

Geraldine Bedell's novel banned in Dubai because of gay character

Jack Malvern

A book festival in the Middle East that claims to celebrate the “world of books in all its infinite variety” has banned a British author because her novel contains references to homosexuality.

The first International Festival of Literature in Dubai has attracted dozens of world-class authors, including Margaret Atwood and Louis de Bernières, with promises that it will be relaxed, vibrant and diverse. One author has found otherwise.

Geraldine Bedell's book *The Gulf Between Us* was greeted with enthusiasm by organisers because of its setting in the Middle East, but the mood changed swiftly when they discovered a gay character.

Isobel Abulhoul, director of the festival, wrote to Ms Bedell to tell her that she was not invited. “I do not want our festival remembered for the launch of a controversial book,” she wrote. “If we launched the book and a journalist happened to read it, then you could imagine the political fallout that would follow.”

She explained that the book was unsuitable because one of the characters was a gay sheikh with an English boyfriend and the plot was set against the background of the Iraq War which “could be a minefield for us”.

Ms Bedell, who has lived in the Gulf, told *The Times* that the book has since been banned from sale in Dubai and the rest of the United Arab Emirates.

“It is incredibly affectionate towards the Gulf. I feel very warmly towards it, except when things like this happen. It calls into question the whole notion of whether the Emirates and other Gulf states really want to be part of the contemporary cultural world ... You can't ban books and expect your literary festival to be taken seriously.”

She said that the gay sheikh was a minor character.

Authors due to attend the festival, which begins on February 26, include Kate Adie, Jung Chang, Carol Ann Duffy, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Anthony Horowitz, Frank McCourt, Sir Mark Tully and Wilbur Smith.

One author contacted by *The Times* privately condemned the censorship: “One always hopes that these sorts of literary festivals open people's minds to other people's cultures, but this doesn't seem to be the case here.”

Giles Foden, who also plans to attend, said: “I've never heard of this happening at other literary festivals, though there is an interesting comparison with that Dutch MP not being allowed to come here, which shows that Britain is not above barring entry to people because of what they say or write.”

Sir Ranulph Fiennes said the festival organisers were merely being practical. "I think that if anybody out there wants to establish a festival of some sort, they would be rather stupid to offend the locals in any way."

Juliet Annan, Ms Bedell's publisher, said the censorship system was opaque but was known to discriminate against references to homosexuality, drugs and the theory of evolution. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was banned throughout the Middle East, she said.

Jonathan Heawood, director of English PEN, the writers' association, said: "Great literary festivals, like great literature, provide amazing opportunities for cultural exchange, which we need now more than ever."

"A literary festival which bars books because of their gay or religious content is neither literary, nor a festival. I hope that the organisers will reconsider."

Behind the story: Rules on what is forbidden can be opaque and erratic

Britons who have fallen foul of Dubai's laws have described the country as a "massive contradiction" for its combination of Western hedonism and strict Islamic culture (Chris Smyth writes).

Decisions on what is allowed and what is forbidden can be opaque and are often erratic, as Geraldine Bedell has found.

She is not the first writer to fall foul of the authorities. Last September Christopher Davidson, a British academic, said that his book, *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success*, had been banned from sale in the Emirate. He said: "It makes it difficult for foreign academics to come to a country and try to do research when there is freedom on anything except the domestic matters of the country and the Government. It's a mentality that is self-defeating for these countries, which are trying to become knowledge economies."

The authorities said later that the ban had been a misunderstanding.

Internet sites are also restricted. Until last August the popular microblogging site Twitter was blocked in the UAE, with visitors told it was "inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political and moral values of the United Arab Emirates". The authorities have since performed a U-turn and last week Dubai took part in a "twestival".

The emirate's views on relationships vary greatly from those of the Western countries many of its inhabitants hail from.

Vince Acors, 34, a British businessman, got a three-month jail term, later suspended on appeal, after being convicted of having sex on a Dubai beach.

After returning home before Christmas, he insisted that heavy drinking and public shows of affection between unmarried couples were common in the Arab emirate. He said: "The locals take part in pretty much every activity as much as the expats do."

Last month a British woman lost an appeal against her conviction for adultery in Dubai and was jailed for three months. Marnie Pearce, 40, originally from Bracknell, Berkshire, fears she will lose custody of her two sons.

She claimed that she was falsely accused after her ex-husband and police burst into her home where she was having a cup of tea with a colleague's brother-in-law.

Sporting stars can also find themselves persona non grata. Only yesterday Dubai denied a visa to Shahar Peer, an Israeli tennis player.