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Readers All Right in the Rain, Book Festival Is Huge Success

By HOLLY NADLER

It's official: Kindle and e-books may flourish, but real books with pages you can turn are here to stay. Just as television thrived without disposing of movies, books and book lovers will never go away. Last Sunday's Martha's Vineyard Book Festival proved it.

It was a day out of a Charlotte Brontë novel: A sharp, rain-spitting wind shook the white tents that had been set up in the field between the Chilmark library and the community center. At times a gale thwacked the hemlines of the tents, jolting people upright in their folding wooden seats. The central tent housing tables with stacks of the 24 authors' books eventually was dismantled and the inventory, courtesy of Edgartown Books, moved indoors to the community center.



photo by Peter Simon

These words don't run, in print and loving it.

The night previous, a number of people assuredly went to bed with a plan to attend this event, only to wake up to last Sunday's gothic wind and rain. They may have turned over and groaned, "Honey, let's stay home and read *The New York Times*." Undoubtedly many people made that decision, but all the same the festival lured a great many people to its tents on the lawn. They wore rain jackets and fleecy sweaters, boots and caps and carried umbrellas. But they came in droves.

Each of the three tents, Stonewall, Squibnocket and Menemsha, offered different authors speaking for 45 minutes at a stretch, and the scheduling was such that each attendee had to make crucial decisions: Does one drop in at 12:30 to hear Geraldine Brooks (*Caleb's Crossing*), Alison Shaw (*Photographing Martha's Vineyard*) or settle in for Chris Adrian (*The Great Night*, based on a modern San Francisco version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)? Decisions, decisions. One thing was for sure: Even a person with supernatural powers of bilocating to a couple of venues simultaneously would have been unable to enjoy the talks of all 24 authors. All the same, browsing the tables of books brought out an impulse to cry out, "One of each, please," whether or not one's bank account could permit so expansive a gesture.

This reporter plumped for a two-for-one experience in the earliest time-slot, 11 a.m. in the Stonewall tent: Culinary historians Jessica Harris (*High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey From Africa to America*) and Joan Nathan (*Quiches, Kugels and Couscous: My Search for Jewish Cooking in France*), their time moderated by fellow foodie, Carol McManus, owner of Espresso Love and author of her own cookbook. “We all three love food and family,” she explained.

Ms. Harris’s explorations and Ms. Nathan’s were surprisingly similar. Both spoke and wrote of diaspora: West Africans to America (as set apart from other extensive dispersions to Central and South America) and Jews to France (as distinct from Jews settling and re-settling the world over). Their respective books traced the influence of these newcomers’ cuisine and culture on the societies into which they were inducted. Both authors shared fluency in French: Ms. Harris studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and in Nancy in Lorraine, and received her doctorate in speakers of French in Senegal, a specialty that came in handy when an audience member soon to visit Senegal asked for dining tips. Ms. Harris’s response: “There’s a special chicken dish marinated overnight in lemon juice and sliced onions, then grilled, and finally stewed with the marinade. They also have a red rice dish called Cheb which later translated Stateside to a number of specialties, among them New Orleans’s jambalaya.”

Ms. Nathan’s most intriguing discovery was how undiscoverable Jews in France turned out to be. She traveled to small towns in Provence to learn “Pas de Juives ici,” (no Jews here) only to learn that, for instance, a woman denying the existence of Jews and in particular Jewish cooks was a chef herself named Madame Rosenfeld. Ms. Nathan revealed that assuredly the war was still on the minds of French Jews who recalled massive deportations to concentration camps, making them reluctant to disclose their ethnicity.

For the 11:45 option, this reporter followed her editor’s advice and scurried to the Menemsha tent to hear Edith Pearlman read from her new collection of short stories, *Binocular Vision*. Ms. Pearlman, who lives in Brookline, has long enjoyed a passionate following of readers that enlarges all the time. Ann Patchett writes in the introduction to the collection, “Edith Pearlman has been a secret much too long.”

The secret is out: the Brookline author has just been selected to receive the PEN/Malamud Award honoring “excellence in the art of the short story.”

When Ms. Pearlman was asked why she writes only short stories, she replied that while she has great respect for, and loves reading novels, “I have a temperament that shies away from big-scale projects.”

She shared with her audience that she writes with an intense focus on unambitious members of society, and is often drawn to characters who live alone, are perhaps celibate, and of couples involved in interracial or gay and lesbian relationships. “Lately I’ve even been writing about interspecies relationships,” she said with a chuckle.

Of her 21 stories, 14 of them new, she chose to read the titular story, *Binocular Vision*, about a 10-year-old girl who borrows her father’s binoculars and randomly studies the comings and goings of Mr. and Mrs. Simons’ apartment across the courtyard. What



Edith Pearlman signs copies of binocular vision.

little the Simons reveal about their relationship is diffused through the limited experience of the young girl. The drama climaxes in an event that made the audience gasp in unison. Some moments of reflective silence followed the last line.

Ms.



Standing room only at the Chilmark Community Center.

Pearlman was asked how she disciplines herself to write: A surefire question for professional writers, inevitably put forth by an aspiring writer eager to start and possibly foundering as he or she waits for the muse to strike. Ms. Pearlman

answered that, first of all, she keeps all ideas that strike her fancy on index cards in a recipe box. Then daily, at the same time in the morning, she sits down with a cup of coffee and writes for four hours, no exceptions, no distractions. She uses a typewriter to force herself to revise every word. She also puts up a screen to signal to her husband that she's at work in her "office."

She started out writing love stories with happily-ever-after endings. Then later she moved to marriages which led her down more nuanced, less optimistic roads, then proceeded to multicultural marriage and gay and lesbian relationships. Her favorite authors of short stories are Sylvia Townsend Warner, Colette and John Updike. She also makes it a point to reread two of Dickens's novels a year.

Back to the sales tent for a copy of Binocular Vision.

Meanwhile the gale-force winds kept up for the rest of the event which ended at 5 o'clock. Linda Fairstein, former Manhattan Assistant D.A. of the sex crimes division, on hand to discuss her 13th Alexandra Cooper mystery, *Silent Mercy*, fielded an equal number of questions about the alleged rape of a New York maid by French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn. She provided intriguing insights, although it was also clear that she was legally bound not to disclose more sensitive aspects of the case.

Finally, before the wind blew this reporter back to Oz, I was able to interview Chatham author and Harvard-trained neuroscientist Lisa Genova about her bestselling book, *Left Neglected*, about a woman injured in a car accident; the brain trauma leaves her unable to perceive anything on the left side, forcing a long, potentially impossible

recovery. She explains it as a metaphor for paying attention to what matters.

Back to the tent for a copy of Left Neglected.

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