

Bookish Weekend

PLAN AHEAD: THE SONOMA VALLEY AUTHORS FESTIVAL RETURNS STRONGER THAN EVER, WITH NEW DATES NEXT SPRING. BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

Expect an intimate and engaging setting for the Sonoma Valley Authors Festival.



It was a Saturday morning last August, and I sat at breakfast with several fans of poetry and U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith. As we dined, she read works from some of her favorite poets out loud—then, like a true professor (Smith teaches at Harvard), she asked us what we thought of each piece. We discussed lyricism and symbolism, and we asked lots of questions. This experience wasn't on my bucket list, but it should have been. It was surreal and beautiful.

Up-close-and-personal interaction with some of the world's greatest writers is one of the many lures of the Sonoma Valley Authors Festival (svauthorsfest.org), which is being held this spring from April 28 to 30 at the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa (fairmont.com). Now in its sixth year, the intimate and impactful festival is the creation of David and Ginny Freeman. The indefatigable couple has reeled in literary greats like Amy Tan, Erik Larson, Isabel Allende, Billy Collins and Amor Towles.

As plans come together for the festival in April, it has already been announced that Sonoma native Ada Limón, recently named the 24th U.S. poet laureate, and Hugo Vickers, a biographer and renowned expert on the royal family, will be part of the lineup of esteemed authors. Limón is the author of six books of poetry, including *The Carrying*, which won the National Book Critics Award for Poetry. Host of the popular poetry podcast *The Slowdown*, Limón's latest book of



ballrooms. Averaging about 100 people per room makes it feel very exclusive.”

And it is. At the event in August, attendees also could attend book signings with authors, listen to Smith read poetry next to an evening fire and stargaze with a renowned astronomer.

problems. At the same time, we must all keep both our right and left brains in shape and balance, so fiction, poetry, fantasy and imagination are part of a healthy mix.”

Clockwise from top left: Renowned author Erik Larson; *New York Times* bestselling writer Nikki Erlick and Michael McCarthy; U.S. poet laureate Ada Limón.



poems, *The Hurting Kind*, was recently released by Milkweed Editions.

“Ada Limón is a poet who connects,” said librarian of Congress Carla Hayden during the appointment of Limón as U.S. poet laureate. “Her accessible, engaging poems ground us in where we are and who we share our world with. They speak of intimate truths, of the beauty and heartbreak that is living, in ways that help us move forward.”

Vickers has written essential biographies of 20th century figures, including the Duchess of Windsor, Princess Andrew of Greece and the Queen Mother. His 2021 book, *Malice in Wonderland*, is an insightful peek into Vickers’ diaries as he researched the life of Cecil Beaton. Earlier this year, he

published a book with HRH the Duke of Kent, entitled *A Royal Life*. Vickers has become one of the go-to authorities for media during important state occasions, especially those involving the royal family. *The Financial Times* recently described him as “the most knowledgeable royal biographer on the planet.”

“Many national book festivals have thousands of people; ours is less than 400,” says David Freeman. “We didn’t want to use the term conference as it sounded like work, not joy, so we settled on a festival. We also have a mix of main-tent sessions, where all 400 attendees hear one author or speaker in the pavilion; and breakout sessions, where attendees choose among four different speakers in various

The event is not only a literary celebration but also a way to expand learning and understanding. The Freemans say they’ve felt informed and transformed by the lectures they’ve attended over the years, so they strive to maintain a similar tone during their own festival. “Our world is changing rapidly, and there are many views on how we tackle problems that affect us all,” says David. “Only through open minds and civil discourse will we be able to solve our global

