

YALLFest goes into third year with huge headliner, more authors

Putting the Y'all in YALLFest

by Elizabeth Pandolfi [@girlseeksstory](#)



Provided

This year's daylong fest will include more events for young readers

For the past two years YALLFest, the YA lit extravaganza, has been attracting tons of bestselling authors, hordes of tween and teen fans, and staging one incredibly popular trash-talking storytelling game called the YA Smackdown. As if that wasn't enough, now it's responsible for restoring to at least one policeman's faith in humanity.

The story behind that has something to do with this year's headliner, Veronica Roth. The 25-year-old is the author of the *Divergent* trilogy, a dystopian tale of a future America in which people are divided according to five primary virtues. It's drawn many comparisons with *The Hunger Games*, perhaps even surpassing that series in popularity. Roth is without a doubt the hottest thing in the YA lit world right now — especially since the final book in the trilogy, *Allegiant*, was just released on Oct. 22 and has a controversial ending that's sparked tearing of hair and rending of clothes among fans, not to mention some death threats via social media.

YALLFest director Jonathan Sanchez of Blue Bicycle Books and the festival's program committee booked Roth about a year ago, and when she was announced as this year's headliner YA readers went wild. "We sold 200 tickets to Veronica Roth within the first hour, so it sold out very quickly," Sanchez says. "People are just begging to come. I had to go to the police today and make sure people are not allowed to camp out."

And that's what made that particular policeman's day. "A really nice policeman who helped us was like, 'They're going to be camping out? For a literary event?'" Sanchez continues. "He said, 'This just renewed my faith in humanity. I can't believe it.'"

Of course, Roth is only one of the 50 authors who will descend on Charleston for YALLFest. Many, like Ransom Riggs, Libba Bray, David Levithan, and Brendan Reichs, have written *New York Times* bestsellers, and plenty have won literary awards. As always, there's a healthy mix of both fantasy and sci-fi authors and realist writers, but there's one group that Sanchez is particularly excited about this year. "One thing that's kind of new is the middle grade authors," he says, referring to those writing for elementary and middle school kids (YA writing is technically aimed at kids 12 and up). "It's fun because the schoolkids, they love to read chapter books. They're the types of books that you really enjoy recommending."

Pseudonymous Bosch, author of the Secret series (*The Name of This Book is Secret*, *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late*, and others), has attended since year one and is a favorite among middle-graders. He's just as silly and secretive as his books and appeared at at least one YALLFest in dark sunglasses (to hide his identity, of course). Bosch is also a member of the committee who chooses the authors, along with Melissa De La Cruz (*Witches of East End*), and Margaret Stohl and Kami Garcia (co-authors of *Beautiful Creatures*). He thinks the highlight of the middle grade programming will be the Story Ball, a new event this year. It's similar to the YA Smackdown, which pits teams of authors against each other in zany storytelling games. "We're going to have all the middle grade authors come together for an event in the Charleston Music Hall," he says. "It'll be an interactive storytelling event for the younger readers." But don't tell anyone, he says. "Everything I say is under wraps. Only between you, me, and your readers."

Another huge draw in the middle grade category will be Adam Gidwitz, author of the *A Tale Dark and Grimm* series. His books are retellings of fairy tales in the dark Grimm Brothers tradition, with some humor sprinkled in for good measure. "He's like the Pied Piper — kids go nuts for him," Sanchez says. Gidwitz is one of several authors who will also be doing school visits while they're here for the

festival.

With celebrity being such a fickle thing, it can seem like booking an author a year or even two in advance might be a bit of a risk. But that's not as much of a concern with authors as it could be with movie stars or other public figures in media, Sanchez says. "Books move a little slower. I will say we've just had great success with picking great authors, and we have a lot of great fans who know the books. As an adult, or even a kid, you may look at our list of 50 authors and only recognize a few names, but they all have big fan bases — we had 50 authors last year, and at least 20 of them had capacity lines at their book signings."

And while Sanchez has a hand in every part of the festival, he gives most of the credit for that success to the selection committee. As popular authors themselves, Bosch, De La Cruz, Garcia, and Stohl are pretty up-to-date on what YA readers are into, and they know the YA author community well. "YA authors are a tight-knit group. It might be because there are fewer of us than adult authors. I'd like to think it's because we're so much cooler," Garcia jokes. As for what they look for when choosing their authors, Stohl says "Aside from being the authors our local kids want to see? No divas. No attitude. YALLFest is a one-for-all, all-for-one gig." When it began, she continues, "It was a complete labor of love — we asked the authors we knew to pester their publishers or get themselves down to Charleston. Now that everyone knows about the festival, we work with the library and the schools to focus on the authors the local kids want to see. This is an author-run, kid-driven festival, all the way."

That author-run part is an important point, and a big reason why authors are not only willing to return, but also frequently send the committee requests to attend. "It makes a difference," says Bosch. "We know what it's like to be an attendee, what makes a good panel. Also what happens is often you go to a festival and you feel very isolated, and we try to make this the opposite of that."

That community feel extends to the readers, who, thanks to the internet and social media, feel a much closer bond to a particular author or other fans than in the past. "There's a much greater relationship between writer and reader today than there's ever been before," Bosch says. "Part of the building of the YA readership and part of the great enthusiastic people who come to a festival like YALLFest is they're part of this online community ... they feel like they're [the authors'] friends, and they're friends with each other as well."

Sanchez is expecting 3,000 people to attend this year, which means that if there's an author or panel that you particularly want to see, you'd better plan on arriving early. The two ticketed events, the keynote and the YA Smackdown, are already sold out, and the panels (which are free) are sure to fill up as well. "I'm a little worried that we're going to be sold out of everything this year," Sanchez says. "I say sold out but you know, standing room only."

It's a good problem to have, especially for a festival that's only three years old. But it does make it a little hard on Sanchez. "My goal this year is at least to not lose my voice. But I'm the director. It's not about me having fun," he says. "The writers go to a lot of trouble to come to this, so the whole point is for them to have a blast."

Tags: Yallfest, Blue Bicycle Books, Veronica Roth, Jonathan Sanchez

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