

Hay Festival (written for Bookseller Monthly)

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Imagine a place where aspiring writers can glean inspiration and valuable advice from highly successful, published authors and readers can come face-to-face with their favorite writers. Imagine a place where great literature and great fun go hand-in-hand.

Snuggled amongst the Black Mountains, the tiny Welsh town of Hay-on-Wye leaps alive every spring with the Hay Festival of Literature, a world-renowned festival that attracts some of the world's most revered and popular authors and public figures for ten days of literary events and entertainment. This year's Hay Festival runs from May 23 through June 1 and promises festival-goers more than 150 scheduled events ranging from an interview with acclaimed Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, who will discuss her novel "Onyx and Crake," to Queen Noor of Jordan talking about her memoir "Leap of Faith: Memoir of an Unexpected Life." The Hay Festival is, above all else, a celebration of the written word.

"The same mix of people who use language explore ideas and tells stories in different media. We've always thought that the way Van Morrison writes a lyric, Eddie Izzard tells a joke, Christianne Amanpour a news report or Margaret Atwood a line of a story is all basically the same process," Festival Director Peter Florence said.

Known as the "Secondhand Book Capital of the World," Hay is the perfect place for a literary festival. A tiny, picturesque town of only 1300 people, Hay has almost forty bookstores, all but one of which are secondhand. Books and friendly townspeople are part of what makes Hay so quaint and charming. It is also the hometown of Festival Director and Co-Founder Florence. Touring the world as an actor in a one-man show about poet Wilfred Owen, Florence visited many festivals and theaters that both sparked his interest and inspired him.

"I loved the way they were gathering points for people and the energy and buzz festivals create. The intensity of entertainment and intellectual challenge is a great crucible for friendships and discoveries. So, we decided to have one at home in Hay."

Since its debut in 1988, the Hay Festival has grown to include more than 50,000 festival-goers annually. Arthur Miller was the first big name to appear at the Hay Festival

in its second year, and since then, some of the world's most famous names have found their way to Hay-on-Wye. Maya Angelou, President Bill Clinton and Paul McCartney are among the long list of notables to make appearances at the Hay Festival in recent years.

The Hay Festival is unique in that Florence actively seeks input from festival-goers on how to make the festival better. Florence cares about what writers and readers want. He then builds a program each year that continues to attract thousands year after year.

“We know that the two things our visitors value above all are discovering new writers and artists and the atmosphere of the Festival. You can get advice on books from newspapers. You can only get the pleasure of meeting writers and readers with this degree of informality at a festival. It is the audience at Hay that makes the experience special for writers and musicians,” Florence said.

Festival-goers will be delighted with the expansive schedule of events at this year's festival, and there's something for everyone in Hay. One of the highlights of this year's festival promises to be American author Don DeLillo. Winner of such highly acclaimed prizes as the National Book Award for his novel, “White Noise,” and the PEN/Faulkner Award for “Mao II,” DeLillo has been a fixture on the American literary scene since his first novel, “Americana,” debuted in 1971. DeLillo will discuss his new novel “Cosmopolis” with British television anchor James Naughtie.

Author of the widely popular novel, “The Lovely Bones,” Alice Sebold is among the many novelists who will also appear at the Hay Festival. Margaret Atwood, Terry Pratchett, Richard Price, New Yorker film critic Anthony Lane and Alison Lurie are also among the many notable authors slated to appear.

The Hay Festival is also a nurturing environment for aspiring writers. It is a place where they can mingle with seasoned authors and other aspiring writers. Some of the notable writers who made their first appearances in the United Kingdom at the Hay Festival include Jonathan Safran, Emily Perkins, Andrew Roberts and Amanda Foreman.

This year's festival will feature first-time novelist Jennifer Donnelly discussing her book “Gathering Light,” and Shane Maloney will discuss his debut novel “The Sixth Lamentation.” The panel the Best of Young British Novelists will introduce upcoming writers Andrew O'Hagan, Peter Ho Davies and Monica Ali. O'Hagan has already

published two novels, “Our Fathers” and Personality,” while Davies has a series of short stories, “Equal Love,” already published and a forthcoming novel, “The Bad Shepard.” Ali will discuss her first novel, “Brick Lane.”

Aspiring writers will want to make sure to attend The Literary Consultancy, a forum featuring Hannah Griffiths and Rebecca Swift, founders of The Literary Consultancy manuscript appraisal service. Writers will gain invaluable insight into what mistakes most first-timers make when writing their novels. A raffle will be held, and the winner will have the unique and valuable opportunity for a one-on-one half an hour meeting with a Literary Consultancy consultant or Griffiths, who is an agent for Curtis Brown. Aspiring writers are encouraged to bring no more than the first twenty pages of a novel or non-fiction book in progress along with a one-page synopsis.

Writers attending the Hay Festival, especially aspiring writers, according to Florence, feel “they’re part of a community of committed, entertaining, happy and sexy people who love books and who are well-informed, curious and keen to spread the word about exciting new talent.”

Most festival events last approximately sixty minutes and include forty minutes of a conversation or interview with an author followed by a twenty minute question and answer session. Festival-goers are encouraged to participate in the question and answer session and can also send their questions ahead of time via email, with the author’s name in the subject line, to questions@hayfestival.co.uk. There are also author book signings after each event. While there are some free festival events, most charge a small fee ranging from three to ten British pounds (approximately five to fifteen dollars) while a select few have slightly higher admission fees.

The Hay Festival is also a wonderful event for the whole family, and there is a special children’s program, The Hay Fever, that allows youngsters the full experience of a literary festival. Among the many varied activities for youngsters include a songwriting workshop with the Welsh National Opera, story writing instruction at author Sally Prue’s workshop and “Moving With Words,” the exploration of words, stories and songs through dance.

Among the authors making appearances at the Hay Fever are Terry Pratchett, Nick Sharratt, Jenny Nimmo and Jacqueline Wilson.

The Hay Festival is also a celebration of the arts. Festival-goers can choose from a variety of musical performances and comedy shows in addition to the many literary panels. The Sarah Jane Morris Quartet and the Albemi Quartet are among the many performers scheduled to appear in Hay. Music lovers will also want to make sure to catch one of cellist Nick Cooper's two candlelit concerts. Van Morrison is also scheduled to play two concerts featuring music from his latest album "Down the Road."

Laughter and fun are also a staple at the Hay Festival. There are plenty of comedy shows from which to choose during the festival including Simon Singh's "What are the chances of that happening?" comedy show at the Theatre of Science and standup by Christopher Hitchens, Boothby Graffoe and Dominic Holland.

Travelers planning to go to the Hay Festival still have plenty of time to make travel arrangements. While most of the hotels and bed and breakfasts in and around Hay-on-Wye are booked through next year, there are plenty of other accommodation options in Wales. Staying in nearby towns and villages offers visitors the unique opportunity to explore other parts of this beautiful country. The drive from the chosen accommodation to the town of Hay can be an unforgettable experience in itself with the breathtaking scenery. For visitors with adventurous spirits, there are two campsites near the festival grounds, and travelers may also find rooms with local farmers for a fee. More information on both accommodation and the festival can be found at the Hay Festival's Official Website www.hayfestival.co.uk.

The Hay Festival of Literature is a writer's, reader's and book lover's dream. The ten day event attracts thousands annually, and the atmosphere is one that is unequalled. Lifelong friendships are often formed, and incredibly, fourteen couples who met at the Hay Festival have already exchanged their wedding vows.

The Hay Festival "was famously described in the New York Times as a cross between an international conference and a country wedding," Florence said. "People get their Festival fix with us year-after-year."