events in 2015. These events drew an additional ~8,000 people (final number in December. Currently 7,499) to participate in book programming, as well as a 1,600-person Children's Carnival hosted in partnership with Madison Public Library's Youth Services department. For many Events Series programs, we continued our strategy of partnering with community organizations (e.g. Centro Hispano, Madison Community Foundation, FELIX Reading Series) to expand our reach and engage with new audiences.

In total, this year's festival drew 19,536 people to 118 events (final number pending November/December events). It is worth noting that last year's attendance of 24,552 included a 9,200 person audience, which we did not have this year, showing incredible growth in the program overall.

Feedback & Demographics

We collected event surveys from more than 1,500 festival attendees with an additional 600 from events throughout the year. This is up from 800 last year and 1,000 in 2013. We were much more strategic in using volunteers to distribute and collect surveys. They were encouraged to hand out survey cards before events and actively collect them afterward. We also made it part of the introduction and closing of events to encourage people to fill out a survey.

With the larger sample, we saw a 13% drop in the number of attendees ages 55 or over. This age group still comprises 53% of respondents, but is down from more than two-thirds of the audience to just over half in two years. We saw multiple percentage increases in the representation of every other age group with gains particularly in 25-34 year olds (up 3.3% over last year). Overall, 30% of the audience was comprised of people between the ages of 19 and 44, up from 19% last year and 24% in 2013.

Over 67% of respondents gave the venue of their event a 5 out of 5 for satisfaction. This is just slightly higher than last year, but there is significance in the number of people who answered this way (1366 surveys in 2015 compared to 553 in 2014). We also saw a slight increase in the percentage of respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their event as a whole (94.8%). Some of the highest rated events according to respondents included: *The Republic of Imagination* by Azar Nafisi, the panel of spouses of transgender people for the book *Love, Always, Bad Kid* by David Crabb, the Charlotte Zolotow Lecture by Yuyi Morales, the First Wave Showcase: Indigenous Voices, Multilingual Traditions, *We Are Not Ourselves* by Matthew Thomas, and *Waiting* by Kevin Henkes.

Survey responses showed that we had attendees from 20 US States and one response from a tourist visiting from Melbourne, Aus. We had responses from more than 94 Wisconsin communities all across the state, ranging geographically from Pleasant Prairie to River Falls and reflecting opinions from large urban areas like Milwaukee or Madison as well as small like Plain (pop. 782) or Juda (pop. 357). We got responses from people in every city in Dane County and responses representing 51 of 61 municipalities in the county. Responses also showed that the festival is expanding its regional draw beyond Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan, bringing in attendees from South Dakota, Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio as well.

Partners

This year, we continued the association between the Festival and Madison's two primary independent bookstores, A Room of One's Own (Room) and Mystery to Me. Room was the

principal bookseller at Wisconsin Book Festival events throughout the year and at Central Library over festival weekend. Room handled purchases for the Bookseller's Lounge which operated throughout the festival, offering books from every Wisconsin Book Festival event. Mystery to Me Bookstore handled sales at all Wisconsin Book Festival events at the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery. The major decisions in assigning booksellers to a particular site were made with staffing capacities in mind. Having consistent bookselling at all major venues led to a marked increase in book purchases at the festival. This year, Room's total sales topped \$20,000 over four days at Central Library, their largest total in the history of the Wisconsin Book Festival. Sales by Mystery to Me, the Wisconsin Historical Museum, and smaller vendors contributed to the more than \$25,000 in sales generated by the festival.

We worked diligently to maintain community partnerships, collaborating with longtime partner, the Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives (OMAI) on several Wisconsin Book Festival events highlighting indigenous voices, including High School Friday and Passing the Mic, a hip hop arts showcase. This year we also continued our partnership with the Wisconsin Science Festival, jointly presenting 14 events hosted at Central Library, Monona Terrace, and the Wisconsin Institutes of Discovery. Partnership events with Go Big Read, the Madison Community Foundation, the Madison Institute, and the Center for the Humanities yielded some of the most well-attended events of the year.

Media

The festival worked closely with Isthmus Publishing to preserve the paper's long-standing role as the main promotional outlet for festival information. The printed festival schedule insert had a distribution of 80,000 and a readership of 150,000. The Isthmus also served as the festival's exclusive print media partner, receiving early notification of the festival schedule. The Isthmus produced multiple articles about the festival itself, as well as reviews of the books featured at this year's festival. The Wisconsin Book Festival was featured on the cover of the Isthmus the week before the festival with two articles about the festival in that issue. The week of the festival, Isthmus featured the OMAI Passing the Mic celebration, which occurs as part of the Festival each year. The expense of the paid festival schedule insert was worth it, informing 47.9% of survey respondents about the festival (this is down from the approximately 60% in past years).

In addition to the Isthmus insert and articles, the Wisconsin Book Festival received widespread coverage in magazines, radio, and newspapers. An ongoing partnership with Wisconsin Public Radio for radio coverage and promotion led to a vastly increased role for Wisconsin Public Radio personalities to host festival events, including appearances by Ann Strainchamps, Steve

Paulson, Rob Ferrett, Gilman Halsted, Kristian Knutsen, and Maureen McCollum. We also had wonderful advertising placement for the festival just before the Marketplace Morning Report on Morning Edition (7:50 & 8:50 AM) and usually two spots during All Things Considered in the afternoon.

For the first time, C-SPAN BookTV covered the Wisconsin Book Festival with a live broadcast. BookTV covered 8 festival events live on Saturday, October 24th beginning with Wayne Wiegand at 10:30 AM through Matthew Diffie ending at 10:00 PM. The live coverage took the Festival to a national audience and was replayed in its entirety on Sunday, October 25th. The events are now available for streaming at c-span.org. In addition to broadcasting the event, BookTV coverage provided two weeks of advertising for our event. Other festivals have noticed a bump in awareness and tourism due to BookTV coverage in years following a broadcast, and we are planning for the same next year.

Local media covered this year's festival more extensively than in past years. There were feature articles in The Isthmus, Madison Magazine, The Wisconsin State Journal, The Capital Times, and The Madison Times, in addition to multiple online outlets. Festival Director Conor Moran was interviewed on WISC-TV News 3, [NBC 15](#), and WORT and library Marketing Director Tana Elias was interviewed on WISC-TV News 3 and on NBC 15 for festival events throughout the year. These media outlets conducted an extensive series of interviews with Wisconsin Book Festival authors in the weeks leading up to the Festival. For a list of news coverage and links [click here](#).

Other Promotion

This year the Wisconsin Book Festival also utilized social media to help publicize our schedule of events. We interacted with authors and community partners through our Facebook and Twitter accounts to create a steady buzz of excitement leading up to the festival. We also used our social media presence to communicate real time updates to the community throughout the festival, using the hashtag [#wibookfest](#). We hope that this initiative helps to inform our younger attendees of the unique events the Wisconsin Book Festival has to offer, as well as allowing authors, partners, and attendees to share their experiences at the festival with their own followers, increasing our reach and providing a level of personalization.

Recognizing the increase in the number of year round events, the festival worked with Cricket Design Works to develop a postcard series that could share upcoming events throughout the year. Spring, summer, and post-festival postcards were able to publicize groups of events as opposed to flyers promoting just one event and these postcards were well received by libraries and other partners. In the month leading up to the festival, postcards highlighted different

audiences (science topics, Wisconsin authors, children's and teen events, and festival highlights) to compliment partnerships with the Wisconsin Science Festival, various organizations serving or funding local writers, and audiences who work with children and teens.

The festival also benefits from being a program of the Madison Public Library, which allows library staff to advertise the festival through regular library promotional channels including 29 email newsletters, in-library displays, library social media, promotion at other library events, and a distribution network of 53 public libraries in seven counties serving 850,000 Wisconsin residents. This reach allows the festival to reach a wide local audience at a very low cost.

Quotes

“I have never been a part of an event like this before and it was a really cool experience.”

“Fabulous venue! Fabulous events! A traveler's 'must-see' visit!”

“I am much smarter and more aware than before I heard this talk.”

“A valuable event overall - the breadth of subject matter and caliber of authors was very impressive.”

“A favorite author reading from his new work! Nothing could be better!”

“A beautiful view into the author's mind and imagination. Thank you”

“Wonderful event of bringing an amazing and bold author to discuss a topic that's not always told in the media. It's great to hear a "diverse" topic and a very important one. “ - about Leila Abdelrazaq's BADDawi

“Overall reaction to festival: Another amazing year! Thank you.”

“INSPIRING talk - leaving me with so much to reflect on, even before I read her book!”

“It is so wonderful to have such events happening and even better that they're free!”

“I love coming to this gorgeous library for these interesting book talks.”

Plans for 2016

We have already begun planning for next year's festival and have 10 events on the 2016 calendar. The 2016 Wisconsin Book Festival will occur Thursday, October 20th through Sunday, October 23rd. We are seeing incredible growth in the Events Series programs with far greater interest from publishers and authors than ever before. We will spend a good deal of energy addressing some of the issues we've encountered dealing with larger audiences as we expect many more fantastic authors in the coming years. We will continue to pursue the partnership with the Wisconsin Science Festival through Conor Moran's seat on the program committee. We will also be conducting a larger survey of tourism impact and potential among those who attended this year's festival and filled out event surveys.