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Books: 134 authors wooed buyers at Midwest Booksellers trade show

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Winners of the 2009 Midwest Bookseller's Choice Awards are, from left, Neal Gaiman, Freya Manfred, Michael Perry and David Wroblewski. (Pioneer Press: Ben Garvin)

It wasn't very gracious of me to greet Hell's Kitchen owner Mitch Omer by saying "So, people tell me you're nuts." I was referring to his wild past, not realizing he's bipolar.

But the Minneapolis restaurateur took my comment as a compliment, I think, since he is open about his mental condition. After ranting about Gordon Ramsay, foul-mouthed host of the television reality show "Hells Kitchen," Omer talked about sending his

signature peanut butter to American soldiers in the Middle East.

Omer, who was pitching his new book, "Damn Good Food," was one of the more colorful authors who energized 358 staffers from 96 bookstores in eight states during last weekend's annual Midwest Booksellers Association trade show at RiverCentre in St. Paul.

Thirty of the 134 visiting authors — Minnesotans and those from out of state — participated a round-robin luncheon at which the writers switched tables every 10 minutes to talk to as many booksellers and librarians as possible about their new books.

St. Paulite Chris Farrell, economics editor for American Public Radio's "Marketplace Money," was sitting across from Omer, and their contrasting demeanors certainly show the variation in authors' personal styles. There was calm Farrell, wearing a nice gray suit, and there was Omer, dressed in chef's whites, jubilantly pointing to scars on his arm that had something to do with Van Halen.

Farrell explores contemporary finances in his book "The New Frugality." He believes sustainability, which he defines as trying to reduce our impact on the planet's ecology, has moved into the mainstream. He also believes that giving is at the core of financial planning.

"Sustainability and giving are the new mindset, the new frugality," he said.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, poet laureate of Kansas, talked about her 10th book, and first memoir, "The Sky Begins at Your Feet." It's about living through breast cancer, for which she has the family gene. "And it's about community, family, kinship and acceptance of the body," Mirriam-Goldberg said of the book, which was given a starred review in

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Library Journal.

Charming and vivacious Stephanie Kallos, actress and teacher, told of how her best-selling novel "Sing Them Home" (just out in paperback), grew out of a photo in a 1974 National Geographic that showed a piano that had been dropped into a field after a tornado in Nebraska.

That piano landed on Kallos' friend's house, and it started her thinking about what would happen if something or someone (in her novel, it's the mother) went up and never came down. Then, for no reason except fun, she led the audience in some rousing choruses of the Nebraska fight song.

SENSE OF PLACE

Independent booksellers have a long history of making books a success through handselling, which means they personally recommend good reads to customers. Some of the regional authors whose books local booksellers endorsed were honored with Midwest Booksellers Choice Awards during a reception at 317 on Rice Park (the old Minnesota Club).

Top honors went to David Wroblewski for his novel, "The Story of Edgar Sawtelle"; Michael Perry in nonfiction for "COOP: A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting"; Freya Manfred for her poetry collection, "Swimming With a Hundred Year Old Snapping Turtle"; Kate DiCamillo's "Louise, the Adventures of a Chicken" for children's picture book; and Neil Gaiman's "The Graveyard Book," the first children's book to win both a Hugo science fiction award and a children's Newbery medal.

All the authors spoke of the meaning of place in their work.

Wroblewski, who grew up in Wisconsin but lived in

the Twin Cities for five years, said his surprise best seller about a family that raises dogs came about "because a whole chain of people took a chance on me, an unpublished author with an unpronounceable name, who wrote a long and unlikely story that starts with the description of a farm. That's not the way to start a novel."

Now a resident of Colorado, Wroblewski said his relationship with the Midwest was neither "love nor hate" but rather "fondness and regard."

"I know why Nick Carraway comes home here at the end of 'Gatsby,'" he said, pointing out that there are four "ghosts of place" in his story and "we are all haunted by where we come from."

Perry is a self-deprecating, funny guy who described himself as "a farmer kid from northern Wisconsin who never set out to be a writer, the only cowboy in Wyoming putting himself through nursing school. In 'COOP' I could revisit my childhood, when we looked forward to the JC Penney catalogue coming."

Although "COOP" is partly about raising chickens, it's also about Perry's family and a personal tragedy involving his brother. "People say it helps them," he says of the book.

POET'S CORNER

Before she read a few of her poems, Manfred touched on the mystery (although she didn't call it that) of why poems mean different things to different people. She says she thought the title poem is about her and a snapping turtle, but others have seen it as conscious vs. the unconscious and other psychological insights.

Gaiman, who was born in England, said he could hardly believe he had lived in the Midwest 17 years,

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until the cat he got as a kitten when they moved here died of old age. He lives near Menominee, Wis., and calls himself a true Midwesterner.

"Richard Burton said, 'Home is where the books are.' That's true for me," he admitted.

Gaiman said he was "raised in libraries and bookshops" in Sussex, where a bookseller gave him advice on "the good stuff."

There was a graveyard behind that store, Gaiman recalled, "and growing up I thought it was the scariest cemetery because witches burned in 1533 were there."

When Gaiman's son was a 2-year-old, he would ride his tricycle around the gravesites.

"I thought I should do a story about a child in a graveyard because my son looked so happy," the author recalled. "It would be like 'The Jungle Book,' only the boy would be raised by ghosts.

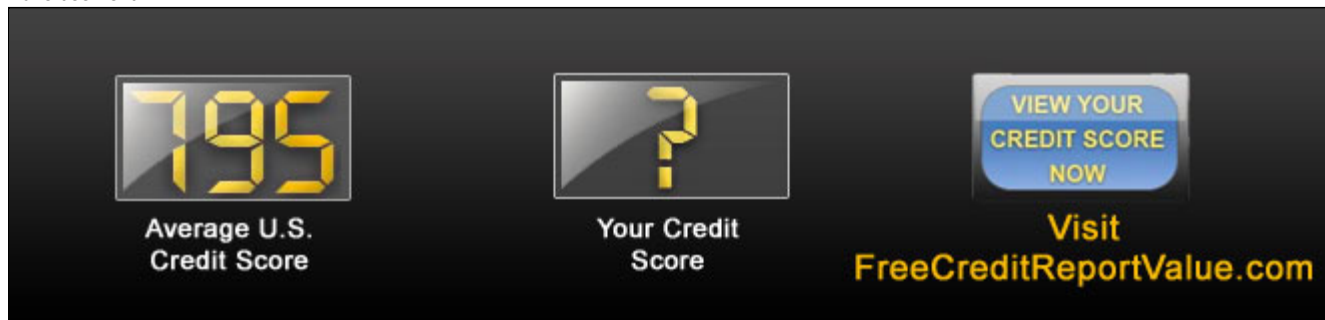
"I was a journalist at the time, so I went up to the office and found it was so much better an idea than I was a writer. I put it off until I learned to be a writer and kept coming back to it.

"Finally, in 2003 or 2004, I figured, 'I am not getting any better, I must write this.' This book has won a ridiculous number of awards, but this one (from the Midwest Booksellers) is the most personal."

Mary Ann Grossmann can be reached at 651-228-5574.

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