

“STORYTELLING IS IN OUR DNA”

Isobel Abulhoul, founder of the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, tells *Stylist* about her two great loves: books and Bedouin culture

WORDS: HANNAH BASS

“

When I read *King Lear*, it feels like there's no one in the room but Shakespeare and me,” says Isobel Abulhoul. “That's what happens to me when I read, whatever I read: I feel like I'm having a conversation one to one. No other medium does that for me.”

Abulhoul's relationship with literature is a lifelong love affair. “I grew up surrounded by books,” she remembers. “Perhaps they were exaggerating slightly, but my parents told me I could read by the

age of two-and-half. And I still live in a bit of a dream world because I get so caught up in books. I just love the place that I go to when I read.”

“PEOPLE DON'T EXPECT DUBAI TO HAVE A LITERARY FESTIVAL, BUT WHY NOT?”

Her other lifelong passion, you could say, is for Dubai. Abulhoul moved from Britain to teach in the UAE in 1968, and it's been her

home ever since. Her contributions to the Emirates' literary and educational landscape have been deep and wide-ranging: over her five or so decades in the country she has founded Al Ittihad School, Magrudy's bookstores, Jerboa Books publishing house (a move spurred by her frustration with the lack of high-quality children's books in Arabic) and, of course, the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature. In 2012 she was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for her services to education and



THE DESERT POETRY NIGHT
IS ISOBEL'S FAVOURITE
EVENT EVERY YEAR

British literature in the UAE.

Her affinity with Dubai's local culture is clear when she speaks to *Stylist*. We talk about our irritation with outsiders viewing the city as in some way shallow or superficial: "I've lived here since 1968 so Dubai really is my home," she says. "And those of us who live here know that it's certainly not true that Dubai is shallow. Yes, it has the world's tallest building and there are all these amazing new things going on, but there is a beating cultural heart to Dubai. The problem is often a lack of understanding. People from the West may see culture as the ballet, or old monuments, but that's quite a narrow-minded view. Culture is the culture of the people, what they regard as important, and a huge part of the culture here is hospitality, generosity and storytelling. That's what makes the people from the Emirates what they are, and what differentiates the wisdom that's passed down here from other cultures."

Some of the misunderstanding, she believes, comes from the gap between western ideas of culture as something fixed and material – written literature, or ancient buildings, for example – and the Bedouin tradition of transience. "The literary heritage in this part of the world is very much an oral heritage," she says. "The Bedu always moved from place to place, and what they couldn't put on the backs of their camels was discarded – they carried their culture with them, in their hearts and souls. That's why they're such incredible storytellers, because that's how news spread: someone would come in on a camel and update the others through a beautiful story or poetry. It's why we place so much emphasis on Arabic poetry at the festival."

She believes that modern-day Dubai also has more culture to offer than might meet the eye: "Look at the burgeoning arts scene here with the converted warehouses in Al Quoz," she says. "That's happening in any big city across the world, but it's perhaps not something that's

shouted about loudly enough here, and I think that's one of the benefits of the literary festival. People don't expect Dubai to have a literary festival, but why not? We know that there's a huge hunger here for culture, and the festival fulfils that need."

"THE DUBAI AUDIENCE IS YOUNG AND MULTICULTURAL AND THEY'RE HUNGRY FOR INTELLIGENT DISCUSSION"

The Emirates Airline Festival of Literature came into being in 2009 after another bookseller asked Abulhoul whether Dubai had a literary festival, leaving her to wonder why it didn't. Abulhoul believes that the city's unique character has been part of the event's success: "All the things that Dubai stands for are part of the festival, too," she says. "The city itself is incredibly diverse, and then there's the fact that we are at the crossroads of east and west, so audience members and authors come from all over the world. It's also a city with a very young population,

which is something that the authors who attend each year always mention. They love the fact that it's a young, multinational and multicultural audience – they're not jaded, they're not shy of showing their enthusiasm, and they're hungry for intelligent discussion.

"Dubai also adds its own flavour to the festival – I don't think there's any other literary festival that has a world poetry night in the desert, but that's what happens in Dubai and I'd never want to miss it. The atmosphere is so special: sitting on Bedouin cushions under the stars with sand at your feet, having just eaten a wonderful Arabic meal, as the poets ride in on camels – it's not like anything else in the world. And you do not need to understand the words to appreciate the poetry – it is, in many ways, music."

Besides the desert setting, the festival has always



ISOBEL FOUNDED
DUBAI'S LITERARY
FESTIVAL IN 2009



AUTHORS SIGNING
BOOKS AT LAST YEAR'S
LITERARY FESTIVAL

celebrated local culture by throwing a spotlight on native authors. "It's our mission statement to provide a platform for Emirati writers, in particular, and to showcase Arab writers to the world at large," says Abulhoul. "And the unseen side of the festival is the knowledge transfer from across the world that takes place backstage. We have more than 150 authors from over 30 countries, and they get together in the green room and exchange ideas, recommend agents or publishers, how to get their work translated into other languages... We also have authors who are now internationally published as a result of attending a festival workshop or winning one of our prizes."

"THE BEDU CARRIED THEIR CULTURE IN THEIR HEARTS – THAT'S WHY THEY'RE SUCH INCREDIBLE STORY TELLERS"

This year, the theme of the festival is 'time', and there'll be a particular focus on Shakespeare, in honour of the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death. It's also the biggest event yet, with a programme that runs over two weeks rather than its previous five days. "There's been a huge demand in Dubai," says Abulhoul, "and I've also noticed an absolute explosion of literary festivals all round the world in the last few years. I'm sure much of that is because we spend so much time in solitary confinement with laptops and iPhones – we even sit in the office and send an email to the person next to us rather than speaking to them. Whereas a literary festival is all about live, intelligent conversation. It's storytelling and as human beings we love that; it's in our DNA, I'm sure."

The festival will take place
1-12 March 2016;
emirateslitfest.com



FOR THE LOVE OF LITERATURE

What to look out for at the 2016 Emirates Airline Festival of Literature

With a near fortnight-long programme of events lined up for Dubai's biggest Literature Festival yet, there's plenty to appeal to every book lover in the city. Festival Director Isobel Abulhoul rounds up some highlights to look out for...



STEVEN BERKOFF WILL
PLAY ALL SHAKESPEARE'S
VILLAINS IN 90 MINUTES

THE BEST OF THE BARD

This year marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, so the festival has some extra special events lined up in honour of the world's most famous playwright. "Meera Syal will be giving us her take on how Shakespeare has influenced her life, and we've got Robert Lindsay who has played some incredible Shakespearean parts," says Isobel. "The final act, if you will, is Steven Berkoff giving us his one-man performance of Shakespeare's villains – I just can't wait for that."

Shakespeare's Villains, 12th March, 6.30pm to 8.15pm, Dhs200



LET A.C. GRAYLING TAKE
YOU ON A PHILOSOPHICAL
CRUISE DOWN THE CREEK

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The eminent British philosopher and Oxford University fellow A.C. Grayling will host the festival's first literary cruise, addressing the role literature has to play in creating an empathic self, a humane society, and a better future. All of this will take place on board Bateaux Dubai, giving the audience the chance to take in the city's historic creek. "This is not to be missed," Isobel says. "The creek is the lifeblood of Dubai, so you'll be seeing the history of the city all around you, while listening to one of the world's best thinkers."

Literary Cruise, 9 March, 7.30pm to 11pm, Dhs495



THE MOST SOCIAL MEDIA-
SAVVY MAN IN SPACE

SPACE MAN

Chris Hadfield is the first person to become a social media sensation while living in outer space. Now retired, the Canadian astronaut (and prolific Tweeter) will be at the festival to talk about his bestselling book: *An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth*. Isobel says: "I think the thing that makes this year different is the focus on space and science and medicine. These are the kinds of things that people wouldn't think are happening at a literary festival, but they are."

An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth, 5 March, 8pm to 9pm, Dhs100