

# The Boston Globe

Travel

## New England 2012 book festivals

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At the Bangor Book Festival, on “a fast tour around the world,” author Margy Burns Knight and illustrator Anne Sibley O’Brien asked who in the room spoke a second language. Many raised hands. Can you tell us where you learned it and also count to 10, Knight said. In turn, they zipped through the numbers in Latvian, Tamil, Japanese, French, Russian, Arabic, Swahili, German, and more. Some said it was their native tongue; others were fluent after living abroad. Knight and O’Brien were using their children’s book, “Africa Is Not a Country,” to make the point that every nation is unique, but they simultaneously demonstrated cultural diversity in Maine.

That was not all we learned about Bangor.

New England is blossoming with literary festivals. Most events are free, with rare exceptions, and all come with a bonus. Wherever you hail from, you will be surrounded by friendly locals who share your love of books. At panel discussions, book signings, workshops, and performances, your common bond makes it easy to strike up conversations and tap into a community whose tastes may overlap your own.

They are a great source of insider tips on local restaurants, off-the-radar shops, and places not to miss while you are visiting. And since civic-minded organizers like to showcase favorite venues, you will find yourself in a mix of places characteristic of their town.

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In the 19th century, Bangor was a rough-and-tumble city, gateway to the North Woods and the world's most important lumber port. Now, even with a casino downtown, the city is more sedate. The fifth annual book festival last fall held multiple programs in the Bagel Central cafe and the Maine Discovery Museum, the state's largest children's museum. "Where Writing Meets Baseball," a workshop for adults, met in a pub. A lively "Draw-Off" between two competing children's book illustrators packed a lecture hall in the Bangor Public Library, the festival's home base. Located in Bangor's Great Fire of 1911 Historic District, the handsome library has an inviting new wing courtesy of local authors Tabitha and Stephen King.

"The flavor of book festivals absolutely is seasoned by the city where they are held," said author Colin Woodard, whose keynote address was delivered in the Bangor Opera House.

New England's first festival of 2012 starts this week: the Maine Festival of the Book in Portland from March 29-April 1. Like traditional seafaring communities, Portlanders have a long history of helping those in need, so it's only natural that the same is true of the event presented by Maine Reads, the statewide literacy program. As a whole, the city's residents are well educated but "close to 40 percent of Maine's adult population functions at reading Levels 1 or 2, meaning it's hard for many of them to fill out a job application," said Sarah Cecil, executive director of Maine Reads. "It's unusual for a book festival to be part of a literacy nonprofit and that's where funds raised through this one go." Typical of the festival's community outreach, one year a graphic novelist spoke to about 300 underserved eighth-graders across Maine.

For Portland's sixth annual festival, more than 2,000 people are expected on the University of Southern Maine campus. More than 75 authors, illustrators, and performers will present films, dramatic readings, book signings, and talks for all ages, ranging from romantic fantasy novels to a police detective's view of crime scenes. Cecil said often the speakers are friends sharing the stage.



Janet Mendelsohn for the Boston Globe

*At the Bangor Book Festival, author Margy Burns Knight led a lively discussion of multiculturalism. “That friendship lends an intimacy to their conversation that is hard to beat,” she said. “Our goal is that fly-on-the-wall feeling.”*

The campus is close to Portland Harbor and the downtown Arts District’s many excellent restaurants and museums, the West End and Eastern Promenade neighborhoods, and scenic Portland Head Light.

Science writer Hannah Holmes still raves about Vermont’s Brattleboro Literary Festival three years ago, remembering the crowd’s enthusiasm was “stunning.” She gained a real sense of a place that she liked.

“While bookish folks can sometimes be shy, there was an energy that led people to ask questions, make jokes, and participate,” she said. “The street scene was vibrant, too, with music and art and tomfoolery. I had a ball.”

Last fall in Massachusetts, the 19th annual Concord Festival of Authors featured “Food ‘n’ Fiction: A Food Tasting and Book Signing” at nearby Verrill Farm with samples of recipes from the works of best-selling novelists. This festival, unusual in that it is spread over a two-week period in the town where Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott wrote, capitalizes on such historic locations as Walden Pond and The Colonial Inn.

The Boston Book Festival, founded three years ago, already is the region’s largest. Last October, more than 25,000 people heard 100 speakers in landmark venues such as Old South Church, the Boston Public Library, and Trinity Church.

At their heart, festivals offer countless possibilities for connecting, observed Joshua Bodwell, executive director of Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance.

“In this age of e-readers, I don’t think the value - and importance - of book festivals can be stated too strongly,” he said. “Readers have always been and will always be, no matter the delivery device, eager to make a physical connection with the authors of books they admire.

“One of the wonderfully organic values of a book festival is discovery: Perhaps you go with the intention of seeing a novelist you admire, but find they are on a panel with a memoirist who is so

engaging they become your favorite new author. In our age of hyperbolic ad campaigns, book festivals offer this old-fashioned opportunity to truly discover a literary gem you weren't aware of." That was definitely true in Bangor, a city of readers, according to Barbara McDade, director of the Bangor Public Library and cochairwoman of the festival. Residents check out an average 14.5 books per capita from the library annually and still support local booksellers, she said. "When Borders closed it was replaced by Books-a-Million and we still have four independents - not bad for a city of 35,000 people," she said.

Laura Cushing of Hermon, Maine, brought her elderly mother to festival events, as she does every year.

"I love how reading takes me places," Cushing said. "When you hear authors talk about how they came up with a topic, it's a great way to introduce yourself to new ideas and push yourself into new ways of thinking."

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IF YOU GO...

### **2012 Book Festivals in New England**

- March 29-April 1, **Maine Festival of the Book**, Portland

[www.mainereads.org/MaineFestivaloftheBook.asp](http://www.mainereads.org/MaineFestivaloftheBook.asp)

- April 27-28, **Newburyport Literary Festival**, Newburyport

[www.newburyportliteraryfestival.org](http://www.newburyportliteraryfestival.org)

- July 27-29, **Belfast Bound Book Festival**, Belfast, Maine

[www.belfastboundbookfestival.com](http://www.belfastboundbookfestival.com)

- Sept. 28-30, **Salem Literary Festival**, Salem

[www.salemlitfest.com](http://www.salemlitfest.com)

- Sept. 21-23, **Burlington Book Festival**, Burlington, Vt.

[burlingtonbookfestival.com](http://burlingtonbookfestival.com)

- Oct. 19 and 20, **Bangor Book Festival**, Bangor

[www.bangorbookfest.org](http://www.bangorbookfest.org)

- Oct. 27, **Boston Book Festival**

[www.bostonbookfest.org](http://www.bostonbookfest.org)

- Oct. 18-Nov. 4, **Concord Festival of Authors**, Concord

[www.concordfestivalofauthors.com](http://www.concordfestivalofauthors.com)

- Oct. 12-14, **Brattleboro Literary Festival**, Brattleboro

[brattleboroliteraryfestival.org](http://brattleboroliteraryfestival.org)

### **Children's book festivals**

- Oct. 27, **Children's Literature Festival**, Keene, N.H.

[www.keene.edu/clf](http://www.keene.edu/clf)

- Oct. 13, **Rhode Island Festival of Children's Books and Authors**, Providence

[www.lincolnschool.org/page.cfm?p=2427](http://www.lincolnschool.org/page.cfm?p=2427)

- Nov. 10-11, **Connecticut Children's Book Fair**, Storrs

[bookfair.uconn.edu/2011.htm](http://bookfair.uconn.edu/2011.htm)