

PROGRAMMING



# AUTHOR!

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Hosting writer events at the library takes networking, creativity, solid logistics, a grasp of community interests—and a little money doesn't hurt

By Lisa Peet

When it comes to memorable author events, Laurie Kincer, communications specialist at the Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL), OH, immediately thinks of St. Patrick's Day 2014. Ishmael Beah was scheduled to appear at CCPL's Parma-Snow branch to discuss his recent novel *The Radiance of Tomorrow* (Farrar) and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Sarah Crichton: Farrar), a memoir of his violent childhood in the Sierra Leone Armed Forces. Kincer may have had her doubts about the timing—"in Cleveland, which is a huge Irish St. Patrick's Day-celebrating community," but Beah filled the 400-seat auditorium to capacity. "Most of them were high school students," Kincer relates, "whose teachers and parents reserved buses and vans and also drove them here.... The kids treated Ishmael like a rock star."

Public libraries are all about access: to services, to data, to books. Offering patrons access to some of their favorite authors is a bonus but an important one. Author events strengthen the existing bonds between readers and books: seeing an author read from his or her work and having the chance to ask questions—or just hear the answers—offers a new dimension of engagement. But these events also reinforce the idea of the library as a point of entry into people's reading lives, beyond simple readers' advisory.

The landscape of author events is continually changing. As programming budgets shrink and authors' publicity tours get smaller, even libraries with successful track records need to be increasingly nimble and imaginative. The events themselves can

take many forms, from a 20-minute reading accompanied by a Q&A period to fully themed activities, Skype visits, sit-down lunches, and readings affiliated with community reads or literary prizes. While the choice depends on a library's resources, location, and patron demographics, there are a few best practices that can help librarians develop exciting and well-attended programs.

## Picking winners

To select authors whom patrons will turn out to see, programming librarians recommend staying up-to-date by regularly reading publishers' catalogs and attending conferences and regional Book Buzz talks. Circulation statistics are also good indicators of interest—if an author's last book was popular, the new book's readings will probably be well attended—and materials selection librarians are a good source of information about what's popular. Author visits can be planned around book award ceremonies, civic events such as Pride Month or African American History Month, or local events and combined with other programming, whether within the library or with outside partners. A cost-benefit analysis of community demographics, space needs, and staffing requirements can be helpful when trying to decide whether to take on a program. Partnering with a local bookstore, for access to both its stock and its mailing list, is also recommended.

Midlist and debut authors are traditionally somewhat harder to place, although this varies with the population. Melissa Bullock Champion, senior manager of author events at Macmillan publishers, suggests hosting lower-attendance opportunities such as book club lunches or dinners, or via

LEFT PHOTO BY ERIN SHEA; RIGHT PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO LIBRARY NETWORK

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**CROSS-COUNTRY EVENTS** (Clockwise from far l.): Wally Lamb and a book group that came to hear him at the Darien Library, CT; Lamb, again, this time speaking to a crowd at the Iowa Metro Library Network's Out Loud! Author Series; Dory Briles (l.), Jan Kaiser (ctr.), and Rebecca Skloot (r.) at an Authors Visiting in Des Moines event; the AVID logo (inset) gets a yearly redesign; Chicago Public Library's One Book One Chicago "Acting the Anti-Hero" panel at Revolution Brewing (l.-r.): Mark Bazer, Sarah Knight Adamson, Terry Gant, and Christopher Borrelli



many people they expect to bring—with the caveat that it's always important that they're accurate." Libraries should provide target dates but be willing to be flexible. And many publishers want some idea of how many books will be sold at the event.

### Getting creative

Not only head counts and book sales count in pitches, Walker notes. "The more creative they are and unique they are, the better."

The author programming at Chicago Public Library (CPL), for instance, is easily as diverse as the population it serves. Events are planned around heritage-based celebrations and citywide initiatives, such as the upcoming Architectural Biennial. Other community events that spark author visits are the Poetry Foundation's Poetryfest, a daylong series of activities including poets and spoken-word artists from around the city; Columbia College Chicago's annual Story Week, which presents nationally recognized authors discussing the art of writing; and the Printer's Row Literary Festival, for which CPL brings in authors to the library and assorted locations.

CPL's community read, One Book One Chicago (OBOC), supplies a number of entry points for imaginative programming as well. The theme around this year's book, Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*—a tale of comic book artists—is "Heroes: Real and Imagined." Within that concept CPL has launched a wide variety of events: Jennifer Holland, author of the animal book *Unlikely Heroes*, partnered with the local anticruelty society, and a panel of film critics convened at a local brewery that featured a craft beer called Anti-Hero IPA, to name a few.

Craig Davis, CPL director of cultural and civic engagement, acknowledges that Chicago has the advantage of being a major literary venue to begin with, but he takes his role as a challenge all the same, in terms of both quality and diversity. "There's a lot of sweat and work that goes into [putting] a seamless show up on stage that's beautifully presented in a way that's conducive for both the audience and the authors that we host.... I always promise...that we'll take very good care of [the] authors while they're in our hands, and we always do."

### Standing room only

For her Books at Noon series at the New York Public Library (NYPL), associate director of public programs and events Jessica Strand doesn't worry about how many her venue can seat. The event, held at Astor Hall—in the iconic Schwarzman Building's public entryway—is standing room only, holding up to 200 people. "It's like you're in the mosh pit," Strand says. Patrons drift in during their lunch hour and stay to watch her interview fiction and nonfiction writers and at least one poet per season, one on one. "I have half an hour," she explains. "It's like trying to write a short story, and I look at it that way."



Skype. Smaller libraries and branches are often successful with local writers, including self-published authors.

Campion also adds that libraries should make a point of cultivating relationships with publishers' library marketing reps, who serve as liaisons between the library and the publicist in charge of an author's itinerary. "Communication is always great," she says. "The more I know about what these librarians are doing, the more I can make sure that our publicists are aware." Many publishers have email blasts or newsletters specifically for library event planners, and Campion has developed a touring author event grid on Edelweiss's online platform so that libraries can upload event proposals and she can, in turn, funnel requests to the publicists.

### Perfect pitch

Presenting strong pitches to publishers is a crucial skill for libraries, and maintaining a robust author event program isn't only about keeping patrons happy. The reality, explains Alan Walker, vice president of academic and library marketing and sales at Penguin Group USA, is that librarians need to be aware that they're competing with bookstores for writers' limited tour time.

Most libraries don't have big budgets for speakers' fees or honoraria and rely mainly on writers who are already on tour publicizing their newest book (or recent reissue). Having a proven track record when approaching a publisher helps to make the library's case as a desirable venue.

"You have to make the best pitch possible," says Walker. "What the author is going to do at the library, what the event consists of, how the library's going to promote the event, how

TOP PHOTO BY SARAH K. NELSON; BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF CHICAGO, WALTER MITCHELL

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Books at Noon is only in its second year, and Strand is still experimenting. This year she has added lesser-known writers who have been reviewed well but might draw a smaller crowd than the big names, “but it puts someone out there, and hopefully people drop in on it. That’s a little bit of what Books at Noon is—there are people who show up because they know what’s going on, and then [others] kind of happen upon it, and it becomes a bigger gathering over the course of the event,” says Strand.

Strand feels that the mobile, informal quality of the gathering offers its own energy. People haven’t bought tickets, and they’re standing in a large public space; they have to want to stay. “My job is to make [the authors] as interesting as possible...to ask questions that they unfold for the audience, so you can watch someone blossom in front of your eyes.”

Patrons and partners

For smaller libraries outside a typical author’s tour circuit, extra funding can make all the difference. Iowa’s Metro Library Network (MLN), comprised of the Cedar Rapids, Marion, and Hiawatha libraries, was approached by the Giacoletto Foundation, a grant-making organization that supports educational institutions and libraries. As Cedar Rapids Public Library community relations manager Amber Mussman describes it, its proposition was open-ended: “‘We’ve got a little bit of money, we want to give it to you, and we want you to do something amazing with it.’ Every library’s dream, right?”

the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, 30 minutes away.

While attendees are encouraged to post reports and photographs on social media using the #outloud hashtag, its most innovative promotion has been the You Out Loud! video contest, which calls on fans to submit a three-minute video that makes “a compelling case” for why they should be chosen to introduce one of the authors at each event. Last year, recalls Mussman, the woman who was selected to introduce Sarah Vowell “couldn’t have been a bigger fan.... It...was a great experience for everybody who was there.”

Out Loud! took as its role model an even more venerable Iowa program, Des Moines Public Library’s (DPL) Authors Visiting in Des Moines (AViD) series. AViD has hosted more than 100 writers in its 15 years, bringing many community partners on board. April’s program included science writer Rebecca Skloot, author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Crown), who spoke to a thousand-person crowd; the following afternoon Skloot took part in a panel discussion at Des Moines University (DMU) with some 500 DMU medical students, Drake University law students, and Mercy Medical Center nursing students arranged by AViD. AViD has received support over the years from a variety of corporate and individual sponsors that underwrite the program through the DPL Foundation and two Des Moines independent bookstores that provide books for the events and donate ten percent of sales to the foundation. The program also works closely with the Iowa Center for the Book, sponsor of All Iowa Reads, and includes that author in the lineup each year as well.

With participants’ permission, AViD hires a local videographer to shoot and edit the event. Each season is collected on a DVD available at the library for checkout and that circulates widely—particularly among book groups and senior centers. Videos are available on YouTube as well and broadcast on the local cable access channel. In addition to some paid advertising, says former DPL marketing manager Jan Danielson Kaiser, this year AViD printed up 10,000 bookmarks publicizing the program, and a local brown-bag catering company agreed to slip them in its bags.

While the additional funding has been extremely valuable, Kaiser, who retired in April, believes that community support is the most important part of the program’s success. One more factor, she says, is that “we give Iowa hospitality. And you know, just about every author that comes is amazed at how much they like Des Moines.”

Eyes on the prize

Awards can serve as the hook to bring in authors—if a library can find the funding to back it up. The Tulsa City-County Library (TCCL) is host to the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, which recognizes “a distinguished body of work written in the field of literature and letters.” The Helmerich family is well known for its philanthropy in Tulsa, and Helmerich, for whom the award is named, served on both the library commission and its trust board. In 1985, the award was launched with a medal and an honorarium of \$5,000; today, winners receive an engraved crystal book and \$40,000, making it one of the country’s larger monetary literary prizes.

Every year the prizewinning author attends a discussion with local AP high school students, who have each received a copy of the book to read. The next night offers a \$175-a-head black tie dinner—the ticket price covers the cost of the event



GRAND PRIZE Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award winner Ann Patchett (signing) at Tulsa City-County Library

The three library directors decided they wanted to bring major authors to their area of eastern Iowa, four hours from major metro hubs such as Chicago and Minneapolis.

“We see authors coming to those places all the time,” says Mussman, “but it’s hard to get them to come to our libraries. So, what if we had money and we could actually do that? That’s what the series has allowed us to do. We’re bringing in authors that our patrons read and names that they recognize.” MLN’s successful Out Loud! Author Series is now in its eighth season. The program, which generally features three authors a year, brings in up to 500 guests at a time; this summer’s authors will be Maureen Corrigan, Rainbow Rowell, and Piper Kerman. Events are held at a nearby hotel conference center, often drawing writers and faculty from

PHOTO BY JOHN FANCHER

## CONSUMMATE CONTACTS

WHEN IT COMES TO PLANNING author events, a good relationship with a publisher's library marketing department is vital. These are the people who know which authors are on tour, where they're already planning to go, who their publicists are, and a host of other important details. And they understand what libraries can provide to publishers.

"I have a bird's-eye view of author events," says Macmillan's

Melissa Bullock-Campion, explaining that libraries' community connections, bookstore partnerships, and flexible spaces are highly valuable to publishers. "From our perspective," she says, "those are all great assets that libraries have to offer for quality author events."

The following is a partial list of library marketing managers at some of the major publishers and distributors. Additional contacts can be found on individual publishers' websites, or at publisher-library sites such as EarlyWord.com.

### CONSORTIUM BOOK SALES & DISTRIBUTION

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### HACHETTE BOOK GROUP

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### MACMILLAN

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### PENGUIN GROUP

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### RANDOM HOUSE

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### SIMON & SCHUSTER

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### WORKMAN PUBLISHING

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and its administration—in the stacks at Tulsa's Central Library. On the following Saturday, the author gives a free public presentation and book signing, again at the Central Library. (The Central Library is currently under renovation, and events are being held at a large regional branch.)

TCCL does a generous amount of standard author programming as well. But the prize is its programming linchpin, with events in regional branches orbiting it. As Larry Bartley, TCCL communications director, explains, "The award program was never intended to be a fundraiser but rather a friend-raiser—a gift to the community."

### Hybrid models

Ohio's CCPL hosts both free and ticketed programs. Its Writers Center Stage (WCS) series, now in its 11th season, was originated by executive director (and American Library Association president-elect for 2014–15) Sari Feldman. The event, which charges \$30 per ticket, does not limit itself to writers on tour and has welcomed such names as Frank McCourt, Alexander McCall Smith, Joan Didion, Mary Oliver, and Cheryl Strayed. WCS brings in the winners of the Cleveland-based Anisfield-Smith Book Awards and will often take a chance on debut authors (such as David Wroblewski in 2008, who unexpectedly overflowed the 250 seats WCS had planned for after his *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* was selected for Oprah's Book Club).

Author readings at CCPL's branches, on the other hand, are free—but no less beloved. Programming is a team event, says Kincer, with help from branch managers across the system, the marketing and collection development departments, publishers, and sometimes even the authors themselves. When Joe Hill spoke, she says, fans drove in from New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and all over Ohio. And while Beah may have been treated like a rock star, Kincer recalls, when musician

Graham Nash came to CCPL for a talk and book signing on the day of a Crosby Stills and Nash concert, people waited in line for two hours to get their books signed—both readers and concertgoers alike.

### Learning opportunities

Estimating all the variables surrounding author programming, especially for a smaller library, may require some trial and error. Before Erin Shea (a 2014 *LJ* Mover & Shaker) stepped into her role as supervisor of the Harry Bennett and Weed Hollander branches of the Ferguson Library in Stamford, CT, she spent four years as head of adult programming for the nearby Darien Library. The two communities, she notes, have strikingly different programming needs despite being only slightly more than five miles apart. For instance, in Stamford, midlist authors are popular for readings, whereas Darien audiences are more interested in bigger names. However, a recent Friday reading at Ferguson brought in only three people.

Shea has a long run of well-attended author events behind her—Ferguson author events usually draw between 25 and 75 people—and looks at this as a learning opportunity, realizing that Stamford is a larger city, with more going on to compete for patrons' attention on Fridays and weekends. The author, she adds, was taken aback at first but ended up circling the chairs and turning the evening into an intimate discussion. "Luckily, most authors had to start somewhere, so they've had an event where three people showed up."

For all its inherent complexities, however, successful author programming returns far more than its investment at any library, large or small, whether it hosts a Pulitzer Prize winner or a local expert. The only rule, as CCPL's Kincer puts it, is "to create excitement around a reading, to deepen the experience of the reader...getting to meet an author they've read, or one that they haven't read but find out that they're kindred spirits." ■