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Get ready for the fully virtual Southwest Florida Reading Festival this March

Fort Myers, FL, Feb. 22, 2021 –The 22nd annual Southwest Florida Reading Festival has arrived, and with it comes a fully virtual celebration of the power of reading. The festival showcases nearly 30 best-selling authors in addition to crafts, contests and prizes all month long this March.

Live events start March 1, but attendees can visit the festival website now to view the author lineup, plan their schedule and take a look at the virtual marketplace booths. Visit www.eventhub.shop/readfest today for early access to the online festival.

Nightly author presentations are offered weekdays March 1 through March 12 on the event platform. Youth and teen authors stream online at 6 p.m. and adult authors follow at 7 p.m. These presentations are also being broadcast simultaneously on LeeTV (Comcast Cable channel 97 and CenturyLink's Prism TV Channel 88 in Lee County).

The award-winning authors scheduled to present as part of the festival include adult authors Jennifer Chiaverini, Gregg Hurwitz, Jayne Ann Krentz and Kyle Mills, as well as youth and teen authors J.C. Cervantes, Greg Pizzoli, Julie Berry and Ryan La Sala. The complete list of authors can be found listed on the event website, along with the presentation schedule.

"The Lee County Library System is proud to put together such an outstanding event every year," Library Director Mindi Simon said. "The Southwest Florida Reading Festival has a stellar reputation for bringing the best literary talent to our community, and this year is no exception."

Attendees won't want to miss the Live Meet & Greet events immediately following the author interviews for their chance to engage with the best-selling lineup via video and text chat. Additional opportunities to chat with authors will be offered during the Saturday Live Booth Sessions on March 6 and 13. Attendees should check each author's virtual booth to see when they are available to chat. After the author presentations conclude on March 13, festival attendees will be able to watch the recorded content on-demand in the video archive booth through March 31.

This year's festival introduces a virtual marketplace featuring local authors and writing organizations. Vendors will be available to meet festival attendees during the scheduled Live Booth Sessions the first two Saturdays, from 1 to 3 p.m. March 6 and 13. Attendees will be able to chat live within in each participating author's booth.

Other components of the festival were designed to reflect the activities typically found in the annual in-person event. Participants of all ages can enjoy the grab-and-go crafts, online reading program, festival bingo and S.T.E.A.M. contests featuring LEGO, art and creativity challenges. Even autographed books will be provided to attendees in the form of signed book plates that can be adhered to the inside of books. A limited supply of signed book plates is available at no charge and requests clearly indicating the author preference, along with a physical mailing address, should be made by email to readingfestival@leegov.com.

As in previous years, the festival will provide each participating child and teen with a free, new book. This year, the free books will be distributed inside of the age-appropriate grab-and-go craft kits, which can be requested from any of the 13 Lee County Library System branches through curbside pickup or at the reference desks from Feb. 22 through March 13, while supplies last. Crafts and free books are specifically tailored for each age group: babies, pre-k, kids (grades k-2), kids (grades 3-5), middle and high school teens, and adults.

Festival participants are encouraged to sign up for the online reading and activity challenge or to complete the paper-based reading bingo for chances to win prizes and book baskets with festival author book titles. The deadline to log reading and activities is March 31. Free reader accounts can be created using the READSquared app or by visiting the website www.readfest.org.

S.T.E.A.M. contests for all ages featuring LEGO building, art, and creativity challenges will take place online, with top vote-earning entries winning fabulous prizes like LEGO sets, art supplies and more! Visit www.readfest.org to enter the contests between Feb. 22 through March 14, and vote for your favorites from March 15 through March 31.

“The Southwest Florida Reading Festival has really tried to provide something for everyone this year,” Festival Coordinator Melissa Baker said. “As festival planning goes, this was a first for us to go all virtual, and with so many of the online features of the event being self-paced we hope that participants can enjoy the content whenever and wherever it is convenient for them.”

The Southwest Florida Reading Festival is free and community-supported through donations, sponsorships and grants. To help ensure the continuation of this free community event, please visit www.ReadFest.org to make a secure online donation. More information is available at www.ReadFest.org or by calling 239-533-4832.

ABOUT THE SOUTHWEST FLORIDA READING FESTIVAL

The Southwest Florida Reading Festival is a family-friendly event that celebrates books and the written word. The Festival began in 1999 with the goals of emphasizing the importance of reading and bringing the finest literary talent to Southwest Florida. Now in its 22nd year, this free festival has grown in popularity and attracts thousands of book-loving attendees annually. Some of the past authors include Sue Monk Kidd, Susan Mallery, R.L. Stine, Janet Evanovich, Nelson DeMille, Jeff Kinney and hundreds more.

The Reading Festival’s objectives are to promote reading and literacy, increase awareness of the library’s programs and resources and foster partnerships between the Lee County Library System and the community. It is also an opportunity to share with the community the available resources and services at their local Lee County library branches. The Reading Festival aims to build a literate community by encouraging children to develop an interest in reading independently, which fosters an increase in vocabulary and improved writing skills. For more information, visit www.ReadFest.org.

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Author list and short biographies follow; photos available upon request.

Adult Authors

Jennifer Chiaverini is the award-winning, New York Times bestselling author of acclaimed historical novels, including “Resistance Women,” “Mrs. Lincoln’s Dressmaker” and the beloved “Elm Creek Quilts” series. A graduate of the University of Notre Dame and the University of Chicago, she lives with her husband and two sons in Madison, Wisconsin. Her latest release is “Mrs. Lincoln’s Sisters.” Visit www.jenniferchiaverini.com

Julie Clark grew up reading books on the beach while everyone else surfed. After attending college at University of the Pacific, she returned home to Santa Monica to teach. She now lives there with her two young sons and a golden doodle with poor impulse control. Her debut novel, “The Ones We Choose,” was published in 2018, and has been optioned for television by Lionsgate. Visit www.julieclarkbooks.org.

Chanel Cleeton is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick, “Next Year in Havana” and “When We Left Cuba.” Originally from Florida, she grew up on stories of her family’s exodus from Cuba following the Cuban Revolution. She has a bachelor’s degree in International Relations, a master’s degree in Global Politics and received her Juris Doctor from the University of South Carolina School of Law. Visit www.chanelcleeton.com.

Ben Coes is the New York Times bestselling author of international espionage thrillers, including “Bloody Sunday,” “Trap the Devil,” “Eye for an Eye,” “Independence Day,” and “First Strike.” Before writing his first novel, “Power Down,” he worked at the White House under two presidents and was a Fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. He lives with his wife and four children in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Visit www.benco.es.com.

Trish Doller has written several young adult novels, including the critically acclaimed “Something Like Normal” as well as “Float Plan,” her women’s fiction debut releasing in March. A former journalist and radio personality, she lives in Florida with an opinionated herding dog and an ex-pirate. Visit www.trishdoller.com

Rachel Hauck is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling and award-winning author living in sunny central Florida with her husband, a pastor. Her latest release is “To Love a Prince.” Visit www.rachelhauck.com.

Gregg Hurwitz is the New York Times #1 internationally bestselling author of 22 thrillers including the “ORPHAN X” series. His novels have won numerous literary awards and have been published in 32 languages. He has written screenplays and television scripts for many of the major studios and networks, comics for DC and Marvel and political and culture pieces for The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian and others. Visit www.gregghurwitz.net.

Eloisa James is a USA Today and New York Times bestselling author and professor of English literature. She lives with her family in New York, but can sometimes be found in Paris or Italy. She is the mother of two and, in a particularly delicious irony for a romance writer, is married to a genuine Italian knight. Her latest release is “My Last Duchess.” Visit www.eloisajames.com.

Nancy Johnson worked for more than a decade as an Emmy-nominated, award-winning television journalist at network affiliates in West Palm Beach and Tampa Bay. She lives in downtown Chicago now and manages brand communications for a large nonprofit. “The Kindest Lie,” a February 2021 release, is her first novel. Visit www.nancyjohnson.net.

Julie Klassen has written 16 historical novels which have sold over a million copies. She is a three-time recipient of the Christy Award and has also won the Minnesota Book Award and the Midwest Book Award. Her latest is the December 2020 release, “A Castaway in Cornwall.” Visit www.julieklassen.com.

Jayne Ann Krentz, under various pen names, is the author of more than 50 New York Times bestsellers. With more than 40 million novels sold, she is one of the most commercially successful authors writing today. She lives in Seattle. Visit www.jayneannkrentz.com.

Kyle Mills is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of 19 political thrillers, including “Red War” for Vince Flynn and “The Patriot Attack” for Robert Ludlum. He initially found inspiration from his father, the former director of INTERPOL, and still draws on his contacts in the intelligence community to give his books such realism. Avid outdoor athlete, he and his wife have lived in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for over 20 years. Visit www.kylemills.com.

Alisha Rai pens award-winning contemporary romances and her novels have been named Best Books of the Year by the Washington Post, NPR, Amazon, Entertainment Weekly, Kirkus and Cosmopolitan Magazine. When she’s not writing, Alisha is traveling or tweeting. Visit www.alisharai.com.

Kim Vogel Sawyer told her teacher back in 1966 that someday people would check out her book in libraries. Her little-girl dream came true in 2006 with “Waiting for Summer’s Return” and now more than 50 of her titles grace library shelves. Kim lives in small-town Kansas, the setting for many of her novels. Visit www.kimvogelsawyer.com.

Cat Sebastian lives in a swampy part of the South with her husband, three kids and two dogs. Before her kids were born, she practiced law and taught high school and college writing. When she isn’t reading or writing, she’s doing crossword puzzles, bird watching and wondering where she put her coffee cup. Visit www.catsebastian.com.

Kids Authors

J.C. Cervantes is the New York Times bestselling author of books for children and young adults. Her books have appeared on national lists, including the American Booksellers Association New Voices, Barnes and Noble’s Best Young Reader Books and Favorite MG Science Fiction/Fantasy Top Ten Books, as well as Amazon’s Best Books of the Month. She has earned multiple awards and recognitions, including the New Mexico Book Award and the Zia Book Award. Her latest release is “The Shadow Crosser,” the final book in “The Storm Runner” trilogy. Visit www.jennifercervantes.com.

Lesia Cline-Ransome is the award-winning author of books for young readers including “Not Playing by the Rules: 21 Female Athletes Who Changed Sports,” “Young Pele: Soccer’s First Star,” and “Before She Was Harriet.” Her numerous honors include the Jane Addams Honor Award, the Christopher Award, Kirkus Best Book of the Year and three NAACP Image Award nominations. Her debut middle grade novel “Finding Langston” received the Coretta Scott King Author Honor and the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Visit www.lesaclineransome.com.

Anika Aldamuy Denise is the author of ten picture books including the Pura Belpré author honor-winning “Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré” and “A Girl Named Rosita: The Story of Rita Moreno: Actor, Singer, Dancer, Trailblazer!” Raised in Queens, New York, she now lives with her husband and three daughters in Rhode Island. Visit www.anikadenise.com.

John Patrick Green is the author of “Hippopotamister,” “Kitten Construction Company” and the New York Times bestselling “InvestiGators” series. He is also the artist and co-creator of the “Teen Boat!” graphic novels with writer Dave Roman. Visit www.investigatorsbooks.com.

Terri Libenson is the New York Times bestselling author of the children’s books “Becoming Brianna,” “Just Jaime” and the popular middle grade series, “Emmie & Friends.” She is the award-winning cartoonist of the syndicated daily comic strip “The Pajama Diaries” which ran in hundreds of newspapers internationally from 2006 - 2020. Born and raised in Kingston, PA, Terri lives with her husband and two daughters in Cleveland, OH. Visit www.terrilibenson.com.

Greg Pizzoli is the creator of the “Baloney and Friends” graphic novel series, as well as the author and illustrator of the award-winning picture books “The Watermelon Seed,” “Good Night Owl” and “The Book Hog.” He is the illustrator of the “Jack” series by Mac Barnett, “Crunch the Shy Dinosaur” by Cirocco Dunlap and two books by Margaret Wise Brown. Visit www.gregpizzoli.com.

James Ransome is an award-winning illustrator of over 60 books. He received the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustrations for his book, “The Creation” and several Coretta Scott Honors for many of his other books. James is the recipient of The Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance award, the NAACP Image Award for Illustration and is an ALA Notable Book recipient. He lives in Rhinebeck, New York with his wife Lesa Cline-Ransome, a writer of children’s books. Visit www.jamesransome.com.

Christina Soontornvat is the author of the fantasy middle grade series, “The Changelings” and the early chapter book series “Diary of an Ice Princess.” Her most recent books include the middle grade fantasy “A Wish in the Dark” and “All Thirteen,” a nonfiction account of the Thai Cave Rescue. Christina holds a B.S. in mechanical engineering and a master’s degree in science education. She spent a decade working in the science museum field, where she designed programs and exhibits to get kids excited about science. Visit www.soontornvat.com.

Melissa Stewart has written more than 180 science books for children, including the ALA Notable “Feathers: Not Just for Flying,” illustrated by Sarah S. Brannen; the SCBWI Golden Kite Honor title “Pipsqueaks, Slowpokes and Stinkers: Celebrating Animal Underdogs,” illustrated by Stephanie Laberis and “Can an Aardvark Bark?,” illustrated by Caldecott Honoree Steve Jenkins. Visit www.melissa-stewart.com.

Teen Authors

Julie Berry wrote the Walden & Golden Kite Award winner “Lovely War,” the Printz Honor & LA Times Book Prize shortlisted “The Passion of Dolssa,” the Carnegie & Edgar shortlisted “All the Truth That’s in Me,” “The Scandalous Sisterhood of Prickwillow Place,” and others. She holds degrees from Rensselaer and Vermont College. Visit www.julieberrybooks.com.

Emily Arsenault is the author of several adult and young adult suspense novels including “The Leaf Reader,” “All the Pretty Things,” “The Last Thing I Told You,” “What Strange Creatures” and “When All the Girls Are Sleeping,” a July 2021 release. She lives in Shelburne Falls, MA. Visit www.emilyarsenault.com.

Ashley Elston is the author of several novels including “This Is Our Story” and “The Rules for Disappearing,” a finalist in the Best Young Adult Novel category of the International Thriller Awards. She graduated with a Liberal Arts degree from Louisiana State University in Shreveport. Ashley worked for many years as a wedding photographer before turning her hand to writing. She lives in Louisiana with her husband and three sons. Visit www.ashleyelston.com.

Ryan La Sala grew up in Connecticut, but only physically. Mentally, he spent most of his childhood in the worlds of Sailor Moon and Xena: Warrior Princess, which perhaps explains all the twirling. He studied Anthropology and Neuroscience at Northeastern University before becoming a project manager specialized in digital tools. He technically lives in New York

City, but has actually transcended material reality and only takes up a human shell for special occasions, like brunch and to watch anime (which is banned on the astral plane). He is the author of "Reverie" and "Be Dazzled." Visit www.ryanlasala.com.