



# LITERALLY SPEAKING

*The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal*

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

### Festival Challenge

Cafe Rouge  
2.30 - 3.30pm

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### Best of Young British Novelists

Town Hall  
4.15 - 5.15pm

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### Justin Cartwright & Giles Foden

Town Hall  
8 - 9pm

## Benn there, done that...

By NIC WALENTOWICZ

Considering Tony Benn's left-wing politics, it seemed surprising that Cheltenham Town Hall, of all places, should be packed to the rafters for this event. Yet a warm ovation greeted him and his interviewer, Nick Clarke, as they entered.

Asking the inevitable question - 'Why is the latest edition of your diaries entitled *Free at Last?*' - Mr Clarke opened the floodgates for an hour of witty, entertaining and at times polemically charged anecdotes from Tony Benn. Never one to hedge his bets, he was as forthright as ever about, amongst other topics, the Blairs, Margaret Thatcher, and even the Queen, who, apparently, Tony Benn won in a raffle in 1945.

An indication of his frank opinions may be gleaned from the fact that, in the latest volume of his diaries, '...in the introduction, I put an apology.'

Whether one agrees with Tony Benn's views or not, and I have to say there was a less than enthusiastic response from the audience to his unequivocal support for the forthcoming strike by certain fire service unions, this event was a rare opportunity to listen to a politician who makes sense.

The reason for the diary title? 'I've been a prisoner of conscience of the Labour Party for 51 years ... and now



I'm unmuzzled.'

'When I die, the Almighty will ask what I did with my life, and I'll give him 15 million words,' he said of his diaries. He described New Labour as 'the smallest political party in Britain, but since all its members are in the cabinet, they're very powerful.'

According to Benn, if David Beckham showed any support for New Labour, they'd probably offer him a peerage. The audience laughed. Asked about renouncing his own peerage, he said 'Mr Benn is the best title, and I like being Mr Benn.' I liked Mr Benn, and I liked the hour I spent in the company of this remarkable man.

## Physically challenged

By MARINA BARNDEN

Reader-in-Residence Patrick Gale set a theme within a theme for the Literary Challenge. This year's Festival explores what it means to be human, but Gale thinks too many writers were 'a bit airy-fairy in their approach to this.' So rather than addressing consciousness or religion, Gale approaches humanity through the body.

The 20 humans who accepted his challenge will read a poem of no more than 40 lines or a 150 word mini-saga about body parts today in Café Rouge at 2.30pm. Though sexiness is inevitable, that means 'anything from your husband's ingrowing toenail to your own surgically removed part.' But this is not a bodily competition, and the prize is (an airy-fairy) spiritual reward. Nevertheless, *voices off* encourages anyone to come and support, in the flesh.

## A blind date with Birt

By ADAM HOROVITZ

What is one to make of John Birt, until recently the equally reviled and acclaimed Director General of the BBC? In the flesh at the Everyman yesterday, he came across like a Frankenstein twinning of Tony Blair and John Inman, with his trademark New Labour grin fixed in permafrost across his face.

He suavely avoided the pitfall questions, set by *World at One's* Nick Clarke, like a grey Indiana Jones with his underpants outside his trousers; the only way one could tell that he might not be enjoying something was when he fidgeted, wrote notes or - in extreme discomfort - let slip a trace of Bootle brogue.

It was telling that at least half the audience applauded whenever Birt was given a hard time. He didn't help himself by admitting that 'in the sixties I didn't have a political idea in my head', shortly followed by the asser-

tion that 'I was put on *World in Action* because I was the only one who knew *anything* about politics.'

Also unhelpful was his admission that he 'helped invent Blind Date', that icon of intelligent television. 'God bless you,' said Clarke sarcastically. Birt claimed later that he loved intelligent TV in Britain, but mostly named imported US shows, such as *Six Feet Under*. He also claimed that 'David Mellor was the bravest and boldest politician I worked with', a fact that I assume was lost on most of us in the wake of Chelsea shirts and sexual scandal.

He suggested that some questions from the audience be 'redirected to my successor', quoting a friend in the church, who apparently told him that 'when the Bishop retires he should get out of the diocese', a sentiment he claimed to agree with. But if this was so, what on earth was he doing here?



## Late & lively

By JON ANDRIESEN

*voices off* came to the Town Hall last night for an entertainment extravaganza seldom seen in these parts. Four sumptuous acts for free, filling out the Pillar Room with a raucous revelry of poetry and song.

Helen Thomas' irreverent style and soft-sound intonations were spot-on as she served up snack after snack of poetic fare. Max Seymour, red balaclava clad, pitched in with one-liners so surreal you didn't necessarily have to be there, and love poems of 'chalk and cheese/chocolate and peas' relationships. Rory Motion - who could almost have been Andrew's cooler younger brother - regaled us with tales of Richard Whiteley and a poem about his car-hating bike; 'it was a vicious cycle.'

Finally, Shed Hunter and the Indigo Fish strummed and sang through scales of joy in this much appreciated evening of high-performance delight.



## Booker 1952

BY DANIEL HAHN

The 1952 Booker judges showed no mercy. Simon Hoggart had to struggle valiantly to defend Richard Gordon's *Doctor in the House* against the fierce onslaughts of Justin Cartwright and Selina Hastings, and the book was quickly eliminated from the shortlist, soon followed by the 'sententious', 'laughable', 'inflated' *Old Man and the Sea* ('and anyway, it's not really a novel').

And then there were three. With half an hour of debate still scheduled, an interim poll revealed that three of the five judges were already supporting the same book. More than a little flustered, the Chair asked how many supported the second of the titles? Nothing. And the third? To his relief and surprise, three hands were raised for that too. Which ruled out Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* (Justin Cartwright berating his fellow judges for their lack of loyalty to the 'heroic' Doris who 'was here only the other day').

Cartwright pronounced Steinbeck's massive *East of Eden* 'crude' and 'derelict', Evelyn Waugh's *Men at Arms* 'sensationally well-written', but the final count went in favour of Steinbeck. James Walton expressed his delight at the divisions in the panel, which had brought the debate 'almost a little bit of edge'. Almost.

## Goodbye...

BY STET PRESS

And so, once again, it comes to this. *Literally Speaking* is over for another year; but there is just time to say thank you - firstly to everyone who has worked at the Festival so long and hard for the last ten days or more.

Many thanks are also due to Cheltenham College, who loaned us invaluable computer equipment.

Most of all we would like to thank you, our loyal readers, who have put up with our punning headlines. In the meantime, we are always interested in feedback. Write to us at [stetpress@hotmail.com](mailto:stetpress@hotmail.com)

See you all next time...

## Rosens are read

BY HELEN WILLIAMS

Acclaimed children's writer Michael Rosen welcomed an audience of all ages to his relaxed Saturday afternoon performance at Cheltenham College Junior School yesterday. He opened his delightful, amusing talk with references to his book titles and the comical situations which arise from them. Imagine, for example, how popular people are in bookshops when they reply to the question 'What's the title?' with 'Mind your own business' or 'Wouldn't you like to know?' Rosen's role-play of such a situation started the ball rolling for an afternoon of outstanding audience response.

Rosen concentrated on his personal experiences, ranging from bringing up his children to his own childhood. He adopted the roles of sophisticated storyteller, stand-up comic and poet, switching between all three with fluency and ease.



His talent for sound effects and impressions was displayed in all its glory throughout the event and was probably the key to spawning hysterical giggling from the younger members of the audience. This is not to say, however, that the older generation didn't laugh at his high-pitched humour - with added sucking and squelching; they reacted more to his active imagination when talking about his school days, explaining his horror at being tied up in a 'school prison' for 'breathing in class'. 'See,' he said, 'some of the old people are laughing; that's because they remember.'

Rosen explained how his writing stems from the people and experiences he knows rather than a made-up fantasy world. The significance of memories in poetry was emphasised strongly, and Rosen certainly sparked a wave of nostalgia in me, being the first poet I ever read. This afternoon was a reminder that poetry can still be fun now, not just when you are in junior school.

## The headmaster's demon?

BY DANIEL HAHN

It was with considerable relish that Chris Woodhead recalled a public event when he (then Chief Inspector of Schools) was introduced as 'Repulsive. But right.' But this man, once so demonised by teachers and unions and the press and parents (and politicians and educationalists and, for all I know, schoolchildren too...), was today surprisingly palatable company. Not quite conciliatory, certainly, but keen at least to explain himself.



For the most maligned of his oft-quoted comments, his words to the effect that there were ten thousand bad teachers who ought to be eliminated (no, he corrected, 'fifteen thousand'), he was unapologetic. Nor did

he back down on his repulsive (but, yes, possibly right) views on private education, school vouchers, and so on.

But today Woodhead is clearly on a charm offensive, a man with important ideas and policies to sell (it's called *Class War*, since you ask, in all good bookshops) and it's a measure of his success that he wasn't harangued by his teacher-filled audience.

Woodhead explained his resignation as a deliberate move allowing him to speak his mind, to criticize the government on matters over which they disagree (centralising school governance and further education targets topping a long, long list). Though he charmed today's audience, he's not about to stop making enemies. Not that he seems to mind much.

## Parris match

BY JENNY MCAULEY

Nick Clarke was not alone in feeling this hour with a former Conservative MP 'nonpareil' to be the ice-cream treat at the end of his day. Honouring the last of four chairing engagements with red wine, he set the mood of cosy indulgence pervading Parris' largest performance venue since a childhood appearance in a Rhodesian *The King and I*.

A dapper Parris recounted his picaresque career - from second billing at a Conservative ladies' tombola to his current contented lot of letters and llama-fancying, with responses to recent Tory scandals kept sweet and discreet. Whatever his doubts about democracy, there can be no doubt of a charm that has made Parliament's loss our gain.

## The Stoat

'I was a bouncer for The Beatles in Southport once,' John Birt said yesterday, 'and the prettiest girl I knew was trying to get in.' To cut a long story short, Birt and a friend copped 'a snog and a feel' in exchange for introducing her to Macca, eventually.

Tony Benn: 'I don't think Chris Woodhead wants the working classes educated, that's the nub of it. He just wants the crème de la crème.'

Festival Director Sarah Smyth was apparently relaxing in a bath yesterday when she fell asleep leaving the taps running for 1.5 hours. 'It was my Festival Moment,' she said. 'Everybody has one.' The Stoat would like to thank her for coming clean!

### THE TEAM

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