

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•  
**Adam Thorpe**

Town Hall  
11.30-12.30pm

•  
**Electricity**

Town Hall  
4-5pm

•  
**Douglas Coupland**

Town Hall  
8.45-10pm

•  
**Late Nite Soundbites**

Town Hall  
9.30 - late

•  
*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)

## Welshing on devolution

By TOBY JOY

Interviewer John Wilson explained that 'there's no middle ground' with Irvine Welsh, and the Scotsman duly demonstrated this, opening the event with an extract from *Glue* entitled *Foreskin*.

*Glue* is Welsh's fourth novel and, from all appearances, it shares much of the features of his previous works - these being phonetic spelling, amorality, bodily fluids and gratuitous scenes of dog-torturing. This, however, is apparently a more 'literary' novel than the others, not that literary novels impress Welsh. He scorns The Booker Prize, but points out that he has a private fear of ever being long listed - all his credibility would be lost. Here is a modern novelist who hates 'most novels written in the UK today' for their inability to deal with current issues, and their over-reliance on history. 'If you want to win the

Booker,' he told us, 'you need to include Tuscany, wine, cheese and landscapes' in your novels. None features in Welsh's work. *Glue* is appar-



ently a return, in stylistic terms at least, to Welsh's most celebrated novel *Trainspotting*. There is the same realist tone, a familiar examination of elements of society.

Autobiographical elements feature in both novels, but Welsh is reluctant to clarify to what extent this is so. He gave an interesting insight into the methods he used; *Trainspotting* began

as a diary from Welsh's own experiences, and was expanded, fictionalised and, perhaps, exaggerated before it became the huge success.

However, for all the book's fame, it owed a lot to the film adaptation of the novel, and, with a sequel on the way, is Welsh spying some more film revenue? 'No', he tells us; he writes the book, and then puts any 'fillum' out of his mind. Otherwise, he might as well be writing a screenplay. One enthusiastic questioner insisted that a Welsh-style playwright was required to kick start the British theatre industry, and the man himself agreed whole-heartedly. Who are we to argue?

Never boring, always amusing and occasionally profane, Irvine Welsh was a pleasure to observe, and was enthusiastically received by an audience that tried its best to empathise with an Edinburgh-born former heroin addict.

## A merry splendoured thing

By JON ANDRIESEN

A 'fabulously feel good night,' said the brochure. Why not be honest? Why not tell the truth? 'Cause it was better than that. First up, the mercurial Marvin Cheeseman, a coma-panacea of poetic delight. His new book, *Full Metal Jacket Potato*, provided the inspiration for a performance of comic versatility, including a Cooper-Clarke homage, 'Let me be your Marlboro / When you're desperate for a fag,' and a foil-wrapped elegy to the humble crisp that sizzled the taste of E-numbers onto the audience's grateful tongues. Next came Alison Brumfitt, 'one of Oxford's finest.' A slam poet of pedigree who still com-



petes without competition. Poems of dieting, line dancing and healthfood were all delivered with a scorn their subjects deserved.

Thom the World Poet - a man of many parts and places - gave us his very own inimitable portrayal of himself. 'No longer a Slammer' he says, he's 'now a Jammer' - he moved from line to line with the soft-centred snap of a pitbull. 'The trick is', says Thom, 'if the audience don't know what I'm going to do, then why should I?' This was hectic poetic improvisation with the bells - of his hat - literally on top. Lastly, a huge thank you to the wonderful Cheltenham Folk Club, whose accordion-led harmonies could only enrich an already ecstatic *Voices Off* night.

## Valuable injections

By NIKKI SHEEHAN

It started well. Compere John Walsh began by reassuring the audience that the British are rather good at taking drugs. The question burning pin-holes in our clothes this evening was why do we, and writers in particular indulge in such perverse habits?

Richard Davenport-Hines, historian and author of *The Pursuit of Oblivion* claimed that it is the search for sedation, enhancement or wickedness. James Walton, author of *The Faber Book of Smoking* was unable to come up with such convincing excuse for the weed, offering, 'It's something to do with your hands'. Writers have always been particularly fond of tak-

ing and writing about recreational medication; from Thomas de Quincy's best seller, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, to Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, and not forgetting the rash of books in the early 20th Century extolling the virtues of smoking such as *Divine Tobacco* and *Saint Nicotine*.

Uncovering the fascinating history of drugs brought the debate no closer to really answering the question 'Why?' The answer that felt closest to the truth was a quote from a former drug user: 'Why smoke, drink, drive recklessly, sunbathe, fornicate, shoot tigers, climb mountains, gamble, lie, steal, cheat, kill, make war - and blame it all largely on our parents? Possibly to make one's self more acceptable to one's self.'



## The Stoat

Festival volunteers were seen in the Writer's Room last night indulging in that most literary of pastimes; playing 'Tweenies' Snap. The Stoat would have joined in, had it not had more pressing engagements elsewhere...

Marvin Cheeseman, in his elegy to crisps, lamented the decision 'never to fill the packet to the top.' Perhaps he could write about arts funding next!

*Drawings in this issue by Heather Spears*

### THE TEAM

#### EDITORS:

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## A mythical tonic

By ADAM HOROVITZ

You'll never see two more contrasting poets in your life: Christopher Logue, the hunched old man of imperious verse and crotchety demeanour who has blazed a trail through British



poetry which is visible from space, and the avuncular and extraordinary Australian, Les Murray.

On stage together in Cheltenham they share a kinship that goes way beyond their agreement that they 'have new favourite poets nearly every time they pick up a book'. Logue, from the jazz/poetry fusion of *Red Bird* to his free adaptations of *The Iliad*, cuts out his lean verse with a cleaver. He reads aloud in a voice that any actor wishing to speak poetry

should be forced at gunpoint to hear, allowing his words the room to roam.

Murray, although his speaking voice is not as clear, writes in a manner which means it matters not. Memorable images abound in his poetry of 'myth the other way round': jellyfish like '...teats / under the surface of the sun'; 'Vegetarians eat sex. / Carnivores eat violence.'

The fact that they deviate from the topic of 'Myth' and just read the poems in all their gory glory, only



helps the cause of myth. There is no reason to (as Logue puts it in *To My Fellow Artists*) '...prove their unreasonableness; / though you are drugged by rationality.'

If you are drugged thus, then this is one mythic tonic.

## Eliot savant

By MORAG HENDERSON

Carole Seymour-Jones has done much to lift the blanket of silence surrounding Vivienne Eliot and her fated marriage to T.S. Eliot. Seymour-Jones' lecture and book, which patches together a history from diaries and archives, articulates the much speculated (and, for the most part, ignored) life of Vivienne Eliot.

Through a self-appointed sense of duty, Seymour-Jones demonstrates compassion and protectiveness towards her subject; these being the main ingredients for a compelling story with both literary and humanising importance. We were weaved through the haunting pictures and the tragic tale of a fragile relationship between the most celebrated poet and someone who 'happened to be in love with him'. This tale goes far to explain the neurotic partnerships which became the root of T.S. Eliot's work.

In effect, Vivienne ruined Tom as a man, but made him as a poet.

## More money for arts' sake

By ALAN MADDRELL

Discussions of the state of the arts take on a curious flavour in the light of current world events, but the consensus is that, far from being irrelevant or trivial, the arts have a valid contribution to the cultural and social wellbeing of those states affected. So the Festival was keen to welcome Baroness Tessa Blackstone, Minister of State for the Arts, yesterday.

In a free event, Baroness Blackstone spoke in broad terms about the role of all the arts in contemporary life, and how this will improve, given the substantial additional funding that is due to be received over the next few years. We were given instances of how regionally-allocated funding will allow professional artists to have a more consistent and in-depth involvement in education, and how students will be



more able to find the funding they need to complete their studies.

However, one slightly awkward question about postgraduate funding of arts education got the response that people seeking assistance to study performance courses will still have to join the long line in front of the British

Academy - or take out loans! Not everyone is to benefit from the new age of the arts.

It has to be said that the Baroness' speech was so general that some members of the audience were left feeling as if few of their critical concerns had been answered, such as the growing and troubling necessity of corporate sponsorship in artistic endeavour. Although the aim was to reassure the audience and to rejuvenate confidence, it will take more than inspirational speeches to rescue the degraded condition of the arts in this country - let the next few years speak for themselves.

## No smoke without whispers

By TOBY JOY

Penniless film producer turned internationally-renowned author, Nicholas Evans knows he's onto a good thing. That's why he's stayed in the American West for his latest novel, *The Smoke Jumper*. This one tells the story of (mad?) people who parachute into burning forests in order to extinguish the fires before it gets too late. Evans pointed out that these guys drink a lot of beer, and it's no great surprise. These are life's 'real heroes', who 'like living life vividly'.

As with Evans' other novels, however, the action plot comes second to a tug of love and some inspiring natural description. A lengthy reading by the author showed us that he hasn't lost his touch in that respect, and a healthy stream of salivating punters followed Evans into the Book Tent afterwards looking for a signed copy.

A Bromsgrove boy who feels more at home in Montana, Evans seemed embarrassed to be reading his work

aloud with an English accent: 'The voice of my writing is American', he apologised. The description-junkies in the audience didn't mind.

A discussion of the cinematic style of *The Horse Whisperer* led to Evans strongly denying writing the book in order to cash in with a film. This is probably true; if he had, he'd never have let Robert Redford play the lead.

