

LITERALLY SPEAKING

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•
Adam Phillips

Town Hall, 1-2pm

•
Mark Lawson, John O'Farrell & Terence Blacker

Town Hall, 4-5pm

•
Slam! Champions Party

Peppers

8.30pm - LATE

Hello, hail and well met

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Welcome to the 52nd Cheltenham Literature Festival. You are now holding in your literature-seeking palms the first issue of the third edition of *Literally Speaking*, which we hope will bring you a glorious gumbo guide to the many and exciting events we are able to cover.

We've already had the first public appearance by a newly en-Nobeled laureate, and there's so much more on offer, from political cartooning to Slam poetry, John Pilger to Benjamin Zephaniah!

Also, Cheltenham's Tourist Information Centre at the Municipal Offices is running a poetry competition for those with short-attention stanzas. Get your six-line poems in to the office this week - we'll be printing the winner next Sunday.

Nobel Naipaul

BY ALAN MADDRELL

The twin deities of literature and fortune shone down on the Festival last night with the arrival of freshly en-Nobeled Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. However, Sir Vidia hadn't even read yesterday's citation as "I don't get the papers."

The Trinidad-born iconoclast read from his latest work, *Half a Life*, in a velvet baritone before answering questions on his life and different style of work from historian Patrick French before a capacity Everyman audience.

Subjects ranged from his autobiographical recurrent protagonists to political questions about space and culture. Here the event took a surreal and (appropriately enough) displacing turn; the audience questions started out typically banal, but soon slipperiness Sir Vidia was refusing to answer

half-baked questions about his alleged racism and cultural arrogance - apparently unanswerable as the audience did not offer specific instances.



One cynical reporter even attempted to bludgeon a controversial statement from Sir Vidia on the bombing of Afghanistan. Which is to say nothing of the mysterious woman who rushed the stage the instant the event finished - she was escorted very rapidly away by Festival Director, Sarah Smyth. Intriguing...

Not only was this a rare opportunity to see a complex, thorny writer, but the event was more unsettled and topical than many; in spite of some 'interesting' moments, this was a very stimulating experience for the Festival - we should consider ourselves very fortunate indeed.

Illustration by Heather Spears

Book It! Follow the bear...

BY DANIEL HAHN

Over two decades *Book It!* has brought to Cheltenham the best in children's writing. Its varied programmes have featured new works and old favourites, familiar faces, others not so familiar, as well as the occasional visit by a fictional character or two. Book It! 2001 is no exception.

This year we are especially lucky to have two grandmasters of children's writing making rare public appearances. Allan Ahlberg, best known for his collaborations with his late wife Janet, is back on the festival circuit to promote his new collection of football poems, *Friendly Matches*. On Sunday 14th Nina Bawden will be here to discuss her children's books.



Most controversial of this year's events is likely to be Saturday's *Shock Tactics*, where Aidan Chambers and Melvin Burgess meet to discuss the responsibilities faced by writers attempting to deal with difficult issues in their work for young adults (*Postcards from No Man's Land* and *Junk*). Both writers help their readers boldly to navigate uncharted territories, and each in his way does so with great success. But will they agree?

For younger children there will be

Imagined friends

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Melvyn Bragg is a man obsessed with writing and emotional truth. In his two recent novels, *The Soldier's Return* and its sequel *Son of War*, he attempts to recreate memories of his father's return from war and his reactions to it. He believes that through a mix of fiction and some historical fact, the very 'emotional truth' of those moments can be re-evoked with honesty and compassion.

Truth is often stranger than fiction, so why not combine them and create a deeper, more powerful story? Bragg uses a semi-biographical narrative - he doesn't trust memoir - and finds the freedom to switch between reality and imagination only enhances the story, making it seem more genuine than the truth. What emerges is a complex, yet sensitive fiction more real and sincere than many of our so-called works of fact.

Redressing the balance

BY DANIEL HAHN

For over three decades, the late Poet Laureate Ted Hughes had kept famously silent about his marriage to American poet Sylvia Plath. Until January 1998, that is, when he surprised friends, readers and critics by publishing what turned out to be his last collection of poems, *Birthday Letters*, about his first meeting with Plath in Cambridge, their subsequent relationship, and her suicide at the age of 30.

Elaine Feinstein, for many years a friend of Hughes (and whose biography is due to be published next week), spoke movingly about her wish to write an account of 'his life as he experienced it', not as it has often been portrayed by people who knew neither him nor Plath. She explained how she was first drawn in to work on this project, and described the 'illicit pleasure' in rifling through the archive of her old friend's letters and papers.

Erica Wagner, literary editor of *The Times*, whose *Ariel's Gift* is a commentary on *Birthday Letters*, also explained the genesis of her own project, as she was called up to the office of her editor to look at a highly confidential manuscript... She was keen to emphasise the importance of seeing *Birthday Letters* in the context of Hughes' earlier work, and of Plath's too.

But though this evening's discussion did range widely over Hughes' life and work, it hardly touched on Plath at all, her work or - still less - her life, and throughout, the emphasis remained firmly on Hughes himself and his famous silence. And although we were repeatedly thwarted by a tiresome pre-publication embargo on discussing the contents of Feinstein's biography, a clear picture did emerge of a far more humane, injured Ted Hughes than we are used to seeing. After the accusations of cruelty levelled against Hughes during his lifetime, this was perhaps a belated attempt to redress a balance somewhat.

Slam, Bam, thank you Cheltenham!

BY JANINA KARPINSKA

Poetry is sexy, and the 7th UK All-comers Slam was an orgy of good verse. Peter Hunter was first up, so to speak. It's not always easy to get started - too many things can go wrong. Just when you think you've got everything in hand, you trip, you fall, and all the words of your poem fly off the page. It's not the effect you were looking for - as Nathan Filer pointed out - 'to realise limitations is to realise you're a man'. But the audience were more than forgiving - Peter became the winner of the first heat. And the heat was most definitely on - the lights were low.

We were all treated to 'a little something for the weekend' that kept us

glued to our seats! Each pack of three came in a variety of flavours and textures - though this may have been missed by Dave Johnson who confessed to suffering from 'poetic premature ejaculation'. Poets were once renowned for 'navel gazing' - but not at Subtone or the Town Hall, where the focus was definitely lower.

No need to fake anything - it was all genuinely good - and it just got better and better. In a series of increasingly intense heats in the final stages, tension mounted. All the poets gave us their best shots, yet in spite of prodigious protection Mel Denne came out on top.

Was it good for you, too?

Picture of Mel Denne by Heather Spears



Sayle-ing close to the wind

BY CANDY ROBINSON

It was a packed Pillar Room that awaited 'the angry one' this evening; a surprising cross-section of people - from gum-chewing midriff-bearing garage devotees to those for whom Glenn Miller was the epitome of cool.

Enter Alexei Sayle, an unexpectedly portly looking gentleman, softened round the edges, his suit an unaccustomed perfect fit, his beard shot through with grey, and careful spectacles perched upon his nose. Was this really the hard man of comedy? Well, at least his head's still shaven.

The interview progressed slowly at

first, a round of insipidly safe questions that even Sayle struggled to make interesting. Tales of student drinking, communist parents, and the four feet of Jubilee Line that he once dug raised some laughs. Not to mention the self-styled writer/love god's admission that he was for a long time mistaken for his wife's unfortunately demented brother.

He read from his book, of course; a short satirical tale about a rich man's search for the cure for death. Reverting to form Sayle read of his hero's abstinence from women and 'solo pursuits', then looked pointedly towards the unfortunate signer... You really had to be there!



Goodbyeeee...

BY DANIEL HAHN

The Festival's opening event was also a farewell of sorts; Jan Morris, author of some 45 books, was here to talk about her latest, which - she assured us - is to be her last. *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* is a tribute to a city she has long felt mystified by, drawn to and with which she has somehow identified. The book is a sort of 'ego-biography' she said.

Trieste is a fitting swansong. It brings together her great interests, the four themes - she explained - which have dominated her writing over four and a half decades: the fall of empires, balance, love and lust, death and old age.

She seems glad to be finished, but explained that *Trieste* is to be merely her last published book; she has no intention of stopping writing altogether. Then - like her writing, gentle and benign - she left the stage smiling, giving a little wave as she went.

The Stoat

Marcus Moore's signing lessons nearly went pear-shaped when his habit of stroking his face was horribly misconstrued. Interpreter Paul Mancini had to issue this correction; "No, Marcus. That means 's**t'."

The Stoat interviewed Alexei Sayle yesterday and can exclusively reveal that his favourite colour is blue. Can it be that Tony is not alone?

THE TEAM

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