

LITERALLY SPEAKING

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All quiet on the Adie front

BY NIKKI SHEEHAN

Philippa Gregory put it so well: 'In general men like nothing more than a bright, able, quick-witted woman to compete with'. And on that premise one must suppose that Kate Adie has brought great joy to the many politicians, warlords, and bigwigs at the BBC with whom she has been in combat during her distinguished career.

She was at the Festival to talk about her two forthcoming books, a biography and *From Corsets to Camouflage*, a history of women in war. Women's roles in war have varied from fighter to (as Adie put it bluntly) tart. A running theme was the link between women being allowed to contribute to war and their role in society. This was reflected in the struggles that she has encountered as a woman in reach-

ing her position and carrying out her job.

Classic anecdotes included the one about the Afghan warlord who initially refused to talk to her because of her



'bumps on the front', and wanted to speak to her cameraman instead. Adie stood her ground and got the inter-

view. Or how about the Saudi and Kuwaiti generals during the Gulf War who were presented with a woman in battle dress effectively fighting for their side. 'Boy, did they have a problem with that!'

She explained that she doesn't kowtow to local sensitivities when it goes against human rights. Diplomatic, maybe not, but in a profession not noted for its high moral standards, Kate Adie's reporting stands out. And for all the difficulties of being a female war correspondent, there's no doubt that her reporting is a lot better for it. 'Boys like their toys', Adie claims, 'and they are fascinated by the front lines. But they miss part of the story of war'.

And, as recent events show, it seems that no-one, not even the Prime Minister, can quench her thirst for the whole picture.

Byronic bliss

BY MATTHEW RIPLEY

I had my doubts at to whether a rendition of Lord Byron's poetry could capture the imagination of a Saturday morning audience for more than twenty minutes, let alone one hour. How wrong I was. This event, chronicling the life of England's 'greatest poet after Shakespeare', was nothing less than engaging, encapsulating and most importantly, enjoyable.

Young RSC actors Richard Hansell and Gerard Logan treated us to an ensemble of Byron's romantic, political and satirical verse, interspersed with the poet's controversial life. Unusually, a balance was reached between the time spent talking about the poet and the time spent delivering his poems, a feat rarely managed when discussing such a popularly flamboyant figure as Byron. This was indeed a rare treat.

Last bites of the cherry

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

How do you finish the Cheltenham Festival of Literature with a bang and no wipe-out hangover to take to work on a Monday morning? The *Voices Off* Pillar Room party, that's how. Formal though the setting may be ('It's nice to be here in a room with so many pillars - I'm sorry; so many fellow pillars' as Matt Harvey put it), the rumbustious spirit of performance poetry leaked out all over a highly-charged, lightning-receptive audience like an ethereal goo with attitude.

Ailish Johnson - a 'wry eye' from Canada - regaled us with a seductive outsider's look at Britain and beyond. Nothing, from queue-jumping to brooches ('a conservative woman's shorthand'), was sacred. Matt Harvey,

as sweetly sly as ever, claimed that, curtain-wise, he is 'a velvet person... crushed, but not ultimately defeated.' His *Lonely Hearts Song* is possibly the most appealing version of a lonely hearts column going; a paean to crochety grannies with 'hand-knitted sulks' and 'toy boy[s] available: batteries extra'.

Add to this the glorious acoustic funk music of *A Wing & A Prayer*, and you have a completely fabulous evening. The evening, however, was not complete; one more act took to the stage looking surprisingly demure. Catherine Crosswell and Lindsey Bretherton are the most amusingly foul-mouthed people ever to take the stage at this Festival; they sing songs with lines like 'indulge me with your bulge!' Trust these ladies to know what to do with a banana in close harmony.



TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

Mary Warnock & Sheila Kitzinger
Everyman

12-1pm

Joan Plowright
Town Hall, 2-3pm

Weather Permitting
Town Hall, 7-8pm

Words on Walkabout

The Strand
3.45-4.45pm

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www.cheltenhamfestivals.co.uk/literature

Oh Boris!

BY TOBY JOY

'Politics needs more interesting personalities,' Robin Oakley told a packed Everyman Theatre. The trouble was, this event's political personality, Boris Johnson, was caught in traffic and arrived an hour late. However, Oakley kept us entertained with a combination of in-jokes and interesting anecdotes.

All this, however, was merely an hors-d'oeuvre before the real entertainer came on. Boris Johnson loves to entertain, despite many in the audience tearing themselves away to watch the rugby, do the shopping or whatever else. We were led from vicious dogs to *The Lion King*, all in the context of Henley and the General Election.

Oakley was an effective straightman to the zany antics of Johnson, but he could never steal the buxom blond's show. The audience were rapturous. Boris merely beamed.

In harmony

By DANIEL HAHN

William Rivière and Louis de Bernières have too much in common. Born in the same year (1954), of the same background (hence the names), they attended the same school where they once even shared an English prize. And discussing their work, they seemed not only circumstantially similar, but also to agree on all things. This rather limited the discussion, which distinctly lacked the passion and insights we'd hoped for.

They (both) spoke most interestingly about their fiction's relation to history and their attempts to ensure they are accurate and fair, or at least that they 'offend everyone equally'. They (both) write 'historical' novels from the recognition that they can't write any other kind; cool, metropolitan novels ('cynical novels about people having affairs with their husband's best friend while somebody else has cancer') are best left to other people, they agreed. And that was about it.

The lighter side

By ADAM HOROVITZ

Literature Festivals tend to attract extreme audiences, though thankfully they tend only to be armed with pens and questions; so, what better place for Jon Ronson, chronicler of the most extreme elements of the western world to come and talk. And answer questions. And sign books.

Thankfully, there don't appear to have been many self-help seeking Ku Klux Klansmen or members of the Bilderberg Group in the audience tonight; nor were there any twelve foot tall blood-drinking lizards, so the deftly diffident Ronson was able to read amusingly from his book - *Them: Adventures With Extremists* - and, in a splendid break from the usual Cheltenham style, take questions pretty much when anyone wanted to ask them.

Ronson is a witty man, and treats

people with a self-deprecating good humour - even in the face of line-dancing neo-Nazis - that utterly disarms them. It is this that allowed him to follow such people as Omar Bakri (the Tottenham Ayatollah), Tom Robb (who led a splinter group of the KKK and tried to modernise it 'because it had a bad image') and the Bilderberg Group.



In fact, he talks almost affectionately about most of these people.

He claims to have come out at the other side of this world of paranoia after five years, but one uncomfortable thought filtered through the laughter; David Icke was overheard saying that Ronson's book would become totally invalid because of what would happen to the world in the year of its publication (2001). 'And he's right,' said Ronson, 'he's right!'

Bus king

By BRENDA READ-BROWN

*It seemed quite restful, lazy,
As a change from Driven Crazy,
To have a bus as transportation
To a mystery destination,
Which was in fact a village store,
Where SJA and Marcus Moore
Told us the score, in Village Verses,
Of the pleasures and the curses
Of Cotswold country life;
Then Stuart Russell and his wife
(Liz) told of trials and triumphs past
As part of England's lowest caste -
They had kept that very shop
Where our tinselled bus had stopped;
Finally Ms. Hampton (Janie)
Explained with anecdotes entertaining
How writing's dull and drear
(Tho' her local gave free beer);
Pat Carr, with virtuosity,
Varied, accordionly to our velocity,
His melody and rhythm;
The gist of this event? - If driven
Or driver; villages, roads or towns -
There are stops and starts, and ups
and downs.*

And finally...

By LITERALLY SPEAKING

We at *Literally Speaking* would like to say a huge, swollen 'Thank You' to everyone who has attended the Festival and everyone who has been reading us for the past week or so, as well as all the contributors without whom etc etc. Also to Cheltenham College for the iMac.

See y'all next year!

The winner of the poetry competition run by the Tourist Information Office in association with *Voices Off* is Erik Caral. Poets were asked to write a maximum of six lines on the theme of 'Cheltenham'. Here it is: *Cheltenham in Eleven Words (with Three Hyphenations)*

spy base
horse race
fast-paced style

college-graced
poker-faced
water tastes vile

Land of Coupland stories

By JON ANDRIESEN

Douglas Coupland is a laid-back man, perhaps more laid-back than he should be. Whether this is natural or induced may be determined by his opening 'disclaimers'.

'I suffer from Hyperslumbia', he told us, a condition that causes chronic fatigue. To counter this he takes a drug with side-effects - a kind of short term memory loss - leading to those pauses that may explain why the event over-ran so considerably. 'I can't believe I came



to Cheltenham on drugs', he said. I can! His other affliction is the classic nerve-induced 'cotton wool mouth syndrome', but thankfully he'd remembered his 'Moistylube', the all-in wet mouth moisturiser.

For those familiar with his writing, it came as no surprise that Coupland is a man disposed to ramblings of the laterally anarchic kind, and that getting to the point would be like waiting for Ronnie Corbett to deliver the

punchline - without the intensity - but all the same it was an attrition with a sometimes wonderful payback.

His musings on the telephone were the most invaluable and incisive, asking 'what would it have been like if they'd had mobiles in the eighteenth century?' Think about it and tell me that art and technology aren't linked.

However, what started as an amiable maunder soon became an elongated fumble and this audience member was left merely 'whelmed'.

The Stoat

Preston Pig was interrupted 'powdering his nose' by George Alagiah in the Unisex toilets yesterday. It appears the pig left the barn door open; George made his apologies and left!

Jon Ronson: 'I'm not going to read a great deal because, frankly, that can get dull; which is what seems to be happening next door with Kate Adie.'

THE TEAM

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