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Everybody loves a good draft

The spoken and the written word come together at Lekhana this fortnight

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As the annual chorale of predictions about the presence and absence of lettered illuminati at this year's Jaipur Literary Festival gathers harmonic force, there is The Lekhana Weekend, another equally distinguished accumulation of writers underway – albeit far less clamorous in its heralding when compared to the jamboree in the Rajasthani capital.

The Lekhana Weekend will bring together authors from countries as diverse as Brazil, Germany and Korea. Arshia Sattar, organiser of the gathering and director and co-founder of Sangam House, a writers' residency in the dance village of Nrityagram, said that the event was an extension of the activities taken up at the collective. "Sangam House believes in nurturing a literary culture in the city and giving writers a place and time to write," said Sattar. "Lekhana is about a series of conversations between writers who may not have a chance to meet their peers from other cultures and languages and for readers who may not have a chance to meet writers or listen to them talk to each other."

Sattar was quick to add that Lekhana is not a literary festival. "The word 'festival' has been hijacked by the Jaipur literature festival and it means marquee names and sponsorships, parties and musical events," said Sattar. "Lekhana is completely independent. It is a gathering where people come to talk to each other and not to be talked at."

This year, Lekhana is supported by *Out of Print* magazine; audiobook website booksTalk; Jagriti Theatre, which is also the venue; and Bhoomija, a local arts trust, which is the main sponsor. The focus of the Weekend will be on writing for the spoken word and, among other things, translating poetry, song writing and scripting for theatre. Time Out spoke to three of the writers who will be part of Lekhana this fortnight.

DW GIBSON

North American non-fiction writer DW Gibson is also the co-founder of Sangam House. He serves as an executive director at Writers Omi, a residency for writers, at Ledig House in New York.

What are your expectations from The Lekhana Weekend?

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We want to connect readers with writers. We want writers and translators to feel equally supported and engaged, no matter their mother tongue. We want writers and readers alike to discover new literature that might not necessarily pop up in whatever "micro-audiences" we all inhabit. This year, in particular, we're really excited to get everyone thinking about the oral modes of literature – theatre, performative poetry, oral history, etc – and how they might function in our modern world.

Your latest book Not Working is about individuals who lost their jobs during the economic downturn in America. Would you say that some of the concerns you raised in the book might be relevant to other cultures such as India?

While I can really only speak in detail to the situation in the US, I have learned enough to know that unchecked capitalism has played a big part in the global economic downturn. With qualities such as an insatiable appetite for cheap, cheap labour – no matter the human cost – capitalism has wreaked havoc on the lives of the polity any place where capitalism reigns supreme. And this includes both the US and India. In both cases I'd like to see democracy re-assert itself with efficient and meaningful rules that create an environment where upward mobility is not a carrot dangled out of range, but a real possibility when hard work and ingenuity are applied.

Will you attempt to make your writing more accessible to Indian readers?

I'd love to. I have no doubt that I'll continue to explore themes in my work – such as the abuses of capitalism, or the power of oral history in a technophile world – themes which, I believe have relevance to human beings [and] that supersede our national borders.

DENISE KUMANI GANTT

An African-American poet, Denise Kumani Gantt is also a playwright who lives in Seattle, Washington.

Do you believe that events like Lekhana help to exchange cross-cultural ideas?

Absolutely. I am an African-American writer who primarily writes about issues regarding the African Diaspora. Recently, I have found myself sharing this work with predominantly non-black audiences. When writers are highly specific in their storytelling they can often reach a level of universality that allows people of different cultural backgrounds to enter into the work, and I see this as something that is very positive.

Could you tell us about the piece you will be presenting that is linked to the recent gang rape and death of a woman in New Delhi? I have been working on a solo performance piece called *Eve's Lament*, which imagines a Biblical Eve retelling the story of being cast out from the Garden of Eden. She also laments the state of the world and purports that humanity's very survival depends upon our collective ability to gain a more global and compassionate perspective. I was deeply disturbed by what happened to this young woman and violence that happens against women in so many ways and in so many places. At Sangam House, I will be spending a good amount of time revising the piece and incorporating this and some other recent events into the work.

Are there any recurring themes or ideas that feature in your work?

I write a great deal about the African Diaspora and American slavery and how those events continue to affect the United States in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The election of Barack Obama as president represents a great shift for the US, but it has also unearthed numerous unhealed racial wounds. My work attempts to shed light on some of the unspoken stories about this era and I hope people leave my work with a sense of healing and catharsis.

ULLA LENZE

Ulla Lenze is a German fiction writer. Her latest novel, *What Remains of Death* was selected to be part of the acclaimed SWR Bestenliste.

How do spaces like Lekhana help from the literary point of view?

In my experience, meeting with other authors is always very beneficial for one's own work – especially as writing is usually a practice that involves a lot of solitude. On the other hand, especially when we have different cultural backgrounds (though these are usually not essential, as many writers are cosmopolitan anyway), it's that difference within the similarity that I find exciting.

Could you tell us a bit about your latest novel?

It has an autobiographical background and deals with the question, what happens when a person who is very close to us dies. I've been trying to stay close to what I myself do know about these states of inner crisis. Since this is a universal subject that everyone has to deal with at some point, I do believe that it is a book that will appeal to a wider audience.

Any Indian authors whose work you follow.

Aravind Adiga, Suketu Mehta and Altaf Tyrewala are some authors whose works I appreciate. There is one book that gripped me and that is *A Fine*



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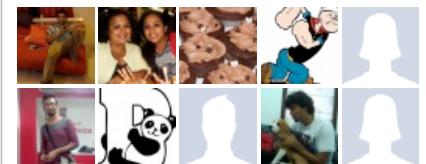
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Balance by Rohinton Mistry. It depicts the time of expanded government power and crackdowns in civil liberties in India between 1975 and 1984. It is Mistry's detached yet compassionate and wise voice that made this a very impressive read.

The Lekhana Weekend will be held from Fri Jan 18-Sat Jan 20 at Jagriti Theatre.

By Shinibali Mitra Saigal on January 18 2013 6.48am

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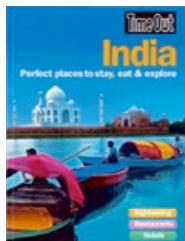
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