

Filven 2024: Inspiration for A South African International Literary Festival

South Africa is upbeat about prospects for a vibrant reading culture following lessons learned from a recent international book festival in Venezuela where South Africa was invited as a guest of honour.

When a child holds a book, the scent of paper becomes a kind of friend. As the pages open to the lightest touch, the words become pictures and the pictures become stories. A magical thing happens. Learning takes place. From such an encounter rises a nation and a vibrant society, rich in an understanding of its diversity. After all, there is nothing more beautiful than a father or a mother reading to a child, or a child reading to another child. This feeling was evoked during one of South America's biggest literary festivals, the Feria Internacional del Libro de Venezuela (FILVEN), which was held in the Venezuelan capital, Caracas in July.

The festival is organised annually by the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and this year South Africa was invited as a guest of honour. High-level dignitaries that attended the festival included the Venezuelan Minister of Culture Ernesto Villega, South Africa's Ambassador to Venezuela, HE Lindiwe Maseko, and the Acting Director General from the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, Dr Cynthia Khumalo.

In honouring the invitation, the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) delegated 18 South African writers to attend the festival. As part of their participation, the delegation consisting of writers of various genres delivered lectures and participated on panel discussions on a range of topics.

The delegation included Fiona Snyckers, Melvin Kaabwe, Stanley Montsho, Dr Jerry Mofokeng-Makhetha, Shubnum Khan, Cliffordene Norton, Vernon Head, Prof Gilbert Motsaathebe, Sabata Mpho Mokae, Charmaine Kolwane Mrwebi, Given Mukwevho, Dr Siphiso Mahala, Dr Monicca Bhuda, Vuyiswa Nodada, Takalani Mutshinyani, Terry Ann Adams, Belinda van Heerden and Bernice Ngcobo.

The delegation was accompanied by DSAC's Director of Books and Publishing, Ms Cathrine Mokoena and the Director of Communications, Marketing and Stakeholder Relations of the National Library of South Africa, Ms Jolene Bhadais.

“At this gathering we – the writers – were reminded of our love for books and our first written words. We were humbled, watching the Venezuelan people share the language of books across their city in a most all-encompassing way. This nation knows the power of reading,” said Vernon Head one of the South African novelists.

“Since the book fair coincided with Mandela Month, the topics suggested for presentation bode very well with the Mandela Month theme. It was significant that Mandela was already very popular in that part of the world, and this made the South African messages very relatable to the Venezuelan audience,” added Prof Gilbert Motsaathebe.

The Venezuelan government applauded South Africa’s historical relationship with Venezuela and the leadership that Mandela displayed worldwide. The festival was also particularly significant for South Africa considering that Venezuela is one of the countries that have been declared illiteracy-free by UNESCO.

The delegation was also able to interact with fellow writers from around the world, affirming that books have the ability to form bridges across continents. South African officials also took to the opportunity to promote the country through a virtual reality tour which showcased tourist attraction sites in South Africa.

DSAC’s Ms Cathrine Mokoena, who accompanied the delegation, said they returned with renewed vigour and enthusiasm to do more in strengthening the reading culture in the country.

From the lessons learnt the South African delegation to FILVEN 2024 – recommend, among others, that South Africa considers hosting its own international literary festival of the same magnitude. In their view, such a move will make South Africa an event-destination for literature. They also hinted at the development of an International African Literature Prize, for example, an initiative such as the Mandela Prize for African Literature which could be comparable to the Nobel Prize.

A Message from the writers who represented South Africa at the 2024 FIVEN