

A fertile fair in the desert



Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan (centre) prepares to cut the ribbon and open the 2009 Abu Dhabi International Book Fair

Long a largely Arab world affair, the 19th Abu Dhabi book fair is spreading its wings internationally. Hannah Davies reports from the event, and sees abundant opportunities for UK publishers in the region

If Abu Dhabi could be summed up in one word it would be "growth". As the capital of the United Arab Emirates, its recent vast and sprawling building projects have been well documented in the West. Yet Abu Dhabi is also keen to expand culturally—both in terms of promoting its own heritage and inviting offerings from the West. Last month saw an array of arts events take place across the capital, including Coldplay rocking the Emirates Palace, and a run of performances by the Bolshoi Ballet. The 19th incarnation of the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair (ADIBF), which took place from 17th to 22nd March, was one of the key features of this culture-fest.

The fair's importance in Abu Dhabi is undeniable. Following its opening, the front pages of local and national newspapers were splashed with photographs of the minister of foreign affairs, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, cutting the ribbon to officially launch the fair (*above*).

In publishing terms, ADIBF has leapt in importance internationally. Exhibitor numbers rose this year by 32% on 2008, with 637 companies attending from 52 countries—up from 42 countries last year—and taking up

14% more floor space. New countries represented included South Korea, Italy, Austria and Australia. Interest from the UK has also increased, with 29 (up from 24 in 2008) businesses attending, including Welsh Literature Abroad, the Muslim Writers Award, I B Tauris and Harlequin Mills & Boon.

Publishers are seen as partners

Dr Robert Thompson, head of special projects, Abu Dhabi Education Council

Changing attitudes

The UK Publishers Association ran a collective stand for those keen to scout out potential new businesses. Emma House, international director for the PA, thinks the interest from UK publishers was piqued when the Arab world was the market focus at the 2004 Frankfurt Book Fair and at London Book Fair last year.

She explains that changing attitudes in the UAE are helping to develop a receptive market. "The cultural foundations here are taking a real interest in literature and there is also an increasing interest in learning English. Publishers have three reasons for coming here: export sales, selling rights for translation and finding co-edition partners. The fair is bigger, and more international, and there is a real interest in new emerging markets."

The rise in its international reputation can also be attributed to the ADIBF's link-up with the Frankfurt Book Fair over the last three years. In 2007, a joint venture between the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage and Frankfurt saw the formation of Kitab, a company specifically set up to establish Abu Dhabi as a publishing hub and improve the links between the Arab and international publishing communities. Developing the reach and appeal of the fair has been key to its strategy. Claudia Kaiser, general manager of Kitab, says: "We are dedicated to raising the bar of industry professionalism by creating the world's best networking platform for international and regional publishing communities."

This year's ramped-up professional programme certainly helped organisers get closer to their aim, with seminars covering all the staples from rights to piracy, digital opportunities to the educational market. Events were, according to Kaiser, much better attended than in 2008, with a mix of Arab and international attendees keen to find out how they can work together.

The programme's launch event,

www.thebookseller.com

"News from the Arab Book Market", led by Bachar Chebaro, secretary general of the Arab Publishers Association, examined the trends and overall state of the region. Though there are about 340 million people in the Middle East and North Africa, and about 445 million Arabic speakers worldwide, a lack of distribution channels means that Arab publishing output is very low; Chebaro reckons that it is equivalent to the number of titles published in Greece. The Arab book trade also suffers from a lack of reliable statistics as there is no pan-Arab data collection agency and publishers often do not adhere to the ISBN standard. Lebanon and Egypt are the dominant players, mostly because of their relatively advanced distribution channels.

Education. education. education

The other key hurdle to be overcome, discussed throughout the fair, is the relatively low level of reading as a pastime in the Arab world. Chebaro revealed that average print runs are only between 2,000 and 3,000 copies, as in general Arabs do not read for pleasure. Kitab is working hard to change this, with projects aimed at promoting literacy in the UAE. Kaiser explains that the cultural programme at ADIBF 2009, which was attended by Raja Alsanea, Elias Khoury, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth and Henning Mankell, "[created] new, exciting opportunities for the book loving public to engage with leading authors".

While creating a love of reading is something that needs to be developed, one area where there is already a booming market is the education sector. The export market of English-language educational titles provides perhaps the biggest opportunity for UK publishers.

Dawood Salabbai, owner of the Al Mutanabbi Bookshop, one of the largest chains in the UAE, says that the key books it sells are medical and computer titles in English, explaining that families in the Gulf, even if they do not have much money, always want to educate their children and that "English is the common language that unites; it is something we need to learn."

The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) is currently overseeing a huge programme of curriculum reform, which will see new teaching methods and resources. The changes were outlined in the fair's two-day Education Chapter attended by 250 publishers, teachers, and leading educational authors. Dr Robert Thompson, head of special projects at ADEC, says the council has a substantial budget to purchase new educational titles for both teachers and students



across a range of ages and subjects: "Publishers are seen as partners; we want to resource schools as best we can with good books in Arabic and English."

Oxford University Press was one of the UK-based educational publishers at the fair making the most of this burgeoning market. Philip Garratt, OUP's business director, education and children's division, says the export and rights market is "a major growth area for the company". What he is most impressed about in the UAE is the government's willingness to spend money on education, including books, even in times of recession. "From our experience schools in the Gulf spend approximately 10 times more per student [on resources] than in the UK."

Crown House's sales and marketing director Caroline Lenton was also out in Abu Dhabi. Lenton says that during the conference she was overwhelmed with orders from teachers desperate to get their hands on English-language titles that would help them keep up to date with the curriculum changes.

Although the number of English-speakers and readers is rapidly increasing in the Arab world, there is still significant potential for UK publishers to sell Arabic translation rights. In previous years, ADIBF has primarily been a fair for Arab publishers and booksellers to sell titles to one another and the public. However, the growing international element, has seen a much greater focus on rights negotiations. This year saw the introduction of Spotlight on Rights, an initiative open to attendees of the fair, which offers \$1,000 (£690) subsidies for rights deals to and from the Arabic language. Lynette Owen, copyright director for Pearson Education, who was overseeing the scheme, says that by the end of the week they had had approximately 220 letters of intent for deals. She says: "By far the majority were for licences into Arabic from foreign languages, a small number from Arabic to English and a few from

Bachar (hebaro, secretary general of the Arab Publishers Association (*left*), in conversation with Amber Books m.d. Stasz Gynch and Lynette Owen (*right*) copyright director for Pearson Education.

Arabic to Arabic [which] was a permitted category because of distribution problems between the markets."

Raise the profile

Translations into Arabic are obviously more popular than translations out of the language, and there are initiatives that are helping to raise the profile of Arabic writing. The International Prize for Arabic Fiction is one. This year Egyptian author Youssef Ziedan claimed the \$60,000 (£41,436) award on the night before the fair opened, for his novel *Beelzebub*; the book is already being touted around to UK publishers by literary agent Andrew Nurnberg. ADEC recently funded the publication of a collection of modern writing from the UAE to showcase Arabic talent, called *In a Fertile Desert*, published by The American University of Cairo Press.

Another new project is the development of a web-based free collaborative platform for the Arab book industry, called Mubtada wa khabar. Supported by the Beirut World Book Capital 2009 ministerial committee, it aims to bring together publishers, literary agents, librarians, authors, booksellers, translators and readers to interact and also expose Arab books on the international scene.

ADIBF has made huge progress over the last few years in boosting the region's publishing industry and attracting international attention. But there are still bigger aspirations for the future. In 2010, the IPA Copyright Symposium will be held in Abu Dhabi, which will provide opportunities for Arab and international publishers to discuss the latest in copyright policy, share best practice and hopefully reduce levels of piracy. Longer-term goals include the development of a comprehensive catalogue of publisher's titles, the introduction of a pan-Arabic ISBN system, and the use of print-on-demand. With this ongoing development and growth in the pipeline, the time looks right for UK publishers to get involved in the Arab book market.

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