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Opening speech for the Frankfurt Book Fair 2020

13 October 2020, Frankfurt Festhalle

Karin Schmidt-Friderichs, Chairwoman of the German Publishers & Booksellers Association

– *The spoken word takes precedence* –

At exactly this time, seven months ago,  
I was sitting on a train from Leipzig to Frankfurt.  
The Leipzig book fair had been cancelled eight days before  
and on the following Monday,  
kindergartens, childcare facilities and schools were to close in most German federal states.  
In the course of the week, almost all stores were also closed.  
From one day to the next, life in Germany changed.  
People left their places of work with a laptop in their bag, often together with a contract for reduced  
working hours.  
If we had known seven months ago, on that Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>,  
that Corona would still be determining the autumn of 2020,  
our already gloomy forecasts in those March days  
would have been even worse.

But then something happened,  
which I like to call the "miracle of the book industry":  
While the international online giants  
concentrated on selling hygiene products and flour,  
the book industry focussed on its digital competence,  
on its creativity and its flexibility.

Almost overnight  
bookstores across the country transformed themselves into online shops.  
Readers browsed on the net,  
Booksellers gave advice through Whatsapp,  
Bicycle couriers supplied the people  
with a "**staple product**", **books**.  
Impromptu pick-up stations were set up.  
The wholesale book trade reacted swiftly  
and secured the supply chain.  
Publishers used social media as platforms for networking.

During lockdown and the other pandemic-related restrictions, despite all our fears, the industry has  
proven to be astoundingly resilient.  
I say that knowing full well,  
that some companies are facing very bad times  
and that without the generous support from the German government,  
we would not be standing, where we are standing now.

But nevertheless:  
Where did this resilience come from?  
What was, and still remains, the strength of this industry?  
The book industry is **more digital** than we  
– and the readers –  
ever knew.  
The book industry is **creative and agile**.  
It has proven and continues to prove itself to be adaptable and resourceful

**Books are *nourishment*.**

Especially during the crisis,  
the value of good children's books has been clearly demonstrated:  
They gave and give (!) children a value-based pastime.  
They make it possible to immerse oneself in other worlds.  
They convey knowledge.  
That children's and young people's books  
proved to be *the* growth category during lockdown,  
is therefore hardly surprising.

**Books are *guides*.**

And so, for example, people contemplated  
not only on the tradition of baking bread,  
but also realised:  
Not every recipe freely available on the net  
has been professionally checked before publication.  
People want assurance in uncertain times,  
which only a well-edited book can provide.

**Books are *Me Time*.**

When people were no longer allowed to go outside  
to visit friends or go to the pub,  
when things became cramped in their flats that had been turned into offices,  
they remembered what good entertainment was.  
They read good books.  
They read classics.

**Books are *beacons of light*.**

In times of fake news and conspiracy theories  
the value of a carefully checked non-fiction book increases.  
Readers trust publishers,  
who don't just publish,  
but support competent authors,  
providing experienced editors and proof-readers.

A further quality of books has become apparent in this year of crisis:

**"There is strength in serenity."**

While faster forms of media are overflowing  
with more and more complex information,  
the book industry processes the topics of the day into knowledge.  
Clearly structured and well-founded  
facts become comprehensible for readers.  
Books are not clickbaiters for daily news.

**Books provide stability and lend perspective in volatile times.**

**We celebrate all of this in October at the book fair.**

We travel from all over the world,  
looking forward to meeting our friends from the industry  
and attract retailers, journalists, politicians and readers to the river main with exciting new releases.

**Normally.**

This year everything is different.  
This year the Book Fair is coming to your home mainly digitally.  
You can enjoy it from the comfort of your couch.  
For most events, you can decide,  
when you choose to watch them. Netflix will get jealous.

That the Frankfurt Book Fair has taken this step into the digital world,  
is the right decision and an important decision.  
We live in digital times  
and people are used to getting goods and content delivered free to their door.  
That perhaps not everything will go perfectly this year,  
does not matter.  
In the digital world, Life is always Beta.

Take the digital book fair 2020  
as a prototype for all future ones.  
We will gain experience  
and learn from it.  
Become better and better.  
This is, and has been, the DNA of the Frankfurt Book Fair.  
Since 1949.

I cannot open this special book fair  
without mentioning one other aspect,  
which was not good news:  
We had hoped,  
to be able to hold the Book Fair on-site, despite Corona.  
Different to previous years,  
but in the exhibition halls here behind us.  
That didn't happen.  
The rising number of cases,  
renewed travel restrictions  
and the responsibility for the health of our visitors and exhibitors  
forced us to cancel.

I believe,  
that many people today will agree with me when I say,  
I feel a bit sad.  
Because today I realise  
what I will be missing this week.  
Encounters,  
which not only make my life as a publisher more wonderful,  
but rather inspire it, yes, make it special.  
And not all of it  
can be transferred to the net in the same way.  
**We need the physical Frankfurt Book Fair.**  
All of us who live and breathe books, will feel this over the coming days.  
We need the platform,  
which connects all of our work.  
We need the interactions.  
We need the publicity.  
We need it,  
to anchor the significance of books in society.  
**We need this major book highlight in autumn.**

**There will be no back to normal after Corona.**  
So, the Frankfurt Book Fair must reinvent itself.  
And it can only do that together with those  
who make the fair possible:  
the exhibiting publishers from all over the world,  
the trade visitors,  
those who bring the good news of the book trade to the outside world: booksellers,  
journalists,

bloggers  
and other promoters.  
And the readers,  
those for whom we all do what we do!  
**The Frankfurt Book Fair needs you to help it reinvent itself for the time after Corona.**

The Book Fair does not need you primarily  
to rent stands or to buy tickets.  
**The Frankfurt Book Fair needs you  
as valued sparring partners.**  
To reinvent itself, the Book Fair must – and will – listen to you.  
We will listen to you!  
We want to know,  
which parts of the varied programme  
you would prefer to be delivered digitally  
and which aspects you would prefer to experience here on-site.  
We are an industry that thrives on interactions:  
from discussions and encounters,  
from contacts and relationships.  
**Frankfurt was and is and will be the place for this.**

The Frankfurt Book Fair is your platform!  
Legally speaking, it is a company,  
but in our hearts, it is our **annual meeting of the industry**,  
our highlight in autumn,  
Setting the pace for our book year ahead.

There's no publisher, who  
hasn't realised in the last few weeks,  
that you can't simply prepare a book fair alongside your normal work.  
There's no journalist,  
who doesn't miss discovering the hidden gems,  
those that are found while strolling through the fair, seen by chance out of the corner of your eye –  
and not by a strategic search and the flood of press releases.  
There's no foreign rights agent who does not know  
that Frankfurt will always fill their contact list.  
No significant book story,  
that does not somehow begin or end in Frankfurt –  
or both.

Successful books are the result of cooperation,  
we all know that –  
a successful book fair is also the result of cooperation.  
We can do this together!  
We proved that during the weeks of lockdown.  
Let's work on it together,  
that next year  
the Book Fair takes place in all its diversity and abundance  
which is after all what makes our industry so special.  
An autumn without a thousand book fair encounters is possible,  
but NOT desirable.  
Thank you!