



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair  
in the presence of King Felipe VI of Spain  
in Frankfurt am Main  
on 18 October 2022**

The power and strength of the book, the great importance of the written word, of thoughts expressed in writing, literally ground-breaking possibilities contained in experiences that have been written down, in narratives and descriptions, in dramas and poems that can trigger debates and discussions, critical essays, political analyses and philosophical arguments – where is all of this any more clearly in evidence than at a book fair?

There can be no doubt that the Frankfurt Book Fair is a significant cultural, and also a social and political event, without which our country, our cultural nation of Germany, is barely conceivable.

But this Book Fair is not just an event for our own country. It makes waves far beyond its borders and has gained a major international reputation over the course of many decades. Not only is important business done, are licences agreed and contracts concluded here, but this is, first and foremost, where authors, publishers and agents, as well as readers and journalists from all linguistic backgrounds and all cultures meet. International relations are forged, and regular attendees know that this happens in a very personal, individual way.

For the visitors to the Frankfurt Book Fair, terms such as “world literature”, “encounters between cultures” or “intercultural debates” are not abstract concepts, but a reality that they themselves experience, one that is synonymous here in Frankfurt with particular names and stories.

Every year, a Guest of Honour showcases its literature at the Book Fair. This is no trivial matter or mere polite gesture. Many German readers, and, of course, also publishing houses and intermediaries, are

indeed most curious each year to find out about the discoveries that you can make here thanks to this aspect in particular.

Spain is this year's Guest of Honour, and who knows what new discoveries, new successes or surprises this will inspire? I suspect that such an appearance at the Book Fair is always bound up with great hopes and expectations. I can assure all our guests from Spain of one thing in any case, because we know this from experience: the German public is curious, Germany as a reading nation is curious to find out about the experiences that Spanish authors convey in their books.

What does the world look like in Spain, what is the social and political, the cultural and intellectual climate, the mood there like, which ways of life are being tried and tested and which reflections about individuals and society are the order of the day in Spain right now? And there is another, no less interesting question: how is the world and how are global and international issues perceived by Spain? Which perspectives of the world, as seen from Spain, can enrich us, can challenge us and our own view of the world and open up a new way of thinking for us?

The fact that the beginning of the Book Fair is coinciding with the state visit of King Felipe and Queen Letizia underscores the significance of the Book Fair as an international cultural platform. What happens here, what you can see and hear here, and what happens in terms of encounters and dialogue here is so important that Your Majesties are gracing us with your presence today. And we are all most grateful to them for this!

With Spain as Guest of Honour, we have, on the one hand, the rich Spanish culture itself as a guest, in which, in addition to Castilian Spanish, great and self-confident Catalan, Basque and Galician literary works are penned. But we are also gaining a fresh perspective of global Spanish literature. After all, many authors particularly from South and Central America have already established a large and faithful readership here in Germany.

At the latest since Cervantes bequeathed his "Don Quixote" to the world more than four hundred years ago, a classic masterpiece that continues to fascinate its readers to this day, Spanish literature has attracted attention all over the world. I will not list any more big names from the great and glorious past now, but, as befits the topicality of a contemporary fair, jump straight to the present.

I am delighted that I had the opportunity just now to talk to two authors – Irene Vallejo und Antonio Muñoz Molina – who will expound on their literature in a moment. In the case of Irene Vallejo, it is particularly fitting that she has written a fascinating book on the significance of books, which is also an ode to libraries and has already

met with great success. It is entitled "Papyrus: The Invention of Books in the Ancient World".

It begins with the Library of Alexandria, the wonder of the world of knowledge, which, as it was completely destroyed, we only know about from stories and accounts, and now also from this book by Irene Vallejo. The books whisper to each other in an eternal dialogue, like in the famous scene in the Berlin State Library from Wim Wenders' Film "Wings of Desire". It is books that preserve and protect the great knowledge of all things, as the infinitely learned author and librarian Jorge Luis Borges, writing in Spanish, demonstrated time and again. Irene Vallejo writes about how his short story "The Library of Babel" leads us into a wondrous world of books, an exhaustive labyrinth of dreams and words. And Jorge Luis Borges, for his part, provided the inspiration for the blind librarian Jorge of Burgos in Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose". A library, however, as we discover in this work, is not always a place of infinite knowledge, but sometimes the backdrop to murder and villainy and the suppression of knowledge.

Yes, it is without doubt books that describe the world to us, that explain the world to us and that make the world understandable to us. And it is books that help us to see the world and its respective state in a critical manner, that make us capable of engaging in dialogue and discussion, that remind us of the consistently big difference between the world as it is – and the world as it could or should be.

Yet we know that books do not always promote what is good. Things are not always as an optimistic slogan of this year's fair proclaims: "words connect worlds." There are bad and mendacious books; there are writings that tempt us to evil, to animosity, to inhumanity. No war, and we are witnessing this once again, is without pamphlets, without self-justifying speeches, without diatribes nor, unfortunately, without books and articles full of hate.

And I would like to very deliberately add at this point that the destruction of libraries, of publishing houses, the devastating impact that the war is having on the entire book and publishing industry in Ukraine, must not just outrage us but motivate us all to do what we can to help and provide assistance. I am sure that there are more than a few exhibitors here at the Book Fair for whom providing assistance for the reconstruction of the book and publishing industry in Ukraine is second nature. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who is willing to step into the breach here. This material assistance, which is urgently needed in Ukraine, is, in a very profound sense, also in the service of truth: part of the fight against murderous lies and in the struggle for enlightenment.

The writer and musician Serhij Zhadan, who will be awarded this year's Peace Prize of the German Book Trade at the Paulskirche on Sunday, has admirably exemplified social and cultural engagement in

eastern Ukraine since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, stepping up his efforts once again with the commencement of Russia's brutal war of aggression, at great personal risk. I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to him and to offer him my sincere congratulations on winning this prize!

There can be no enlightenment without books. The history of the great European libraries is inseparably bound up with the history of the Enlightenment. Just six months ago, I visited the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel, one of the most important German libraries, which was celebrating its 450th anniversary. One of its librarians was the great luminaries of the Enlightenment Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

The philosopher Hans Blumenberg dubbed one of his intellectual masterpieces "The Readability of the World". This wonderful title describes the genuine promise made by libraries, indeed, by any good book: that the world is "readable", that it is understandable and explainable, that it is accessible to reason. Books are not merely a metaphor for this "readability of the world" – they are the vital tool precisely for this: for being able to understand the world, our lives, society: in a nutshell, ourselves.

No one can read all books in their respective language, which is why the work of translators is so vital. I am therefore delighted that this year's Book Fair is drawing special attention to translation, to this great art and skill, with its dedicated International Translation Centre. Allow me to convey my sincere thanks to all of the translators!

The emblematic motto of this initiative – "Translate. Transfer. Transform." – can be applied to the spirit of the Book Fair as a whole. By translating, we transfer other thoughts, other ways of life, other reflections into our own ways of thinking and into our own lives. And this is how change occurs time and again.

I hope, for us and for all of you, that the 2022 Frankfurt Book Fair will be a ray of light in our darkened present. And I look forward to the pile of new Spanish literature that awaits me in my conservatory, to the sensation of turning the first pages of a new book, to delving into the world of ancient Alexandria, to waiting together for Cecilia, to sharing in the fate of the protagonist in Fernando Aramburu's latest novel, and to so much more besides.