

Michigan's literary legacy celebrated by 'State of the Book'



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Despite the crisp fall air Saturday morning, individuals gathered in the lobby of Rackham Auditorium where journalists, authors and publishers chatted excitedly about their area of expertise, while students integrated themselves into the folds of the conversation. The book fair, a part of the State of the Book symposium, was the beginning to the day-long celebration of literature.

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The event consisted of a series of panels, performances and speakers that included some of Michigan's most notable writers, such as fiction writer Charles Baxter and former U.S. Poet Laureate Philip Levine.

Local booksellers and representatives from literary reviews and journals filled the lobby, selling work from predominantly Michigan authors. And if the writing itself wasn't local, the publishers were based in Michigan.

Bill Cusumano, a buyer for Nicola's Books and representative in the book fair, said it was Nicola's duty to be involved in State of the Book.

"Let's face it. There are only two bookstores left in town," he said. "It's a sad commentary on a town like Ann Arbor ... so, yeah, it's obligatory for us to be involved."

Though Michigan may be home to some of the nation's best writers and non-profit writing organizations, the dismal economy has given Michigan a "bad rep" in the past few years, according to Jeremiah Chamberlin, associate director of the English department's writing program. This overshadows much of the state's achievements in creative writing, Chamberlin said.

Citing Detroit's shrinking population as a major topic of national conversation regarding Michigan, Chamberlain said he aims to remind people of Michigan's storied literary past, and present. To do that, the list of speakers

began earlier in the day with writers just starting out and culminated with masters of the craft.

“You’ve got people at the start of their career to people at the peak of their career,” Chamberlin said.

The youth and collegiate presentation featured performances from the University’s slam poetry team, Detroit’s InsideOut Literary Arts Project and the Neutral Zone’s VOLUME Youth Poetry Project. The participating children read their own works and released 826michigan’s fourth volume of “OMNIBUS,” its annual student-written compilation of work. [826michigan](#), one of seven chapters of Dave Eggers’s non-profit organization 826Valencia, is a center dedicated to the teaching and inspiring of students to become better writers.

Among other events, a panel on the future of literary journalism included four journalists and authors who discussed the direction journalism is headed in and how to seek out opportunities to further journalism.

“I enjoyed hearing about how journalism is changing and about their work,” said LSA Junior Michael Nevitt. “About the different opportunities in the field that these authors have been able to pursue.”

Though the event lasted for its scheduled hour, Nevitt said there was a lot more to discuss.

“There should have been something where prospective journalists and people interested in the field would go to hear information,” he said. “It turned into the writers and the authors talking up their work. It’s relevant, but it took over too much of the time.”

Despite the desire for more, the panel was insightful and garnered a large crowd, with people taking notes and jotting down thoughts, Nevitt said.

The main attraction, the keynote discussion with Baxter and Levine, was more of a conversation in which the two authors discussed their lives and futures.

“I really became a writer in many ways by hearing Charlie Baxter read when I was 15 in high school,” Chamberlin said of the conversation. “I had a transportive experience listening to him read, I thought to myself, ‘Wow, I want to be a writer, and I want to go to school wherever he’s teaching.’”

Despite the packed auditorium, the two managed to execute their conversation well, telling jokes and anecdotes that left the crowd feeling like they’ve witnessed a sincere discussion between friends, Chamberlin said.

Dwayne Hayes, managing editor of the literary journal “Absinthe,” said the State of the Book was as much about celebrating the literature being published as it is about raising awareness. Hayes said that people in Michigan are unaware of the impact Michigan literature has on the rest of the country.

“Writers across the U.S. know what’s going on in Michigan (with writing),” Hayes added. “For me, this was about celebrating the diversity of publishing in this state.”