

Friday 17 August 2012  
FOR IMMEDIATE USE

## 2012 Edinburgh World Writers' Conference kicks off with trenchant debate on the politics of literature

50 years after Edinburgh hosted a legendary conference, credited as the world's first literature festival, the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference got underway today with the first event asking 'Should Literature be Political?' chaired by Turkish author Elif Shafak. Egyptian novelist and political commentator Ahdaf Soueif delivered the keynote speech arguing that "The question becomes critical in times of crisis." She went on to suggest that "In Egypt, in the decade of slow, simmering discontent before the revolution, novelists produced texts of critique, of dystopia, of nightmare. Now, we all seem to have given up - for the moment - on fiction."

Soueif argued that at present, in the wake of the Arab Spring, writing novels, at least in Egypt, has become redundant. However, she expressed hope that "Fiction will come again". She continued "And maybe I'll tell the story of Boulac sands, not one kilometer from my home, where the police killed Amre el-Bunni last week and a community is being terrorized out of its homes to make way for a luxury development, or maybe I'll tell the story of Samira Ibrahim who put a stop to the Military's virginity tests, or Ahmad Harara whom they shot in one eye on 28 January and in the other in December, or Khaled Said's mother who's adopted all the young revolutionaries in lieu of her murdered son."

The Edinburgh events of this worldwide conference, which is an ambitious programming partnership between the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the British Council, involve 50 delegates from 25 different countries discussing and debating the role of fiction in society with a public audience. Today's discussion, which was streamed live around the world and was accessible to 43,000 people on twitter, was attended by writers from 25 countries around the world including China Miéville, Xi Chuan, John Burnside, Ben Okri, Melvin Burgess and Kamilla Shamsie.

Following the keynote speech the discussion was opened up to the floor. Ewan Morrison argued that these days there are seldom political consequences achieved by writing, asking "Has the superabundance of books on Wall Street affected the financial system?". Denise Mina claimed that the production and consumption of literature is necessarily predicated by your surroundings: "Crime fiction is a privilege. If you are in a refugee camp you don't want mysteries to be solved. The mystery is 'why am I here?'" John Burnside claimed that rather than questioning whether literature should be political, the real issue is "Should literature be dissident?", stating that the author has a duty to rally against the status quo.

Earlier in the day John Calder and Jim Haynes, organisers of the 1962 Edinburgh Writers' Conference discussed the organisation and impact of the original event. They reminisced about its tempestuous gestation, which memorably included Sonia Orwell striking John Calder with a wine bottle at a planning meeting; French writers refusing to participate because August is traditionally a month spent on the beach; and protests from Edinburgh citizens who argued they needed 'drains not culture'. They claimed the conference had far-reaching implications, not only launching the career of William Burroughs but also affecting a seismic shift in attitudes towards censorship and sexuality in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The Edinburgh World Writers' Conference continues tomorrow (Saturday 18 August) when Ali Smith will lead a discussion about 'Style vs Content' chaired by Nathan Englander.

Edinburgh World Writers Conference Sessions at the Edinburgh International Book Festival run from 3.00pm to 5.00pm daily until Tuesday 21 August. Tickets, priced at £10 (£8 concessions) are available from [www.edbookfest.co.uk](http://www.edbookfest.co.uk) or through the Box Office on 0845 373 5888. Each session will also be broadcast live on-line on [www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org](http://www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org).

-ends-

For further information please contact:  
Frances Sutton, Press Manager, Edinburgh International Book Festival  
0131 718 5654 or 07841 579481 or [frances@edbookfest.co.uk](mailto:frances@edbookfest.co.uk)  
or  
Alex Bratt, Senior Press Officer, British Council  
020 7389 4872 or [Alex.Bratt@britishcouncil.org](mailto:Alex.Bratt@britishcouncil.org)

---

**Editors Notes:**

**The Edinburgh World Writers' Conference** is a major programming partnership between the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the British Council and is supported by The Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund, Creative Scotland, the City of Edinburgh Council and EventScotland.

**Edinburgh World Writers' Conference Delegates:**

Scottish Delegates: Alan Bissett, Theresa Breslin, John Burnside, Sophie Cooke, Keith Gray, Kirsty Gunn, Kapka Kassabova, Jackie Kay, Aonghas MacNeacail, Denise Mina, Nicola Morgan, Ewan Morrison, Ian Rankin, James Robertson, Ali Smith, Irvine Welsh.

Other UK delegates: Melvin Burgess, Alan Gibbons, Hari Kunzru, Nick Laird, Patrick Ness, China Miéville, Ben Okri, Owen Sheers.

International Delegates: Andrei Astvatsaturov, Bernardo Atxaga, Xi Chuan, Junot Díaz, Nathan Englander, Carlos Gamerro, Xiaolu Guo, Manu Joseph, Margo Lanagan, Michel Le Bris, Yiyun Li, Garth Nix, Joyce Carol Oates, Elliot Perlman, Matthias Politycki, Jose Rodrigues dos Santos, Preeta Samarasan, Elif Shafak, Kamila Shamsie, Kyung-Sook Shin, Dag Solstad, Ahdaf Soueif, Janne Teller, Kim Thuy, Chika Unigwe, Binyavanga Wainaina, and Samar Yazbek.

International Events:

The Edinburgh World Writers' Conference will travel to Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Malaysia, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago and Turkey.

**1962 Writers' Conference**

The format of the 2012-2013 Edinburgh World Writers' Conference mirrors the notorious event that took place 50 years ago in 1962. That year, the radical publisher John Calder worked with the impresario Jim Haynes to bring some 70 authors to Edinburgh. The guests included US authors Norman Mailer and Henry Miller alongside Scottish writers Hugh MacDiarmid and Muriel Spark, and several lesser-known authors, including William S. Burroughs, who would become famous as a result of the Conference. John Calder argued at the time that 'the novel enriches mankind by its ability to rouse the senses, to stimulate the intellect and to excite the imagination'. The 2012 Writers' Conference takes as its starting point the same five topics that were discussed in 1962.