

# The FLIP Festival

Head Over Heels in Parati, Brazil

**M**OUNTAINS thick with tropical vegetation rise behind the coastal town of Parati, Brazil; the bay spreads before it, dotted with fishing boats. Along the old wooden docks, fishermen, shirtless and shoeless, prepare their nets with quick, strong hands. In streets paved with oversized cobblestones, women serve *doces*, sweets like *maracujá* (passion fruit) tarts made with condensed milk. Parati—which, until the 1970s, was accessible only by boat—lies equidistant from Brazil's major cities, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and is home to the last of Brazilian royalty. It is known throughout Brazil as somewhere special, a retreat and an oasis.

But that is not why writers, editors, journalists, television broadcasters, performance artists, and other interested Brazilians flock here for a long weekend in July (which is midwinter in Brazil, rainy and cold). It is in Parati that Liz Calder, a cofounding editor of British book publisher Bloomsbury, and Luiz Schwarcz, the head of Brazil's influential press Companhia das Letras, founded an international literary festival in 2003. In a remarkably short time, Festa Literária Internacional de Parati (FLIP) has blossomed into the most important literary event in Brazil.

The idea for FLIP began as a kitchen-table conversation among Calder and some well-connected Brazilian friends in Calder's solar-powered house in Parati, where she lives part-time. The

**JOELLE HANN** is a poet living in Brooklyn. She works as an editor for Bedford/St. Martin's. She is translating *O Amor Natural*, the erotic poems of Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade.



The colonial town of Parati offers hundreds of beaches and islands accessible by boat.

idea kicked around for several years until Peter Florence, the mastermind behind Hay-on-Wye, an annual festival in Wales, visited Calder in Parati and coined the catchy acronym FLIP. "Peter galvanized us, gave us a bit of lead in our pencil," says Calder. "If the thing's got a name, it's got to happen." Florence, a close friend of Calder's, has advised on the planning and execution of FLIP since the beginning.

Initially, the event was held on the second floor of a large house in town, where you can see (and hear) horse-drawn carts hauling green bananas through the streets. Only a few hundred people were expected for the weekend festival that included readings and panel discussions—but more than a thousand came. Many watched from overflow tents outside. "It was quite improvised," says Samuel Titan Jr., a translator and editor, and codirector of FLIP 2005. "There were things like authors helping each other with their books, holding them open. It was quite a homely thing."

Homely—but not for long. Journalists from Brazil's major newspapers,

television stations, and Internet sites jumped on the idea of a literary festival in Brazil. "It was the press who created the excitement," says Calder of FLIP's skyrocketing popularity. "There was a lot of coverage—a lot." Large music festivals have been *de rigueur* in Brazil since the 1960s. Film festivals, too, are quite popular. The São Paulo International Film Festival, established in 1977, and more recently the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival, established in 1999, draw hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. For literature, however, the pickings had been slim. With the press's enthusiastic coverage, FLIP's attendance swelled from a thousand-plus in 2003 to twelve thousand in 2005. What started out as a low-key weekend festival has become a five-day program of events that include music concerts, film screenings, and literary tributes.

**C**ALDER'S connection to Brazil dates back to the 1960s, when her husband, an engineer with Rolls-Royce, was posted to São Paulo. "I came in my early



FLIP enthusiasts in costume pose in the author's tent.

twenties with two young children, as a mother and a wife.... It was the time of incredible music and culture—under the dictatorship—a very lucky time to be here,” she says. Calder moonlighted as a model and, on returning to London in 1968, worked her way from entry-level publicist to editorial director of the British publishing house Victor Gollancz. In 1970 she helped to establish *Virago*, a feminist press in London, and, in 1986, she cofounded Bloomsbury. The success of *Harry Potter*—a series that Calder signed to Bloomsbury—has allowed FLIP to continue, and Calder to semiretire to Parati.

Now in her sixties, Calder is the public face of the festival, interviewing authors, meeting journalists, and introducing events. But FLIP's programming is handled entirely by Brazilian literati. For the first two years, Flávio Pinheiro, an influential literary journalist from Rio, directed the event. In 2005, Ruth Lanna and Titan, former literary editors from São Paulo, took over. The festival demands much of its organizers, who must begin to orchestrate topics, invite authors, and juggle pro-

gramming issues just one month after the previous festival ends. Editorial and publicity departments of publishers in Rio and São Paulo vie for representation—some might say dominance—at FLIP. The festival directors try, too, to give voice to those Brazilian writers who do not live in Brazil's major cities and are not as prominent or as widely read as others in the influential south, where the major publishers are located.

The festival has managed to shine a much-needed spotlight on Brazilian writers, who tend to be isolated from one another in their vast country, and—because they speak Portuguese, not Spanish—from the rest of South America. Brazilian literature was well represented in the United States in the 1960s, but now, most American readers are hard-pressed to name any Brazilian writer, let alone a contemporary one. Works by Brazilians are, however, being translated and read in Europe.

FLIP has featured such writers as Americans Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Jon Lee Anderson, Robert Alter, and the late Susan Sontag; Brits Ian McE-

wan, Martin Amis, and Colm Tóibín; and Canadians Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, as well as writers from France, Spain, Argentina, Turkey, India, Angola, and Israel. Bringing these writers to Brazil does two important things: It gives international writers access to new audiences, and it gives Brazilian writers contact with international colleagues. “We hoped to bring more international literature to Brazil, and more Brazilian literature to the world,” says Calder. “And I think it's working quite well. Books sell out after events, even ones by unknown authors. It's a great place to get a start.”

In 2005, panel topics ranged from the esoteric to the quotidian. Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk discussed Borges's influence on his writing and translations, while culinary celebrity Anthony Bourdain discussed cooking and other antics in New York City restaurant kitchens. One of the most popular panels featured Brazilian hip-hop artist (pronounced *hippee-hoppee* in Portuguese) MV Bill and anthropologist Luiz Eduardo Soares, who discussed their coauthored book on urban violence in the *favelas* (urban shanty towns) in Rio. Urban violence concerns everyone in Brazil, where forty-five thousand people are murdered each year—a greater number than those killed in the entire Arab-Israeli conflict. MV Bill lives in Cidade de Deus, a Rio *favela* made famous by Fernando Meirelles's 2002 film, *City of God*. He spoke eloquently of his efforts to help other *favela* dwellers express their despair instead of killing one another. Speaking of his plight, he wept. The audience gave him a standing ovation.

Television talk-show host and comic Jô Soares led a very different—and uproariously funny—panel on Brazilian humor with historian Isabel Lustosa. “Soares is usually a one-man show,” says codirector Titan. “The idea was to bring him together with someone you would never associate with him.” Both festival tents were filled to capacity—nineteen hundred people. Another two thousand watched on a big screen in

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the town square. "The whole Praça da Matriz was taken over," Titan says. "It's great in itself, but it's also great because some of these people will then listen to the names of Jeanette Winterson, Robert Alter, and David Grossman," whose works have only recently become available in Portuguese.

Pulling off this kind of panel requires more than just the insights of the directors and the financial backing of sponsors like Unibanco and Bloomsbury. It requires superb organization to provide simultaneous translations in English, Spanish, and Portuguese (on sometimes crackly headsets—I sat through more than one panel holding my transmitter in the air), printed programs for each event, a well-stocked bookstore, hundreds of multilingual staff members, and experienced technicians. But consider also that in Brazil—which has had a democratically elected government since the 1980s—police, government, and municipal bureaucracies can be slow to help and are sometimes downright corrupt. If you want to get anything done, let alone done quickly and efficiently, it helps to know influential people. Brazilians have an expression: *Dar um jeito*. It means to work around a situation that's more or less impossible and get it working. "That says a lot about Brazilians' character," says Calder. "They can always find a *jeito*, a way, and that's come in handy with FLIP. There have been a lot of *jeitinhos* done for us on- and off-site."

**A**CCORDING to statistics compiled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2005, 88 percent of Brazilians over the age of fifteen are functionally literate. However, many publishers, editors, and journalists at the festival complained of the lack of readers in Brazil—only 10 percent of the functionally literate buy books, and only a fraction of that number buy literature. "Most people don't read as a habit. They

watch TV, but they don't read," says prize-winning poet, translator, and scholar Paulo Henriques Britto, who presented his new book on a FLIP panel in 2005. "In fact, one of the things I notice when I go to New York City is all those people in the subway reading trashy novels. It's great, because if, out of a hundred people who read trashy novels, one becomes a reader of great books, that's marvelous. You go to the metro in Rio and there's no one reading anything. Not even newspapers." According to Titan, the average first printing for a book of fiction or nonfiction in Brazil is a mere three thousand copies.

Distribution, too, is a serious problem. In a country of Brazil's size (just slightly smaller than the United States) and development (much of the interior is unsettled), a book that's already expensive in Rio at 35 *reais* (U.S. \$15) becomes a luxury item in Manaus, the capital city of the Amazon more than twenty-seven hundred miles away, where the average monthly minimum wage is 175 *reais* (U.S. \$75). The government has plans to subsidize costly shipping rates, but political scandal has effectively frozen any new initiatives from President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's troubled government.

Nonetheless, the festival gives everyone—Brazilian readers and writers, journalists, editors, and publishers—a welcome chance to show their work and meet one another. "Brazilians come from all over," says Paula Barcellos, a journalist and book reviewer for *Jornal do Brasil*, a daily newspaper in Rio. "Here you can discuss literature and talk to the authors, and that's the difference. And the setting is beautiful." São Paulo's biennial, the only other literary event of comparable size, is a hectic trade show. But in Parati, people socialize in the relaxed atmosphere of a beautiful town. Ronaldo Correia de Brito, a doctor and writer from the northeastern city of Recife, says he was grateful to be at FLIP last year, not just to participate in the panel on writers from the remote (literarily, at least)

northeast, but because it added “another dimension to see people in the flesh.” Calder agrees: “People are constantly running into each other here. Communication is much more immediate, intense, and intimate.”

Correira’s presence at the festival also helped in a practical way—his book sales increased. Cristiane Costa, a literary editor in Rio, has seen this happen at every FLIP so far. “Last year, Spanish writer Rosa Montero read from her first book; she went from being no one to being a sold-out author. It launched her career.”

In its service to readers and writers, however, the festival tries to go beyond providing intellectual diversion and a venue for networking. FLIP brings a lot of money to Parati in its off-season. In fact, the city generates more revenue in the festival’s five days than in all the winter months together. FLIP also runs a literacy program in a handful of local schools. And it has an extensive children’s program at the festival itself—with concerts, readings, performances, and films for and by children.

In its short life, FLIP has inspired a parallel festival, OFF FLIP, at which unknown writers like New York-educated poet Flávia Rocha, who now runs a film school in São Paulo, launch their books. Many of these newcomers are poets, whose collections have a commercial value in Brazil as low as those in the United States. In 2005, there was even an OFF OFF FLIP, an event organized by performance poet Tavinho Paes, from Rio. Performance poets gathered at midnight at the house of Brazilian prince Dom João Maria de Orleans e Bragança (who, strangely enough, had died two days before). The modest *palatio* sits near Parati’s bay, where at high tide, the sea sweeps in to clean the streets. Dom João’s son, the prince, served thimblefuls of family-estate *cachaça* (a sugar-cane rum) to onlookers in the *palatio*’s courtyard. My companions, journalists from Rio, declined to taste the *cachaça*, saying they never drank the stuff, but I accepted.

It could have been the carnival atmosphere, the full moon, or the magic of Brazil, but I was happy to be served

by a prince in a seventeenth-century palace near the sea, in a town overflowing with enthusiasm for literature. ∞

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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**Web site:** www.flip.org.br

**Festival Dates:** To be announced on the FLIP Web site in the spring, but will most likely fall on the first weekend in July.

**Cost:** Tickets are available only online and sell out within twenty-four hours. In 2005, almost every event cost approximately seven dollars, and there were more than twenty events from which to choose. Visit [www.americanas.com.br](http://www.americanas.com.br) for more information.

**Accommodations:** Parati has many *pousadas* (inns), from which to choose. The most expensive can cost up to 340 *reais* (U.S. \$160) for a double room with breakfast. Stay in or near the historic center, which is full of shops and restaurants, or else you will need to rent a car. Basic rooms are available up to the last minute at *pousadas* farther from the historic center and at a hotel near the bus depot, which is within walking distance to the festival, for approximately 100 *reais* (U.S. \$45) per night. Visit [www.paraty.com.br](http://www.paraty.com.br) for more information.

**Travel Tips:** Varig Airlines ([www.varig.com.br](http://www.varig.com.br)) offers competitive prices for flights to Brazil. Beware that, even though July is low season (winter) in Brazil, you will probably still pay North America’s high-season prices.

## Strangers in a Strange Land

When Writers Retreats Don't  
Live Up to Expectations

**F**LIP through any magazine for writers—including this one—and consider the seemingly limitless possibilities for the international traveler. You can embark on a literary retreat in colonial Mexico or a medieval Italian village; convene with famous writers and scholars in Prague, St. Petersburg, or Kenya; discuss poetry in workshops located anywhere from Provence to Guadeloupe; or even tweak a manuscript on Crete. Along with the explicit writing opportunities

and the implied career benefits are the touristy perks, which range from guided tours of the countryside and on-site yoga classes to exploration of the region’s restaurants.

These retreats sound tempting, and are made even more so by the availability of fellowships, many of which are too small to cover anything more than the most basic travel expenses yet honorary enough to convince writers to invest the rest of the fee themselves. And judging by the plethoric increase over the last several years, these types of directed travels have found their market. But do the journeys always deliver according to expectations?

Some do. Jamaican poet and writer Geoffrey Philp notes that the Calabash International Literary Festival in Treasure Beach, Jamaica, where he has been a participant as well as a teacher, is “the greatest little festival in the greatest little district in the greatest little country in the world. To be honest, everything was spectacular,” he says. “Food,