

Exhibits

Adventures of a Reader in the International Book Fair

The Eighth International Book Fair brought with it the world's latest and increasingly costly certainties. Once again the Palacio de Minería in downtown Mexico City was host to the miracle of myriads of books all on display together, and gazed upon by hungry eyes.

To the rich harmonies of paper-bound ideas, the Fair arrived on a Saturday and left town on a Sunday; its music played from February 28 through March 8, 1987. Fifteen hundred publishers from 43 countries took up stands in this event sponsored by the National Autonomous University of Mexico, its School of Engineering, Humanities' Coordinating Center and University Cultural Extension, along with the Mexican National Chamber of Publishers.

As in other years, once again the Fair made us grateful for the sound of rustling pages, and allowed us to breathe the scent of glittering book covers and listen to the hum of browsing book-lovers. All in all, over a million people came to the Palace, a 65% increase in attendance over 1986.

As I ventured through the halls of Minería and felt the blessings of books rain down on me, I realized how out of reach the books closest to us really are. Georges Duby's work, *Tiempo de Catedrales. El arte y la sociedad 980-1420* (The Age of Cathedrals. Society and Art, 980-1420), was selling for fifty dollars, practically a quarter of a university professor's monthly salary: I could only touch and caress the book, and put it back in its sanctuary, on its stand. Raymond Aron's *Memorias*

(Memoirs) was selling for the same price... No way I could afford it: And I could only gaze sadly at Carl Sandburg's *The Complete Works* of Jorge Luis Borges...

The highest priced book cost almost \$2,000; but it was comforting to know there were also books going for fifty cents. And despite the fact that most of the books were way beyond our reach, the Fair did allow us to enjoy an endless variety of genres and topics, including poetry, fiction, agriculture, ecology, nutrition and psychology. The endless adventure continued on into philosophy, physics, cybernetics, languages, music, history, children's literature, gardening, mathematics, business management, biography, and more.

We strolled through the Fair's 420 stands in a leisurely fashion, only quickening our pace when we reached the Iranian section, presided over by a fierce-looking poster of Khomeini. Hurrying on, we reached the Argentine section, where we settled down to rejoice and suffer through a video called *Outings with Borges*.

Following a day at the Fair, from twelve noon until nine at night, we headed for home enveloped in the aroma of books and the sound of the fading crowd, leaving behind us the reflection of book covers, those voices from distant worlds. Yet we returned, the next day and the next and the one after; repeating the ceremony over and over again.

Now that the *Palacio de Minería* has returned to its habitual silence and solitude, it seems fair to remember one outstanding book-launching that took place during it: the presentation of a book that tells the adventures and misfortunes of a Portuguese poet: *Vida y obra de Fernando Pessoa. Historia de una generación* (The Life and Work of Fernando Pessoa. The History of a Generation), written by Joao Gaspar Simoes. This book was launched on the first Saturday night at the Fair, with commentaries by writers Alvaro Mutis, Francisco Cervantes and Octavio Paz, who said: "Throughout the Twentieth Century the history of the intellectual class, with very few exceptions, has been the history of our civilization's sins and errors. The mistakes of our century's great leaders and politicians have surely been worse and far more bloody than those made by poor Pessoa."

And now that the Fair has come and gone, it's also fair to quote the testimony of its passing as it was recorded in those old birds of ill omen, better known as

newspapers:

Close to 400,000 books were sold during the Eighth International Book Fair. The most successful publishers in terms of sales were Mexico's Fondo de Cultura Económica, SEP (Ministry of Education) and UNAM.

The books on display occupied some 30,000 square feet of space and the cost per square foot was around \$26. It is estimated that double this year's space will be required for next year's Ninth Fair.

The Fair encompassed some 300 different activities, including conferences, forums, exhibits, concerts, theater, round table discussions, films, and Aztec,

Chinese, Korean, and Israeli folk-dances.

Two thousand people attended some 40 lectures; seven thousand attended 70 book-launchings. Some 80 meetings took place between Mexican and foreign publishers and book-sellers, to discuss arrangements for book sales, distribution and copyright exchanges.

Now that the Fair has left until next year, with its ink and paper music, I'm all set to return and repeat the ceremony of reviewing the latest and not always costly certainties. I'll be all set to renew the adventure.★

Luis Perdomo Orellana



International Book Fair stands, Palacio de Minería.

Photo from unoméano archive.