




Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books founder: 'We think what we got this year is better'



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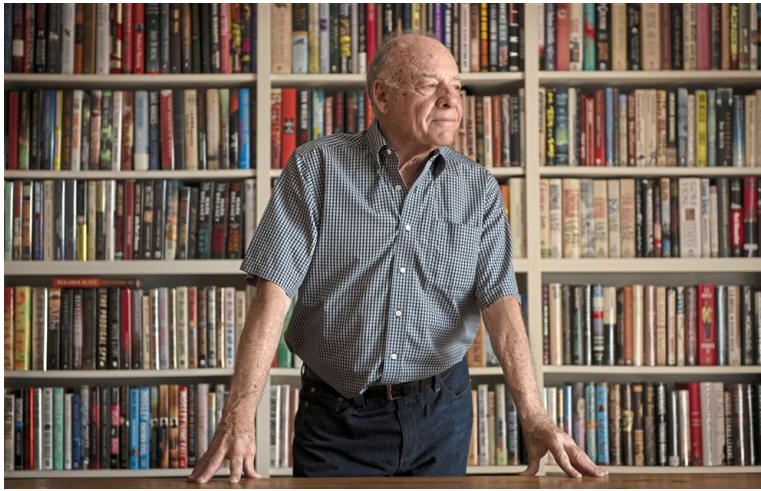
Last year, more than 2,000 literature lovers flocked to East Liberty for the inaugural Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books, a free celebration of the written word featuring industry exhibitors, children's activities and a chance to hear from a variety of notable authors and poets.

"For the first one, given the challenges, I think it went very well," Marshall Cohen, the festival's founder and chairman, told the Post-Gazette. "At the same time, we learned a lot. We think what we got this year is better."

Pittsburghers can be the judge of that next weekend when the second-annual Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books takes over the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in East Liberty. This year's festivities will run May 13 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and include another diverse group of vendors, specialty programming for both children and adults, and more than 70 authors and poets — including a few folks with direct Pittsburgh ties.

Anyone interested in checking out individual writers' talks can register for them via pittsburghbookfestival.org. Mr. Cohen said there were more than 800 registrants and counting for 2023 book festival events as of April 24. He expects several hundred attendees for presentations from 2023 keynote authors Jeanette Walls ("The Glass Castle," "Hang the Moon") and Ross Gay ("The Book of Delights," "Inciting Joy").

In an interview with the Post-Gazette last week, Mr. Gay made this promise to festival patrons regarding his reading: "We'll have fun."



Marshall Cohen, founder and chairman of the Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books, in the library of his Shadyside home on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2019.
(Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette)

Mr. Cohen, 78, is a Shadyside native and Peabody High School Graduate who credits his lifelong passion for reading to the librarian at Liberty Elementary School who gave him a book about exploring caves at an impressionable age.

“I never became a spelunker, but I became a reader,” he said. “You put a book in a child’s hand, like someone put a book in my hand, and they become a reader. That’s not a one-day thing. You’ve done something that’ll help them for life.”

He moved west to attend the University of California, Los Angeles and ended up spending nine years in The Golden State serving as a lobbyist tasked with overseeing government affairs operations for international corporations. His work in the political realm took him to Maine, New Mexico and Washington, D.C., before his retirement in 2015. Three years later, he and his wife relocated back to Mr. Cohen’s childhood stomping grounds in Shadyside, which is where they currently reside.

It didn’t take long for Mr. Cohen to realize that something was missing from Pittsburgh’s rich lineup of yearly arts-related events: “a community-based, free, significant book festival,” as he put it.

“If Pittsburgh can have a [pickle festival](#), surely it can have a book festival,” Mr. Cohen quipped.



Exhibitors in Bakery Square interact with attendees at the 2022 Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books.

(Renee Rosensteel/Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books)

To get his idea for a book festival off the ground, Mr. Cohen had to “educate Pittsburgh in a sense” about what he was proposing. He started the process in 2019 by presenting the notion to Pittsburgh City Council, which drafted him an official letter of support. After a series of “fits and starts” that included several COVID-induced delays, the first Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books went off [with nary a hitch](#) last May.

“It’s difficult to be sort of against the idea of a book festival,” Mr. Cohen said. “Now that hopefully more people understand and see what we’re trying to do, they can get there.”

Unlike last year’s event that was spread out all around East Liberty, the 2023 book festival will be concentrated at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Mr. Cohen said events will be held all day long at eight venues on campus and to also look out for a poetry tent, an outdoor area dedicated to keeping kids engaged, food trucks, and presences from local literary entities like the University of Pittsburgh Library System, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and Duolingo.

The first book festival was headlined by stage and screen star [Billy Porter coming home](#) to read a few excerpts from his memoir, “Unprotected.” There’s no one with quite that much star power among this year’s [list of participating writers](#), but Mr. Cohen said he’s excited to have literary luminaries like Rinker Buck (“Life on the Mississippi”), Russell Shorto (“Smalltime”), Leon Ford (“An Unspeakable Hope”) and Joseph Sassoon (“The Sassoons”) gracing his festival.

Mr. Cohen also highlighted a sports-centric panel with The Athletic’s Josh Yohe and authors Jim Wexell and Tom O’Lenic; two Heinz History Center-run talks about Kennywood’s history and the Heinz family; a joint discussion with Pittsburgh-based authors Kathleen George and Stewart O’Nan; a “Sleeping Beauty” story time presented by Pittsburgh Ballet Theater; and a reading of Elizabeth Pagel-Hogan’s book “[Animal Allies](#)” featuring live animals from the Pittsburgh Zoo.



Authors Louise Lippincott, left, and Maxwell King sign copies of their book "American Workman: The Life and Art of John Kane" at East Liberty's Kelly Strayhorn Theater during the 2022 Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books.

(Renee Rosensteel/Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books)

This will be Mr. Gay's first time at Pittsburgh's book festival. He participates in events like this quite often, and he appreciates how they generally tend to attract "a more mixed draw" in terms of audience makeup.

"Often, people who go to poetry readings are other poets," he said. "In these book festivals, there can be journalists, poets, people writing about history and all kinds of genres represented. The audiences can be more unpredictable in a way, and I like that."

Mr. Gay has a few direct connections to this region. He has family in Youngstown, Ohio, lived here in 2005 during his semester teaching at Pitt and [has partnered with](#) the University of Pittsburgh Press on three of his poetry books. There was also his close relationship with late poet Gerald Stern, who Mr. Gay considers to have been "one of Pittsburgh's great poets and essayists."

"When I'm in Pittsburgh, I'm seeing it through one of my beloved teachers' eyes," he said. "It's so neat to cruise around this city being informed by people's work and imaginings that I just love."

Taking in the Steel City from a literary angle is exactly how Mr. Cohen hopes people visiting the 2023 Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books enjoy its sophomore outing. He thinks getting yinzers excited about books is especially important during a time when attempts at banning books are [occurring with alarming frequency](#) nationwide.


"We find ourselves in an era of attack on literature," Mr. Cohen said. "I think something like this, trying to expose all kinds of people to the importance of stories, I think is a good thing. It's always been a good thing, but especially in this climate."

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