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Bay Area Book Festival returns with Boots Riley, Rebecca Solnit and expanded programming

By Zara Irshad, Staff Writer • March 29, 2026

This year's event features expanded family and poetry programming, local stars and more.

The Bay Area Book Festival is set to return to Berkeley May 29-31.
Leon@Saperstein.com/Bay Area Book Festival

The Bay Area Book Festival is leaning into bold, forward-thinking ideas during its 12th edition, which will feature more than 350 authors as well as local stars like filmmaker Boots Riley and “Reading Rainbow” host Mychal Threets.

Under the theme, “Writing the Future,” Executive Director J.K. Fowler — now in his second year at the helm — is positioning the festival around collective action.

"The future is not something that just happens to us, it is shaped by our collective imagination and courage," Fowler said in a statement. "In this era of increasing authoritarianism, we must be clear-eyed about the realities we face while remaining steadfast in our commitment to building something better. Dreaming is not escapism; it's resistance, and it's strategy."

That ethos shapes the programming at this year's festival, set for May 29-31.

Headlining events include singer-songwriter Saul Williams in conversation with "Men Explain Things to Me" author Rebecca Solnit about activism in trying times, and "Binti" author Nnedi Okorafor in conversation with Harvard University lecturer Marshall Ganz about world building and social change.

A panel on inclusive publishing initiatives will feature comedian and author Phoebe Robinson, who launched the publishing imprint Tiny Reparations Books; Red Hen Press co-founder Kate Gale; longtime book worker Hannah Moushabeck of Interlink Publishing; and author Cynthia Leitich-Smith, who curates the imprint Heartdrum.

Also notable is the return of Democracy Dialogues, a series of politically centered discussions, with a special program featuring Riley, the "I Love Boosters" director, lawyer and activist Walter Riley and La Peña Cultural Center program director Jesse Strauss.

New this year is the Bay Area Book Festival's Chill Zone at the newly-renovated Martin Luther King Jr. Civic Center Park. Inspired by the Bay Area retail chain Sports Basement, it will feature chairs and picnic tables for readers to lounge in throughout the festival. Local chapters of independent book clubs, such as the Silent Book Club, are also planning to meet at the space over the weekend-long event.

Curated by Oakland-based Social Justice Children's Book Fair, the festival's newly expanded YouthLit family programming (May 30-31) will showcase speakers such as Threets, "May the Best Player Win" author Kyla Zhao, "Rez Ball" author Byron Graves and "Yellow Dog Blues" author Alice Faye Duncan. The Bookworm Block Party, now in its second year, is set for the festival's final day, capping off the kid-friendly programming.

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Poetry programming has also been expanded to two stages on May 31. Events include a two-hour youth open mic on the BART Plaza stage; an exclusive pre-sale and celebration of **Greg Sarris**' new book, "The Last Human Bear"; and a panel on the romance and romantasy genres.

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