

# First Annual Asbury Park Writing Festival Delivers Feast

By

Steve Sears

A writing festival – in Asbury Park, my vacation spot as a child?

“I am so there,” I said to myself.

The Provincetown Fringe folks presented it, and Restaurant Plan B on historic Cookman Avenue was the host location (705 Cookman Avenue, 732-807-4710 [www.restaurantplanbap.com](http://www.restaurantplanbap.com)). The thin but long restaurant, which features the culinary expertise of 22 year old Executive Chef Matt Levine, was filled with writers and lovers of the written word.

For me, one word to describe it: Heaven!

“Jeffrey,” barked out one enthusiastic woman to Jeffrey Haveson, owner of Restaurant Plan B, “we have to get started.”

“We will, we will,” he said, “people are still coming in.”

And they were, paying their \$15.00 admission at the door, enjoying wine, as the writers gathered in back, preparing for their moment at the microphone.

“We have,” said Haveson enthusiastically, “a 42 seat restaurant...black tables with linens,” as he hurried to the back. The music of the Rolling Stones blared pre-

performance, and a sign above the open kitchen that Levine mans read, “*Life is all about how you handle Plan B.*”

The first reader was Michael Carnevale, who read from chapter 9 of a novel he is working on called *Married*. I thought of that word very briefly, not only because my wife of 22 years, Lucille, sat in front of me, but because of Asbury Park. This city means something to me, and so many other people as well. I, and a host of others, spent childhoods here, maybe not so much in town, but near the boardwalk, where time and environment caused crumbling. In a sense, I am “married” to Asbury Park and, often times, you discover something about a loved one that you were unaware of, and what I discovered about the Cookman Avenue area is that it too, like the boardwalk, had seen much blight.

That’s yesteryear stuff. It’s alive now, and Jeffrey Haveson, Matt Levine, and Restaurant Plan B have played a big part in that. “I had,” said Haveson, “been looking at Bed and Breakfasts, but not in Asbury Park. I saw the space online for rent, came down (from his home in Westfield), saw an up and coming city, met some of the business owners, felt a vibe, and decided to pack up and move to Asbury Park. It was also coming back to my roots, as my grandmother was born and raised in AP, my great grandfather owned a business here, my grandmother met my grandfather here, and, when they were married, they lived in the Santander, which is a famous apartment building here in town, and now I live right next door to that building.”

As Carnevale finished, I, sitting beneath a huge marlin hanging on an aquatic-themed wall, said to myself, “I’m *really* thrilled to be here. I’m not sure what I want more here, food or the written word!” This is American cuisine with a twist, and the menu changes often. House made potato gnocchi is a hot appetizer item, but everything else on the menu is equally succulent.

The second of seventeen writers was Ruth Abromwitz, 89 years young, fresh off of her first book publication back in 2007, and a member of the local Harriet May Savitz Writers of the Roundtable of Bradley Beach. She read an essay about her mom. Talented writers were they all, and some of their writing resonated more deeply than others. Kathleen Phillips read a poem about her late mom called “Theresa”, while Black Box Ink writer’s group member, Sophie Stach Virgilio, mom to publisher Richard of the local B Plot blog, read a tale about an anxious day in her life as a child in Poland. Her voice cracked in nervousness and, it appeared, sadness, as she spoke. Lisa McLaughlin presented her story titled “Cake”, which featured lots of Garden State references – especially mentioning Route 18 (a thrill for this highway lover who loves reading maps), while Gayle Eggen Aanensen read from her historical novel, *The Little Rough Rider at the Jersey Shore*, which takes place in and around Asbury Park and Ocean Grove. Other presenters included Bob Podrasky, Christine Emmert, Irene Maran, Jeffrey Seeds, Kathy Polenberg, Kim Brittingham, Marjorie Conn, Patricia Florio, and Paula Newcomer

The reader whose work perhaps best exemplified Asbury Park, the restaurant field, and a freelance writing career, was Sue Saker’s poem “Swim At Your Own Risk.” It scored, for me, a trifecta. The writing life is littered with peaks and valleys, and those reading on this Sunday, the day after the area had suffered a major snowstorm, were

(perhaps) subject to loving critique from the attendees. It takes guts to be a writer, and then bare it for all eyes in a publication, or in a forum or live on stage a la this particular Sunday.

It also takes gust to open a restaurant as Haveson has, to be such a young Executive Chef like the 22 year old Levine, especially in a city like Asbury Park, many times promised a rebirth, but instead remaining a skeleton of its former self.

All that has changed.

“I love Asbury Park,” Jeffrey Haveson exclaimed. “I love the diversity of the people, and have made great friends. You get a support group that would rival the closest family. The music and art scene here in town is innovative, and growing in leaps and bounds. You are never at a loss for something to do, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. AP is undiscovered city; It is Greenwich Village. I have been working with Marge (Marjorie Conn) from Provincetown Fringe Festival in Asbury Park almost since we opened. I like finding those days when a non bar restaurant would otherwise be dead and have an event that gives people an alternative. Already, since Sunday (2/7), we are being asked to have the writer’s festival part 2.”

*Swim At Your Own Risk...*

When you do what you love, somewhere that you love, sometimes it isn’t risky at all.