

EUROPE

For Catalans, a Day of Books, Roses and, of Course, Politics

By RAPHAEL MINDER APRIL 26, 2018

Since medieval times Catalans have celebrated the feast of their patron, Sant Jordi, or Saint George, on April 23, which happens to coincide with the deaths of both William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes.

Almost a century ago, business-savvy publishers turned it into a book-selling event. Men traditionally offer women roses, and women buy them books in return — though these days women also receive books to ensure gender equality. All through Barcelona and other Catalan cities, bookstands are erected side-by-side with flower stalls.

But this year, after months of secessionist turmoil, not even a festive day of books and roses was immune to the political divides of Catalan society. The

question was, perhaps inevitably, to be, or not to be, independent.

Ada Colau, Barcelona's far-left mayor, wore a yellow rose as a lapel pin, a nod to the yellow ribbon that has become the symbol of Catalans demanding the release of jailed Catalan politicians awaiting trial for rebellion, after briefly declaring independence from Spain last October.

“Of course Sant Jordi is always a great feast, but it's also true that this Sant Jordi isn't like all others, and that we now have people who are in prison instead of being out on the streets, enjoying this with us,” Ms. Colau said.

She also lamented the fact that Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's government was still administering direct rule over Catalonia.

Not everyone was pleased to listen to her.

“Catalan society is divided, so Sant Jordi should never be the day to talk politics and divide people even more,” said Àlex Sàlmon, the editor of the Catalan edition of El Mundo, a Spanish newspaper.

Along the Diagonal avenue, which crosses Barcelona, some people gathered around a book stall to celebrate the fictitious Republic of Tabarnia, a jab at the separatist parties who failed to win a majority of the votes in many parts of Catalonia, including within Barcelona.

The book stall was selling copies of nine different books opposed to independence.

“Separatism has infiltrated and tried to destroy every aspect of life in Catalonia, even sadly Sant Jordi,” said Albert Boadella, a playwright who is the unofficial “president” of Tabarnia, as his supporters lined up to have their photo taken with him.

A short distance away, the mood at another stall run by one of the main pro-independence associations was more somber. People gathered there were writing letters into scrapbooks that will be sent to the jailed politicians.

“We and those of Tabarnia can each have our own space, with no need to talk to each other,” said Xavier Vidal, while he supervised the letter-writing session. “Sant Jordi is a very special celebration of Catalan culture, but every day is important to reach our goal of independence.”

The feast is also an opportunity for readers to meet their writers. Established authors organize book-signings, while debut writers aim for the release of their work to coincide with Sant Jordi to jump-start sales.

Some acclaimed novelists have recently published books about the history and politics of Catalonia, like Eduardo Mendoza, who was born in Barcelona but now mostly lives in London.

“I wanted to put my own ideas in order, as well as clarify things for others,” Mr. Mendoza said. “I’ve been reading and hearing things about the Catalonia of 2018 in terms of oppression and Franco, when all of that is so clearly in the past.”

At another stall, Toni Albà, an actor and theater director, took a different view about the legacy of Franco’s dictatorship, while he signed copies of his own book, based on extracts from Hamlet and titled, “To Be or Not to Be Catalan.”

Mr. Albà was recently indicted on a charge of publishing insults on Twitter, including words directed at a Spanish judge who sent Catalan politicians to prison. “I was a child under Franco, so I sadly know all about censorship in Spain,” he said.

About 1.5 million books are sold during Sant Jordi in Barcelona, yielding around 20 million euros (\$24 million) in revenues, which represents a significant portion of the annual income of publishers, particularly smaller ones who specialize in books written in the Catalan language.

Sant Jordi is also essential for the flower economy, even if the roses start to sell at a discount as the day nears its end.

“You can end up walking away with a bunch of cheap flowers, while the books are thankfully more stable,” joked Claudio López Lamadrid, the editorial director of the Spanish subsidiary of Penguin Random House. “If people then read them, great, but at least they buy them.”

Of course, this year some of the roses were yellow rather than red. “I wanted a yellow rose to make clear that it’s not normal to have people in prison because of their ideas,” said Txema Escorsa, a teacher.

María Navarrete Cano said she wrote her book “From Catalonia with Love”

because she was frustrated that her relatives in the southern region of Andalusia couldn't come to terms with her support for independence, since part of the family emigrated to Catalonia from Andalusia in the 1950s.

“I really care for my family in Andalusia and I'm not against anybody who is Spanish — so I really want them to understand that this is only about being against a Spanish government that's been hurting Catalans,” she said.

Santi Vila, a politician who stepped down from the Catalan government just before the botched unilateral declaration of independence last October, had a book, too.

His work denounces the mistakes of secessionism, and has already sold 10,000 copies since being published last month, in both Catalan and Castilian Spanish.

“Of course many people feel exhausted by our political situation, but it doesn't mean they can ignore it altogether — whether they like it or not and even on Sant Jordi,” he said.

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