

Millicent Weber. *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture* (New Directions in Book History). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 272 pp. A\$160.00 ISBN 978-3-319-71509-4

I finished reading Weber's engaging book over a weekend attending readers' and writers' events at the Wellington International Festival midway through March 2020. A week later the festival closed early, just prior to Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home protocols sweeping Australasia, as they did across the globe. In this period, some writers and some festivals have worked hard to maintain a virtual presence, keeping the word alive, as it were, online. What will post-Covid literary festivals look like? How closely will they resemble the festivals Weber evokes so well? Will northern hemisphere writing megastars still travel south? If festivals will largely comprise Australian and New Zealand writers, will audiences still be keen to turn out, debate and, most importantly, buy books in such large numbers as has been the custom? It is, of course, too soon to tell.

Weber's book was published in 2018, and is based on very thorough surveys conducted in the five or so years before then, so here she cannot directly comment on these matters. However, the Covid crisis has brought to a brutally sudden end what may well look like a golden age of global literary festivals. Weber cites the founding of the Cheltenham Literary Festival in 1949 as the first of these, but rightly suggests that these events truly began to flourish in the final decades of the 20th century. From the Harbourfront Festival in Toronto in the 1980s (where, as a PhD student I was enthralled by the annual parade of writers only a few subway stops from my College), to the Melbourne Writers Festival and its equivalents in Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Auckland, the literary festival has risen to being an iconic, beloved presence in each of those cities, fuelling the imaginations of book lovers, enhancing the allure of such places as cultural capitals, and significantly adding to the sales of books and other book-linked 'merch,' as well as of course coffee and other beverages thirsty festival goers require.

The festivals are much loved, discussed and will be very much missed until public life returns. And yet, as Weber notes at the beginning, they are actually not much discussed, at least not in terms that are rigorous and scholarly. She makes then an excellent contribution to Palgrave's *New Directions in Book History* series, and the book is packed full of insight.

The main approach is qualitative. Weber's core data set is a series of interviews conducted at the Melbourne Writers Festival, the Emerging Writers Festival, the Clunes Booktown Festival (Victoria), the Edinburgh International Book Festival, and the Port Eliot Festival (Cornwall). The data then spans three English language countries and festivals ranging from the boutique and the regional to the gargantua of everything that, every year except 2020, marks the Edinburgh event. For each festival Weber interviewed at length 10–15 audience members. This enables her to provide a satisfying sense of the resonance of the festival for those interviewed. There are charts and graphs aplenty here but those, like me, who teach in literary departments, will find the audience commentary the most resonant part of Weber's discussion. Her skill here is in embedding those in a wider cultural and political context.

Weber calls these 'literary' festivals, to indicate a wider arc than just considering them as events where writers speak about and, frankly, spruik their latest book (though that is clearly a core activity). Instead the term 'literary' allows Weber to account for the wider penumbra of these events, the spaces where people debate literature, experience the solidarity that you are amongst fellow travellers. The literary festival is then a zone where writing performs itself in the public

sphere, especially where the Festival precinct is very prominent, such as at Federation Square in downtown Melbourne. Weber draws strong links to Habermas and makes especially effective use of aligning her data with Bourdieu's crucial notions of the building of cultural capital.

Of necessity the approach here is positivist: Weber can only report from audience members who did in fact attend chosen events and then agreed to speak at length. Despite the popularity of festivals, the vast majority of the public in fact pay no attention, so it would be good to hear more about the festival as a zone of exclusion, or as zones where for various reasons, people feel excluded. To what extent do festivals mirror the ethnic complexity of Australian or British society? If my experience of New Zealand equivalents is anything to go by, not very well might be the answer, as the audiences here skew white (European descent) and are rapidly ageing.

Those of course will be issues as we move forward and discover what kinds of live events writers and readers will relish. For a sense of how the recent past felt about such things, Weber's book will stand as a well-evidenced and thorough guide.

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