



Byron Bay puts its best frock on

Byron Bay put on its 'best party frock' for this year's writers festival and the crowds were more than happy to come to the party. **Matthia Dempsey** reports.

IF LAST YEAR'S BYRON BAY Writers' Festival was a particularly soggy affair, this year's event more than made up for it. 'The weather was absolutely superb,' festival director Jeni Caffin told BOOKSELLER+PUBLISHER. 'Byron put its best party frock on and kept it clean all weekend.'

This year's festival, which ran from 26 to 29 July, attracted more than 9000 attendees, 'slightly up on last year' according to Caffin. While this figure was spread over three days, it was nonetheless an overwhelming number of attendees. 'Everyone was buzzing and able to hear and the amenities coped well,' says Caffin, although she admits 'this is probably as big as we want to get on [the current site].'

'The Heart of the Media: Maintaining Integrity in a Cynical World', a Sunday session chaired by Jennifer Byrne and featuring David Marr, Fran Kelly, Daved Leser and Chris Masters, proved to be the most popular event. 'You could barely see the marquee for the crowd,' says Caffin. 'The media content was a big drawcard and brought people who had never been to the festival before, and engaged all ages across all demographics.'

Other sell-out events included Thursday's 'sporting lunch' with Mick O'Regan, Gideon Haigh and Lincoln Hall; Friday's 'literary lunch' with Kerry O'Brien and Chris Masters and Saturday's 'people who take the piss' with Nury Vittachi, Bryan Dawe, Shalini Akhil and Charles Firth.

Big audiences also turned out to hear Gail Jones in conversation with Susan Wyndham, Nicolas Rothwell in conversation with Deborah Hope and Alexis Wright in conversation with Melissa Lucashenko,

while political hot-topics such as the politics of climate change (addressed by *High and Dry* author Guy Pearse) and police corruption (*Blowing the Whistle*, Simon Illingworth), generated intense interest and big crowds.

'Highlights for many people included author Barbara Ewing's solo reading, rap poet Miles Merrill and the utterly enchanting Alice Pung and Alexandra Adornett,' says Caffin, although she says the 'biggest raves of the festival' were directed to David Marr, who delivered the opening address 'Shouldn't we be home writing instead of having a good time in Byron Bay?'

Sell-out workshops

As well as the general sessions, the festival offered several workshops in 2007, including 'Short Story Makeover' with Cate Kennedy; 'Satirically

Speaking' with Charles Firth; and 'Position, Position, Position: A Workshop on Structural Editing' with Shelley Kenigsberg. While Caffin said the festival had 'cut down dramatically' on such workshops this year, nearly all of those offered sold out.

Also very popular was the festival's first residential writing retreat which packaged tuition and accommodation with festival passes.

The superb weather and 'buzzing' atmosphere proved popular with visiting authors who are already 'clamouring to come back in 2008,' according to Caffin. As for Caffin herself, how did she find her first festival as director?

'I learnt a huge amount, and for this I am grateful to my extraordinary team and committee.'

As for next year, Caffin says there will be changes. 'There will be things dropped and many more included and others changed,' she says. 'Loads of discussion will be about the shape of the festival for 2008.'

For the moment though, Caffin is just happy to have pulled off her first Byron Bay Writers Festival. 'I still can't believe I have been given this chance to develop a forum for our country's most interesting minds' she says. □





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BBWF Top 10

The festival's top 10 bestsellers, according to official bookseller Dymocks Brisbane were:

1. *Unpolished Gem* (Alice Pung, Black Inc.)
2. *Shadow Thief* (Alexandra Adornetto, HarperCollins)
3. *Nine Parts Water* (Emma Hardman, UQP)
4. *Carpentaria* (Alexis Wright, Giramondo)
5. *The Year We Seized the Day* (Elizabeth Best & Colin Bowles, A&U)
6. *Feng Shui Detectives Casebook* (Nury Vittachi, A&U)
7. *The Unknown Terrorist* (Richard Flanagan, Pan Macmillan)
8. *Another Country* (Nicholas Rothwell, Black Inc.)
9. *Adult Themes* (Kate Crawford, Pan Macmillan)
10. (tied) *Twilight of Love* (Robert Dessaix, Plcador) & *A Big Life* (Jenny Kee, Lantern).