

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF LITERATURE

This year's Nobel Museum exhibition in Dubai opens up the wonderful world of literature to future Nobel Prize laureates. *Flashes* attended the opening.

"This year's theme is literature and this is the closest to our heart," said His Excellency Jamal bin Huwaireb, Chief Executive Officer of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation. "This part of the world loves poetry. Loves the written word."

HE bin Huwaireb was at Dubai's La Mer for the opening of the fifth edition of the Nobel Museum, which highlights a selection of writers and literary masterpieces that have had a huge emotional and cultural impact on millions of readers across the world. Amongst them, the work of Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz.

Organised by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (MBRF) in collaboration with the international Nobel Foundation, and running until 2 March, this year's Nobel Museum falls under the umbrella of 'The Nobel Prize in Literature – Sharing Worlds'. It's the latest edition of the exhibition to be held in Dubai, with previous years focusing on different elements of the Nobel Prize, such as chemistry and physics.







Above: HE Jamal bin Huwaireb, CEO, MBRF (right), with dignitaries at the opening of this year's Nobel Museum exhibition

Consisting of eight sections, each of which focus on a specific theme, the exhibition is designed to promote the production and transfer of knowledge, with the themes covering everything from tolerance, peace, life, love and family, to fairy tales, the city and the human condition.

The peace section, for example, introduces visitors to selected novels by Nobel laureates in literature that have war and peace as their theme, whereas the human condition section poses questions about what it means to be human. The life section, meanwhile, explores the fragility of our existence.

"We selected a number of themes that we thought were relevant in the context of the Nobel Prize and

then we made a selection of books that in a good way depicted these different themes," said Dr Olov Amelin, Vice President of Exhibitions at the Nobel Prize Museum in Sweden. "Some of the works are very well known, some are not, and they are spread out over a large geographical area.

"There are writers from the northern part of Europe and from Egypt and from many other parts of the world. We've also tried to mix male laureates and female laureates so that we have a good representation of writers."

Amongst the featured works are William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, Gabriel García

Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*. All are displayed in various ways throughout the venue.

Central to the exhibition is a series of interactive artworks that help bring to life some of the museum's selected novels. There's a small-scale recreation of a streetscape in the Algerian city of Oran for Albert Camus' *The Plague*, created by the Brooklyn-based duo Nix & Gerber, and Manal AlDowayan's magical interpretation of Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. The latter has placed some of the cinematic renditions of Mahfouz's novels into a series of glass orbs. Each artwork is accompanied by audio information about the author and excerpts from their book. There are

also explanations of the artworks by some of the artists, including AlDowayan, a Saudi Arabian contemporary artist best known for the installation piece *Suspended Together*.

"It was actually the curator of the exhibition who came up with the idea that art could be a new and interesting interface through which you could approach the different works of the laureates," said Dr Amelin. "So he selected a group of four artists and asked them if they were willing to provide artwork for the exhibition and I think the result is amazing.

"It's a very good way to introduce the works written by a laureate and to tell the story about the writer. Making an exhibition about literature

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HE JAMAL BIN HUWAIREB,
CEO, THE MOHAMMED BIN RASHID
AL MAKTOUM KNOWLEDGE
FOUNDATION



is always quite tricky because the literary work is an artwork itself and should be read sitting in a chair or lying in a bed. But to do an exhibition about literature is always a challenge and bringing in the artwork was really a brilliant way of making this into a three-dimensional exhibition.”

Of particular interest is Mahfouz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988 and remains the only Arab to have ever won the prize. He published over 50 novels, more than 350 short stories, wrote numerous films scripts, and saw much of his work adapted for the screen. As such, his influence on the Arab world has been huge.

Midaq Alley was first published in Arabic in 1947, with an English translation appearing in 1966, and is central to the exhibition’s ‘city’ theme. Widely regarded as one of Mahfouz’s greatest novels, it brings to life a teeming back alley in Cairo.

“He is the only Arab figure that has won the Nobel Prize,” said HE bin Huwaireb of Mahfouz. “He has been such an influential part of the Arab people because so many of his books were translated into films and TV, so everybody is familiar with his work. He has had a huge impact and is still a figure who we aspire to.

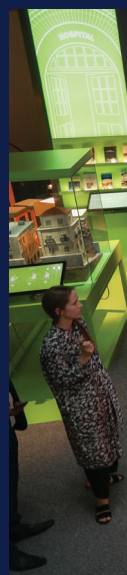
“When any student, or any aspiring writer from the Arab world, comes to this exhibition and sees that he is amongst those who have won the Nobel Prize, they will think it’s a possibility for them to also accomplish something big. Hopefully we’ll have more Arab figures who will win the Nobel Prize in Literature.”

The exhibition is in fact held in Mahfouz’s memory, with a special section dedicated to his work. He was also the subject of a workshop led by the Egyptian writer and scholar Mohammed Al Salmawi.

At the heart of the exhibition, however, is the belief that literature helps us to better understand the world in which we live. “Literature is an effective instrument for spreading tolerance among societies, facilitating solid relations among differing civilisations,” said HE bin Huwaireb. “It allows us to learn about the cultures of others, accept their mindsets, and coexist with them in peace and love.”

Dr Amelin agrees. “Remember that when Alfred Nobel decided literature should be part of the Nobel Prize it reflected his own interests,” he told *Flashes*. “He was a man who worked a lot with

Below: Several artists were invited to interpret the titles of the laureates’ books. The exhibition features art works from Zim & Zoe, of France, Manal Aldowayan, from Saudi Arabia, Kabuki Harada, from Japan, and Nix and Gerber, of New York





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EXHIBITIONS AT THE NOBEL
PRIZE MUSEUM IN SWEDEN

the sciences, he wanted to become a poet, he wanted to write literature, and he also became one of the foremost peace advocates of his time. So it's a very interesting mix, and the Nobel Prize reflects the ideas and the views of this man.

"Literature makes us understand humans in a much better way," added Dr Amelin. "It's also a way of opening the eyes and seeing things in ways that we haven't been able to see before. That prepares us to grow as human beings, and if we look at all the laureates who have been awarded the Nobel Prize, this group of writers has helped us to understand humanity in a better way, and through that we can make better decisions.

"Art, including literature, is extremely important if you want to build a society where people can live, develop, share ideas, discuss and get inspired. And I think that's just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago."



TALKING HEADS

Visitors to this year's Nobel Museum exhibition enjoyed a series of workshops held by literary authorities. *Flashes* meets the experts behind the engaging talks...

DR GUSTAV KÄLLSTRAND

TOPIC: THE HISTORY OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE



There is a pragmatic side to the Swedish Academy, the body responsible for choosing the Nobel Laureates in Literature. According to Gustav Källstrand, a cultural historian specializing in the history of the Nobel Prize, when faced with tough decisions the academy will frequently opt for the lesser known writer.

"If you have two writers on the shortlist who you think are equally deserving – who are of equally high literary value – you should pick the one who's less known," said Källstrand during his talk at the Nobel Museum exhibition. "Because it will be of the most benefit and help the writer find more readers."

He cited two such examples: Isaac Bashevis Singer, who won in 1978, and the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska, who was awarded the prize in 1996. It was a particularly frank observation in a talk sprinkled with insights.

For example, up until 1980 only four non-European or non-North American writers had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and even they wrote primarily in European languages.

"There was a big problem," admits Källstrand. "In the 1980s it was quite clear that the prize was very Eurocentric... And the problem with this is that is says in the will of Alfred Nobel that the prizes should be given to

GREAT READS

The featured Nobel laureates during this year's Nobel Museum exhibition in Dubai included:

people regardless of nationality. So it's supposed to be an international prize. And in 1901, for Europeans international meant the rest of Europe. But by the 1980s it was embarrassingly clear that there was a bigger world outside of Europe if you wanted to be truly international."

The Swedish Academy therefore began to change, broadening its scope and becoming more global in its approach. "It was about the committee trying to raise its own standards, to recognise more literature in more parts of the world," said Källstrand.

In 1982 the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, the master of magical realism, was recognised. In 1986 the Nigerian playwright, poet and essayist Wole Soyinka became the first African Nobel laureate. In 1994, Japan's Kenzaburō Ōe won for creating "an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today".

There are also discernible literary trends, said Källstrand. In particular, what has been described as 'witness literature'. For example, the Hungarian author Imre Kertész wrote about the holocaust, Herta Muller the dictatorship in Romania, and Gao Xingjian the cultural revolution in China.

"The Nobel Prize is not a competition," added Källstrand. "It's not a contest between the greatest literary writers in the world. It's not the literary Olympics. Instead, I think we should look at the Nobel Prize as an honour that the Swedish Academy can give to some of the writers in the world that they judge to be of very high literary value.

"So, rather than seeing the Nobel Prize in Literature as the World Cup or Olympics for literature, maybe we should see it as the world's most prestigious book club, where readers every year are introduced to great works of literature."



WILLIAM GOLDING

England (1911 – 1993)

Featured novel: *Lord of the Flies* (1954)

Theme: Human Condition

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1983



SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

Belarus (1948 – present)

Featured novel: *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985)

Theme: Peace

Awarded Nobel Prize: 2015



SIGRID UNDSET

Denmark (1882 – 1949)

Featured novel: *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920)

Theme: Love

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1928



NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

Egypt (1911 – 2006)

Featured novel: *Midaq Alley* (1947)

Theme: City

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1988



GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

Colombia (1927 – 2014)

Featured novel: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)

Theme: Family

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1982



TONI MORRISON

USA (1931 – present)

Featured novel: *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

Theme: Tolerance

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1993



SELMA LAGERLÖF

Sweden (1858 – 1940)

Featured novel: *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906)

Theme: Fairy tales

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1909



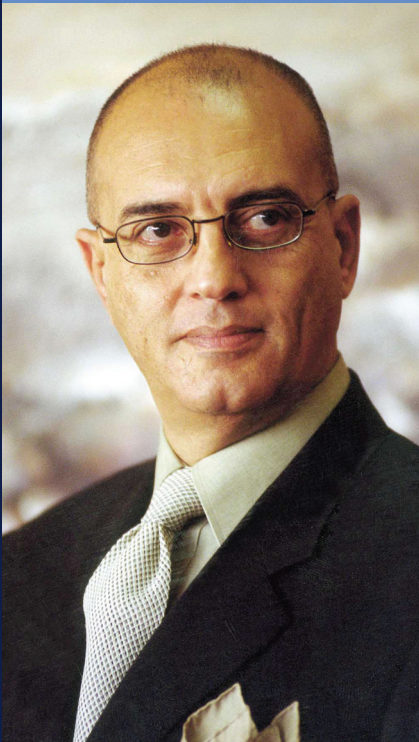
ALBERT CAMUS

Algeria (1913 – 1960)

Featured novel: *The Plague* (1947)

Theme: Life

Awarded Nobel Prize: 1957



MOHAMMED SELMAWI

TOPIC: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

The prize-winning Egyptian writer Mohamed Salmawy gave a 40-minute talk on Naguib Mahfouz, the only Arab to have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

A former colleague of Mahfouz at *Al-Ahram* newspaper, where many of the laureate's novels were serialised, Salmawy was a close personal friend of the "grand old man of Egyptian letters" and his personal representative during the Nobel celebrations in 1988. It was there that Salmawy delivered Mahfouz's Nobel lecture in both Arabic and English at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm.

During his talk at the Nobel Museum exhibition, Salmawy, the former President of the General Union of Arab Writers, said that crowning Mahfouz with the most prestigious literary prize was a tribute to Arabic literature as a whole after it had been ignored by consecutive Nobel juries for more than 90 years.

He also stated that Arabic literature was an old tradition dating back to pre-Islamic times, and that Mahfouz's acceptance of the prize helped ascertain the credibility of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

"Naguib Mahfouz is rightly considered the father of the modern Arabic novel," said Salmawy. "During his prolific career, spanning some 70 years, he led Arabic fiction to new horizons both in form and content. His novels have also helped evolve the Arabic language, bringing it closer to modern daily use.

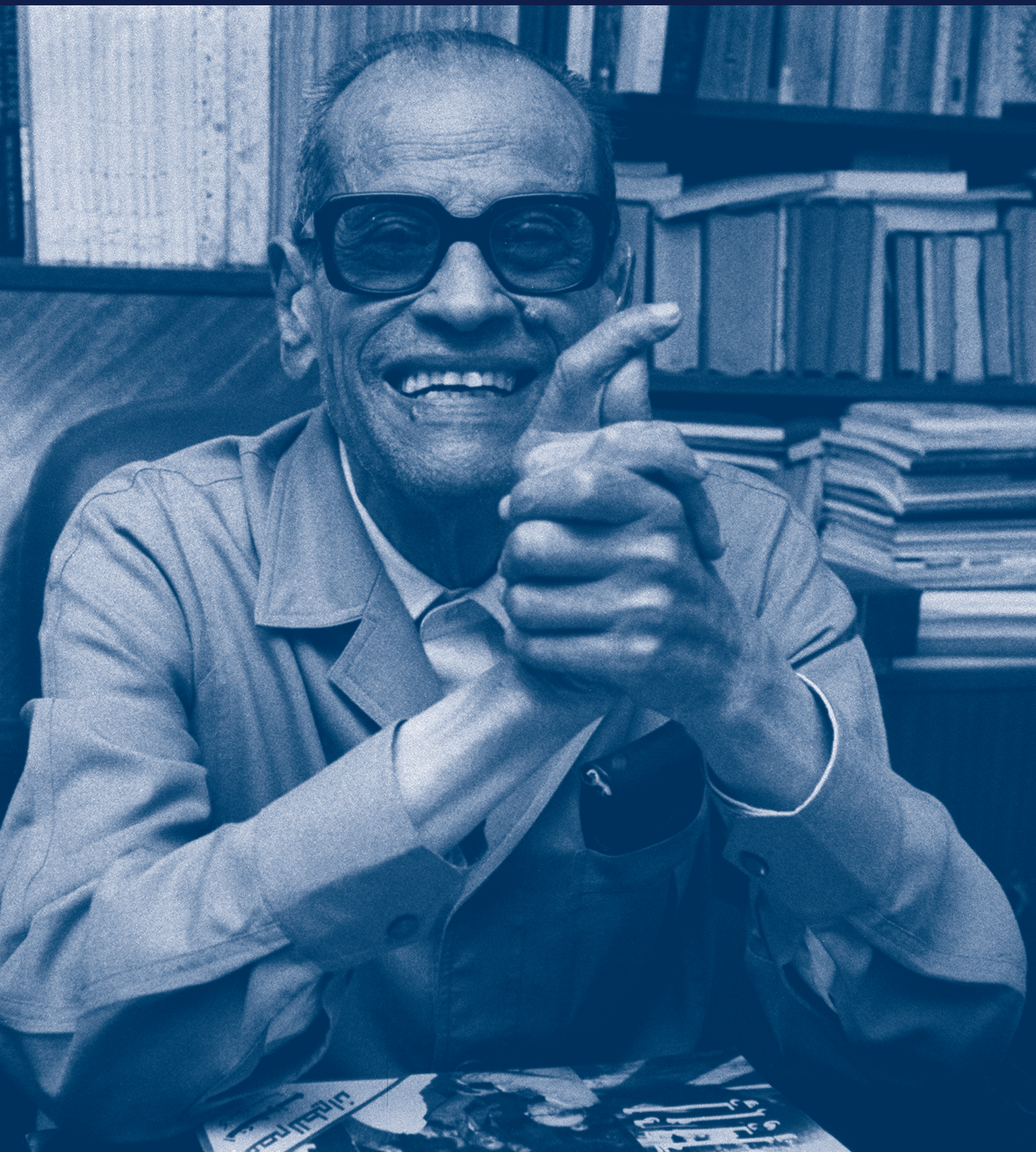
"American scholar and critic Roger Allen believes it is because of Mahfouz that we can now speak of the 'Arabic novel' as a genre, the same way we speak of the English, the French or the Russian novel. Hardly any Arab novelist in the generations succeeding Mahfouz has not been influenced, one way or the other, by his writings."

Salmawy, the author of more than 30 books, some of which are on Mahfouz, was among the few friends allowed regular visits to Mahfouz's hospital bedside after an apparently minor fall sustained in his home in Cairo in July 2006. His visits led to *The Last Station*, Salmawy's intimate journal of Mahfouz's final weeks. Mahfouz died in August 2006 at the age of 94.

"My relationship with Mahfouz was a very close one extending over 30 years," said Salmawy. "We both worked at *Al-Ahram* newspaper where we became great friends in spite of the generational difference. He chose me as his personal representative in the Nobel ceremony where I read his Nobel lecture at the Swedish Academy in December 1988. After the failed attempt on his life in 1994, which left him with a disabled right hand, he chose me again to conduct weekly interviews with him to be published in *Al-Ahram* newspaper in lieu of his weekly article, which he could no longer write."

After his talk Salmawy, who wrote a number of books on Mahfouz in Arabic, English and French, received questions from the audience. He was also honoured by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation for his lifetime achievement in the field of literature and culture.

Naguib Mahfouz





KRISTIAN FREDÉN

TOPIC: WRITE LIKE A NOBEL LAUREATE

How do you write like a Nobel laureate? It's a question that Kristian Fredén, an author, literary critic and librarian at the Swedish Academy has sought to answer. In his book *Write Like a Nobel Laureate*, Fredén asked what kind of authors are out there, how do they write, and is it possible to become as skilled yourself? He has tried to answer such questions by highlighting the work of 10 writers and analysing their style and technique. Each of the 10 writers' lives are also discussed, with emphasis on how their life illuminates their work.

It's a topic that Fredén revisited for his talk at the Nobel Museum exhibition in Dubai, referencing selected Nobel laureates in literature and drawing on his experiences working as a librarian and literary expert at the Nobel Museum and then as a librarian at the Swedish Academy.

He began with Selma Lagerlöf, the first female award winner and the first from Sweden. Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* was included in 'The Nobel Prize in Literature – Sharing Worlds' and was illustrated by artwork created by Japanese automata maker Kazu Harada.

Lagerlöf's literary creativity continues to fascinate and inspire writers today and raises further questions. What do Lagerlöf and Swedish horror novelist John Ajvide Lindqvist have in common, for example? How does Swedish film producer Jerker Virdborg read Ernest Hemingway, or Anna Hallberg read Polish poet and essayist Wislawa Szymborska? The answers to these questions – if you can ascertain them – will give you an idea of what it takes to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

During his workshop, Fredén also discussed Alfred Nobel and “how the Swedish Academy since 1901 has tackled the tricky task of selecting each year's Nobel Prize laureate for literature”.

Indeed, the Nobel Prize in Literature has not been without its controversies. The decision to bestow its distinguished literary award on Bob Dylan in 2016, for example, unleashed a storm of criticism. Uproar also accompanied the announcement that Peruvian writer, politician, journalist and essayist Mario Vargas Llosa had won in 2010.

“Challenging is probably a better word for it than tricky,” said Fredén. “Historically I would say it's been challenging because of two things. Firstly, the interpretation of the words ‘the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction’ in the will of Alfred Nobel. And secondly, simply the vastness of the literary field, especially since the choosing of laureates stopped being as Eurocentric as it was during the first decades.”

It's a topic that has been researched in detail by Kjell Espmark, whose book *The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study of the Criteria Behind the Choices* is based upon the Nobel Committee's reports to the Swedish Academy and the comments of outsiders in support of nominations.

So how do you write like a Nobel laureate?

For Fredén, the answer is simple. “The moral of my book is that originality comes from studying the work of others,” he said. “Or simply: to be a good writer you must be a good reader.”

EBBA HOLMBERG

TOPIC: NOBEL BOOKS EXPRESSING HUMANITY

“One of the reasons for my great passion for literature is that it’s a meeting between writers and readers, bridging the gaps of time and space,” said Ebba Holmberg, a literature expert at the Nobel Prize Museum in Stockholm.

Holmberg, who wrote the text for the ‘The Nobel Prize in Literature – Sharing Worlds’, was in Dubai to deliver a workshop that explored the different ways that books from the exhibition express humanity and human life. This is often done in surprising and unexpected ways, she said, as the exhibition’s combination of artworks and literature revealed.

“Rather than seeing literature as a one-way communication where writers tell their readers a story, I see it as a constant and mutual re-creation of stories within each reader,” said Holmberg, who regularly holds literature programmes, lectures and workshops. “That makes the reader (or listener) just as important and active as the writer or the poet. The themes of the exhibition are themes that open up for participation and that hopefully will inspire people of all ages to read and write.”

In her talk, Holmberg discussed different writers and their works, revealing how Nobel laureates explore and play with themes such as family relations, heritage, trust and the fragility of life. Authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, William Golding, Toni Morrison and Wislawa Szymborska.

Of particular interest was the Belarus writer and journalist Svetlana Alexievich, who represented the theme of ‘peace’ with her novel *The Unwomanly Face of War*. First published in 1985, the book is a groundbreaking oral history about the female soldiers who fought in the Red Army during the Second World War. Alexievich won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015.

“Alexievich always works combining the methods and roles of journalist and writer, and her literature is often described as ‘documentary novels,’” says Holmberg. “The book is based on interviews with more than 200 women and Alexievich depicts the horrors of war by focusing on their personal experiences and their stories about daily life in war.”

“Alexievich says that she is interested in writing ‘the history of feelings.’ This is effectively shown in Manal AlDowayan’s artwork in the exhibition. AlDowayan has done a data analysis of the women’s stories and of their use of different words connected to feelings. It turns out that the words ‘love’, ‘fear’ and ‘sadness’ are much more frequent than the word ‘hate’. Shifting the perspective of how the history of a war is told, *The Unwomanly Face of War* poses many questions on our ideas about war and conflicts and also about what peace is.

“By focusing on the personal experiences and feelings of the soldiers, the tragedy of war is more effectively shown than if Alexievich would have only focused on the battles and the violence. And to understand peace and how to maintain it, it’s important to understand the mechanisms of war and the individual experiences from wars and conflicts.”



PARTNERS IN KNOWLEDGE



A host of government and private entities in Dubai and the UAE backed the Nobel Museum exhibition this year, and their tremendous support has been a vital factor in the event's success.

"The exhibition cements Dubai's status as a leading international destination for hosting major events," said MBRF's CEO His Excellency Jamal bin Huwareb (above). He added: "The Nobel exhibition has become a permanent fixture on the annual knowledge calendar, welcoming attendees from all segments of the community, who come to explore the accomplishments of Nobel laureates from various disciplines, who have contributed to the progress and prosperity of human societies.

"We truly appreciate the constant support we receive from the exhibition's sponsors; it empowers us to carry on and further improve the event every year," said HE bin Huwareb.

WHAT THE SPONSORS SAY



"ADNIC's participation in the fifth Nobel exhibition is part of our social responsibility effort, where we support initiatives to build a knowledge-based society in the UAE. We take pride in our continued cooperation with the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation."

ABDULLA AL NUAIMI,
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF SHARED SERVICES, ABU DHABI NATIONAL INSURANCE COMPANY (ADNIC)



"We, at Meraas, always look forward to providing innovative and inspirational experiences to our visitors across all of our urban destinations. With that in mind, we are delighted to be supporting the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation in hosting the Nobel exhibition in Dubai once again. The event showcases innovative ideas that stimulate visitors' imagination and passion for creativity; it is a landmark addition to the emirate's already busy events calendar."

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SALLY YACOUB,
CHIEF MALLS OFFICER, MERAAS HOLDING



"TeN TV is always on the lookout for opportunities to sponsor important events, out of our faith in the important role knowledge plays in building and developing nations."

NASHAAT EL DEEHY,
EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT OF TEN TV



Visitors from around the world can take a virtual online tour of the Nobel Museum exhibition through MBRF's official website: mbrf.ae/en/nobel-museum-virtual-tour/2019



"We aim to ensure that the people of the UAE are always informed of the latest accomplishments and developments in science and technology. The Nobel exhibition sheds light on the prestigious Nobel Prize, reputed all around the world, and showcases the contributions Nobel laureates have made that have helped shape the world we know today. We hope this inspires talented people to innovate and come up with inventions, breakthroughs and works that will one day be displayed alongside the remarkable scientific feats the Nobel exhibition contains."

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DIA HAYKAL,
HEAD OF CONTENT, HAYKAL MEDIA



"We are proud to continue this journey of partnership with the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, and to sponsor the Nobel exhibition again this year.

Our sponsorship comes from our belief in the fundamental role knowledge plays in building and developing societies. We reaffirm our commitment to working closely with the Foundation and supporting its local and international initiatives and events. We are always keen to support all efforts aimed at empowering future generations, and we look forward to an ongoing partnership with MBRF."

FARES SAYEGH,
CEO, ROYA TV