Abu Dhabi Book Fair 2014 where a thousand voices came together

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May 5, 2014 Updated: May 6, 2014 11:15:00

Award-winning authors, impromptu concerts, Emirati fables and Swedish meatballs were only a few of the offerings at this year’s Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. In its 24th year, the annual event upheld its standing as one of the region’s leading literary meetups with its share of awards glamour, probing discussions and bargain book deals.

Held within the cosy, air-conditioned confines of the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre, the fair hosted stands – from the shiny to simple – from hundreds of independent and major booksellers, in addition to cooking demonstrations from popular local and international cooks.

With the event completed for another year and thousands of bookworms back at home with trolleys full of new reads, the fair once again offered something for everyone.

**Emirati authors in the spotlight**

Established and emerging writers took part in this year’s festival discussing new and old works.

The Emirati children’s author Maytha Al Khayat’s (*I Love My Dad’s Long Beard and My Own Special Way*) festival experience this year included a story-reading session and an agreement to collaborate with the popular Swedish illustrator Stina Wirsén on a new children’s
“We are really excited about it,” Wirsén said. “As soon as the fair is done we will begin working on it and we have some good ideas.”

Zayed University students were also at the fair to present the second instalment of their Story Mile Project, a collection of historic and modern Emirati folkloric tales.

Historical local literature was discussed in The Sea in the Emirati Memory session. The researcher Bilal Al Budoor said names of early Emirati generations reflected their surroundings. “Some called their children Qwaher, which is when the sea is quiet,” he said. “You may also find a girl called Qumasha, which means a garment.”

UAE leaders in attendance

The fair has seen regular visits from the country’s leadership. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, arrived at the fair on Sunday to award the winners of this year’s Sheikh Zayed Book Awards. Last Wednesday also saw an opening day visit from Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, Minister of Culture, Youth and Community Development, who toured the site.

Music at the fair

Melodies and words fused together in several musical performances, both planned and impromptu.

The Swedish Sami singer Sofia Jannok and her three-piece band enchanted the crowd with a half-hour set that introduced the public to music from Sweden’s indigenous community.

The oud player Charbel Rouhana mixed history with his performance as he explained Lebanese musical developments over the years.

A hastily planned concert was held on Saturday evening featuring Swedish author and saxophonist Jan Lööf alongside the trumpeter Sami Al Fakir and the tenor Vincent Hashimi. They performed a pleasing set of traditional Swedish songs and jazz standards.

The award winners

The Abu Dhabi International Book Fair season is home to two of the region’s most important literary awards.

Last Tuesday, the night before the fair kicked off, the International Prize for Arabic Fiction was awarded to the Iraqi novelist Ahmed Saadawi for *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, a loose Iraqi take on Mary Shelley’s horror classic.

Sunday saw Abdel Rasheed Mahmoudi receive the Sheikh Zayed Book Award in the Literature category for his novel *After Coffee*.

The nominees from both awards also had their time to shine as they took part in numerous discussions in the fair surrounding their acclaimed works.

A world premiere

The legendary Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz had one of his minor plays translated and presented in English for the first time by NYU Abu Dhabi students. Titled *The Jinni Speaks*, the supernatural tale is inspired by the ancient folk tale *City of Brass* from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

The students gave a reading of the play, complete with musical accompaniment.

NYU Abu Dhabi’s assistant professor of literature Paulo Horta said a full production of the play is being considered.