

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

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## Take a walk on the wild side

BY DANIEL HAHN

Edmund White doesn't do these events often - more's the pity. But unlike most famously reticent writers he's not ill-at-ease, not softly spoken, nor does he appear to be even remotely nervous. 'I'm an American,' he jokes, 'we all love to talk about ourselves.' And he does it very well; he's an enthusiastic, persistently jolly figure, and it's hard not to warm to him.

He's here to promote *Le Flaneur*, his recently published 'homage' to Paris, written wistfully as he was leaving it after 16 happy years there. He now lives in New York (teaching in Princeton - for the money, he explained), and spoke poignantly about his feelings and those of his fellow New Yorkers in the aftermath of September 11th.

But though he is here to plug *Le Flaneur*, he chose to read to us instead from something more recent still - a

handwritten excerpt from his novel-in-progress (with enviably few crossings out for something he assured us was indeed a first draft). Written, we were told, 'recently - well, on Friday, actually!', the passage introduced us to the novel's protagonists: its narra-



tor, the prolific Mrs Trollope (mother of the more famous and yet more prolific Anthony), and the Scottish radical, Fanny Wright.

The historical novel is not White's natural habitat, though; he's best known for his series of autobiographical novels (beginning with *A Boy's Own Story*, and concluding with *Farewell Symphony*), which helped to chronicle 'the evolution of gay life in the U.S.' and which he began to write 'just to keep my head above water - a sort of compulsion.'

This new voice - his narrator-in-progress - is different, more distant. Her voice is harder to define at once, stranger than his usual, but White's gentle humour is always there, familiar. This is no surprise - 'in real life I see myself as a sort of comic character'. Perhaps so, but one with the most serious of things to say.

Drawing by Heather Spears

## Read on...

BY ANN CLEEVES

This is probably the best job in the world. My last residency was in a prison - I write crime fiction so at least I had a captive audience. But Festival readers are enthusiastic and eager to share their passions. There's a buzz in introducing a reader to an unfamiliar author. It's like bringing together friends, a literary match-making. I'll be in the Festival buffet every morning from 10.00 - 11.00. Join me then to look at readers' recommendations and every afternoon at 3.30 to discuss a novel featured in the Festival. Monday's book is Helen Dunmore's *A Spell of Winter*.

If you'd like to know about my writing, I'll be with *Murder Squad* in the Council Chamber, Municipal Offices on Wednesday at 8.00pm, putting crime fiction in the dock.

## Poliakoff: Drama King

BY JON ANDRIESEN

You never know what you're going to get with Stephen Poliakoff, but isn't that what you want from drama?

A funny little man, in both senses of the word - the voice skittering playfully across bands of octaves, accelerating and decelerating at a whim - needing no encouragement as his poly-claused, multi-cited sentences rupture, on and on from incidental incident to thought-provoking anecdote; a couple of well-placed name-drops, a family reference, anecdote, Olivier, anecdote, breath.

And then you start to realise - Poliakoff's not like us, he doesn't simply write drama, but he lives it and loves it. He's a genuine DC Comics Superhero - he is Drama Man!

Just like his BBC series, *Shooting the Past*, where a photographic library



is threatened with closure and the subsequent destruction of its archive, Poliakoff must similarly be preserved by all means available and allowed the freedom to roam, procreate and produce a new generation of dramatists worthy of the name.

## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

• Achilles

Town Hall  
2.30-3.30pm

• Ethan Canin & Dennis Bock

Town Hall  
2.30-3.30pm

• The Seven Deadly Sins

Peppers, 12.30-1pm  
Town Hall

5.15-5.45pm

• Back issues of *Literally Speaking* are available from the Front Desk in the Town Hall, or visit our website on:  
[www.cheltenhamfestivals.co.uk/literature](http://www.cheltenhamfestivals.co.uk/literature)

## Nina Bawden

BY MEL BURGESS & CLAIRE LEAR

It was hard to tell who was enjoying themselves more, the entranced audience or Nina Bawden herself. This was a rare appearance from the acclaimed author for adults and children. From the beginning, Bawden's love of storytelling shone through. Asked what inspired her, she told how, as a child, she made up stories about people she knew, which often got her into trouble with adults. Even when not writing, she is always listening for a good tale, although she admitted that lately she finds it more difficult to overhear conversations.

There were plenty of questions and comments from the audience, but none could describe Bawden's talent quite like herself: '...everybody said I'd done it rather well. So there!'

## Signing on

By **BRENDA READ-BROWN**

Join index fingers and move them apart in windscreen-wiper arcs; form an L and its mirror image with forefingers and thumbs, and separate them - this means 'different language', and that is what signing is; a sinewy form of communication, lending passion and humour to poetry and imaginative story-telling.

The Deaf Poets' Society - the first ever *Voices 'Turned' Off* event - was the culmination of workshops run by Slam! Productions with deaf children from Naunton Park School, and trainee signers from Gloscat.

The confident renditions by the kids of their poems and stories showed that lack of hearing has in now way impaired their ability to create fantasy and fun with words and actions. Most surprising, however, was the dimension added to well-known poems through signing.

Festival signer Paul Mancini provided his usual skill and grace.

## An event of much brain

By **ALAN MADDRELL**

To mark the 75th anniversary of Pooh's arrival into this world, Brian Sibley gave an appreciative Everyman audience of all ages a potted history of the bear of little brain, reading extensively not only from the stories themselves but from the poems, hums and other pieces that preceded them.

The story is a long one, from a soldier travelling to Quebec and buying a lost cub from a trapper to the bear (named after Winnipeg) arriving at London Zoo, where a certain Christopher Robin Milne fed the very tame bear some very condensed milk. It was that encounter that inspired young Christopher to name his new teddy bear Winnie. The 'Pooh' came from the young boy's childish name for swans, of all things.

The stories drew from and inspired

the pair's games, though neither fully shook off the legacy of Pooh. Milne Sr. was a cross between Alan Bennett and Alan Coren, never even planning to engage in children's literature before the arrival of his son.

Over time, various incarnations of

Pooh have appeared, from the 1922 song recording to Disney's pervasive film interpretations. Sibley displayed an ample range of these and the older generation emitted a perceptibly pleased creak at hearing Norman Shelly's plummy radio tones once

more, though Sibley's own extensive readings (with Eeyore sounding like a more sardonic Ken Livingstone) were just as enjoyable. It's rare that an event has an equal appeal across all age groups, but *Three Cheers for Pooh* (from Sibley's new book, a veritable encyclopaedia of the bear) had as diverse an audience as you could ever hope to see. Genuinely enjoyable.



## The Stoat

According to Stephen Poliakoff, Peggy Ashcroft has been known to sleep in a hat. The Stoat thought she was taller than this. Ah, the wonders of the silver screen...

The Vicar of St Andrew's Church apparently prayed for the Literature Festival in his sermon yesterday. Does he know something we don't?

### THE TEAM

#### EDITORS:

Jon Andriessen, Sara-Jane Arbury, Adam Horovitz

#### DEPUTY EDITORS:

Michael Chirgwin, Alan Maddrell

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## Rapped up in Scarfe

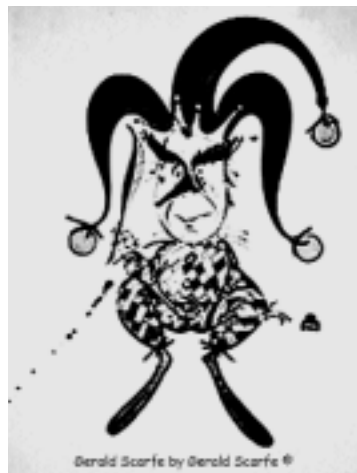
By **CANDY ROBINSON**

'One of the most popular British artists of the twentieth century!' said the blurb and there were certainly a lot of people present in the Everyman to witness this enjoyable evening event.

After a warm reception, Gerald Scarfe dived straight in to a selection of slides, choosing important milestones from his career as an artist to guide us through his life. He couldn't fully explain from where his ferocious vantage point had come from, but said it had been there from the beginning. A lonely childhood spent in bed suffering from severe asthma produced work that prompted his teacher to ask why he always drew disasters!

The work he displayed tonight, however, was far from being a disaster. Starting with his early years - spent in an uncle's design studio learning to draw - Scarfe took us through his sometimes controversial

career via his often-censored work for *Private Eye*. In these much more liberal times, it is all too easy to forget just how protected those in the public eye used to be. Perhaps we should be more grateful that times have



changed, as Scarfe's series of political satires were a joy to see; the audience took particular delight in the repeated images of a demonised Mrs Thatcher. My own favourite was of her contemporary Ronald Reagan, complete

with Mickey Mouse ears and a huge phallic rocket, bemoaning the fact that Gorbachev had a bigger one.

It wasn't all light-hearted. Scarfe was obviously still affected by the time he spent in Vietnam during the war and explained his difficulty dealing with the on-the-ground effects of political actions. His drawings of soldiers were sadly poignant, whilst pictures of the political leaders responsible were scatologically ferocious. And even Scarfe admitted being at a loss to draw anything less than insipid immediately following the September 11th disaster.

Scarfe moved on to extol the importance of animation and its huge potential; a point neatly illustrated with an excerpt of the video made with Pink Floyd. After another snippet of animation, this time from Disney's *Hercules*, which Scarfe designed, the floor was opened to questions; most notably 'Do any of your victims ever buy your drawings?' 'Not a lot', came the reply.

## Poetry is the food of love

By **ADAM HOROVITZ**

'I'd like to start on a sinister note' Polly Clark insisted at yesterday's *Voices Off* event in Café Rouge, opening with *Crimes of Passion*, a spooky poem about cows crushing a woman to death (for those of you unsure whether poems about cows can be spooky, Polly Clark has proved it).

She's a fine poet who writes about love with a barbed and intimate kiss and about animals with distinct authority in her debut collection, *Kiss*.

Peter Finch, however, is a distinctly different animal (and not just because of the surname). Opening with a wild, tonal translation of *The Mabinogion* and closing with a Burroughs-inspired Mills & Boon cut-up poem (before which he ripped up a Mills & Boon book), he 'salsify(ed) our lust' for his poetry 'with pimiento'.

Appropriate for someone who's new book is called *Food*.