

Opening weekend of EIBF Online attracts global audience

For authors, audiences – and for the Book Festival's own team who have had to completely change their way of delivering a festival – the opening weekend of the Edinburgh International Book Festival Online was always going to be a leap of faith.

Never more so than the moment on Saturday when the first live event, a conversation between Val McDermid in Edinburgh and Joan Bakewell in London, streamed online and organisers saw the numbers watching race upwards into the thousands and the audience chatroom burst into life.

Karine Polwart, Ali Smith, Nayrouz Qarmout & Val McDermid

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Sara Stridsberg



This warm, funny and engaging conversation confirmed that an online festival, where authors and moderators are not sitting in the same room, sometimes not even on the same continent, can work.

Nick Barley, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival said “Now we’ve got a few days under our belt we’re comfortable with the technology, audiences are joining us and still watching events in their thousands – exactly how many we don’t know yet, there’s a lot of analysis to be done, but significantly more than would fit into our main theatre in Charlotte Square Gardens and more than would pass through the

gates of the Gardens on a daily basis.

“But more important than the numbers is the reach of the online festival. Not only are we seeing audiences tune in from around the world but also those closer to home who are unable to travel to Charlotte Square for a whole range of reasons – physical and economic.

“With all events free to watch and most available on demand they are all watching and engaging from the comfort of their own homes.”



EIBF Director, Nick Barley

Audiences have been enjoying a wide range of free events for adults and children over the first few days including Ian Rankin, Philippe Sands, Julia Donaldson, Olivette Otele with Angela Saini and an exclusive interview with double Booker Prize winner Hilary Mantel.

People have been engaging with the Book Festival all around the world – from Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Japan, China, India, Canada, across the USA from California and Washington State in the West to New York and Washington DC in the East, and across the length and breadth of Africa from South Africa to Algeria and Kenya to Nigeria and of course from Europe and all over the UK,

Feedback has been positive across all events, and in particular from families who are enjoying readings, conversation and drawalongs in the Baillie Gifford Children’s programme with their children both live, and on demand when they get back from School.

Giles Yeo



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Ruth Davidson



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Karen Lloyd & Prayaag Akbar



Another first for the Book Festival is their new online bookshop which not only sells the books featured in the programme this year, but also showcases books from across the Scottish publishing community.

Another new innovation which is working well is the virtual book signing or Meet the Author, where audience members can buy a book through the bookshop and sign up for a private zoom conversation with the author after the event where they can have a chat and watch the author signing their book. Just like the book signings in the physical festival – but through a screen.

Authors are enjoying it – whether they are here in Edinburgh or signing from their homes, and the individuals who are getting their books signed are loving it.

Heiða Ásgeirsdóttir & Steinunn Sigurðurdóttir



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Steve Jones



Nick Barley continued “This is obviously an extraordinary year, and of course we very much hope that in the future we will be able to bring back our physical festival. Festivals are made by the people that attend them – authors and audiences coming together but whether that will be possible in 2021 we just don’t know.

“The success of our online offering so far means that we will certainly be looking into how we could present a hybrid festival – with a mix of live events in front of an audience and events broadcast live, or on demand, to the world. It’s early days – we’ve still got two weeks to go of the 2020

online Festival, but it's an exciting time and an opportunity for us to reimagine elements for the future.”

The Edinburgh International Book Festival online continues until Monday 31 August, with speakers including Joshua Wong, the democratic activist from Hong Kong, Samantha Power – former US Ambassador to the UK and advisor to President Obama and all six of the authors nominated for the 2020 International Booker Prize. All events are free and can be watched live, or on demand, through the Book Festival website edbookfest.co.uk.

All authors' images from the EIBF 2019