



The Festival Experience

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FESTIVALS OPEN OUT worlds with words. It's really about travel. Whether it is the ends of a country or the world, or the local bookstore — it is about our minds travelling with words as signs on a page and then in the air sketching a meaning. Listening to a panel of writers having the freedom to express and answer the contradictions and leave some questions unsolvable is part of the buzz of being alone and together. The buzz is also about an audience travelling together with the imagination to make meaning of something not entirely understood.

The open cafés, translations, nearly new friendships because ideas have been simmering like old passions now bearing fruit is all part of the casbah of literature festivals I've enjoyed inhabiting. These festivals of words are a performative theatre of ideas, practice of philosophies, invention of histories, the craft of aesthetics, the politics of language, the timelessness of the now. Festivals design patterns and shape avenues for teachers, secondary-school attenders, eternal students thirsty for the rare. It's the way venues throw open their wares, and live music, mood, drink, voices, accents, rants, raves all swerve into the festivity of culture that is a breathing cosmopolis; that Festival experience.

In the act of recalling this, there is a distinct craving for this. While every certitude of collective live interaction has been swept away by the swirling coronavirus, sponsors and charities have to rethink, festivals of literature have fought on. It's meant a huge investment in technology, and following the summer lockdown of early-glitch interviews, the Festival experience is changed, but is present in new ways.



The festival experience is as much about the craft of writing and the pulsating energy of the contemporary audience. No two festival years can be the same, even if it is the same curator and staff, and that is not just because a new set of books and publishers have come in, or the audiences have grown bigger or the prizes just got better. Literature festivals can be like jazz — it's a known song, but each singer makes it sound so different with the unique chemistry of the three Aristotelian unities of time, action and space.

Some curators test your stamina of how much you take in, and challenge your conservatisms. Going to these as a writer listening, is very different from going as an audience member seeking writers. It's good to meet someone who does not have the same interest as you, it opens a window of what else is around that could surprisingly change your experience.

Among my favourites are LSE writers' festival, The PEN writers and translations at London Book Fair. Then crossing the wide Brahamaputra, writers about holocausts. The Byron Bay literature festival for women in science, Bhutan for environment perspectives. The Jaipur Literature Festival internationally has curated literary talent with freedom of expression, a range of writers who are critical to the festive experience on a global platform of culture.