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The 2023 Bay Area Book Festival in Six Acts

By Jane Ciabattari June 9, 2023

20–25 minutes

Act I.

“Bay area book fest!!! Starts at a party, ends at mcdonalds. My kind of weekend”

A drizzly night didn’t dampen the enthusiasm of the crowd gathered in Berkeley to launch the ninth Bay Area Book Festival on the first Friday night in May. This year’s festival lineup: 250-plus authors, including beloved musician/artist Joan Baez, novelists [Ramona Ausubel](#), Cory Doctorow, Brandon Hobson, [Kathryn Ma](#), Margaret Wilkerson Sexton, Pulitzer winner [Jane Smiley](#), and Margaret Verble, a Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Spur Award for Best Traditional Western; memoirists Nicole Chung, who was launching *A Living Remedy*, and Ingrid Rojas Contreras, whose *The Man Who Could Move Clouds* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award, the National Book Award, and, as would be announced the next week, the Pulitzer Prize; nonfiction authors Adam Hochschild (*American Midnight*), which won a California Book Award later in the month), and Ilyon Woo (*Master Slave Husband Wife: An Epic Journey From Slavery to Freedom*), plus poets Forrest Gander, Paisley Rekdal, and Tongo Eisen-Martin,

the San Francisco Poet Laureate, who would be talking truth about reforming cop culture in Oakland and nationwide on Sunday.

Dozens of authors circulated in a spacious Residence Hotel ballroom for the launch party, telling stories, greeting friends, meeting strangers.

[Jonathan Escoffery](#) (*If I Survive You*), who is wrapping up a Stegner fellowship at Stanford, laughed when asked about being touted as a potential Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction in *Electric Lit* (he's been longlisted and shortlisted for multiple awards for his first book). He greeted other Stegner fellows in the room, including Johanca Delgado, who is heading soon to the Dominican Republic to work on her new novel with the help of an NEA grant, Rabia Saeed, and Jemimah James Wei, who later tweeted, "Bay area book fest!!! Starts at a party, ends at mcdonalds, my kind of weekend....!!!"

Susan Ito and [Marie Myung-OK Lee](#), who had just flown in from JFK, compared covers for their upcoming books on their phones (Ito's adoption memoir, *I Would Meet You Anywhere*, is due out in November; Lee's YA book *Hurt You*, a retelling of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* centered by an autistic Korean teenager and his loving sister, on May 16). Carolina De Robertis (*The President and the Frog*), recently honored with the John Dos Passos award, described her new novel, *The Palace of Eros*, a retelling of the story of Psyche and Eros with a queer nonbinary Eros, coming in 2024. Aya de Leon (*That Dangerous Energy*) mentioned she was launching Fighting Chance Books, a new climate justice fiction imprint of She Writes Press. Memoirist (*Meeting Faith*), travel writer and VONA faculty member Faith Adiele was preparing to head to Morocco for a literary fellowship in Fez.

Sasha Vasilyuk, whose novel *Your Presence Is Mandatory* will be out next year, was set for a festival interview Saturday with Katya Cengel about *From Chernobyl with Love* and her time reporting from Ukraine. Janis Cooke Newman, founder of Lit Camp, had gathered fifteen writers for a Sunday afternoon outdoor stage reading of stories about unreliable narrators—con artists, liars, people we just don't trust.

Poet Tess Taylor offered an advance look at *Leaning Toward Light*, her anthology of gardening poems coming out in August with contributors including Ada Limon, Jane Hirshfield, Ashley Jones, Jericho Brown, Alan Chazaro, and Camille Dungy. Dungy was arriving at the festival Sunday to talk about her new memoir, *Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden*, a kaleidoscopic personal-political collage—essays, poems, photographs, drawings. It's one of the first books acquired by former National Book Critics Circle vice president Yahdon Israel as a senior editor at Simon & Schuster. (He first read her work when serving on the National Book Critics Circle's criticism committee in 2017; Dungy's *Guidebook to Relative Strangers* was a finalist.)

Stockholm-based journalist Jens Liljestrand was at the festival to launch his first novel, *Even if Everything Ends*, which connects four characters in wildfires in Sweden, an apocalyptic subject close to the festival audience. Also in the room: novelists Tom Barbash (*Dakota Winters*), Brooklyn-based Tom Comitta (*The Nature Book*), Jasmin Darznik (*The Bohemians*), Vanessa Hua, whose best-selling novel *Forbidden City* is just out in paperback; [Susanne Pari](#) (*In the Time of Our History*), and concert violinist/novelist [Brendan Slocumb](#), along with nonfiction authors Frances Dinkelspiel (*Tangled Vines*), Rebecca Solnit (*Orwell's Roses*), and

Scott James, whose *Trial by Fire*, about the Station Night Club fire, was featured on “48 Hours” (the episode was a finalist for an Emmy).

When the room was full, it was time for a tribute to BABF founder Cherilyn Parsons, who was stepping down as executive director and heading to Paris to rest, write, and “possibly start something new in the literary space—but after a long recovery from this one,” she told me. (She will formally join the board and plans to be back in 2024 for the festival’s tenth anniversary.) Scott Gelfand, the festival’s COO, led the toasts, with a slide show of images from the past, ending with “Dear Cherilyn, Thank you for your vision, tenacity, and the indelible mark you have left on the Bay Area literary scene.” Parsons welcomed to the stage Norah Piehl, the festival’s director of literary programming, who previously ran the Boston Book Festival. Now in her second year, Piehl has brought changes such as free admission, radically expanded youth programs, and popular genre programs, all key parts of the festival that would unfold over the weekend.

Act II.

Dave Eggers and Wild Things

Dave Eggers and Shawn Harris drew an “all ages” audience Saturday morning to launch *The Eyes and the Impossible*, about a freedom-loving dog who lives in an urban green spot modeled after Golden Gate Park, The McSweeney’s version is an art object of a book, with gilt edges and a laser-etched wooden cover.

How did Eggers develop the speedy voice of Johannes, the wild dog who narrates *The Eyes and the Impossible* (and tells us right off, “I run like a rocket. I run like a laser”). “The untethered voice, I

hope, mirrors his untethered way of living,” he told me. “Because Johannes exults in his freedom, and his speed, the voice had to match that — and be a little weird, too.”

Oakland-born indie rocker/illustrator Shawn Harris created the illustrations. “From the start, I didn’t want the artwork to depict any one moment from the book,” Eggers said. “Instead, they’re lush, color-saturated breaks in the text that show the grandeur and beauty that Johannes sees and desperately wants to preserve.”

Annie Dills on the *McSweeney’s* staff sourced about forty paintings, most of them Flemish and Dutch Old Master landscapes. “Then we chose the ones that seemed most descriptive of a large urban park, and got the rights from the museums that own those paintings. Finally, Shawn painted Johannes into each landscape.”

While Eggers read from *The Eyes and the Impossible*, Harris stood onstage to paint Johannes into an oversized landscape. Five young volunteers served as a coyote chorus. One of them was ten-year-old Django Lang Riley, whom Eggers brought onstage to read Riley’s first published book, written in a workshop at Oakland’s Chapter 510, a writing project inspired by Eggers’ 826 Valencia.

At question time, Eggers called *The Eyes and the Impossible* “catapulting down a hill prose,” and “the most liberating writing I’ve done in thirty-odd years.”

Also on Saturday morning, John Freeman, Knopf executive editor, literary critic, poet, and editor of *Freeman’s* deftly maneuvered the conversation about a life in books that teamed Jane Smiley, whose essay collection, *The Questions that Matter Most: Reading*,

Writing, and the Exercise of Freedom, is due out in June; novelist Joan Frank, author of *Late Work: A Literary Autobiography of Love, Loss, and What I Was Reading*, and legendary Oakland librarian Dorothy Lazard, so beloved she has her own #DorothyLazardFanClub, with a new memoir out this month: *What You Don't Know Will Make a Whole New World*.

Act III.

“It’s like taking apart a clock and finding out how it’s ticking.”

Saturday afternoon five recent fellows in the National Book Critics Circle’s Emerging Critics program took on the question, What Makes a Critic? Moderator Heather Scott Partington, NBCC president, was a former Emerging Critic herself.

Jonathan Leal, now an assistant professor at USC, said former NBCC board member Walton Muyumba, who he met while attending the University of North Texas, opened his path to criticism. He told Muyumba, “I’m a drummer who loves to read. And I don’t know what to do with that energy.’ Muyumba said, ‘Read Ralph Ellison. Read James Baldwin. Make yourself part of a larger conversation.’” Leal’s *Dreams in Double Time: On Race, Freedom, and Bebop* is due out in August.

Ricardo Jaramillo, a poet and case manager at Oakland International High School with recent work in the *New York Times*, *McSweeney’s Quarterly*, and *The Rumpus*, credits *Zyzyva* editor-in-chief and former NBCC board member Oscar Villalon as his mentor in criticism. “I don’t think of book reviewing as a position of authority,” he said. “There can be no absolute opinion on a book, because a book doesn’t exist on its own terms; it exists in conversation with a mind and a life. I aspire to humility about what

I do not know.”

“Criticism is activism... criticism is my way of honoring all the ways in which I’m being fed by the writers I read, and of sharing the light that they shine,” said Antonio López, award-winning poet (*Gentefication*), and the newest and youngest member of the East Palo Alto City Council (he’s also pursuing a PhD in modern thought and literature at Stanford). “I love advocating for people. We need critics who understand the complexities of what poets are saying today. You have to push the form.”

“I came to criticism because I wanted to figure out why and how the fiction I loved worked,” said Yohanca Delgado, Stegner fellow and winner of multiple awards for her short stories. “It’s like taking apart a clock and finding out how it’s ticking.”

Act IV.

“Flash is something you write in three minutes and rewrite for the next three years.”

A capacity crowd, with listeners lined up against the back wall, indicated the emergence of flash fiction as a popular, quick and satisfying storytelling form. The readers were all contributors to the new anthology, *Flash Fiction America*, which Danielle Evans calls “a chorus of voices” telling us our “country is pissed off and giddy and bold and grieving and dying and in love, that is forever and already gone.”

I’m on the moderator side of the stage, with [Kirstin Chen](#), author of *Counterfeit*, and [Grant Faulkner](#), editor of 100-Word Story and author of *The Art of Brevity*. We are longtime collaborators in the Flash Fiction Collective, a San Francisco based flash reading series. Each of the readers—Patricia Q. Bidar, K-Ming Chang,

Molly Giles, Nicole Simonsen, Kara Vernor—struck a distinct emotional chord.

Questions came fast and furious after the reading ended.

“Writing flash I surprise myself,” says K-Ming Chang (*Organ Meats*). She started off writing flash while commuting an hour each way on the train, with the idea of writing a series of stories with titles drawn from the alphabet, but stopped at G. (She read that story, “Gloria,” which begins, “Gloria Gao was the first girl I ever hurt.”) Molly Giles, whose *Home for Unwed Fathers* is due out in August, brought a knowing laugh from the flash fiction writers on stage and in the audience: “Flash is something you write in three minutes and rewrite for the next three years.”

A few blocks away, another capacity crowd filled Berkeley’s Marsh Arts Center to hear authors describe how their novels were inspired by their families’ histories in some of the world’s conflict zones: North Korea, Afghanistan and Iran.

Susanne Pari (*In the Time of Our History*) said she drew from her childhood when her family freely traveled back and forth to Tehran, and then abruptly with the 1978 Islamic revolution, “We could never go back.”

Jamil Jan Kochai (*The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*) said he felt compelled to visit his family’s old village in Afghanistan, even though it had fallen into Taliban control in recent years and Kochai was warned that entering the town was “risky.”

Marie Myung-Ok Lee (*The Evening Hero*) defied her university’s concerns and traveled to North Korea as part of an educational program, flouting the autocratic government opposition to such visits by people of Korean heritage. Lee had hoped to find

glimpses of the country her father remembered from decades past, but that Korea had long been obliterated by war and instead replaced with “a Stalinist masterpiece,” Lee said.

Act V.

“I was painting his portrait, the young Bob Dylan. I put his music on, I wept, and the bitterness, it all washed away.”

Saturday night’s keynote session with trailblazing singer/artist /activist Joan Baez and author/tribal chair/visionary leader Greg Sarris, felt like eavesdropping on a conversation between close friends, which they are.

Baez kicked off the evening by lauding the tribe’s focus on social justice: “Every dime is going to good,” she said. Sarris, who is in his sixteenth elected term as tribal chairman, supplied statistics: the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria has donated \$200 million over the past nine years to local communities, \$80 million to charities supporting social justice and environmental stewardship, and made it possible for all federally recognized tribal members in California to go to U.C. tuition free.

Sarris described listening to Baez’s music as a high school student, a “lost kid on the streets,” and deciding, “I want to do what she’s done, help the world.”

The evening continued with a focus on drawings from Baez’s new book, *Am I Pretty When I Fly?* She was drawing throughout her life, even before she began her singing career. “I was struck by the range of emotions in her drawings and how her response to difficulties and pains from childhood to adolescence to adulthood always prompted in her an emotional response that she translated into political action,” Sarris told me.

The first drawing Baez shared on the screen was of a young girl flying a kite against the wind.

“You were the brown girl in the class, an outsider,” Sarris prompted.

“Yeah,” she said. “I felt marginalized, a brown girl in a white school. I created my own little world. I started writing upside down, drawing upside down, or with my left hand. Lots of pictures in the book are about flying, levitating.”

She spoke of her legendary singing career, and her political work. “I’m happiest when I can combine singing and activism,” she said.

These are the worst times she’s lived in, Baez said. “The hardest part is nature, losing seventy percent of wildlife. It’s important not to take away from the victories. Those lunch counters, that speech. Maybe we can do it again.”

They talked about Baez’s new bio-documentary film, “Joan Baez: I Am a Noise,” which launched at the Berlin Film Festival. (Sarris is an executive producer.) It was supposed to be about her final tour, Baez said. “I gave the director the key to my storage unit. All my letters were there, the narratives of the experiences of these years. There was some traumatic stuff. It’s a little rough around the edges. But I wanted to leave a legacy. I’ve got nothing to lose, now. It’s been a wonderful life.”

“What are you working on now?” Sarris asked.

“Poetry. Paintings. The Mischief Makers. I have forty now.”

Subjects for these portraits of social justice icons include Martin Luther King, Jr., Greta Thunberg, Patti Smith, Bob Dylan. “I was painting his portrait, the young Bob Dylan. I put his music on, I

wept, and the bitterness, it all washed away.”

It was time for questions. “Would you sing? Four bars of anything?”

Baez opened her mouth and began, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around...”

The crowd burst into applause.

Act VI.

“We are living in surreal times”

Sunday afternoon, authors of “books where weird things happen, books that push the boundaries of imagination,” as moderator Heather Scott Partington, National Book Critics Circle president, put it, shared a conversation that was both playful and profound.

Katie Hafner described the inspiration for *The Boys*, her first novel after forty years as a journalist and six nonfiction books. “I was on a bike ride in Scandinavia, and heard a bizarre story about something that happened on a previous trip. My daughter turned to me and said, ‘Mom, that’s a novel.’ My agent said, ‘Go for it!’” Hafner said. “It was wonderful to have an agent who didn’t tell me to stay in my lane.”

Peter Hoey, a longtime illustrator for newspapers including the New York Times, creates graphic novels with his sister Marie. Their long-form comics like *The Bend of Luck* are written as prose first, Hoey explained. “Then ninety percent of the words disappear.” Hoey said his trick for letting readers into his fantastic world is to use a deadpan voice; extreme things happen, but it seems plausible.

Mark Ciabattari's [stories](#) begin with a spark, he said, often from observation. (Full disclosure: he's my husband.) Hafner compared Ciabattari's work to the German author Reinhard Lettau, and Kafka. She mentioned studying Kafka's diaries while in college, noting the difference between pure observation, observation-turned-invention, and pure invention. There was talk of "consensus reality" and "availability bias." Hoey quoted Kafka: "The meaning of life is that it stops."

"We are living in surreal times," Partington concluded.

Meanwhile at the outdoor fair, as sun warmed the outdoor "Word Power" stage, Sarris ([Becoming Story](#)) hosted a reading of essays by eight young Native youth on how stressful it is to be a young person today, living in a world that is unpredictable and unsafe. All took part in workshops sponsored by the Graton Writing Project, now in its sixth year of collaborating with the festival. A few readers were brought to tears as they spoke of climate change, the violence against Native women, and teachers and administrators molesting kids. Some expressed a deep fear about the world, from the planetary to the personal.

Parents and grandparents in the audience listened quietly to the wisdom coming from this new generation. As tribal leader, Sarris congratulated the young writers: "They will be the ones leading not only the tribe but the world," he said.

Apocalypse, climate change, survival and hope were themes throughout the weekend, concluding Sunday afternoon with a poetry reading by CJ Evans (*Lives*), John Freeman (*Wind, Trees, and Water*), Tess Taylor (*Rift Zone*), and Anthony Cody, who writes in his new collection, *The Rendering*, "I confuse today near the

Fresno Rescue Mission with 1939” and “the annihilation of anything is exhausting.”

Activists W. Kamau Bell and Kate Schatz wrapped up the fest Sunday evening with a lively, hilarious, and profound exploration of the content of *Do the Work!*, their interactive anti-racist activity book. This closing keynote was a final reminder that Berkeley’s fest, in keeping with its location, centers on social justice, a diversity of voices—plus emerging voices as well as literary icons—and emphasizes the power of words to describe our troubles and bring us hope.

Finale.

“After ten years of climbing a steep mountain, we made it!”

Sunday night, on a rooftop overlooking the bay and its bridges, Cheryl Parsons reflected on her decade of building the Bay Area Book Festival.

“From the beginning, I wanted to create a large festival that spanned the spectrum of local to international—because these days, aren’t we all so entwined? And don’t we need, more than ever, to understand each other across differences?”

She added, “One of my favorite parts of the festival has been engaging with the international literary scene.,” she said. “Bringing in international authors has been a priority of mine from the beginning. A major highlight for me was being invited to participate, twice, to represent the U.S. in Literature Live Around the World, a global virtual event that was a pandemic-time brainstorm of Norway’s LitFest Bergen. It brought together twelve major festivals or literary programs around the world, from Jamaica to Edinburgh, Nigeria to New Zealand, Paris to India,

each with an hour of live programming. I anchored the U.S. segment. At the end of the twelve-hour tour, I literally cried. Literature really is alive around the world.”

This ninth year was “a great way to go out as Executive Director,” she said. “Anyone who has founded an organization, especially an organization with such scale and complexity, knows what a heavy lift it can be. With the success of this year’s fest, it felt like after ten years of climbing a steep mountain, I had *made* it, and it wasn’t me alone. Along the way I amassed a great team that can take it further. Of course, I want to continue to be a part of it, but no longer as chief Sherpa. I finally get to just enjoy the view.”

