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The Mertin Agency Has the Hometown Advantage

By Emily Williams

If you're involved in Portuguese- and Spanish-language publishing, there's a good chance your Fair experience started on Monday night at a dinner and reception thrown by the Mertin Agency. For many years, agency founder Ray-Güde Mertin hosted the guests in her home, welcoming them back to Germany with a glass of Riesling and a warm laugh. Since Mertin's death in 2007, the tradition has been carried on by her successor, current president Nicole Witt, and the agency's energetic and multicultural team of young literati.

Of course, this year's event was nothing compared to the one that will be thrown next year when Argentina is the Guest of Honor. You see, The Mertin Agency has always been in the unique position of being in Germany, but not really of Germany. Ray-Güde Mertin, a professor of Portuguese language and literature, founded the agency to represent promising Brazilian and Portuguese writers (including an up-and-coming José Saramago), and has since stayed close to its roots, introducing Latin American and Iberian writers to readers around the world. The firm represents more than a dozen authors from Argentina, including María Sonia Cristoff, José Pablo Feinmann, and Leila Guerriero.

Despite the global economic downturn, 2009 has been good to the firm. Two of the agency's heavyweight authors, Nobel laureate Saramago and Chilean Luis Sepúlveda, have delivered new novels, giving Witt and her col-



The Mertin Agency, led by Nicole Witt (front and center), is located in Germany and represents some of today's most prominent Spanish- and Portuguese-language writers like José Saramago and Luis Sepúlveda

leagues much to talk about at the Fair this year. What's more, Mertin has just announced a new deal with Spanish publisher Alfaguara to represent five of the company's authors: Marcelo Figueras, Manuel Rivas, Luis Manuel Ruiz, Clara Sánchez and Manuel Vicent.

The agency is already gearing up for

2010: they have brought authors Claudia Piñeiro and José Pablo Feinmann to attend the Fair as a kind of preview for next year. "Claudia's novel *Thursday Night Widows* was adapted for the screen by Marcelo Piñeyro and recently shows in Buenos Aires, with a release in Europe set for next year," Witt says

proudly. "Claudia's books are bestsellers, *Thursday Night Widows* has already sold more than 150,000 copies in Argentina alone, and her new novel *Jara's Cracks* is at the top of the bestseller lists right now. Plus, the British edition, published by Bitter Lemon, was included in a list of eight Rising Stars by Amazon UK."

Meanwhile, Feinmann, a popular and controversial thinker in Argentina, typically draws huge audiences for his lectures and television appearances in his home country. While at the Fair, he'll be discussing his novel, *Carter in New York*, the latest installment in a series starring Los Angeles detective Carter. At 1:30 today, you can get a taste of his charm and wit when he'll be conversation with literary critic Osvaldo Quiroga in Hall 5.0 D901.

Frankfurt, admits Witt, does give the agency a "hometown advantage." The agency is within walking distance of the Fair, which means since it doesn't have to sink a lot of money into travel to the Fair, it gives them the opportunity to travel more throughout the rest of the year. That the agency is in Frankfurt also means Witt and her colleagues are also often called for tourism advice.

Witt's best tip for fairgoers looking to experience a bit of Frankfurt while attending the Fair: "Be sure to check out the Berger Strasse, linking the Nordend and Bornheim. The street is lined with shops and restaurants that will suit anyone's tastes." (A direct connection is available via metro U4 right from the Messe). •

Attend events with José Pablo Feinmann

Literary Encounter: Argentina
Thursday at 1:30 p.m.
International Centre (5.0 D901)

Literary Encounter:
"Civilization and Barbarism"
Friday at 1:30 p.m.
Hall 5.1 D975