

So Many Books, So Little Time

By Katie Beecher

On a Sunday late in September, my friends and I ventured to the Baltimore Book Festival. At one point, while wandering and shopping, I lost track of my friends. Being alone in a large crowd, in a place you're hardly familiar with, would usually instill panic in someone, myself included. Despite being lost, surrounded by strangers, the environment created was so comforting that instead of anxiety I felt only a sense of tranquility. To me this wasn't a terrifying situation because I was surrounded by the comfort of books. I could peacefully move around and browse the shelves without interruption. I was in my own little world. Though the people around me were strangers, they were also people who understood why books were so magical. The environment created was so comforting that instead of anxiety I felt only a sense of tranquility. It was then that I realized the sense of community a festival like this could bring to so many different people. This realization had been formulating in the back of my mind all day, and it had started almost as soon as I had reached the festival.

I step off the bus, my friends in tow, having just figured out the bus system for the first time. Surprisingly grateful that I didn't get us hopelessly lost, I cheerfully fall into step with my

friends and talk about the books I'm hoping to find. It's a sunny September day, the Baltimore Book Festival has been in full swing for the past two days, and my inner book-lover is anxious to dive between the rows of novels. Despite the bright sun, the air is chilly and I pull my jacket around me as my friends and I make our way down the street. A large, colorful banner welcomes us to the annual Baltimore Book Festival, and spread out before us is the harbor. Various-sized boats are dotted around the water, the principal of them being an old fashioned pirate ship docked right up near the entrance to the festival. All across the right edge of the harbor are bright white tents that creep around the water like an enormous snake. There are hundreds of people, young and old, some looking as if they're on a mission and others browsing in the tents, perhaps hoping to stumble upon a piece of treasure. Two of my friends wish us luck and, as book perusing isn't something that everyone finds interesting, duck into the nearest H&M. As the remainder of us make our way through the throngs of people, we pass by the tents that independent book stores have set up. People outside of them shout, "All books are five dollars! Get three for ten!" By the time we make our way back to the same tents the prices have been marked down with a red sharpie and the crowds have grown. The bibliophiles have congregated

and completely taken over the large location.

The Baltimore Book festival is located in the Inner Harbor, coincidentally situated in the shadow of the rehabilitated Power Plant that now houses a two story Barnes and Noble. To understand what the event is about you only need to visit their website where they advertise it as a festival that ". . . features hundreds of appearances by local, celebrity, and nationally known authors, book signings, more than 100 exhibitors, and booksellers, nonstop readings on multiple stages, cooking demos by top chefs, poetry readings, workshops, panel discussion, storytellers, and hands-on projects for kids, and love music for kids . . ." Despite the title 'Book Festival' this event includes more than just books. It has activities for every literature enthusiast and even food lover to enjoy. Staying true to its name sake, though, this three-day festival allows Baltimore to, as the *Baltimore Sun* puts it, "celebrate the bibliophiles among us, bringing together authors and the magical words they produce with the people who love (and benefit from) them." Walking around and exploring the tents, brushing shoulders with fellow book lovers, listening to authors talk passionately about their work, I can't help but to find this statement true. I was living it.

I immediately see what the *Baltimore Sun* meant by celebrating the bibliophiles among us, because what I



am really in awe of as I wander around the festival is the *amount* of books. There are shelves of books everywhere, with some catering to brand new and others to the old and worn. Every genre can be found; sometimes there's a mixture in one tent, and at other times a specific genre has established its territory. We enter a tent and without a word disperse to find something that will catch our eye, subconsciously knowing that we will find each other later. The scent of pages envelops me as I trail my fingers across the titles, my eyes dancing from cover to cover. The back of the tent goes right up to the water, and I must be careful not to fall in as I twist my way around the shelves. Despite the cacophony of sounds radiating down the street, the tent is utterly silent as the people pick their way through the stacks. The quiet remains unbroken save for the occasional person turning to a friend and showing them the treasure they've found. Despite the silence, and the differences in all of us, there is one clear connection the festival has created: You understand me, you understand this, you understand this love of words.

We have no book festivals in my city, so the only time I have felt this connection is when I walk into a Barnes and Noble or the tiny bookstore near my house. Here, however, I am surrounded with people I can identify with, if only in this small way. I realize how many people love books as much as I do; even if they don't read the same genres, there is still the overwhelming sense of unity between us bibliophiles. The festival gives everyone a chance to go out and be surrounded by peo-

ple who share the same interest in literature, providing them a sense of community.

Books aren't the only agenda on vendors' minds, though. One tent sells tote bags with quotes on them, another sells bookmarks and posters, and two men sell necklaces with tiny book replicas for charms. Food tents are spread out randomly, and one woman eagerly shows off her handmade, leather bound notebooks. The festival has become a place for the people of Baltimore to reveal their creative sides and interact with others whose passions reflect their own. What's more, events are set up so that people can do more than just spend money. Question and Answer panels with authors are facilitated, to allow them to showcase their new works while also interacting with fans and discussing the genres they specialize in. Adults are able to relax with friends around benches or outside of restaurants while their children play giant scrabble or are taught to write their own short stories. Couples, friends, and families, walk languidly around the harbor, enjoying the view and stopping to take their picture in front of the giant blown-up Cat in the Hat display. Though all of us are different, we can find at least one aspect of the festival to enjoy.

As Wolfgang once said, "The world is so if one thinks only of mountains, river, and cities; but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant, is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden." The garden is the community that the Baltimore Book Festival creates. We are surrounded by people who are unlike us in so many ways, yet who think and feel the same way we do about the wonder that is literature.



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