

Literature fest opens in the capital

By Atle Hetland

It was with fanfare and a crowded hall that the second Islamabad Literature Festival opened at Hotel Margala yesterday afternoon under the auspices of Oxford University Press. Last year, was the festival's maiden voyage in Islamabad, following the successes of similar events in Karachi since 2010, and in Lahore, where several publishing houses have joined hands in organizing such annual events.

"I have been asked to organize such events in other cities", said Ameena Saiyid, the Managing Director of Oxford in her opening speech. "I tell them that they should go ahead themselves. We have now made a model for how to do it", she said, underlining that books will always be with us, in spite of modern technologies, e-books and other communication forms.

In his opening address, Asif Ferrukhi, founder of the Karachi and Islamabad Literature Festivals, stressed that not only do writers help us shed light in the tunnel, they also help us see the tunnel itself, meaning the world and issues around us. Aamer Hussein, a UK based writer of Pakistani origin, also reflected on the role of writers in society in his well-crafted keynote speech. He said that writers may not be specialists on politics and societal issues. Yet, they do have an important role in holding up the mirror and discussing issues. He also mentioned writers in the colonial time, and he gave special tribute to a Danish-writer in Kenya, Karen Blixen, who first wrote under the penname of Isaac Dinesen.

But no literature conference can be inaugurated without a poem or two, and it was the role of Zerah Nigah to speak about poetry and read some cherished verses – in Urdu, of course, because poetry is always best in the mother tongue.

And then it was onto a short dance performance by Sheema Kermani who entertained young and old in the audience with elegance and passion. By the time she ended, the hall was packed and the story telling session could start at sunset, as is indeed the time for such an activity.

Ameena Saiyid had mentioned in her opening speech that this year's literature festival is not only about books; it also includes visual art, presented by 'My Art World' and 'Art Now'. The Italian diplomat who officiated at the opening ceremony, Federico Bianchi, was pleased to talk about the importance that his country pays to cooperation with Pakistan in art and literature, and also in cultural documentation and research, including in Swat.

A number of publishing houses have large stands at the Festival, with tables full of books and special bags for the customers. And if booklovers want the most recent releases, the hottest cakes in town, they should attend some of the 14 book launches during the Festival through Saturday and Sunday until it all closes late on Sunday evening. By then, no less than seventy sessions have been held and one hundred and fifty writers and booklovers have spoken.

Photos attached

Photo captions:

Photo 1 & 2: Eager volunteers at the Islamabad Literature Festival ready to assist participants.

Photo 3: Salma Iftikhar, novelist and science teacher, with Asif Ferrukhi of the Karachi and Islamabad Literature Festivals.

Photo 4: Aameena Saiyid, Managing Director of Oxford University Press welcoming the large audience at the opening of Islamabad Literature Festival.

Photo 5: Dr. Feriyal Amal Aslam, a festival participant at a book stand. “This book is my mother’s favorite”, she said, as she quickly looked at Urdu books.

(-Photo by the writer)