

A more novel approach

Texas Book Festival's focus on fiction reflects Austin's writing community.

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This weekend, after some grumbles among local authors that the annual Texas Book Festival had given fiction short shrift in recent years, the event is offering a profusion of top-notch novelists and short-story writers, including Jonathan Lethem, Margaret Atwood, Colson Whitehead, Luis Alberto Urrea and Jane Smiley.

What's even more striking is that this cavalcade of literary stars seems like a logical extension of what's already happening in Austin the other 51 weeks of the year. Over the past decade, Austin has become a hotbed of literary activity. World-famous authors fly into town to do readings at BookPeople or the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Center or, just outside of town, the Southwestern Writers Collection at Texas State University. Others settle in for a week or a semester at UT's prestigious Michener Center.

Others — and the numbers seem to be growing — have decided to live here permanently.

"Austin has had a literary scene for years," said local writer Owen Egerton. "I just think it has exploded even more so over the last 10 years or so."

Austin has long had more than its fair share of homegrown fiction writers — Dagoberto Gilb, Sarah Bird, Stephen Harrigan and Rolando Hinojosa, to name just a few. What's new is how many writers with national reputations are settling here. One thinks of ZZ Packer, who moved to Austin this year. Or Jim Lewis, who arrived in 2001. Or Elizabeth Crane, who landed here two months ago.

Some of this is simply natural growth; Austin is a much bigger city than it was a decade ago. But speaking to local authors, one hears again and again that it's not just the size, but the nature of the scene that's changing. Solitary authors and small cliques are morphing into a mutually supportive community of writers.

A trio of factors seems to have galvanized these changes: a set of high-profile institutions, many tied to the academic world; "quality of life" attractions; and a literary community that is unusually welcoming to unproven writers.

The result is a scene that reflects the Austin of the 21st century: multiracial and multiethnic; unwilling to settle for regional renown; and willing to be changed by Texas, even as it changes Texas. Harrigan, who has spent decades in Austin, expresses excitement about what's going on. "(Austin) was known as a good place to be if you had to be in Texas," he said. "Now it's known as a great place to be no matter where you're from."

Three institutions

As Harrigan sees it, three local institutions have nourished Austin's literary scene: Texas Monthly, which has always given journalistic assignments to local novelists such as Sarah Bird and Oscar Casares; the Texas Book Festival; and the Michener Center, which was recently named the fourth best master of fine arts program in the country by Poets & Writers magazine. (It should be noted that Harrigan has longstanding ties to all three.)

But the Michener Center is hardly the only academic entity that feeds Austin's literary scene. Texas State's MFA program, in particular, produces many new local writers.

One also shouldn't underestimate the reach of UT's Ransom Center, or the Austin-based Writers' League of Texas or downtown bookstore BookPeople.

"BookPeople is a huge thing," says Margo Rabb, an author who moved to town from New York last year. "I've never been in a city that had a bookstore that felt like such a cultural center."

Low cost, high creativity

Authors move to Austin for many of the same reasons other people do. But Austin's relatively affordable real estate and cultural scene are of particular importance to writers. Money is a chronic problem for authors, so a town where comfortable accommodations can be rented in the three figures has a great appeal.

"In New York we always had to do some sort of dance wherein one of us was working a full-time job and the other one got to cut back to part-time and focus on writing," said Dalia Azim, who is finishing up the manuscript of her first novel. Azim moved here three years ago when her husband got into the Michener Center's screenwriting program. "Here, we're able to start a family and both write for at least half of our daytime hours," Azim said.

The city's lively arts scene also appeals to writers, many of whom cross over to other media. Egerton first made a name for himself in the city's comedy scene. Bill Cotter, whose debut novel, "Fever Chart," is drawing a lot of buzz, was a professional poker player who was inspired to write by the city's slam poetry scene.

"A lot of my friends were making films, some people were writing short stories, some people were making art," writer Amanda Eyre Ward said of arriving here in the late 1990s. "I just felt surrounded by people who were trying to do creative things, and felt it was important to do creative things."

The borders between Austin's cultural scenes have become porous enough that the newest phenomena in town are regular events that mash-up fiction, music and art. Texas State grad Amelia Gray last year launched a monthly series of readings called Five Things that also features musicians and visual artists. In January, recent Chicago transplant Elizabeth Crane will launch the monthly Awesome and Great Reading Show!, which will feature three writers and one musician. Monofonus Press, a small startup publisher, creates handmade packages of writing, art and music by locals.

Supportive network

The sense of fraternity that has long marked Austin's music scene now seems to have infected the literary community, whose members show up in droves for each others' events.

"In my experience, none of us actually love either going to readings or giving readings," said Dominic Smith, a Michener grad who lives in Austin and has published two novels. "The reason you're there is to support someone."

One thing that makes this sociality possible is the lack of hierarchy between published and unpublished writers.

Azim, for instance, was stunned that Ward and Bird offered to read the manuscript of her first novel in its entirety and give comments. And the rewards run in both directions. "All my attractive young friends!" Bird said. "I'm so lucky they let me hang out with them!"

Nowhere does this dynamic of mutual support play out more powerfully than in the young-adult books scene, which is so fertile that one Minnesota-based publisher declared Austin "the new Paris for YA authors." Local YA authors are aggressive about using social media to support each others' work.

When Jessica Lee Anderson and P.J. Hoover scheduled a joint book release party at BookPeople, local YA author Cynthia Leitich Smith, who runs a nationally read Web site about YA fiction, promoted the event months in advance. Anderson and Hoover pushed the event on Facebook, and BookPeople's blog featured an interview with the pair. Hoover and Anderson wound up drawing more than 200 attendees, an extraordinary number for a pair of authors who write for small presses.

There are so many YA authors in town that five of them write for the same publisher, Delacorte Press. To compare notes and swap shop talk, they formed a support group, the Delacorte Dames and Dude.

This month, the group added a member when Delacorte author Bethany Hegedus moved to Austin, specifically because she had heard so much about the YA scene.

"(Cynthia Leitich Smith) does so much with her blog Cynsations publicizing everything that's going on in Austin," Hegedus said.

"I've been looking at the pictures of events for years, and finally decided instead of looking at them on my computer screen I wanted to be in a couple of them."

It's 'Old Austin,' again

In a 1980 essay on the Austin literary scene, Stephen Harrigan wrote that Austin possessed "an almost organic sense of purpose and calm" that worked to the betterment of the local literary scene.

Though the city is bigger than it was then, Harrigan says his characterization holds. "It is still a nurturing place and still, to a certain degree, undiscovered, even though, obviously, people are flocking to Austin," he said.

"It's still not and probably never will be the center of the universe, which is a good thing, I think, for those of us who write."

Austin in 2009 seems distant from the two extremes of literary production: that of the tortured, solitary genius and that of the New York literary scenester, so busy attending cocktail parties he has trouble getting any writing done. Instead, the local scene has grown large enough that a critical mass of creativity has been reached, but not so large that socializing gets in the way of work.

"The literary scene now is what I always imagined the old Austin music scene was like," Bird said. "At this historical moment, I am having my 'old Austin,' and having it right now!"

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Texas Book Festival

This weekend's Texas Book Festival gets under way at 10 a.m. today with readings and discussions from more than 200 authors. Most events are held at the state Capitol; a select few are at the Paramount Theatre, 713 Congress Ave., the Sanctuary, 1201 Lavaca St., and elsewhere. Information: 477-4055; www.texasbookfestival.org.

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