

Krakow - UNESCO City of Literature!

2014-02-03

After a three-year wait, Kraków is officially revealed as the latest UNESCO City of Literature. The decision reached Mayor Jacek Majchrowski on Monday, 21 October 2013. We are the first city in continental Europe and the seventh city in the world to be granted this honour, following Edinburgh, Melbourne, Iowa City, Dublin, Reykjavík and Norwich!

It is significant that the splendid news that Kraków has received this honour is announced in late October, on the first day of the Conrad Festival; this prestigious literary event, one of the most noteworthy in this part of Europe, runs in parallel with the Kraków Book Fair, celebrating the Polish publishing industry and attracting crowds of readers over many years.

This rare distinction, awarded since 2004, has been bestowed on very few cities so far: the title is held by the metropolises of Edinburgh, Melbourne and Dublin, as well as the historical Norwich in England and the entrepreneurial Iowa City in the US, renowned for its State University. Kraków is only the second non-English language city to hold the title (alongside Reykjavík), and the first in mainland Europe.

How did it happen?

In order to become a UNESCO City of Literature, the candidates must meet several requirements in terms of the quality and diversity of initiatives held by local publishers, the role of literature in its broad sense in the everyday lives of the city's inhabitants, the range of festivals and literary events, and the abundance of bookshops, libraries and other institutions involved with books and literary heritage. Also important is the involvement of the media and the creation of ambitious development programmes: all the themed titles awarded by UNESCO (City of Film, City of Music and City of Design) form the wide-reaching Creative Cities Network.

Kraków's application, originating in 2011, was successful precisely because of the harmonious co-existence of all these elements, as well as the city's broad, daring plans for the future. Kraków is already a treasure trove of literature, with the first books printed in the Polish language published here in the 16th century (Historyja umęczenia Pana naszego Jezusa Chrystusa, anon., 1508, and Raj duszny, a prayer book by Biernat of Lublin, 1513). Putting the new plans into action means that literature will also become the driving force behind the development of other creative industries, and bring together circles of writers, poets, critics and scholars, as well as booksellers, publishers, the media, IT companies and investors. The process started during the preparation of Kraków's application with the participation and collaboration of dozens of public, private and municipal institutions located in Kraków; the work was overseen by the Kraków Festival Office, an organisation responsible for coordinating numerous literary events.

Krakow's candidacy for the title was endorsed among others by: Adonis, Zygmunt Bauman, Susan Bernofsky, Marek Bieńczyk, Anders Bodegård, Wiera Burłakowa, Roberto Calasso, Andrej Chadanowicz, Stefan Chwin, Bei Dao, Duo Duo, Peter Esterházy, Janusz Głowacki, Juan Gelman, Namita Gokhale, John Gray, Manuela Gretkowska, David Grossman, Julia Hartwig, Miriam Van hee, Jane Hirshfield, Eva Hoffman, Ryszard Krynicki, Michael Krüger, Fleur Jaeggy, Hatif Janabi, Mario Vargas Llosa, Richard Lourie, Alain Mabanckou, Alberto Manguel, Eduardo Mendoza, Herta



Müller, Uładzimir Niaklajew, Amos Oz, Brian Patten, Orhan Pamuk, André Rouillé, Janusz Rudnicki, Steve Sem-Sandberg, Ben Shalev, Anna Schloss, Zadie Smith, Gary Snyder, Matteo Terzaghi, Jeanette Winterson, Adam Zagajewski. Nobel Literature Prize Winner Wisława Szymborska offered special support in the last months of her life.

Krakow was also officially supported by its partner cities: Solothurn, Zagreb, Dublin, Edinburgh, Vilnius, Budapest, Orleans, Rochester, Nurnberg, Rome, Vienna, Leipzig, Frankfurt and Milan, as well as by members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network: Norwich, Melbourne, Iowa City, Reykjavik, by applicant cities: Naples, Prague, Lviv and Vancouver, as well as cities of long literary tradition: Bratislava, Madrid, Stavanger and Brussels.

Why Kraków?

Kraków receiving the title of UNESCO City of Literature bears testament to the cultural heritage of our ancient city and the wealth of its artistic life today. Kraków has long been an academic and intellectual centre of Europe and a cradle of language and literature; it was the first Polish city to hold scriptoriums, libraries and printing houses, and it is the birthplace of scores of literary masterpieces. It was also home to the authors of Polish modernism – Stanisław Wyspiański, Stanisław Przybyszewski and Józef Mehoffer – and more contemporary artists including Karol Wojtyła, Tadeusz Kantor, Stanisław Lem, Sławomir Mrożek and Andrzej Wajda. It was here that Czesław Miłosz (awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980) returned after many years in exile, and it was the home of Wisława Szymborska (Nobel Prize in 1996) throughout her long life until her passing in 2012.

Kraków holds many of Poland's finest publishing houses, such as Wydawnictwo Literackie, specialising in fine literature since 1953, and Znak, founded in 1959 as an independent publishing institute. There are also countless exclusive and artistic publishers, including a5, Czarne, Ha!Art, Otwarte and Karakter, numerous publishing houses specialising in children's literature, and a thriving network of religious publishers. From the Rynek Główny to the Kazimierz district, the streets are lined with literary cafés (Bona, Matras Caffé, Czuły Barbarzyńca, Lokator), excellent venues for reading (Pod Globusem, Café Szafé, Gołębnik, Arteteka), and historical libraries with globally unique collections (Jagiellonian Library, Czartoryski Library, and the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Polish Academy of Sciences). Kraków also hosts translation and interpreting events, conventions of scholars and poets, and resident scholarships (with the participation of the Villa Decjusz), as well as awarding literary prizes. The most recent, most coveted and of the highest monetary value is the Wisława Szymborska Prize: instituted in the author's will and presented by an international jury, it is awarded for a volume of poetry composed in Polish. Kraków is also home to the Book Institute – a national institution promoting Polish literature around the world, awarding the prestigious Transatlantyk Prize, and supporting literary programmes in Poland.

City of many events

As well as the two major literary festivals recalling acclaimed Polish authors (the Conrad Festival and the Miłosz Festival), Kraków hosts book readings for children, conventions of fans of fantasy and crime novels, reviews of young and independent literature and the latest graphic novels, poetry tournaments and competitions, popular book swap programmes, literary events



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in public spaces (outdoor events as part of the Night of Poetry, the e-multipoetry campaign, the itinerant library and literary murals), scholarly sessions devoted to literature, poetry slams in pubs and literary cafés, and exhibitions and campaigns promoting reading (Second Life of Books, Virtual Library of Publishers). There are also ambitious projects supporting literature, including the Reading Małopolska project and the Kraków City of Literature portal, developed as part of the preparation of Kraków's application for the UNESCO title. The city also hosts the Book Fair, attracting crowds of visitors each year; since 2011, it also holds Poland's only Children's Book Fair.

The title of UNESCO City of Literature is a prestigious acknowledgement of this wealth of literary and cultural heritage, but the distinction has far broader implications, outlined in Kraków's visions of development that explore new territories. The scope is extremely wide: from preparing tourist literature, through creating innovative literary venues, to paving the way for collaboration with other creative industries such as filmmaking, new media and game development. The historical city of Kraków, home to rapidly developing state-of-the-art technologies, has a wealth of potential to show that the brave new digital world can and does exist in harmony with good old printed literature.