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BolognaBooksPlus launch is 'a historic day' for BCBF

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The opening day of this year's virtual Bologna Children's Book Fair was hailed as an important milestone by organisers, as for the first time in its nearly six decades of the event it had attendees from outside its core children's market.

The fair kicked off with yesterday's (14th June) BolognaBooksPlus (BBP) stream and its flagship "Forging Forward: the Pandemic—An Interruption, or an Opportunity to Rethink" conference. The BBP stream, which features a number of adult publishing-oriented seminars along with children's events, is programmed by former London Book Fair director Jacks Thomas.

Elena Pasoli, BCBF director, said: "This is a key day in the history of BCBF because, for the first time in our 58-year history and in addition to the 200 plus events for BCBF, we have brought together in Bologna, albeit virtually, representatives of the global publishing industry to discuss together the central issues for the entire publishing industry in this particular moment."

Pasoli did stress the conference stream was continuing to emphasise its children's roots: "It is fantastic to have children's publishing represented throughout, from [Kalimat founder and

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chairs through to a children's industry voice as part of every panel. I am sure that this day will be the starting point of a new and wider relationship between Bologna and the global publishing community."

The "Forging Ahead" sessions included appearances by the novelist Elif Shafak, Wattpad c.e.o. Alan Lau and PFD c.e.o. Caroline Michel on her experiences as the Hay Festival chair.

In the "Changing Reading Habits" session, which focused on the pandemic's effect on technology and reading, Oxford Education m.d. Fathima Dada pointed out that the pandemic had accelerated the shift to digital. That combined with giving "unprecedented access" to free resources given out to parents and teachers resulted in "our print sales being quite negatively impacted. [Declining print sales] have been a pattern over a few years but there was definitely a particular dip in the last year that was pandemic-generated."

However, Dada said that the pandemic forced the OUP education division to "think really quickly and sharply, about developing solutions that go right across the board" about some of the more acute problems of the pandemic, including the inequality of access to digital resources. She added: "We issued a report this week which highlights the impact of the digital divide. Where 79% of those surveyed said socioeconomic barriers had the biggest impact on digital learning –and this is not only in emerging markets but in very developed markets as well...so while we continue to invest in digital globally, we are now even more sharply cognisant of these [inequality] issues, and I'm actively working to address them."

BBP continues with rest of the week with highlights including a lecture on the Dante 700th anniversary and an appearance by Victoria Hislop. Thomas said: "[BBP has had] a fascinating first day, and we're delighted that people could join us to hear about the amazing ways publishers have risen to the challenge of these difficult times, something that has at times been humbling and inspiring in equal measure."

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