

Transcript

What is a literary festival?

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A literary festival brings famous authors into close proximity with their audience, their readers. While reading and writing are often solitary pursuits, literary festivals create shared, temporary communities. People go to literary festivals because they want to meet their favourite authors, attend book signings, buy books and socialise with other bookish people.

Often these festivals take place in the summer partly outdoors and in places with tourist appeal. The most famous literary festival in the world, the Hay Festival of Literature and the Arts, takes place over ten days each May and June in Hay-on-Wye in Wales. The former US President Bill Clinton famously called The Hay Festival, a Woodstock of the mind.

People have been meeting to talk about books for as long as literature has existed. Think, for example, of the literary salons and coffee houses of the 18th and 19th centuries. But the literary festival as a public event is a relatively new cultural phenomenon.

The first modern literary festival was the Cheltenham Literature Festival which has been running since 1949 but it's only in the last three decades since the Hay Festival in 1988 that literary festivals have really taken off as major cultural events.

With English language literary publishing an increasingly global business the model of the literary festival has spread massively in the 21st century. The Hay Festival has deliberately supported sister festivals in places such as Cartagena in Columbia and Dhaka in Bangladesh. And now no self-respecting city can be without one.

There are over 200 major literary festivals criss-crossing the world from Belfast to Beirut, and from Jaipur to Melbourne all bringing authors to meet their reading public.

Let's not beat around the bush, literary festivals are big business. The Hay Festival sells over 270,000 tickets and generates some £25M in revenue for the local economy each year. With the creative industries increasingly important to the UK economy literary festivals promote book sales while contributing massively to the local economy of the host city.

As with the music or film industries there is now a literary festival circuit taking in various cities across the globe. Writers, agents, publishers and booksellers often do this circuit to promote the latest literary bestsellers. Speaking at literary festivals is also a lucrative income stream for authors.

With the Covid-19 pandemic spreading across the world some literary festivals such as the Hay Festival have gone online this year while others are postponing until large gatherings are allowed again. As long as readers want to meet the authors of their favourite books the literary festival will continue to have cultural relevance.