

City That Reads

Pratt Library celebrates 10 years of CityLit



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Citylit organizers Gregg Wilhelm and Judy Cooper inside the Pratt library

By [Baynard Woods](#)

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Ten years ago this month, writer and educator Gregg Wilhelm held the first CityLit Festival. In the intervening decade, he has helped usher the event to a central spot in Baltimore's literary landscape. This weekend, the organization celebrates a decade of programming, publishing, and education surrounding the literary arts with the 10th CityLit Festival, featuring fiction writer and MacArthur "Genius" George Saunders. On a bright but chilly spring afternoon, Wilhelm bellied up to the bar in the basement of Brewer's Art to talk about the festival.

City Paper: George Saunders as a headliner, that's a big deal.

Gregg Wilhelm: That's awesome.

CP: How did you pull that off?

GW: It just so happens that I'm in a program at the University of Tampa, a low-residency MFA program, and the director of the program is a graduate of Syracuse, where George teaches. I met him a year ago, in January 2012, and when it came time to plan the 10th-anniversary CityLit fest for 2013, I was back in Tampa and said, "Oh, I need to email George and see if he'll headline the festival this year." I emailed him from Tampa on the first Friday of the new year and that was the weekend that *The New York Times Magazine* story broke that called his new book the "best book you'll read this year." So I was like, "Great. Ain't gonna get him." But he was gracious enough that we worked it out. He was available and he's never been to Baltimore before. So it will be his first trip to Baltimore and he's headlining the 10th-anniversary festival.

CP: Thinking back a decade ago: What got into you to start something like CityLit?

GW: When Hurricane Isabel wiped out the Baltimore Book Festival in 2003, the local literary community got together and said it would be a shame for two calendar years to go by without there being a celebration of the literary arts in Baltimore. At the time, I was cobbling together the start of a nonprofit, the CityLit Project, and we decided to do a scaled-down version of the book festival the following spring, which coincided with the official incorporation of CityLit. It became our first program, so we called it CityLit Festival, which lead to how we brand things: CityLit Press, CityLit Kids, CityLit Teens. You've played at the CityLit Stage at the Baltimore Book Festival. [I read as part of CityLit's programming at the 2011 Baltimore Book Festival, where my band, The Barnyard Sharks, also played.]

In the time between the canceled Baltimore Book Fest in 2003 and the first CityLit festival the next spring, the headliner, Edward P. Jones, won the Pulitzer—literally two weeks before the festival—for *The Known World*. So that brought a lot of press for our first festival. The second festival in April 2005, we booked Steve Coll, who was at the time the managing editor of *The Washington Post*.

He had a new book out on Bin Laden and the Taliban, which was still very hot topic, as it remains today. Then two weeks before the festival in April, he won the Pulitzer for nonfiction. So the joke around Baltimore was: If you want to win the Pulitzer, get yourself booked for the CityLit Festival.

CP: All right then. How about next year? Are we on?

GW: (Laughs) The following year we had the debut memoir by the guy whose life story was the basis for *Hotel Rwanda*—he didn't win anything but he debuted his memoir and thousands of people showed up. The following year we booked Junot Diaz, who, sort of in the 11th hour cancels and says, "I can't make it, but I swear I'll come back next year." Well, that year, he wins the Pulitzer and he keeps his promise and comes back for our fifth CityLit festival. So there's this crazy confluence of events that has always made CityLit Festival special. I like to think it's because me and my partner in crime, Judy Cooper, over at the Pratt Library, are interested, engaged readers and we know what we like and we basically make a program that we want to go to—a program that is diverse, rich in content—and we've had a lot of luck with it.

CP: Obviously you started CityLit because you saw some kind of need. What was that and how has Baltimore's literary scene changed in the last 10 years?

GW: Before CityLit came along, a lot of us noticed that the scene in Baltimore lacked cohesion, and new writers would come to Baltimore and say, like, "Where's the scene?" But now someone says, "Oh, you've got to get to know CityLit, you've got to get to know the 510 Reading Series or the New Mercury Reading Series." So CityLit acted as an epicenter and a lightning rod to bring some cohesion to the community, both from a programmatic and media-relations standpoint but also from those collaborations. The people you meet you collaborate with and you generate new art. For example, Jen Michalski, who also saw the same need with the lack of cohesion—a few years after I started CityLit, she started the 510 Reading Series, which in turn led to her saying, "There's no good anthology of Baltimore writers past and present." So she came up with a proposal for *City Sages*, which happened to dovetail with me starting an imprint at CityLit. So it became the first book from CityLit Press. So you have a really dynamic collaboration of people, not just in the literary arts, but crossing disciplines. Baltimore has always been a collaborative place, but I think what CityLit, along with people like Jen and Michael (of 510 Reading Series) and [CP contributors] Deb Rudacille and John Barry with the New Mercury series made sure that the literary arts are part of the mix.

CP: So I made kind of an asshole-ish quip in the paper the other week about literary readings being like concerts for the deaf—a sort of apology for the solitary nature of the activity itself. But you ended up getting thousands of people out to a reading. What is that draw that brings all those people out for the public performance of a private activity?

GW: A lot of what CityLit also does is workshops, and some of those are professional development like, "How to read frickin' well." Granted, the literary arts have this challenge of being written in solitude and consumed in solitude. But you've got to be a good reader. Musicians don't practice just to perform in garages and basements. They've got a little bit of an ego thing. Certainly actors do. It's innate in their art, but the literary question is: "How do you make engaging public programming?" I've always tried to treat it as a literary equivalent of Lollapalooza. CityLit is so fortunate to be given the keys to one of Baltimore's premier institutions, the Pratt Library, and we get to take it over for a day. We have five programming areas bringing concurrent diverse programming. And this literary marketplace where we have more than 70 exhibitors, self-published authors, editors, literary associations, journals. And it's noisy and it's fun to make noise in a library, to celebrate literature. So why do people come? They want to hear George Saunders and Junot Díaz, and Edward P. Jones. They come for that but they stay for discovering an unknown voice or seeing the smiles on kids faces when they're recognized at the Maryland Humanities Council Letters About Literature program.

CityLit Highlights

George Saunders (3-4:30 P.M., Wheeler Auditorium) is the obvious highlight this year. When his new collection, *Tenth of December*, came out early this year, we said: "In the MacArthur 'Genius' grant-winner's hands, sacred normalcy is twisted into shapes that often come across as perverse—until one considers how bizarre a short story about a modern American's life might seem to someone reading it two decades ago" ("Future Shock," [Books, Jan. 9](#)).

But Saunders ain't the only big name or important voice at the festival. Stanley Plumly, Maryland's poet laureate, and Dick Allen, the

laureate of Connecticut, will read and discuss their work, leaving you, as Plumly might put it, “wobbling, piping, wounded with joy” (Wheeler Auditorium, 1-2:30 P.M.).

Ariel S. Winter will be on a panel discussing “Mysterious Adaptation: Noir from Novels to the Movies” (School and Student Services, 12-1:30 P.M.). Winter’s *The Twenty-Year Death* won our 2012 “Best Fiction” prize and shows “the same character, from a variety of perspectives, in different times and different places. As in life, events that seem central in one place have faded into vague recollections a decade later in another locale” (“Death Between the Covers,” [Feature, Aug. 22, 2012](#)).

Jen Michalski and Michael Kimball host the 510 Reading series (Fine Arts Dept., 11:30 A.M.-12:30 P.M.) with CL Bledsoe, Andrew Keating, Nathan Leslie, and Ron Roensch, whose stories we compared to those of F. Scott Fitzgerald (“Things Fall Apart,” [Books, March 6](#)). And then Michalski will read with Terese Svoboda (Poe Room, 1-1:50 P.M.). Of Michalski’s new novellas, we wrote, “The two very different styles in *Could You Be With Her Now*, not only make the case for the novella as a form, but also for Michalski as a wise writer and a master stylist” (“Literary Diptych,” [Books, Jan. 16](#)). And we hear she may be reading from a new forthcoming title.

There will also be plenty of nonfiction. CP contributors John Barry and Deborah Rudacille will host their New Mercury readings at CityLit with a stellar lineup, including our own Spitballin’ columnist Jim Meyer, MICA’s David Sterritt (who is also the chair of the National Society of Film Critics) and Karen Houppert, who will read from her important new book, *Chasing Gideon: The Elusive Quest for Poor People’s Justice* (Fine Arts Dept., 2-3 P.M.).

And nonfiction headliner Jamal Joseph will read from his book *Panther Baby*, which traces his path from radical to criminal to the Chair of Columbia University’s School of the Arts film division. WEAA’s Marc Steiner will be on hand to lead the discussion. Steiner will also host a Cave Canem reunion with poets Afaa Michael Weaver and Reginald Harris (Poe Room, 12-12:50 P.M.).

Finally, we’re looking forward to hearing Tim Wendel read from *Habana Libre*, his yet-to-be-released novel about baseball in Baltimore and Cuba, when he shares the stage with Leigh Newman, who will read from *Still Points North*, her new memoir that stretches between Maryland and Alaska (Poe Room 11-11:50 P.M.).

For a full schedule, visit citylitproject.org.

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