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Off the Page and Onto Your Screen: How to Set-Up a Virtual Literary Festival

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Peter Bremer and Kristina Smith

Off the page and onto your screen

How to set-up a virtual literary festival

Literary festivals are an opportunity for authors and readers to mingle and interact. Libraries that host literary festivals connect book lovers and writers in a very personal way, enabling libraries to bask in the glory of that connection.¹ They allow fans to get close to a beloved writer, hear a reading, and maybe even get a book signed. And like almost everything else during the pandemic, they have had to adapt or go into indefinite hiatus.

The Prairie Gate Literary Festival (PGLF) at the University of Minnesota-Morris chose to roll with the changes for its 2021 offerings. Part of the impetus in deciding to offer programming was the recognition of the emotional toll that the pandemic was having on the members of our community.² People were feeling isolated and cut-off. We wanted to retain a festival presence while offering a healthy distraction. Instead of a traditional face-to-face event with tables full of books for sale and tempting hors d'oeuvres, we opted to go virtual. It turned out to be a great decision, resulting in stable or increased attendance for most events as well as significant cost savings. But it didn't come without a lot of trepidation. Would people even show up for a virtual author reading? We knew a Zoom event could never match the thrill of being in the same room with a bestselling author. Would the audience feel connected to the author? Would individual and group participation translate well virtually? There were other concerns, as well. After nearly a year of distance-learning at our campus community, we had to acknowledge that remote learning fatigue was a real possibility. And yet the more we considered online offerings, the more advantages we uncovered.

Honorariums, lodging, and travel expenses regularly take up a huge chunk of book festival budgets. PGLF is no exception. Our budget for a traditional three-day face-to-face festival relies heavily on grants, something that was in short supply during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with this dilemma, we decided to take the plunge. One thing that became clear was that we could save a lot of money by pivoting to a virtual model. In 2019, the last time we held a festival, our total expenses amounted to a little more than \$14,000. That enabled us to bring in four notable authors, as well as pay for their lodging, travel, and board. It also included publicity and catering.

For our 2021 festival, in contrast, we ended up needing only \$800, which allowed us to bring in five well-known writers, as well as a small press children's book author. We also were able to do needed publicity locally and regionally. A big contributing factor was the reduced price of author fees. Two years earlier, before the world changed, we paid an aver-

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age of \$1,400 per author. By using technology and broadcasting live so that our writers only had to carve out a small slice of time to participate, we reduced these expenses by a whopping 88 percent.

Another area of savings was time. Having a small group of volunteers makes putting on multiple author events a challenge. Most of us have regular jobs on campus, whether in the library or classroom, that demand our attention. Our student representative copes with juggling classes and a paying job. By switching to an online format, we managed to reduce the time necessary to plan for the events dramatically, thereby alleviating much stress. There was no need to reserve physical spaces, put up detailed signage, plan meals and snacks, or coordinate rides and welcome packets. A few minutes was all it took to set up our Zoom meetings and then share the access information with panelists.

One area that we had to pay more attention to, of course, was behind-the-scenes technology. Many of us had already become well-versed in using Zoom for meetings and instruction, but there was still a lot to learn. The ability to spotlight a presenter for the whole group proved invaluable. So too was the inclusion of PowerPoint slides that incorporated welcome information. Zoom's chat feature was the perfect way to share our crowdfunding donation link and post-event survey form. We also used chat to help field questions during the Q&A session at each event. Although we tried to anticipate every technology need, there were times when things didn't go as smoothly as we would have liked. For example, on one occasion we had difficulty sharing a PowerPoint because of permissions and on another we started the recording late. Even so, we had a good system in place that minimized most mishaps.

A few days before each panel discussion, we always had an organizational meeting to go over the details of the upcoming event and make sure our ducks were in a row. But our planning started way before that. To help us keep track of who was doing what and record completed activities, we created a spreadsheet for each virtual event. It listed things like Zoom setup, author publicity photos, honorarium paperwork, publicity posters, newspaper ads, social media, and crowdfunding. When a needed task was completed, the individual responsible entered their name with the date. Roles were also designated with planning group members assigned to either publicity, budget, host, or technologist. Dividing these last two duties was crucial. We found that it was much easier for the host to handle moderating the panels if they didn't have to also worry about spotlighting a speaker or sharing a particular screen. In turn, the technologist could also help monitor the chat for questions. Another area of preparation was checking the general Zoom settings to make sure things were in order. Having a sound beep when a guest enters a room is helpful for the host or co-host, but it also can be very distracting if everyone else hears it.

Holding any event, virtual or face-to-face, can be nerve-racking. All the planning in the world doesn't guarantee a well-attended event. That is why we were pleasantly surprised with the reception to our virtual panel discussions. We held three separate events, spaced a month apart, in February, March, and April of 2021. Our first event showcased self-published and small press authors sharing their "Paths to Publishing." More than 40 people attended our inaugural event, which was quite a respectable number for us, even during face-to-face settings. Almost as important as attendance was interaction. Many individuals left their videos on, which helped create a sense that a conversation was taking place. When it came time for the Q&A portion of the event we had a number of thoughtful queries.

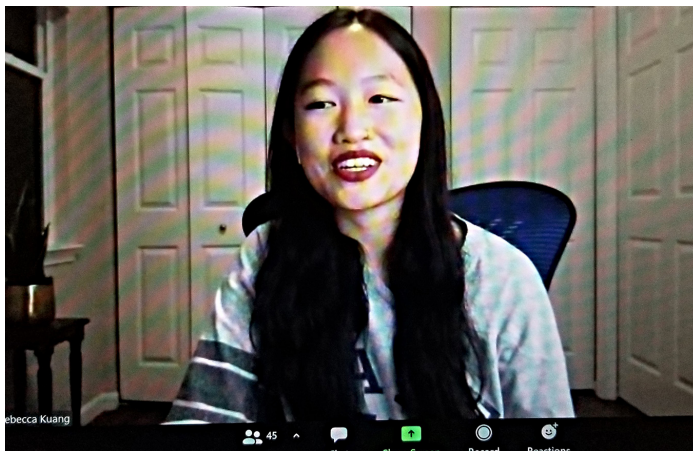
For our second offering we focused on fantasy and science fiction. Because our modest budget could go farther thanks to the savings of the virtual world, we were able to bring in some fairly prominent authors, such as Rebecca Kuang, author of the bestselling *Poppy War*



Festival participant Joshua Johnson, assistant professor at UMN Morris and author of *The Forever Sea*, published by DAW, 2021.

Trilogy, as well as Farah Naz Rishi, and our own Joshua Johnson. Once again, attendance and general interaction exceeded our expectations. We were definitely on a roll. Our third and final panel featured two acclaimed poets (Nancy Naomi Carlson and Terri Ellen Cross Davis) and was advertised as “An Evening of Poetry.” Whether because of Zoom fatigue, scheduling (we took a chance on a Friday night), or a lack of interest in the subject matter, attendance was less than half compared to our other events. Those that took part, however, were engaged and enthusiastic, and sometimes that’s enough.

All in all we were very pleased with our first foray into virtual festival programming and wouldn’t hesitate to try it again, although we are sincerely hoping for a return to face-to-face



Festival participant Rebecca Kuang, author of *The Poppy War* fantasy series, published by Harper Voyager.

experiences by the time we reconvene in fall 2022. There are certainly some things we would do differently. One facet of our traditional gathering that didn’t make the migration to an online environment were writing workshops and classroom visits. Each session is taught by a visiting author and focuses on a particular area of interest or expertise. They are a popular tradition and allow for more in-depth interaction between writers and the public. Incorporating these opportunities into a virtual PGLF would be high on our priority list.

The prospect of implementing virtual readings within a face-to-face module, when schedules conflict or geographic distance is an issue, has also been considered.

Making the decision to hold PGLF online turned out to be a good one. By taking the leap, we managed to bring in high-quality authors at a fraction of the price while retaining our presence as a viable artistic activity. Choosing to go virtual also increased our reach, allowing individuals far removed from our rural location to participate. We even managed to use crowdfunding as a way to raise exposure and generosity. And by recording some of our events, we were able to share those experiences with individuals unable to attend the live event and at the same time invite them to give monetarily, if they so choose. Of course, the possibilities of an online platform isn’t limited to merely literary festivals. Over the last year,

Briggs Library at the University of Minnesota-Morris has held online trivia nights, game nights (featuring *Among Us* and *Jackbox Games*), a Halloween Reading as well as web-based discussions featuring our long-running Asking the Big Questions series. The possibilities are virtually endless.

Looking ahead, we are in the planning stages of hosting another festival in fall 2022. This time around we are hoping that we can be face-to-face and are organizing the event with this in mind. This time around we are hoping that we can be face-to-face and are organizing the event with this in mind. If the situation dictates that we pivot back to virtual, we are equipped to do that and will communicate that contingency to our authors. We may even have one of our more distant authors participate via Zoom because of the cost savings. Our focus will be Native American writers. The University of Minnesota-Morris has a large indigenous student population that comprises more than 20% of our enrollment. We have already identified at least five authors that we are interested in bringing to campus. Next steps include reaching out to these authors and readying a grant that will hopefully pay to have these talented folks participate in PGLF. Overall, we feel like we're ready for almost anything, but if the last two years have taught us anything, it's to expect the unexpected.

Notes

1. Beth Dempsey, "Literary Festivals, Library Style: Libraries Can Use Literary Festivals to Secure Their Role as the Ultimate Connection among Readers, Authors, and Books," *Library Journal* 130, no 3 (2005): 28-31.
2. "COPING in the Time of COVID-19," *American Libraries* 51, no. 6, (2020): 20-23. *n*