

# 25-03-14 TheBuzz web

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Tucson Festival of Books, authors, community spirit, University of Arizona, book giveaway, Science City, exhibitors, book signings, children's area, fiction, memoir, Adeeba Nelson, Oshun and Me, Bookstagram, podcast.

## SPEAKERS

Christopher Conover, NPR promo, Adiba Nelson, Holly Bonassi, Abra McAndrew, Nicole Cox

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00:00

Following is an azpm original production.



Christopher Conover 00:09

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover this week Tucson's love letter to literature. The Tucson Festival of Books takes place this weekend. It will bring about 350 presenting authors, several local businesses, and if estimates hold up around 130,000 people, the event is big enough that crews started setting up tents on the University of Arizona mall last week. As setup was going on, we caught up with Abra McAndrew, the festival's Executive Director, no pressure. This is your first year in charge. How's it going?



Abra McAndrew 00:54

Yeah, it's been a really wonderful ride, and I'm so appreciative all the volunteers. Some of them have been involved every year of the Book Festival, so they know the template for the festival back and forth, and they've done a great job of training me and the community spirit behind it is what makes this event so unique, and that's been really fun to be a part of this year.



Christopher Conover 01:13

You know that community spirit I've been involved through a ZPM for years with this been a moderator, stood out at the tent, talk to people, spent probably too much money in some of these tents, of course, because I love to read. But that's what's always struck me. This is such a community event, and it's not a small event. It feels like hundreds of 1000s of people.



A

Abra McAndrew 01:36

Yeah, we're expecting between 130 and 140,000 people each year. So we'll hit that or more this year, depending on the weather, maybe, and so it's a weekend of free fun for the whole family. It's not just about books, although, of course, there's plenty of books for sale and plenty of authors to meet and get your books signed and hear what they have to say about their books and how they came up with their ideas and what it means, you know, for our society right now. But there's also, you know, the hands on activities in the children's area, the book giveaway for teens and for children, the Science City interactive activities. And then all the exhibitors. We have 290 something exhibitors this year with their education and their wares, and, you know, lots of things to check out.

C

Christopher Conover 02:18

So something that's often struck me as someone who reads a lot, there are only so many hours in the weekend that is Book Festival. How are Festival of Books? How do you come up with and you the the organizers come up with, which authors are coming?

A

Abra McAndrew 02:37

Right. Well, we have a committee, actually. So the community spirit, you know, is behind it. The community is deciding what authors to bring, you know that are going to get people excited to come out to the festival, but they have to have a book within the last year or so pretty close to that. So that's the first criteria. Published by one of the publishers at the University of Arizona Campus Store can purchase their books so that we can have them available for the public that weekend so that they can be signed, and they have to just be of interest right to the community, so And of course, they have to be willing to come to Tucson. It's a little bit off the beaten path for a lot of these authors. Many of them haven't been here. This will be their first time. And then some authors have come, you know, every time they have a new book out. So we have new authors. We have authors that you've seen before who have something new to share. So, so that's how it happens.

C

Christopher Conover 03:24

And of course, march in Tucson is not a terrible place to be. The the buffalo Festival of Books would not be taking place at this time of year. So I'm sure you can lure some authors that way also.

A

Abra McAndrew 03:37

Well, this is one of the most popular times to come to town. As you know, those of us who live here know, and you know, we're so happy to welcome people from all over the country this time of year. And you know, grateful for the businesses and hotels and others that support us as well to be all set up to receive these authors and the guests.



Christopher Conover 03:55

**C** Christopher Conover 03:55

This is a huge thing. As you mentioned, close to 200,000 people, potentially, depending on the weather, hopefully it'll be good, whatever. And maybe you have asked yourself this question, whatever possessed you to take over and be the head of this little festival? Yeah?

**A** Abra McAndrew 04:12

Well, you know, I've always been a book lover as well. Christopher and I actually write a blog online on sub stack called the book tender. So that's been my hobby for the last year plus. And I've worked on the University of Arizona campus before I took this job for 19 years. So I love the idea to, you know, continue to stay connected to to one of our biggest partners for the festival is the University of Arizona, and to be involved in the community this way.

**C** Christopher Conover 04:37

So, so I'm really going to put you on the spot on this one, and I hate to do it, but I love the answers we've been getting as we've asked people this question, since you've been an attendee and involved with the festival, who's your favorite author? Maybe they're coming this year, or maybe it was somebody in the past, someone you got to meet and hear, and it was just like, wow, that's the festival. Books, right?

**A** Abra McAndrew 05:01

Goodness. Well, there's so many that I'm excited for for this year. So, you know, I've read about 10 of the books so far, and I have a little stack of others that I want to read. Hopefully some of them I'll get through even before the next weekend. But I did read Jason de Leon's book, soldiers and kings, which won the National Book Award for non fiction. I'm a sucker for an ethnography. And he really went deep, you know, he described it as deep, hanging out with people who work along the entire smuggler trail, you know, moving migrants. So that was a very interesting book, and I'm interested to hear more about it. I hope I'll get to peep into that session. Of course, it's going to be really fun to have Maureen Dowd here talking about her new book. So, I mean, that's just a great thing that we get to do too, is have you know, community members paired up with some of their favorite authors, you know to be the ones asking the questions.

**C** Christopher Conover 05:54

you mention authors that maybe people recognize their names. But one of the things that's always struck me is there are some authors that maybe you've never heard of, or a small number of people have heard of, who come out here and they give amazing talks and force me to spend even more money buying books because I've heard them talk and wow, now I want to go read your book.

**A** Abra McAndrew 06:19

That's one of the most fun things about the festival for me, when you asked him of my favorite

That's one of the most fun things about the festival for me, when you asked two of my favorite authors have been, you know, I don't know if I have like, a specific answer for that, but my favorite thing about the festival is just to kind of wander into a presentation with an author that I've never heard of and discover a new book. So I discovered, let's see, last year I discovered a mystery. Oh, I'm going to remember the name, so you'll have to edit this out. But, and then what was the name of that other one? Anyway, I found two books last year that way that I really enjoyed reading after the festival.

**C** Christopher Conover 06:49

And the other thing is, if we all have those genres we like and those genres we don't like, if you can't find your genre here, I would be surprised, because the authors really cover every genre you could possibly think of.

**A** Abra McAndrew 07:04

Yeah, that's right. And, you know, I really love fiction and I really love memoir, so there's always a lot of selection for me. But there's so many mystery authors coming this year, and we have actually some big romance panels this year too, which is a little bit, you know, exciting for those readers.

**C** Christopher Conover 07:21

All right. Well, we will keep our fingers crossed for good weather and and lots of good reading.

**A** Abra McAndrew 07:28

Yeah, lots of good reading. And we have the free entertainers and everything too from the community. I can't, you know, forget to mention them, because that's, you know, there's just so many fun things that you know to do for free this weekend. And I hope we see a lot of you out there.

**C** Christopher Conover 07:41

That was Abra McAndrew, Executive Director of the Tucson Festival of Books. By the way, she remembered those titles after we hit stop on our recorder. They were end of drum time and the last days of the Midnight Ramblers. Among the events hundreds of authors, is a name that many azpm listeners will recognize. Adeeba Nelson is an author and regular contributor to Arizona spotlight. She's also among the children's book authors who will be on various panels at the festival. I think the most fun part of this for me is Welcome back. We haven't talked to you in a while.

**A** Adiba Nelson 08:20

Thank you. It's good to be back. I miss it here.

Thank you. It's good to be back. I miss it here.

**C** Christopher Conover 08:23

So you're back as an author, first tell us about the book you've written.

**A** Adiba Nelson 08:29

So the book I wrote is *Oshun and me* a story of love and braids, and it's a story about this little girl, Yadira, who learns about her culture and her own beauty and her own uniqueness through her mom doing her hair,

**C** Christopher Conover 08:42

which is, you know, such a mom daughter kind of thing.

**A** Adiba Nelson 08:47

And it is, but the way it takes place, it's so unique to black culture, you know, it's Sunday, it's hair day. I think every black family in America Sunday is hair day. And beads, you know, and shells we put in our hair. The way we adorn our hair is very central to black culture. But then there's this other part. Yadira is Afro Latin. Yeah, she's an afro Latina little girl, maybe roughly based on me and my own child, but she learns about the goddess Oshun, who is part of her cultural heritage, and what Oshun means to her culture and her hair.

**C** Christopher Conover 09:25

And, you know, I would assume that kids, families, who are, you know, within those cultures can read it and say, oh, yeah, that's, that's about me, sort of, but other people read it and it becomes educational, right? For them, learning about another culture,

**A** Adiba Nelson 09:42

right? And I think that is so important nowadays, especially in this day and time that we're living in, to know as much as we can about the people that live next door to us, about the people in the country next door to us. You know, at some point everything is going to touch us. So why not be educated? Why not. Learn as much as you can. Why not see the humanity in your neighbor? And if that comes through a children's book, so be it. The secret part about the book is that Yadira is in a wheelchair. She's disabled, but that has nothing to do with the story, and that's intentional, because so many times we see children's books with disabled characters, where the book is about the disability, instead of just letting the character be the character. And I wanted kids to be able to see that though she's in a wheelchair, she's literally doing the same thing like that wheelchair has nothing to do with anything. She's doing the

same thing as you would do Sunday, still getting her hair done, still getting her hair done, still arguing about the shells in her hair and the beads, and still playing with her friends on the swings at school, still getting nervous about being the new kid at school all the things.

**C** Christopher Conover 10:43

So let's switch gears a little bit to the Tucson Festival of Books. I know you've wandered around, as so many of us have, but now you're gonna be one of the presenting authors. What's that like?

**A** Adiba Nelson 10:56

It's really interesting. This is my second time. The first time was in 2023 with my memoir, ain't that a mother shameless plug, but this time it's in the children's section, which it'll be interesting, because I have often been a vendor in the children's pavilion with my first children's book, meet Clarabelle blue, and been very successful with that, But I've always wanted to sit on a children's panel. I've been to them when candy or Nelson was here and other authors were here. I think Judy Blume was here one year, and I went to her panel. I was like, God, that'd be really cool to sit on one. And this year I actually am. So I'm very excited. I'm with Matt Pena, who is like, the god of children's books, but it's a little surreal too to be behind the wall this time.

**C** Christopher Conover 11:48

So I've been a moderator of panels for probably a decade, and I know what it takes. I have to read the book and take notes and come up with questions so I can keep the conversation going. I've never looked at it from the other side. What do you have to do as an author to get ready to sit up there for an hour?

**A** Adiba Nelson 12:10

Drink lots of water, because you get mealy. Now, try not to look directly into the audience, because then you'll see them all. But really, just maybe familiarize after familiarize myself with my co panelists books and look at the questions they do. Send the questions in advance so I kind of know what I'm being asked and what some talking points could be. But for me, I never like to walk into these things pre rehearsed. I can give you my authentic self. So I might flub things, I might say things and be like, wait what? I'll fix it later. But for me, it's just, it's just really getting ready to connect with an audience that the given give and take, the back and forth with the energy is just preparing yourself for that. More so than anything.

**C** Christopher Conover 12:58

What's it like as an author, and I imagine it's a little bit like doing radio, which you which you've done in radio, we sit, as I say, in a padded room, and we talk into microphones, and who knows if anybody ever actually hears it an author. Now, you sit at your computer, you you write all this

stuff, and out it goes. What's it like to meet people who want to meet you because they read your book, be it your memoir or one of your children's books.

A

Adiba Nelson 13:27

That is, I just, I don't know if I'll ever get used to that. Don't know if I will ever get used to that. I have been out shopping with my daughter and so I'd be like, are you with Deepa Nelson? I'm like, maybe. Like, oh my gosh, I read your book. And then they'll start telling me about parts of the book, especially the memoir. And I'm like, I don't talk about it because I'm like, it's in the book. Like, that's all. We don't need to go into conversation about that. Um, so it's, it's, it's a very odd, interesting time. The weirdest thing just happened, sometimes I google myself just to see, like, what's out there. And I recently found that someone was selling an autographed copy of my book on eBay.

C

Christopher Conover 14:18

Wow, your book has gone to auction.

A

Adiba Nelson 14:21

It's pretty amazing. And I was like, This is really weird. Like, that's a whole different side of things that I'd never even contemplated. So that was weird. I love I love meeting people. Don't get me wrong, when people come up to me and they say, oh my gosh, I follow you on Instagram, or I love you on NPR, or I've read your books. I love it. It means so much to me that people are being able to connect with work that I've done, that it means something to them, because it means that essentially, what I've set out to do is working, which is to help people either see themselves or see humanity in other people. So I love that it's making that connect. Action. But on the personal side of things, it's always just like, whoa, Hi. How you doing?

C

Christopher Conover 15:09

I was just buying produce. Don't look in my cart. Well, thank you so much. Congrats on the new book, and we look forward to catching up with you at the festival. Thank you.

A

Adiba Nelson 15:22

I can't wait to have the festival come. I can't wait to meet everyone. We'll be doing an autograph signing at the end of the panel for about half an hour. So hopefully people come

C

Christopher Conover 15:32

through. That was author, adiba Nelson, you're listening to the buzz after the break, we shift focus to the people who show up to the Tucson Festival of Books, stay with us

N

### NPR promo 15:45

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C

### Christopher Conover 16:08

Welcome back to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. We're taking a look at the Tucson Festival of Books this week. We shift now from the stage to the crowds at the event. Holly Bonassi is an educator in the Phoenix area who travels down to Tucson for the festival each year. How would you consider yourself as a reader, occasional reader, amazing bookworm, you know, somewhere in between, you know, so people know who we're talking to here.

H

### Holly Bonassi 16:38

So I've always been a reader. But I think, like, you know, once I hit my early adulthood and life kind of takes center stage and getting married and all that stuff, starting careers, I kind of fell off a little bit with the reading, and then COVID hit, and basically my husband told me that I needed a hobby, so I it gave me a lot more time to read. So I kind of got back into reading, and that's when I got also, like, super active on Instagram with, like, the whole Bookstagram thing, and I created that account. And then from there, somebody I met through the Bookstagram community, I said, Hey, I have this, like, passion project. Let's start a podcast. So then we started a podcast called speaking, speaking literally. And then from there, it's like, I just, I always have, like, two book, at least two books, that I'm reading. So I have a website now, like, I am probably, like, addicted. And now my husband thinks that it's like this whole cult, and that, like the reading world is just like, he's like, I didn't know all these things existed. I thought you guys just read books.

C

### Christopher Conover 17:43

Yeah, as an avid reader, i i get it completely. So when did you start coming to the Tucson Festival of Books?

H

### Holly Bonassi 17:52

So two years ago, um, I had just kind of heard about it. And so I because I'm in the Phoenix area, so Tucson is only, like a two hour drive. And so we had some other things going on that weekend. And I'm like, you know, again, I asked my husband. I'm like, Hey, let's just go down to Tucson. Our kids are older now, and they can be home alone. So we went down kind of like Sunday afternoon, so I only saw, like, the very, very end of everything. So we were only had, like, maybe the last two hours. And I'm like, this is kind of cool, because at first we got there, and we must have been, like, at the kind of, like an offside area of it where there was only, like,



a couple little tables. And we're like, this, is it like, we interrupt two hours for like, three tables, but then you walk and, like, because it's on the University of Arizona campus, and they have like an old main that kind of sits there, and it blocks, like this whole open green kind of like runway area. And like, you walk around Old Main, and all of a sudden you see, like hundreds of tents and like 1000s of people. And we're like, okay, we found it now. And so it was just really cool. And I'm like, Oh my God, I need to come back next year and do the full two days, because this is absolutely amazing. So then last year was the first year that I went down Saturday morning, got a hotel, and did two full, full days of it. And then one of the, one of my friends who's in Oregon, who comes onto our podcast every now and she she flew in, and so we spent the weekend together doing the festival.

C

Christopher Conover 19:29

So do you come down with an empty car so you have room for all the books you buy going back? Are you just here to listen to all the authors and talk with them when they're out signing and things like that, or both, both,

H

Holly Bonassi 19:44

I definitely come down with a I try to stick to a budget of how many books I'm gonna I'm going to buy. But then I get down there and I see books, and I'm like, you know, I try to see who's coming, like, what authors are gonna be. Presenting and doing signings. And so if I have a book, then I'll bring it for them to sign. So I do a lot of audio books, because I spend so much time in the car. So if an author is there and I don't have the physical copy, then I buy the book. So yeah, so I end up buying a lot more books than I expect to buy. But it's just, it's like the whole process. It's just, it's really cool. Just to walk around and see the different vendors and to see, like, the small businesses that are set up. It's, you know, like last year, one of the people that we were kind of excited to see was RL Stein. We grew up with RL Stein, and, like, the fear Street and, you know, goosebumps. It's like, oh my god. This is like our childhood. And so being able to see him speak and have him read passages, and then then to kind of go and stand in the three hour line to to meet him and get him to sign, it's, it's just cool to see some of these people. And you know, I guess as a bookworm, I view it the same way that people would view it as, like, their favorite musician or, you know, if they saw, you know, Tom Brady or whatever. And it's for us, this is like, you know, it's kind of the same thing. It's like, oh my god. Like we live in in your world that you've created, and we love it so much. And, and here you are, like, it's really cool. And like, TJ Clune last year was probably one of my favorites, like, I went to a couple of his different panels. And, you know, you get to kind of learn about them as as a person too, because you experience their their characters in the worlds, and then you hear from them, and it kind of gives you more insight and more depth to what they've created, and then just to be able to talk to them, and it's just the whole thing is experience is just really cool. And so the panels, and then the people that you get to meet, and it's just the whole thing is just, there's it's really cool, and there's just so much to do.

C

Christopher Conover 21:55

Have you ever had the experience where you met an author or you got to hear them speak? It was like, Oh, they're nothing like I picture, you know, their their personality is so different from the world that they've built that I've read all their books, or their one book, or whatever.

H

Holly Bonassi 22:11

Um, no, you know, it's funny, because I feel like the the authors that I've met and listened to and have read their books, it's very fitting that that's what they've done. It's, it's, you know, I think about the fact that, you know, you kind of lose part of yourself into your books. It's like, you know, I'd be, I'd be fascinated to find that, that that author who is like, so different from what they from what they write. But I haven't really seen, I haven't really seen that yet, because it's like, you listen to him, like, Yep, I can see, I can see why, why you wrote the way you wrote, or why you wrote what you wrote. The cool thing was, like, I would go, like, a lot of the panels have multiple authors, and it's like, focused on topics. So you might go to a panel to see one particular author, and then through that, you meet other authors that you never really heard of before, and you're like, Okay, so now I'm adding all of their books to to my list to read. And All right, let's go back to the, you know, the the bookstore 10 so I can buy some more books. And so that's cool, too. It's just like learning new authors and going, oh my gosh, that's I never knew you existed. Where have you been my whole life?

C

Christopher Conover 23:32

So you're an educator. You're an assistant principal now you're a classroom teacher. You had kids in your office when we first connected. So is the festival? Is it professional for you in any way, or is this pure escape for you?

H

Holly Bonassi 23:49

I've never really thought about it in that sense, which is interesting, because I've been an assistant principal for nine years now, and before that, I was an English high school English teacher. Surprise, surprise, you know, for 14 years, and so while, like, there's always that innate educator in me when I'm like, looking at books and looking at literature, the surprising thing is, I'm not a big fan of classics, you know. I just like reading, and I like storytelling. So, so I don't necessarily see it as, like, professional it's definitely an escape for me. But there's always an element that I'm always hyper, analyzing everything, just like I always taught my kids. And, you know, I'm always looking at, you know, conflict and setting and tone and theme and illusion, like every single like literary element. I used to teach my students about, like, I'm always, like, hyper vigilant about and I'll be like, they could have done that better, or I wish they'd done that, or there should have been more foreshadowing. But yeah, so overall, I kind of think, like, the. Whole book world for me is it was a passion that led me to become an English teacher. But now it's kind of like it's just my personal passion now, and I don't necessarily have to connect it to my job, but it's it helps because, like, if I'm I work in a high school, so if I'm walking around and I see a kid reading a book at lunch, I'll be like, hey, what you're reading and, you know, and being able to have those conversations, like, last year, there was a student who would always have a Colleen Hoover book in her hand, and like, How's Colleen Hoover's books for you? So, yeah,

C

Christopher Conover 25:38

and how if you ever get to meet one of these authors that one of your students is reading, how

and boy, if you ever get to meet one of those authors that one of your students is reading, boy, you're gonna be the hero of the week, probably right. Well, thank you for spending some time with us, and good luck. You know, don't hurt your back lifting all the books.

H

Holly Bonassi 25:56

I'll take a wagon this year.

C

Christopher Conover 25:58

That was Holly Bonassi, a frequent attendee of the Tucson Festival of Books. By the way, azpm will have a tent at the Festival of Books. You can stop by meet some of our producers, reporters and on air personalities, get pictures with characters from the PBS Kids network, and get a tour of our station. And while you're there, keep an eye out for Mark McLemore. He's the host of Arizona spotlight. He'll be at the event talking to people about books they love. So start thinking about that question now, and that's the buzz for this week. Tune, in next week as we sit down with Arizona State Treasurer Kimberly Gee. You can find all our episodes online at [azpm.org](http://azpm.org) and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast, just search for the buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer, with production help from Maggie farmer, Our music is by enter the haggis. I'm Christopher Conover, thanks for listening.

N

Nicole Cox 27:19

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