

Revelation Book Festival Celebrates Reading

Revelation Vineyards, a winery set in the Hebron Valley of Madison County, Va., drew book lovers from throughout the region on Sunday, September 29, for the venue's second annual "No Book Left Behind: Celebrating our Freedom to Read" festival. The celebration, which coincided with Banned Books Week, included three presentations focused on the importance of literature and the freedom to read, along with several pop-up shops and exhibits.

Writers, librarians, teachers, professors, tutors, book sellers, artists, students, and civic organization representatives were all in attendance at the family-friendly event, held from noon to 5 pm. The opening session featured two local authors, Susie McKenna of Charlottesville and Devlyn D'Alfonzo of Madison, along with Heather Griffin, owner of Hundred Acre Books in Culpeper. Moderated by Fran Roebuck, long-time librarian at the Madison County Public Library, the panel explored the writing process, the impact of reading from an early age, and concerns about book banning and censorship.

The second session featured Dr. Gaila Sims, vice president of programs and interpretation at the Fredericksburg Area Museum. Sims reviewed the importance of literature in her work as a museum curator, particularly in the area of African American history. She introduced the audience to several Black women writers and depictions of slavery in their novels.

The final session celebrated the work of James Baldwin as the nation commemorates the 100th anniversary of his birth in Harlem. Widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers and thinkers, Baldwin's work continues to have an enduring impact today, according to Dr. Kevin Gaines, who, along with Sims, facilitated the panel discussion. Gaines, the Julian Bond Professor of Civil Rights and Social Justice at the University of Virginia, has taught the work of Baldwin in several university classes and spoke of him as "a significant voice of the Civil Rights movement."

As part of the Baldwin session, three panelists read Baldwin's acclaimed letter to his nephew, "My Dungeon Shook," first published in 1962. The letter has been banned by the Madison County School Board. Kaleb Hackley, president of the Culpeper Branch of the NAACP; Jason Ford, vice president of the NAACP Culpeper Branch; and Ashton Morse, director of community response with Encompass Community Supports and a founding board member of Culpeper Pride, served as the readers of the letter and participated in the hour-long discussion and analysis that followed.

Gaines noted that Baldwin's letter acknowledges that in the 1960s racism persisted not only in the South, but throughout the country. Gaines, Sims, the readers, and audience members all responded with surprise to the Madison County School Board's assertion that the letter "did not reflect a love of country," which led to its banning from the high school curriculum. Hackley stated that the judgment reflected a position that was "painfully unaware" of the experience of Black Americans, and that nowhere in the letter did Baldwin condemn America—rather he spoke of love and patience.

"The charge that this text does not reflect a love a country is completely false," added Gaines. "He's envisioning a future in which White people will understand their history and see the common humanity of Black people and renounce racism. He's imagining a solidarity between Blacks and Whites that is absolutely crucial to his idea of achieving our country."

"I find [the idea] baffling that to understand Black history, to learn about Black history, to acknowledge the violence that is inherent in this country is to not love this country," noted Sims. "I majored in American history, I love American history, and I love this country, but I also know about the violence, and I feel it's a privilege to share that history. The pain is part of our history, our reality."

"The conversation that James Baldwin is having with his nephew through this letter is the same conversation that I have had with my father and grandfather," said Hackley. "It's very real and current."

"This situation brings up a question of patriotism right now," added Mary Ellen Turner, an audience member. "What defines a love of country today?"

Gaines added: "I guess you could say that in banning this work, the school board, or those people responsible, are against reconciliation. They're against Black history. They are against putting Black history and Black realities in front of students."

When asked why Baldwin's work is so enduring and impactful, panelists credited his insights and skills as a writer. "Baldwin endures because he's able to tell hard truths," said Gaines. "This letter was addressed to his nephew but he's really addressing White America. He's very committed to that dialog across the racial divide. He tells hard truths but he's very hopeful."

Sims noted that while Baldwin has primarily been known as a novelist, his letters and essays are widely read today. Hackley added that "Baldwin's words came from a place of love," and wanting something better for the nation.

"Reconciliation means being open to a conversation," Gaines commented. "It means being open to growth."

"Reconciliation requires radical empathy," added Hackley. "And it requires committed action toward that empathy."

"We are so honored that writers, scholars, and representatives from civic organizations participated in the festival; they made the event insightful and very enjoyable," said Francoise Seillier-Moiseiwitsch, co-owner of Revalation Vineyards. Supporting organizations at the event included the Madison Literacy Council, the Madison Public Library, Culpeper Pride, MADSafe, NAACP Culpeper, Hundred Acre Books, and Sidney Morgan Crafts. Revalation Vineyards plans to hold a third book festival in October 2025.

Photos

Writers' Panel: *L-R, Heather Griffin, Devlyn D'Alfonzo, Susie McKenna, and Fran Roebuck*

Baldwin Panel: *L-R, Dr. Gaila Sims, Kaleb Hackley, Ashton Morse, Jason Ford, Dr. Kevin Gaines*

Book Festival: *Audience members enjoyed three presentations at the No Book Left Behind festival at Revalation Vineyards.*