The 26th Abu Dhabi International Book Fair gets under way with its biggest edition to date

News 4

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Why the 26th Abu Dhabi International Book Fair that opened yesterday is unmissable

By Sharmila Dhal

ABU DHABI - The UAE's Year of Reading has received its biggest push yet with the launch of the 26th Abu Dhabi International Book Fair (ADIBF) in the capital today.

Although the event is an annual affair, this year's fair is like nothing before. It seeks to nurture a generation of avid book readers and firmly put the UAE on the global literary map after the UAE Cabinet last year declared 2016 as the Year of Reading and called for a national framework to promote the habit of reading.

This week's ADIBF is an unprecedented literary fiesta. Never has the fair spanned such a huge area - 3,502 square metres, up 10 per cent from 2015 - housing as many exhibitors - 1,260 - as it does this time.

If you're a student, you cannot but feel the difference. Every young visitor is being handed a backpack containing essential books and other publications as part of a National Library initiative. The book bag is a spin-off from previous National Library programmes in which coupons worth Dh5 million were distributed to schools and universities.

The fair is bustling with a raft of novel activities - over 500 of them - to enthuse visitors and potential readers. Among them are special sections like Show Kitchen and Black Box Cinema to Guest of Honour and Personality of the Year corners (see box).

Over 600 authors from 63 countries have specially flown in for the event, with visitors getting a chance to rub shoulders with them and up their literary quotient.

It is no coincidence that Italy has been appointed guest of honour. As Dr Ali Bin Tamim from the board of directors at organiser Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA Abu Dhabi), said, "Italy was chosen as this year's guest of honour due to its importance in the cultural and political landscape of the contemporary world, and the cultural bonds that brought us together centuries ago. Selecting the great Arabic-Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd as ADIBF's Personality of the Year recognises his credentials as a courageous historical thinker and his contribution to creating and spreading the region's cultural renaissance."

Mohammed Al Shehhi, director of research and publication at TCA Abu Dhabi, said, "We renew our loyalty to the legacy of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the nation, through the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, and we will celebrate Arab narrators with the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF)."

Italy has planned a dedicated programme to highlight its literature through a series of talks by a group of authors, poets and academics. Italian publishers will also be present in a pavilion displaying their literary and scientific works.

The Italian talks include 'Storytelling and history writing' by Valerio Massimo Manfredi; 'From Paper to the Screen: The Importance of Character' by Antonio Mancini; 'The Italy of Tomorrow: fantasy, illustrations and novels for young people' discussed by Beatrice Masini and Liliyah Troya; 'Saints, Navigators... and poets? Italian poetry in the third millennium' by Valerio Magrelli.

A project by Emirati filmmaker Nawaf Al Janahi, the Black Box Cinema will give visitors a chance to buy specialised books on cinema from participating publishing houses and choose one of the films to watch from 2.5pm.

The event will feature 18 films from 10 Arab nations including Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Kuwait and the UAE.

Some of the films to be screened include A Thousand Mercies and Lights, Get Married, A Wish, Bang Bang, Made of Clay, Romeo Married Juliet and Bou Lawld.

What: Abu Dhabi International Book Fair
When: April 27 to May 3
Where: Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC)

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