



# LITERALLY SPEAKING

Issue no.6 • FREE Edited by Glenn Carmichael & Sara-Jane Arbury Thursday 14th October 1999

## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

**Tony Harrison**  
Town Hall,  
4.30-5.30pm

**John Major**  
Town Hall, 8.45-10pm

**Time and Again:**  
**Colin Thubron**  
Town Hall,  
7.15-7.30pm

## In the bluff

BY DAN DOBIE

At The Everyman yesterday, the figure of Sandi Toksvig loomed small. She talked nineteen to the dozen, browbeating the audience with her quick-fire jokes and dry wit. Toksvig began by paying respect to her influences; "I'm not going to mention Auden, but I am going to mention *Janet and John*." Her English teacher, whom she called "a murdering siren of syntax" would call the class' attention to past participles in a novel's steamy sex scenes. "I fell," Toksvig said, "exhausted and sweating into the arms of Enid Blyton."

In her blue cardigan and collared shirt, she looked every inch the schoolgirl herself as she read - in the toffee-nosed accents of *Malory Towers* - from her new book *Whistling for the Elephants*. Toksvig delighted the audience with tales of hairbrushes in dormitories which would have had every Enid Blyton reader blushing with suppressed glee.

## A lighter shade of Palin

BY ALAN MADDRELL

Michael Palin's career shift has been a curious one, spurning a surely golden career in comedy in favour of travel journalism. Having circumnavigated the globe in his own right, he then decided to follow Hemingway's gargantuan footsteps around it.

Enlisting the aid of some wayward slides (which were almost invisible), Palin conducted a lecture which put an image to the now legendary tales of Hemingway's international macho exploits. These ranged from his early wartime experiences in northern Italy to missing ducks with shotguns in Africa. And therein lies the inevitable comedy. Though we might not retain strong memories of the locations and dates, it will be hard to shake the persistent image of Palin pushing an American tank round the Arc de Triomphe, or an eye-watering Masai circumcision ceremony. Palin tried



his hand in characteristically inept fashion at the manly pursuits Hemingway loved and which eventually killed him. A good excuse for a travel programme perhaps, but it raised questions about how wide the audience might be.

That said, the venue was packed, perhaps more in expectation of laughs

than a Hemingway passion.

The odd gag about some highly unlikely characters (The Honest Brothers' shop in Africa and the Cuban newspaper *Grandma*) added a touch of comic relief to an essentially straight-laced lecture. And still the audience laughed...

*Sketch by Heather Spears*

## Soya think it's all worth it?

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Sir John Maddox, who in the words of Richard Dawkins "...has stood godfather to so much of recent science...", yesterday morning asked the worthies of Cheltenham *What Remains To Be Discovered?*

Given the average age of the audience, the most likely answer was the mysteries of death, but Maddox set out regardless, stating that "Science gives answers to questions we don't yet have the wit to ask." He started by mentioning the scientific landmarks of this century: Einstein's Theories of Special and General Relativity, Quantum mechanics and Watson and Crick's finding of DNA. These he described as a river of discovery, which has welled up towards the end

of this century, culminating in genetic modification and an attempt to tie all the conflicting theories together with String Theory.

Maddox, twice editor of *Nature*, is assured in his intellectual prowess, and quite convinced that genetic modification is a panacea for humanity. He believes that if we, as a race, are to survive we need to run with the exponential change that is the benchmark of modern science; as he says, "Genetically modified foods are the future" (although he also asked "How artificial are we prepared to let the world become?").

Whether or not he is right remains to be seen, but the issues will "...occupy our children...for centuries to come, perhaps even for the rest of time."

## Hell's Bell

BY SIMON WARREN

Underneath the rambling voice of Steve Bell lay a man quite clear in his purpose to humiliate political figures past and present. The audience were kept on the edge of their seats. I can see why he is one of the most widely-liked political cartoonists. His ability to capture the less beautiful sides of politicians sets him apart from all the rest.

The multimedia experience was stimulating, in particular his use of slides to illustrate his performance. "I suppose I have been a bit nasty to him" he said, referring to his caricatures of John Major. This seemed like a bit of an understatement as he wasn't particularly regretful...and neither was the audience.



## Magic Mitchell

BY MARY FAUSET  
& NISHA KUMAR

Adrian Mitchell's welcome return to Cheltenham was thoroughly appreciated by the intimate audience. He stirred them up with a selection of work, including a beautiful new children's story called *Nobody Rides The Unicorn*.

One could not help but admire his passion and wit, both in poetry and introduction. His subject matter ranged from early school days "...in Hell," to *A Puppy Called Puberty*.

At one point the audience backed him as he sang *Stuck Together Song* in a blues-style drawl which drew rapturous applause.

The climax to the performance was Mitchell's touching poem *Especially When It Snows*, dedicated to his late, adopted daughter Boty.

## Good Times with Kelman

BY DOMINIC LONG

Many writers seem reluctant to give a general explanation of the way they work. Not so James Kelman. His answers to questions from the floor were notable for their laudable analysis of his working methods.

The event began with readings of short stories including a couple from his latest collection *The Good Times*. The uncompromisingly demotic style for which Kelman is famous was displayed to full effect in the selected offerings, parts of which featured language strong enough to embarrass a docker.

Particularly well received was *Cute Chick*, a very short story about the nom de plume of a genteel but savvy female punter in the days before legalised betting. The extreme brevity of this story was one of the themes



expanded on by the author. One must be careful, he warned, not to descend into the merely anecdotal.

Kelman told how, in his opinion, the short story has been downgraded and devalued in our culture and he

mused on the perceived validity of the genre. Short story writers, he said, would never get away with the things some novelists do.

Yet it was the insight into his working methods that really made this event a treat. The aspiring writers in the audience (it appeared there were many) were given a brief masterclass in - for example - how to get back into the 'voice' of a narrator after an absence from the work. He showed how the absence itself can bring experience to that work.

If the rest of the audience felt inspired to go away and attempt to write a short story or two, it is largely because Kelman managed to demystify the creative process - at least as it applies to him.

One more thing - there should be summary fines for people who forget to switch off their mobile phones!

## Let them eat bread

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Quietly walking into the Attic, there's jazz softly spoken on the stage, courtesy of *Spiral Staircase*.

I had hoped for less and been given more. *Something Frightening*, a group of four women poet performers, black dress divas and gestalt breeders, sucked on image after image of love unrequited.

This was more performance than poetry, more effect than affectation, but even so, we would have enjoyed it more in shorter bursts.

The ubiquitous Hovis Presley was running back and forth, nervously considering the task ahead. I spoke to him briefly before a tangible performance in which he said, "I'm not sure what it is about poetry, I just do it." A John Cooper Clarke apprentice, and none the worse for that.

The evening ended in drunken revelry, the sort made famous by the Lit-Fest, and a turn of phrase from Hovis; "Call everyone love." Oh yes!

## Song words on Rice paper

BY ELEANOR HOLMES



Delving into the mystery that is the art of lyricism, libretto and lullaby, the challenge of finding the words which "...in order to breathe, need music" is every lyricist's dream.

A C H Smith effectively explored the process of writing that elusive Oscar-winning musical or award-winning opera, addressing the technicalities of metre, rhythm and rhyme alongside the myth and fantasy behind playground chant.

Each speaker chose a piece of music

to which they had written the lyrics. The following discussions were enlightening; common queries of "why" and "how" were finally answered.

Michael Berkeley explained the methodology and practicalities associated with writing a successful opera, illustrated by his choice of music.

The session ended with a controversial discussion exploring the idea of "popular music versus opera" or "EastEnders versus Shakespeare." The event was a splendid challenge to the comfortable medium of music, song and verse.

*Oh, What A Circus*, the autobiography of Tim Rice (who also spoke at this event) will be celebrated tonight at 7.30pm and again at 9.15pm in The Playhouse Theatre. Singing songs from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita* and *Joseph* are students from Archway School.

The book is a humorous and gossipy treat, giving an insight into his famous partnership with Andrew Lloyd Webber, whom he is not above having a minor dig at.

## The Stoat

Sir John Maddox was late this morning, due to a flat tyre. He apologised for his tardiness and introduced his lecture by saying "This proves science isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Overheard in the Press Room 2. "Marcus Moore reminds me of Matthew Corbett."

Have Marcus and Sooty ever been seen in the same room, together? Contact us at [idiomverse@yahoo.com](mailto:idiomverse@yahoo.com)

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