

Frankfurt book fair: cancelled prize ceremony for Palestinian author is part of a long history of political zigzagging

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Adania Shibli was awarded the prize for her novel about the 1949 murder of a Palestinian girl by Israeli soldiers. Marco Destefanis/Alamy

The Frankfurt Buchmesse, or book fair, is the world's largest publishing industry gathering, attracting thousands of exhibitors every October. On one level, it's a business event focused on creating buzz for forthcoming bestsellers, trading rights and discussing industry developments. On another, it's a public celebration of books and the values associated with them.

In its 75th year, however, Frankfurt's normal business has been disrupted by a suggestion that a particular book should not be celebrated. That book is *Minor Detail* by Palestinian author Adania Shibli, which presents a fictionalised account of the real-life rape and murder of a Palestinian Bedouin girl by Israeli soldiers in 1949.

Shibli is the winner of the 2023 LiBeraturpreis, awarded by the German literary association Litprom to a female author from the global south (developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America). However, the prize ceremony, due to take place at the Buchmesse, has been cancelled.

In its announcement, Litprom grounded its decision in the context of the Israel-Gaza war:

Due to the war started by Hamas, under which millions of people in Israel and Palestine are suffering, the organiser Litprom e.V. decided to not hold the award ceremony ... Litprom is looking for a suitable format and setting for the event at a later point.

The Frankfurt book fair has been at pains to distance itself from Litprom's cancellation. Litprom, though, is part-funded by the Buchmesse and the president of its board is Juergen Boos – director of the fair.

Boos also released a statement expressing their desire to “make Jewish and Israeli voices especially visible at the book fair ... Frankfurter Buchmesse stands with complete solidarity on the side of Israel”.

The Buchmesse has taken a political side. Boos may have since released another statement emphasising his sympathy with innocent people in both Israel and Palestine, but the initial statement remains intact.

A commercial book fair might not immediately seem a site of position-taking, but as we discovered when researching our book, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business* (2020), the fair has political roots.

International commerce, cosmopolitan discourse?

The foundations of the modern fair were laid after the second world war, amid a desire for global harmony. Its original setting was the Paulskirche, which is a historically important site for German democracy. It was the location of the first unified German parliament in 1848 and the first building reconstructed after the heavy war-time bombing of Frankfurt.

From 1950, the German Publishers and Booksellers Association's peace prize has been awarded during the fair. The prize aims to show the trade's “commitment to serving international understanding between nations and cultures”.

It is one tool in the fair's self-construction as a site not only of international commerce but also of cosmopolitan discourse. This year, the prize goes to the writer Salman Rushdie.

But the fair's idealistic constructions have often been at odds with its actions. In 1968 global unrest resulted in a swathe of protests, including the May riots in Paris. In response, there was heavy police presence at that year's fair, which was dubbed the *Polizeimesse* (police fair).

Tensions in 1968 centred on the award of the Peace Prize to Senegalese president and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor. The award indicated a West German opening up to Africa, and former European colonies. However, Senghor had violently suppressed student revolts at Dakar University earlier in the year against what they viewed as a neocolonial and anti-democratic regime.

In turn, German students protested in solidarity with their Dakar peers. While Senghor received the prize, it is the protests against it that are remembered.

More recently, the bestowal of the fair's guest of honour status to oppressive political states including Turkey (2008) and China (2009) have proved contentious. The fair's aspiration to separate culture from regime, or to encourage democracy through the means of culture, has been frequently challenged.

From 2017 to 2019, we conducted fieldwork at Frankfurt. During this period, the resurgence of far-right politics presented more challenges to the fair's neutrality.

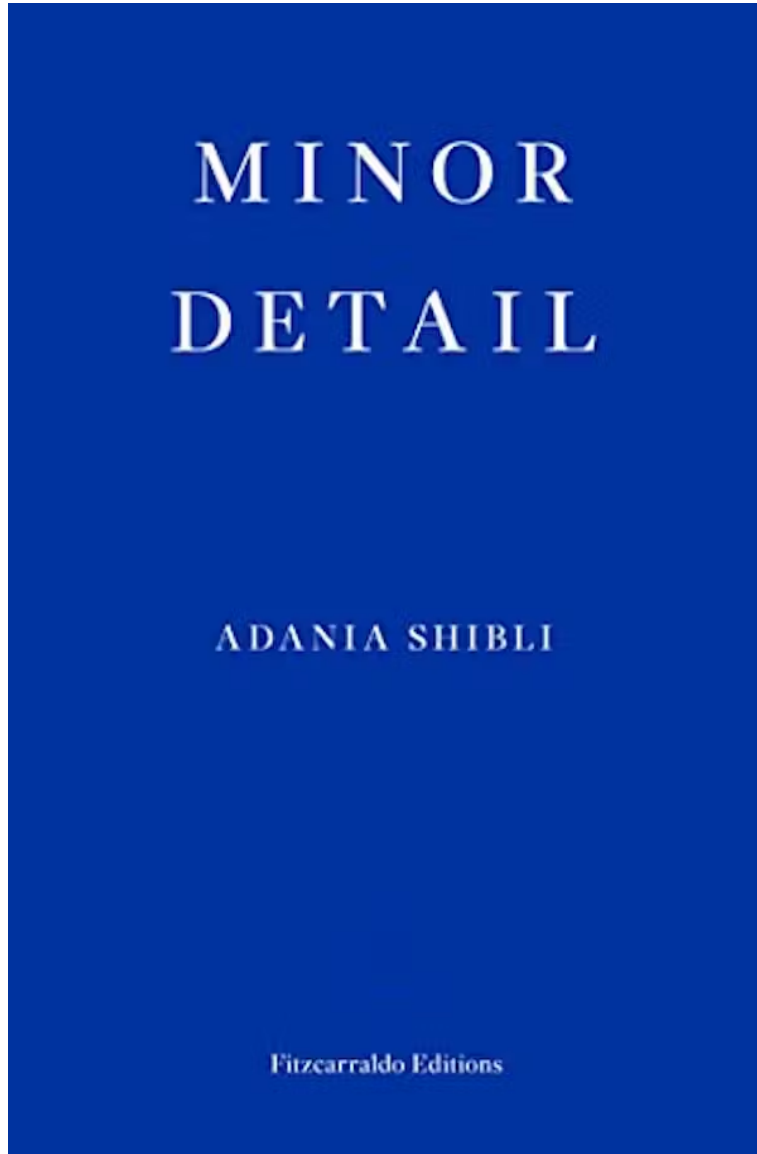
In 2017, a fight broke out at the stand of a far-right publisher, one of a series of disturbances brought about by its presence. The fair's free speech stance was heavily debated as a consequence and its aisles patrolled once more by armed police.

Frankfurt's political zigzagging continues. Sometimes it takes positions on conflicts, sometimes it avoids them by invoking general values such as humanity. The result? Very mixed messages about the humanitarian obligations of books, authors and publishing professionals.

Frankfurt's shadows

Now we have Shibli's book prize ceremony being pulled. The New York Times reported that Shibli agreed to the postponement and to the cancellation of a talk between her and her German translator.

Shibli's publishers and literary agent objected that this was not true (Litprom's statement and the New York Times article were later corrected) and expressed their anger at the cancellation.



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Numerous authors, publishers, national agencies and organisations have subsequently pulled out of the fair, including the Arab Publishers Association, the Emirates Publishers Association, the Indonesian Publishers Association and PublisHer, a group of female publishing leaders.

The cancellation has also been condemned by PEN International, the global organisation for defending writers' freedom of expression. An open letter has been signed by more than 600 writers, publishers and academics.

Prompted by our observations at Frankfurt, including the 2017 violence and the fair's contradictory stances, we extended our research by writing an intentionally parodic work of "fictocriticism". It interrogates the shadowy, unresolved political impulses of the publishing industry.

Satirical observations, rendered as fiction, help us understand the Frankfurt's compromised situation. In this case we invented a neo-Nazi organisation attempting to take over Frankfurt, and a vice president for intellectual freedom in a very compromised position.

Books are part of the world, as culture but also as social and political action. Actors in book culture and the publishing industry are well advised to acknowledge this. As it is, rather than a bookish celebration of its 75th year, the Frankfurt Book Fair finds itself once more embroiled in political controversy.



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