



The Festival Experience

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WHEN I MOVED TO THE CITY, in my twenties, I was in thrall to the International Book Festival. Those four weeks every summer were the highlight of my year. It wasn't just the events themselves, but rather the way literature spilled over from the festival gardens onto the streets: the throng of a thousand conversations, the buzz and hubbub and air of excitement and possibility, all focused around my favourite thing in the world — books. There were the free, un-ticketed, ramshackle late-night performances, line ups announced last-minute, where some of the most exciting authors in the world appeared, as if magically, on the boards of the circus-like tent for spellbinding readings. My friends and I were enraptured. So you can imagine how I felt when, a few years later, after my first book was published, I was invited to take part in an event at that same venue.

The day did not go according to plan.

I arrived on site early, determined to take it all in. The sun was high; I looked over the crowds in the gardens. I was excited, but not anxious. I could do this, relish this. This was a huge moment. Everything was perfect. This was when I decided to enter the festival bookshop.

It wasn't really a surprise I couldn't find my novel. You could barely move for customers. Books were stacked untidily on all corners. Maybe its absence was even a sign it had been selling well.



It wasn't. After some time snooping under tables and fixtures, my empty backpack swinging awkwardly as I crouched, I found twenty copies of *Infinite Ground* lumped behind another novel in a shadowy corner. I looked around, canvassing the store — it was so busy, and I couldn't make out any staff; surely no-one would mind if I displayed my book more prominently? As casually as I could, I picked up a handful of copies, cleared a space alphabetically on the shelf, and slipped them in, cover facing outwards. It only took a second. I felt a flutter of uncertainty as I looked up, and exited the shop.

There were a couple of hours still until my event. I bought a cup of peppermint tea and found a quiet, out of the way spot to sit and think. I sipped on my tea and took out my notebook and pen — this was the kind of thing a writer should be doing, I told myself.

All of a sudden, a figure came bounding into view, racing around the corner, wide-eyed, with her lanyard bouncing, cheeks flushed, mouth open in alarm. It was a friend of mine, who worked in the festival bookshop. I hadn't noticed her earlier. 'Martin!', she exclaimed — and with some difficulty she spluttered out what had happened.

My actions in the bookshop, it transpired, had generated a Security alert. My suspiciously empty-seeming rucksack; my shifty expression and frequent furtive glances around the store; my darting motion, descending under the table. The radio chatter had increased when I gathered up the pile of books; Security stationed a figure by the door; they were waiting for me, and the moment I stepped across the threshold, I would be seized. Thankfully — scarcely believably — my friend had heard the chatter, realised what was happening, and explained I wasn't a criminal, just an idiot. She persuaded them to call off the operation. And so I walked out, with no idea how close I had come, to mortal, terminal embarrassment and shame.

I reported to the author's tent, head bowed, with a wry smile on my face.