



# LITERALLY SPEAKING

*The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal*

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

### Hannah Holmes

Town Hall  
2.30 - 3.30pm

### Inner Vision

Town Hall  
7.30 - 8.30pm

### Ben Okri

Town Hall  
8.30 - 9.30pm

### Festival Club

The Bell Inn  
9.30pm - 12am

## Goddess of small things

By DANIEL HAHN

Not long after the publication of her first novel, Booker-winning *The God of Small Things*, architect-turned-writer Arundhati Roy announced that she was not embarking on the second novel quite yet, but meant instead to use her new public voice to campaign for India's dispossessed and underprivileged. Tonight, she tried to articulate the importance of those great causes which she'd pledged to fight for, but not before giving us a short and wonderfully evocative reading from *The God of Small Things*, as if to remind us teasingly of what we are missing...

Her novel, she found, gave her a platform on which to express her ideas about power and powerlessness,

especially as seen in their extreme forms in India, but with this possibility came a great responsibility. She spoke often about shouldering a 'bur-



den'; not many have the opportunity to make themselves heard, and for those who do 'to remain silent is just as much a political act as speaking out.' And not just in India, she stressed: these are battles for the peo-

ple in this hall in Cheltenham too.

Her reading from a new collection of essays, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, was not only politically powerful and inspiring but also (if one may be allowed a little literary self-indulgence) a piece of extraordinarily beautiful, compelling writing. More than a talented 'novelist', she has found herself a naturally talented 'writer' and is putting the power of that talent to a worthy cause.

She insists that she still thinks 'fiction is the most wonderful thing', and by no means rules out the possibility of writing another novel, in time. 'But I am prepared to wait,' she says.

In the meantime, there are vital battles to be fought. Tonight was as rousing a call-to-arms as you could hope to hear.

## Gentleman footballer

By JON ANDRIESEN

Gordon Banks is a legend - not a literary legend, but a legend all the same. Speaking at Cheltenham Town Football Club, Banks seemed as comfortable before an audience as he had been faultless as England's number 1 goalkeeper.

His autobiography *Banksy* will not make the headlines - unlike those lesser millionaire footballers with their pampered lives and empty trophy cabinets - but it will be worth reading if this event was anything to go by. Egged on by the consummately professional sportswriter Jim White, Banks flirted with and informed the audience about the life of a footballer before Sky TV.

His first club, Chesterfield, 'paid out a £1 win bonus and 50p if we

drew. It wasn't about money in those days.' When he eventually joined up with the England squad, 'we'd have roast beef and Yorkshire pudding followed by apple pie and custard,' he said - something not highly recommended by nutritionists today. This was an era of gentleman footballers whose appetites outweighed their attitudes - and surely football was the better for that.



James Quinn, former UK Allcomers Slam Champion, garnished the line-up with a succession of footy-inspired poems which - despite admitting his support for Manchester United - were wonderfully received. 'Football and poetry have a lot in common,' he revealed in the introduction to *Just Three Minutes To Go*, a metaphorical match between poet and poem.

## Simpson: King of Kabul

By ADAM HOROVITZ

John Simpson, the ever so slightly flouncy 'liberator' of Kabul, bounced onstage at Cheltenham last night with a few jokes, a few opinions and a goodly amount of softly-spoken recent political gossip.

He is not a man who gives anything much away; many of his opinions could easily have been collated from the more liberal broadsheets of the last year or so. However, this arch BBC man did let fly a few genteel broadsides from under the cover of his impartial mask.

He was clearly a mite depressed that the USA has 'turned Saddam into some sort of martyr... Tariq Aziz recently got a standing ovation...'. This, he tells us, from a man who once told him during an interview that 'If you ask another question I'll have you liquidated.'

'There's a real thirst in America for news of the rest of the world now,' he

says, but is fully aware that middle America would be 'shocked if you tried to link the situation in Israel and

Palestine with September 11th.'

He thinks that religion and politics are 'the same thing. Northern Ireland... is a conflict between the original and the new inhabitants'. 'Religion,' he says, 'is an overcoating.'

It's strange to think that this man, dressed for an afternoon at Lords, is the same one who delivers breathy missives from the latest war-torn corner of the Earth. 'Part of my function is to remind you that real people are being bombed,' he says. Apparently, the most accurate bombing 'is usually in cities containing foreign journalists'. And then he lets his impartial mask slip: 'A group recently measured estimated IQs of US Presidents... Bill Clinton got 186, George W Bush only got 91. It must be very weird to be half as clever as the bloke in the same job before you,' he says with a polite smirk.



## Life begins at sixty

BY JOSIE BLOUNT

'The one thing worse than going deaf is not realising it.'

In his latest novel *Knocking On*, Christopher Matthew discusses the perils of the slow, slippery slope of ageing. Matthew's sharp life observations form the less-than-sharp character of Crisp.

Only Crisp, 'the guardian of morality,' manages to turn the common scenario of an out-of-control airport trolley into a full strip-search.

Crisp also toys with the idea of sleeping rough (in case he's ever asked!) - the only problem being he can't find a cardboard box which gives the right impression - 'no-one knows the problems of sleeping rough!'

In this exceptionally light-hearted, comical talk, Christopher Matthew warns that 'one minute you're looking at your parents wondering what it's like to be as old as them and the next minute you are!'

## Well Donne!

BY BRENDA READ-BROWN

Can erotic poetry be an aphrodisiac? Alas, Neil Rollinson's attempt to seduce his audience with songs by Catullus failed at the climax - Neil had left behind the poem with the real hard stuff. His own very frank poems, though, soon perked us up.

For Kate Clanchy, the predominance of male writing about sex makes it difficult for female poets; women who desire are vulnerable, but men who desire are just men. The wryness of her work showed this, especially juxtaposed with the exuberant confidence of John Donne.

Confession time! Kate confirmed preconceptions (a word defining erotic poetry?) by admitting that she wrote far more about sex when she wasn't getting enough. Neil acknowledged the difficulty of putting away 'the bulging biro', to ensure that poetry celebrates love and sex, rather than the skills of the poet.

It's a common problem - this was titillating, but not satisfying.

## The funky Gribbin

BY DANIEL HAHN

John Gribbin has long been one of our leading science writers, a scientist and an advocate for what used to be called rather paternalistically The Public Understanding of Science. A man, then, who takes science seriously, and sees its importance. 'Too much money is spent on scientific development nowadays,' he says.

Sorry? Surely you mean 'Not enough?' Surely you should be lamenting the state of public funding, the brain-drain to the US, the disenfranchisement of serious scientific work in our frivolous soundbite era? Not a bit of it. 'There are too many scientists, doing too much and spending too much money.'

His argument is that too much emphasis is put on the work of sci-



ence laboratory 'technicians' for the paltry number of 'great ideas' this investment has produced. We'd do better to take things slowly. 'What's the hurry?' he asks; 'we have to leave things for our grandchildren to find' (it's hard to tell whether he's joking). We have to learn to enjoy the advances that have been made, he argues, before rushing off onto the next and the next. After all, historically the great scientists haven't been 'cold, rational, calculating' technicians; many, if not most, have been 'hot-blooded, irrational, even mad.'

So Gribbin's *Science: A History* makes no claims to be a revolutionary contribution to scientific thought; rather it is an enthusiastic, appreciative tribute to those 'hot-blooded' people of science past, the great scientists whose work has brought us where we are today.

## Getting under the skin

BY KATHRYN HARPER

With two distinctive personalities like Jenny Diski and Linda Grant taking part in a series entitled *Under the Skin*, you would expect something beyond the standard literary chat. Although competent, this event seemed slightly disconnected, polite and flat. Fairly standard questions received fairly standard answers.

Take 'Has writing always been important in your life?': both authors agreed that it was ideas which drove their writing - and 'the gas bill' which concentrates the mind. Diski admitted that she'd quite like to write a novel with no characters and no plot. Grant said that she never abandoned a novel even at the most difficult juncture, because she'd have to pay the



advance back.

The timetabled discussion about place didn't really get started until quite far along in the talk. They spoke of the difficulty of writing about 'known places', as most corners of the world have been 'pre-digested' for us: 'We have all been there before.'

Grant commended Diski for staying in bed when she finally reached the Antarctic. She further advised that the most important place to visit when you arrive in a new country is the supermarket. Jenny Diski said that her next non-fiction travel writing will be about staying home on the sofa. While irony and self-deprecation can provide a few laughs, you sometimes want to get a sense of passion for a work. I'm sure it's there - it just didn't come through tonight.

## Prize Poets

BY REBEKAH CANE

*Literally Speaking* is delighted to announce the winner and three runners up of its Personified Poetry competition, all of whom receive a book donated by Hammicks. The runners up are - in no particular order - Marina Barnden, Heather Spears and Philip Elston. The winner is Festival volunteer Alex Runchman with:

### The Gymnast Gasp for a Drink

She balances on the round podium,  
Her hands between her slightly parted legs,

And spins into the splits, and then beyond,

Perplexing possibility, those legs  
Like arms, a V above her head. She holds

Her poise a moment - teetering - and digs

Her hands into the crash mat, which she pulls

In one terrific motion from its ledge.

The legs snap down. It's a strangely uncouth

Conclusion to a vintage pirouette, Indecorous, but what should we expect

From girls who open bottles with their teeth?

## The Stoat

An audience member asked John Simpson last night if he got 'many propositions from women in his travels?'

'Not enough,' said Simpson wearily. 'No, not at all. It's a great sadness in my life!'

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More from John Simpson (on why he does what he does): 'I couldn't be a plumber... and God knows I couldn't be a Foreign Secretary.'

### THE TEAM

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