

# The National

## Illuminating from cover to cover

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Last Updated: March 19, 2009 8:30AM UAE / March 19, 2009 4:30AM GMT

As the Indian chef and writer Vidhu Mittal whipped up a vegetarian curry in front of an entranced and hungry crowd on Tuesday night, this felt for a moment more like a food festival than the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. The organisers have clearly understood that, however literary an event, a little razzle dazzle never goes amiss, and the presence of the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, the organisation that brought the show kitchen to Abu Dhabi in its quest to promote the best cookery books in the world, added some international polish to this year's huge fair.

It truly is a global event, with exhibitors from more than 45 countries, Arab and non-Arab. Indeed, the organiser, KITAB, is a joint venture between the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) and the Frankfurt Book Fair, and both the UAE and Germany have a strong presence. Qalam, which is an ADACH initiative to encourage writing by Emiratis, has a huge stand, and there was a large area of German-published books. Among the English exhibitors was the Muslim Writers Awards, a UK-based foundation that focuses on fiction published in English by Muslim writers and will name its winner in London in May.

Of course, easily the most international stand was the returning Millennium House, the publisher of the giant, award-winning, limited-edition 20kg atlas Earth that was launched at the Sharjah Book Fair. The book, which was created by 100 cartographers and includes 355 maps, was proving extremely popular, said Suzanne Gross at the stand, which was why they had decided to return to the Emirates. Earlier that day, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, Minister of Foreign Affairs, had stopped by to sign copy 0119 of the Royal Blue atlas, of which just 2,000 exist. That copy remains on display for the duration of the fair and will then be donated to the Red Crescent for a fundraising auction.



Khamis Qalam, 30, a teacher from Abu Dhabi, looks through books during the first day of the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. Andrew Henderson / The National



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Browsing the Earth stand was Patricia Wand, the dean of library and learning resources at Zayed University. She had just provisionally ordered two copies of the Royal Blue atlas for the university and was happy to marvel at the size of the fair and its growth from year to year. "The book fair is very stimulating," she said. "All the languages are represented and there's something for everyone. We often buy our Arabic books at this fair and at the Sharjah Book Fair. I'm planning to head over to the antiquarian section now. We don't have many antiquarian books in our library yet, but the university is only 10 years old, and you build a library book by book – we have about 110,000 volumes."

A fair within the fair, the Antiquarian Book Fair claims to be the first such event in the Arab world, bringing 17 of the world's top antiquarian dealers to the country with their selections of books and manuscripts covering the last seven centuries, ranging from hand-illuminated Qurans to Japanese woodblock books.

Wand was not the only person to be thrilled by this development. The Indian author Amitav Ghosh, on his way to a book signing of *Sea of Poppies*, was excited too. "I'm looking forward to looking at the antiquarian section. I'm very interested in antiquarian books – perhaps because a lot of my writing is about historical subjects," he said. The author has been strongly influenced by Arabic writers, though he admits that his Arabic is a little rusty. "I think the book fair is amazing – I don't read Arabic very well any more but I've long been interested in the literature and this has made me think about it again. I think if I were to spend six months relearning it, I would be up to speed."

And there was no doubt that the historical books here were the most extraordinary aspect of the fair, with some exquisite items for sale by the international dealers, a reminder of the Arab world's long tradition of beautiful books. At Johanson Rare Books, a book dealer from Baltimore in the US that finds its stock in private collections and auctions, a number of illustrated Qurans were on sale.

"We specialise in Islamic pieces, incunabula – early printed books from 1460 to 1515 – travel and illustration and, as we're both English professors, there's always some literature in there. But the most interest has been caused by our Islamic manuscripts and illuminated books. We have a beautiful illuminated Quran dating to 1790AD, copied in Turkey by Ali al Askdari, for \$14,000," she said, pointing to a small, elaborately painted book.

The book fair, then, is about the give and the take: the return to the Arab world of such exquisite items and the sharing of the Arab cultures with the rest of the world through literature. A worthy cause indeed.

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