

WordFest 2007

Want Chyi

“Who is that man?” my friend and fellow writer Dinh Vong asked me, as the lights dimmed for our first reading at WordFest 2007. Her face pointed toward a photograph of a man propped on a chair beside the spotlighted lectern and microphone.

“Probably just a logo advertising the festival,” I whispered back, as the audience hushed and checked that they had turned off their cell phones.

“But he looks so startled,” Dinh said. Seated at a desk, his pen poised, the photograph’s subject did betray surprise, as though each of us, waiting for an excerpt from the debut novel of Indian-Canadian writer Ameen Merchant, had in fact, burst upon him in his private study, and caught him writing—art being one of the most subversive acts.

As we later discovered, the man was not a stranger posing for a picture, but a writer who has been imprisoned by the Uzbekistan government for his work—reminding us again, of the importance of our words, of the power we have to change the world with what we do.

That was my experience at WordFest 2007: remembering that art has validity and power, and that it forgives and nurtures. At the Wednesday night showcase, we were treated to readings from Canada, New Zealand, France, and Scotland. Hearing works in translation, hearing voices speak in accents, I felt the way I did standing in Waterstone’s bookstore when I studied abroad in Wales, examining the bestseller shelf: where we come from matters. Although it might have seemed easy to forget we were in Canada, the landscape and cityscape familiar enough that we could have been in the U.S., the group of us soon discovered subtle differences in culture, which in turn, altered *us*.

While exploring downtown Calgary, we saw posters for an African mayoral candidate, and witnessed voters carrying a banner asking that citizens support the homeless. Upon our arrival in Banff, I read that homelessness had risen 30% in Calgary since the last election, and that the topic remained a deciding factor in the municipal race. Indeed, less than one percent of the city’s population was homeless—certainly lower than in any major city in the U.S.—yet, its residents were concerned enough to march in the streets days before the election took place. What also impressed me was the knowledge that a nineteen-year old Asian named Jeremy Zhao, was also running for major. His platform pushed for a greater voice for immigrants, young people, and minorities. He is an engineering student at the University of Calgary.

The difference in politics I saw in Calgary became a difference in climate in Banff. There, the crisp air and mountains provided a window into a life I wished to explore in my fiction, and the readings and panels I attended allowed me insight into books and authors I would not have otherwise known. It had been years since I’d enjoyed a slam poetry performance, or clapped along to a spoken word artist. But at WordFest, I had the opportunity to not only experience how music and language inform one another, but be reminded of how what we do impacts the earth and all people, translating into every tongue available.