

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

### Antarctic Adventures

Everyman  
1.30-2.30pm

### The Birth of Time

Everyman  
4-5pm

### Café Philo with Roy Hattersley

The Queen's  
7.30pm onwards

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)

## Stella's got her groove back

By ALAN MADDRELL

At times in the Festival's history, a security presence has been in evidence around the Town Hall. The *Literally Speaking* team has fond memories of being invaded by a very friendly sniffer dog in advance of John Major's arrival, but former head of MI5 Stella Rimington was accompanied by a few stout men in dark suits talking up their sleeves last night as she recounted her unique career, 27 years of which were spent as the first ranking woman officer in the concealing folds of MI5.

Although her upbringing instilled in her a dour ambition, it was far from her mind to join the intelligence services, since this simply was not an option for women at that time.

Forget today's more open recruitment processes - the 'tap on the shoulder' came when she was a diplomat's wife in India - itself an exciting



prospect, even if it was limited to such antics as putting on a production of *Cinderella* in Afghanistan. The current prevalence of women in intelligence (total equality, compared to the private sector's resident chauvin-

ism) is due in no small part to Rimington's success at persuading MI5 that women's 'interpersonal aptitudes' are ideally suited to such work.

Other far-reaching changes took place under Rimington's watch. She greatly appreciates the new international openness that the end of the Cold War has brought. It is exactly that sort of sharing of information that gives counter-terrorist agencies even a slim chance of intercepting attacks.

She also took the opportunity to address some of the criticism levelled in the papers at her autobiography *Open Secret*. The notoriously chauvinist and prurient tabloids have dogged her private life, terrorising her daughters as they besieged her house and violated her privacy when her appointment was made public (a first for MI5) in 1991.

Send those gents in suits round, Stella - it would work on us.

## Cementing Atonement

By BARBARA FAUSET  
& RON CAPELL

Ian McEwan's front page article in *The Guardian*, immediately following the events of September 11th, promoted the novelist as interpreter of significant events that constitute a profound change in the state of the world: ultimately he saw love and trust is all we have.

In *Atonement*, the living past captures a moment now faded, the fusion of thought and feeling, in the fall of France half a century ago. The catalyst of the story is the misperception of an enigmatic crime for which atonement has to be sought.

Professor John Sutherland commented on the novel's emotional



appeal and modulated proportion: Briony falls in love with the French soldier, Luc, at the moment of his death; part of her atonement for distorted perceptions. McEwan perceives the novel as the conjunction of Edwardian sensibility with modernism, drawing the reader into the internalised experiences of Briony.

He regretted the effect of class on the English novel in comparison with the broad sweep of Americans like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. But things are changing.

In the Imperial War Museum's cupola, McEwan researched the Dunkirk which his father survived: now he sees the value of unthinking obedience in times of crisis. Perhaps we need to discover this again?

## The Terry and Gerry show

By ADAM HOROVITZ

One of the hardest questions a writer has to answer is 'Where do your ideas come from?' In Pratchett's

case it appears to be from 'serendipitous research' and going for long walks, whilst Seymour indulges in long walks with his two black Labradors, who, if they could speak, would apparently be able to swear very effectively; a result of Seymour's habit of speaking his characters' dialogue aloud. He also advocates 'going into dark corners on your own and absorbing themes'.

This event was billed as a discussion between Terry Pratchett and Gerald Seymour on how authors cre-

ate their imaginary worlds, but was gently subverted by the two avuncular writers and became a charming account of the many anecdotes that have driven their writing over the years.

In amongst these delicious tales (such as Seymour having his passport stamped 007 coming out of East Germany

and Pratchett no longer accepting slices of young fans' birthday cake since 'the cannabis incident') were some pearls of writerly wisdom, but the orderly stampede for the signing queue spoke volumes about the reasons for the audience being there.



Drawing by Heather Spears

## Driven crazy



BY BRENDA READ-BROWN

*It's ten p.m. in Cheltenham;  
I collect my precious cargo -  
An actress to deliver home -  
I'm a literary Wells Fargo.  
To those exhausted volunteers  
Perhaps I seem a skiver,  
But when they're home and sleeping  
I do duty as a driver.  
We crawl through late-night London  
With the speed of an escargot.  
She talks; but all that she reveals  
Remains under embargo.  
Gone midnight. I'm in Maida Vale;  
My trip is half-complete.  
I stop to get some petrol -  
Damn! They won't give a receipt.  
I spend the journey home concerned  
About my recompense;  
Will being a Litfest driver mean  
I end up with less money than sense?*

## Sin-tillating tales

BY BRENDA READ-BROWN

*Voices Off* presented with *Pride* the first of - yes, you've guessed it - seven events dealing with those numerical Deadly Sins, to be held on seven days in seven venues; a magical collection of fables, moral, merry or mythical.

Storyteller Kulchalee's tales and poem touched lightly on his theme, using images from the animal kingdom to illustrate its pitfalls and celebrate its propriety, while his extended introduction proved pride to be a good thing in the right place and time. His final drumbeats humbled the audience's attempts at rhythmic applause, but should call potential sinners and



saved alike to revel or repent with the performers to follow.

Were they chosen to match their subjects? Find out if you can overcome *Sloth* with Alexander Mackenzie, then sample double helpings of *Gluttony* with Thom the Tall Tale Teller (wasn't he once a world poet?), or take time out to manage your *Anger* with Widsith the Scop, *Envy* the green-eyed skills of the Midnight Storytellers, live a little with the *Lust* of Inez Aponte - and if you're the sort of person who can never have enough, then have some more alongside *Greed* guru Graham Langley.

Sin has never been so tempting!

## Wren-ovation

BY DANIEL HAHN

According to the dust jacket of Adrian Tinniswood's new biography, *His Invention So Fertile*, Christopher Wren was 'the greatest architect Britain has ever known'. Nothing surprising there, given that the domed structure of St Paul's Cathedral weighs more than the fully laden Titanic! However, in Tinniswood's clear and fascinating illustrated lecture, we learnt that Wren was also a pioneering anatomist and Professor of Astronomy, a natural philosopher (read 'scientist') of international repute by 32. And of course the man responsible for Trinity College Library, London's city churches and some 200 other building projects.

Aged 91, he felt that his proper work had been thwarted and he'd wasted his time on 'rubbish', dejected at his failure to do anything significant. As Tinniswood said, 'If that's failure, I wouldn't mind some of that!'

## A spell of Hellish Nell

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Helen Duncan, or 'Hellish Nell' was the last person to be charged and convicted of witchcraft in Britain, not in the Dark Ages, but during Churchill's wartime government in 1944.

Yet, this is not a tale of black cats and broomsticks, it is a story of the suppression and control of 'heretic' spiritualists and the attempt of an authority to stamp out an old woman who spoke too openly about wartime events. Ironically, by choosing to prosecute her under the Witchcraft Act those same authorities were ridiculed by a court case that quickly became the laughing stock of Britain - but still they got their conviction and Nell served nine months.

Malcolm Gaskill, Cambridge historian and author of *Hellish Nell*, explained that, to his mind, she was no medium. She was in fact an extraordinarily talented fraudster whose popularity grew in a war-torn Britain strewn with anxieties and grief. She



may have even offered solace and peace to many an unfortunate victim who came her way. It is for these reasons that Gaskill still keeps 'an open mind' about witchcraft and the undoubted good Nell had performed.

Although she died in 1957, Gaskill was lucky enough to chat with his subject recently when visiting a medium for 'research'. Nell's message was simple and clear:

'Be careful, laddie, be careful what you do!' she said. Perhaps something we should all remember.

## War frenzy

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

One could smell battle and the frenzy of blood in the Pillar Room yesterday as Elizabeth Cook read from her new novella *Achilles*, gesturing pugnaciously to emphasise the words; and what words!

She used a sinewy, tough and exciting language that squared up to the great warrior Achilles' reputation, drawing her audience in - like the shades described in the opening segment at the mouth of Hades hungering for blood - and making them desperate for more.

The heart of this fine book stamped around on stage, shifting in mood and metamorphosing like Thetis, Achilles' mother, as Peleus wrestled with her to make her his wife; first a seal, then a lion, then water until, finally, exquisite mutuality. The audience were dragged along 'helpless as a fish' by images that fell as 'thick as a rain of arrows'.

A thrilling, visceral event which you shouldn't have missed!

## The Stoat

Audience members overheard after the Rimington event:  
'Anyone coming for a drink?'  
Reply: 'No, one Stella's enough for me!'

A notable member of Festival staff apparently mistook Ruth Padel for Fiona Shaw yesterday. And neither of them have beards! What on earth is going on?

More Stoats please!

## THE TEAM

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