

WSF X WBF AUTHOR TALKS



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This year’s partnership between the Wisconsin Science Festival and the Wisconsin Book Festival showcased how some of the most compelling scientific discoveries are oftentimes rooted in human stories. In 2025, Book Festival authors explored a wide variety of topics ranging from the deep ocean and ancient fish populations to the geology of our planet and the revolutionary history of American music. Held across the state, the Wisconsin Science Festival was a celebration of literature and learning that wove a tapestry of interdisciplinary thought, showcasing how science, history, and the humanities constantly inform and build upon one another.

Chasing Extremity: The Volatile Intersection of Curiosity and Calamity

A key theme flowing through the talks was humans’ ability to push past physical and psychological limits, especially when facing the hazards found in nature’s powerful and unpredictable currents.



Book Festival author Frank Bures describes canoeing the Mississippi River in his book *Pushing the River: An Epic Battle A Lost History A Near-Death and Other True Canoeing Stories* during the Wisconsin Science Festival. Photo Credit: Sam Mulrooney

Matthew Gavin Frank’s *Submersed: Wonder Obsession and Murder in the World of Amateur Submarines* investigated the high-risk, DIY subculture obsessed with descending into the ocean abyss. Frank, who took his own 2,000-foot dive, explored how this compulsion to sink connected to the Titan submarine disaster. Frank’s talk thematically blended stories of submariners voyages to the ocean’s extremity with the wonder of discovery.

This spirit of endurance and risk on the water was mirrored in **Frank Bures’s** *Pushing the River: An Epic Battle A Lost History A Near-Death and Other True Canoeing Stories*, which covered his own near-death experience on the Mississippi River and the legendary Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby. Bures detailed the grueling 450-mile race, revealing the foundational role Ojibwe racers and builders played. Then, the Book Festival author explained how Native designs influenced modern canoeing despite the early racism experienced by Indigenous populations.

Shifting from environmental extremes to anatomical frontiers, **Mary Roach’s** *Replaceable You* offered a glimpse into the ambitious quest to recreate human anatomy. Roach explored medical advances, such as sculpting noses from brass and growing body parts from stem cells, highlighting the complex questions prompted by the body’s failings. Together, these three events underscored a theme of testing human limits, whether in a DIY submersible, a river canoe, or an operating room.

Decoding Deep Time and Building Planetary Viability

The Wisconsin Science Festival’s book talk events also provided essential context on the planet’s immense history and the urgent need for environmental repair.



Authors Joe E. Meisel and Rebecca Hogue Wojahn speak about their books during the Wisconsin Science Festival. Photo Credit: Sam Mulrooney

Laura Poppick’s *Strata: Stories from Deep Time* provided the bedrock for these discussions, decoding the Earth’s 4.54 billion year history in geological layers across four global transformations. **Jack Lohmann’s** *White Light* connected the geological past to the present threat of climate change by tracing phosphorus, an element essential to life that, through mining and agricultural industry, has broken from natural cycles. Lohmann emphasized that renewing our relationship with the Earth requires accepting the cycle of life and death.

The collective action needed for this renewal was the central focus of **Malcolm Harris’s** *What’s Left: Three Paths Through the Planetary Crisis*, which argued that only a unified “meta-strategy” combining progressive, socialist, and revolutionary efforts can avert climate catastrophes. Harris’s argument was given historical weight by **Mark O’Connell’s** *The Year Science Changed Everything*, which detailed how the International Geophysical Year (IGY) in 1957 successfully united 6,000 scientists from 66 nations across political borders to produce foundational climate research, offering a blueprint for modern global collaboration.

The practical applications of these systemic challenges was explored in the Fish Tales event, featuring **Joe E. Meisel** (*The Marlin’s Fiery Eye*) and **Rebecca Hogue Wojahn** (*Saving Our Sturgeon: Protecting Wisconsin’s Ancient Fish*). Meisel detailed the somewhat bizarre adaptations of deep-sea marine life, such as anglerfish whose males become parasites of the female during reproduction. Wojahn’s work focused locally on the near-extinction of Wisconsin’s ancient lake sturgeon and the successful, decades-long conservation efforts driven collaboratively by government agencies, conservationists, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, and spearfishing groups.

Two nature talks further grounded this ecological theme: **Dexter Patterson’s** *Birds of the Great Lakes*, a guide emphasizing conservation best practices and habitat sustainability for over 100 regional bird species, and the celebration of *The Wisconsin State Park System 125th Anniversary*, where **Scott Spoolman**, **Betsy Korbinyr**, and **Randy Hoffman** showcased the link between the state’s geologic history and its current recreational landscapes.

The Soundtracks of Identity and Place

Further talks at the Wisconsin Science Festival explored how cultural expression and local identity capture historical movements and social changes; showing how music, storytelling, and traditions reflect shifting values, giving voice to communities navigating moments of transformation.



Tamara Saviano, Grammy-winning music producer and author of *Poets and Dreamers: My Life in Americana Music* speaks about significant moments in Americana history during the Wisconsin Science Festival. Photo Credit: Sam Mulrooney

Selena Fragassi’s *Alanis: 30 Years of Jagged Little Pill* celebrated Alanis Morissette’s 1995 album as an “existential awakening of sexuality” and a courageous “rail against sexism.” Fragassi detailed how the album became a groundbreaking platform for feminist themes, noting that Morissette refused to polish her raw sound, recording songs quickly, sometimes in one or two vocal takes. According to Selena Fragassi, this authenticity proved that female artists were “viable” in the music business.

Similarly, **Tamara Saviano’s** *Poets and Dreamers: My Life in Americana Music* traced the rise of Americana, a genre born from artists who prioritized literary music over country radio. Saviano, the first woman president of the Americana Music Association, detailed her close relationships with icons like Kris Kristofferson and Guy Clark, and emphasized the community’s decision to establish the “Spirit of Americana free speech award” to honor those who use their voices for good.

The exploration of music as a vehicle for identity continued with **Doug Bradley’s** *The Tracks of My Years: A Music-Based Memoir*, which chronicled his journey of self-discovery against a post-WWII soundtrack, from Sinatra and Motown to Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell.

Providing a broader historical and geographical foundation were **Dean Robbins’s** *Wisconsin Idols: 100 Heroes Who Changed the State, the World, and Me*, an essay collection highlighting figures like Abraham Lincoln and Oprah Winfrey who have surprising connections to Wisconsin. Robbins’s work established the state as a “notably influential place.” Finally, The Wisconsin Whey celebrated local craftsmanship and collaboration in the Driftless Region, showcasing master cheesemakers like Sid Cook and Andy Hatch, and highlighting the unique camaraderie among competitors committed to quality within this Wisconsin industry.

The Wisconsin Book Festival Author events were part of the Wisconsin Science Festival’s ten day lineup of statewide programming, enriching the schedule with conversations that connected scientific discovery, cultural history, and stories that shape our understanding of the world. By bringing these perspectives together, the talks encouraged audiences to consider how knowledge, creativity, and community engagement can drive meaningful change.

Join the Wisconsin Science Festival in 2026 for more Book Festival partnership events! Visit WisSciFest.org to stay in the loop and get more details.

Video recordings of select talks are [available online](#).