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OPINION

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A celebration of readers



PHOTO: THE MALTA BOOK FESTIVAL / FACEBOOK

THIS October the National Book Council has once again organised the Malta Book Festival. The popularity and success of this event prompt us to reflect on its celebratory nature.

The festival is meant to primarily showcase what local publishers have on offer and to provide thousands of visitors with an opportunity to discover new books by local writers. Besides acting as a networking event for those in the publishing industry, the festival allows the public to visit a wide variety of exhibitor stands and attend some of the events forming part of a rich programme aimed at facilitating interaction with books, writing, and performative readings.

This is in line with Millicent Weber's research on literary festivals, the functions of which include celebrating excellence and diversity in writing, promoting and distributing literary culture, and introducing readers to new writers.

First organised in 1979, for the NBC the festival "celebrates the book culture in all its forms". In fact, the theme of this year's edition focuses on #beyond-books, which underscores how writing has the capacity to occupy different media rather than just printed or electronic books. The emphasis placed on the product is probably appropriate here given that the event is meant to support the book industry.

Reading, which in itself is an activity that can be engaged in and understood in diverse ways, is also something that such a festival celebrates. As a multifaceted process, reading is deemed vital not only by those who have a commercial interest in their products being bought and read, but also by educational authorities, policymakers and anyone who treasures a society made up of highly literate citizens.

Beyond the utilitarian purpose for celebrating reading, though,

lies the one that probably matters most of all: its value and meaning as a leisure activity. In the television series *Westworld*, two characters who think of themselves as human while actually being androids have a conversation about reading. The book that sparks this conversation is Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

This is somewhat ironic given that *Westworld* is a giant Wild West-themed amusement park in which human guests are free to do anything they want without the android hosts being able to harm them in the least. After asking her to read a passage from the classic story, Bernard tells Dolores, "I guess people want to read about the things they want the most and experience the least." While this might be true of some readers, its opposite is true for others.

Nonetheless, what Bernard says acts as a reminder that reading has for centuries provided billions of people with an op-

portunity of engaging with and transcending the cultural, political and social limitations that fence them in. It is one of the reasons for which some human beings read for leisure, but there are many equally valid motives that encourage people to derive enjoyment from reading.

Apart from celebrating the significance of books and of reading as a crucial human behaviour, an event like the Malta Book Festival is most importantly a celebration of those who cherish reading so much that they willingly – and perhaps regularly – engage in it. Given that they attend such events in large numbers, the fact that English lacks a collective noun for readers is remarkable.

In an article on the fictional nature of a writer's audience, Walter J. Ong argues that the reason for which there is no collective noun for readers is because their plurality hinders them from constituting a united group. Unlike the audience

attending a talk, they do not act here and now on one another and on the orator. The term 'readership' is inappropriate because it is an abstraction, something that a talk's audience is not.

However, Beth Driscoll's research shows that for some people a literary festival can take a quasi-religious meaning as it creates a secular space where a love of books can be celebrated amongst fellow believers. This helps to form a sense of community that relies on both cognitive and emotional engagement, and involves an element of self-celebration on the part of the cultural community's members.

Given the peculiar nature of many of the collective nouns found in English, perhaps it would not be entirely amiss if we borrow from the celebratory nature that is typically manifested at book festivals to start referring to a celebration of readers.