

Cultural Daily

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Intellectuals at Play: Frankfurt Book Fair 2013

Kate Gale · Wednesday, October 23rd, 2013

I got an email while I was at the Frankfurt Book Fair asking me the important questions. “Are you going to late night parties? Are you closing deals?” One says yes. It’s like the question of is the weather fabulous in California. You always say yes. In fact, you pitch books, and the deals are often closed after you return home.

The Frankfurt Book Fair is one huge, massive hall after another; hallways full of book people doing book business. Hall 8 is where the Americans are; consequently, they have a long line for the bag check coming in there. None of the other halls have extra security, just the hall where the Americans are. You have to be careful about Americans. They might do bad things. More significantly people might do bad things to Americans. The whole situation requires security. But it’s a pain in the ass.

You have meetings, lots of them. In some ideal world, you have all your meetings in Hall 3, then Hall 6, then Hall 8. Somehow this never happens – at least not for [Red Hen Press](#). You toss yourself back and forth from hall to hall. At each meeting, you are hustling your books to the Germans, the Swiss, the Japanese, the French, the Greeks, Australians, New Zealanders, the Italians. Estonians were pushing books to me. Estonia isn’t a big country, but according to my contact, Estonia has an important literary identity which is very much like Finland. Nationalities you don’t see much of in Frankfurt and I know they have some literature, but somehow you aren’t seeing them. African countries. Iceland. Greenland. Canada. Bulgaria. Romania.

You have subrights agents in the different language groups and you meet with publishers and then you meet with your subrights agents who are going to help you follow up with the publishers. The CLMP booth had eight American publishers including Red Hen Press.

Frankfurt Book Fair is the biggest rights fair in the world. Being there makes you realize how small your own publishing world is. The world of international publishing is huge, but distributors buy a lot of books from the U.S. The U.S. exports films and books much more than we import them. American publishers still believe in profit making, saleable stories, but Europeans love publishing as a place of imaginative ideas. At every meeting, people are telling stories, leaning into you, listening to your stories, telling you theirs. This is why I fell in love with publishing: for story.

As one French publisher explained to me, French publishing has never been about making money. It’s more about intellectuals having a company where they can play. I really like that description. I’m going to make that the new motto for what we do at Red Hen. Intellectuals at play.

This German publisher was pitching me a book about this rural German guy who moves to the city and then becomes politically liberal. That’s the big drama of the book, the guy goes from ignorant and conservative to happy, liberal, and smart about things. She said, “You wouldn’t understand this ignorant conservative kind of person we have in Germany.”

I said, “Well, America’s not so much a red state/blue state country as a red country, blue city.” And

she said, “But Americans in the country are not as ignorant as Germans. Americans are glamorous.” Really now? She needs to go to Topeka, Kansas. She needs to go to any town outside of Topeka, Kansas. She needs to stop at little towns across Texas or the Dakotas. She needs to go to Missouri. These towns are wonderful. Amazing people live there. But glamorous? Not really. Are many Americans ignorant? I’d say that’s a solid yes. Just as ignorant as Germans? My God yes. Americans are proud of their ignorance. That’s a fact. So it makes me happy to know that the book business is alive and well. Here, there and everywhere. Books hold ideas; we should all keep finding a way to swim around in ideas. It’s what makes the world interesting. I’m trying to remember everything about Frankfurt on the twelve hour flight back. The whole thing is a bit of a blur now. The meetings, the many lattes that I drank all day, the Germans drinking Jagermeister everywhere. They say it’s a digestive and is good for you: Breakfast, lunch, dinner, Jagermeister. I’ve done my share of Jag-bombs, but in Frankfurt, I’m fighting the monster jet lag of a nine hour time difference. Maybe Jagermeister would have helped. There is always next year.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, October 23rd, 2013 at 2:21 pm and is filed under [Fiction](#), [Lifestyle](#), [Technology](#)

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