



LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

John Birt

Everyman

12 - 1pm

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Selina Hastings

Everyman

4 - 5pm

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Late Night

Northern Lights

Town Hall

9.15pm - late

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And the grass is still singing

By KATHRYN HARPER

'Perhaps I am a reject of history.' Doris Lessing read from her recent work. This could not be further from the truth as far as her own career is concerned. In the fifty-two years since the publication of *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing has probably been one of the great chroniclers of the 20th century.

When asked for her feelings about the view of the present, she was positive: 'We should see ourselves as survivors. We survive history... We are brilliant at adapting and going on. That makes me an optimist.'

However, when the subject of Zimbabwe came up, her mood was more sombre. With the 'rapacious ruling class' grabbing everything in

sight, AIDS operating like the new black death and now a looming environmental disaster with drought/deforestation, she could not



see how it could be worse than it is. However, when referring to the continent as a whole she did say that people underestimate how much Africa influences us and we influence Africa.

True to form, Lessing took on the

publishers. She spoke about how they asked her to make cuts to *The Grass is Singing*. When she sent it back two weeks later with no changes whatsoever, they complimented her on how improved it was. She admitted that editorial advice was not always bad but she bemoaned the dearth of proper copy-editor 'dragons' who have fallen under the sword of publishing cost-cutting. But she stated that writers do tend to feel that it's 'us against them': 'you always feel underpaid and underprivileged.'

Lessing's clarity and vision was incredible for any age. Her 83 years only really manifested themselves when Kate Mosse had to repeat a few questions. When asked about new projects, she said: 'Writers do not retire. They just die in harness.'

And why not!

By NIC WALENTOWICZ

Wouldn't it be nice to think that that the people who are invited to speak at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature actually believed in what they said? Unfortunately, I'm not sure this was the case with Barry Norman. Although I felt that his seemingly scripted responses were always incisive, pointed, and, if the reaction of the other members of his captive audience are to be believed, entertaining, he was clearly here more at the mercy of an aggressive marketing strategy than for any enjoyment he might get out of it.

His 'straight man', John Miller, was working, apparently, from a different script with the inevitable result that Norman's replies were often a little obscure. So what was he doing here? I am told that Mr Norman has an autobiography in the shops, and that may be the reason why he deigned to turn out tonight. Cynical, perhaps. And why not...?

Cops and Barristers

By ALEX RUNCHMAN

The clamorous laughter of Morse and Rumpole devotees echoed through the corridors as John Mortimer and Colin Dexter served up anecdote after anecdote last night, often veering wildly away from chairman David Freeman's actual questions. Not that anyone minded.

'I do write pornography, but under a different name,' exclaimed Dexter, accounting for the sparsity of sex scenes in Morse, whilst Mortimer recounted the fate of a jury member who woke during a trial to find a note saying, 'Would you care for a screw?' in front of him; sadly not a proposition from the personable young lady next to him, but a victim's transcript of an indecent pro-



posal she was too embarrassed to utter. Indeed, sex was on both their minds, and Mortimer plugged his new book at the end by drawing attention to a lap-dancing scene.

There were some more serious moments: Mortimer's disillusionment

with the current Tory/Labour party, a consideration of the inherent decency (or indecency) of the detective, and universal respect for the late John

Thaw.

However, the evening consisted primarily of the stories of two members of the old guard for whom malt whiskey is the best inspiration, which was exactly what the audience wanted. After all, as both agreed, stories rather than character are of most importance in both writing and television.

Book it!

By DANIEL HAHN

Spot, everybody's favourite puppy, comes bounding into Cheltenham this morning to get the second *Book it!* weekend off the ground. Clifford the dog, *Meg & Mog* and the *Flower Fairies* are among the other classic characters who'll be delighting young audiences around the Town Hall over the next two days.

Michael Rosen will be talking about his work, and Shirley Hughes, the grandmother of children's books, will be introducing her brand new *A Life Drawing*. Illustration is also the theme of today's debate, which will include Anne Fine and the incomparable Ralph Steadman in a discussion of the working relationship of authors and illustrators. No Festival would be complete without the hilarious Roger McGough. Add to these a dozen other fantastic events, to make a fun-crammed couple of days. And the other good news - you don't have to be a kid to come along...



A good time had by all

By DANIEL HAHN

Biographer Frances Spalding and actress/writer Anne Harvey joined us this afternoon for a gentle introduction to the life and work of Stevie Smith (or 'Stevie', as we now all call her, apparently). Spalding's generous talk, illustrated with Harvey's well-chosen readings of Stevie's work, took us on a leisurely wander around the writer of *Not Waving but Drowning*, a roam through the biography, the themes, the reputation, and the question - in this year, the centenary of her birth - 'Why is Stevie Smith important?'

Spalding was at pains to point out that we can only answer this question by looking beyond her single most famous poem and into the versatility and breadth of the rest of the work. Besides her three novels, she wrote a large body of very diverse poetry (beginning in the thirties with *A Good Time Was Had by All* - its title taken from a local church newsletter). It deals with death, with alienation, enchantment ('attractive but dangerous') and her ambivalent attitudes towards religion ('There is a God in whom I do not believe'). The voices she creates range from sardonically funny, through pensive and sometimes pessimistic, to 'faux-naïve', the tone which brought her so much criticism.

Stevie Smith's private life was, we're told, 'unsatisfactory, painful and incomplete', but she turned this to her advantage, developing a 'refusal to turn away from pain'. She sought to 'extract the poetical from ordinary life' (Spalding described her London house as 'spectacularly ordinary'). But although her work is clearly largely autobiographical, Spalding stressed the dangers of 'the too-easy collapsing of the work and the life'; the work is too complex for this to be useful, its voices 'not just particular to her'. As Spalding's talk and Harvey's readings ably demonstrated, it is this that brought Stevie Smith her extraordinary popularity, and here that her importance is to be found.

A dark heart

By ROBYN HILL

With A N Wilson's comment that 'smoking is only for children and it should be the adults that abstain', this lecture celebrating the centenary of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* started on an unusually jovial note. Robert Hampson followed with a comprehensive background to the novella, including the questionable ethics of the author himself, his involvement in gunrunning and the slave trade. That said, Hampson soon started defending Conrad against the insults of Achebe's 1977 criticism that he was a 'bloody racist.' Hampson and Wilson explained that, placed within its correct historical and political context *Heart of Darkness* can't be viewed in this light.

The critics focused on the contemporary meaning of the novella and its relevance to today's society. The universality of this work stems from its exploration of human potential in the face of greed, corruption and genocide, therefore giving the audience a glimpse of the world if humanity and ethics no longer existed.

Better than Eden

By ADAM HOROVITZ

'You can't remake the world without remaking yourself,' said Ben Okri yesterday, quoting from his poem *Mental Fight*. He himself is an exquisite remaker of the world, concentrating on the mythic elements central to the two societies he lives in: the Nigeria of his ancestors and the Greek and Roman myths that, more even than the desert religions, inform Europe.

Okri is a master of stillness. Even his entrance onto the Town Hall's main stage had mythic qualities, down perhaps to the vivid red jacket he was wearing. His voice booms around the hall like cautious thunder.

Reading from his new novel *In Arcadia*, he began an exploration of the genesis of his artistry. 'When something haunts you, you've got to do something about it,' he tells us.

And it's the legend of Arcadia that's been haunting him.

He came to this book by way of Homer. 'The Odyssey is an affirming book... of all the great values. It's about paying attention to dreams.' Then a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge encouraged him to read Virgil, who forged Arcadia as a territory of the mind. Arcadia's very unreality made it a place Okri wanted to go. 'It even sounds better than Eden!' he said.

In Arcadia is a travel book where 'the journey is real, but the people are not.' 'There are things more real than what we see,' says Okri. 'I tell these tales in which I weave - as best I can - that which is real and that which we sense in our hearts is real.'

'The thing about African art is you have to see it in motion,' he adds. 'The imagination collects, forgets its sources and then joins the dots.' Ben Okri is a master of joining the dots.



Science: fact and fiction

By REBEKAH CANE

The Everyman played host to an intriguing discussion on the way science is portrayed on the page yesterday, featuring an eclectically diverse panel: the guarded televisual avuncularity of Raj Persaud (a pop psychologist spotted drinking Sprite onstage), glamorous 'future fiction' novelist Maggie Gee plus critic and anthologist John Carey, who looks like he might show you a literary swingometer at any moment.

'I don't think there are any duties on a novelist to be scientifically correct, but it pleases me,' said Maggie Gee. 'My sense of beauty is very much spurred by science.'

John Carey brought attention to

the fine Czech poet Miroslav Holub, suggesting that he was perhaps the best example of an artist in touch with science since Goethe, and Raj Persaud claimed that a 'significant number of scientists pursue science because they read sci-fi' in their youth.

The panel bantered genteely in this vein for an hour or so, at which point Kate Mosse brought things

to a polite end, but you could sense that there was a keenness on the part of audience and particularly panel to continue. This was an informed and informative event that proved - in the end - as nebulous and multi-faceted as its two diverse subjects.



The Stoat

'Can you all hear at the back?' Mo Mowlam asked halfway through her talk yesterday. On hearing a negative reply she shouted, 'Then why didn't you put up your hand and say so, otherwise you're just wasting your time!'

A.N. Wilson yesterday: 'Jesus wasn't a writer. He wrote with his finger in the sand once, but he wouldn't have come to a literary festival I suspect.'

THE TEAM

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