



LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•
Will Hutton

Town Hall

12 - 1pm

•
Lisa Jardine

Everyman

2 - 3pm

•
Pub Bookworm

Rotunda Tavern

8pm onwards

Back copies of *Literally Speaking* are available from the Press Desk at the front of the Town Hall. Thanks to Cheltenham College for the use of computer equipment.

Hobsbawm's choice

By DANIEL HAHN

In the Coda to his autobiographical *Interesting Times*, Eric Hobsbawm quotes LP Hartley's 'the past is another country'. The advantage of older historians is that 'we have lived there'.

So, in today's extraordinary talk, Hobsbawm insisted that his is not an intimate autobiography but a historical one - covering his birth

in the year of the Russian Revolution, his marriage during the Cuban missile crisis, and so on.

The second advantage of age to historians, we're told, is the sense of impermanence which historical experience bestows. Hobsbawm has seen enough once-powerful empires crumble to be certain that the looming US-global one won't be permanent. But he remains pessimistic. 'It's just the

nature of the period in which we've lived', he says; and he confesses to finding our new century 'equally discouraging'. The terrorist attacks on the US, the 'deeply immoral' arguments for an Iraqi war, and the 'horrific' actions of Ariel Sharon's regime



in Israel, all serve to confirm his pessimism.

To hear him speak, you can't but wonder whether there's a subject in the world this man hasn't given serious thought. Whether considering his own Jewishness and anti-Zionism, or the consolations of good piano jazz, he expresses himself in a way that is always thoughtful and often very moving.

The problems he talks about are undeniably serious, yet with such people giving them their attention it's somehow hard to share his pessimism.

So much, so young

By ADAM HOROVITZ

Nothing can prepare one for serious, high-kicking poetry that takes the promise of heightened speech and delivers it with some serious sauce, and yesterday's *voices off* at Café Rouge, featuring Caroline Bird and Clare Pollard, delivered a sucker-punch of excellence. Both women wrote their first books whilst at school, and both of those books ring with a street-smart authority. They are clearly indebted to the tough-mouthed 1980s progenitors of the new verse, but have a clear and healthy independent streak.

Bird, who spoke first, writes and reads with a quivering northern streak of surrealism which she carries off with a wry, gangling smirk. Her book, *Looking Through Letterboxes*, is full of the heightened speech of a terrifyingly articulate teenager, with references to pizza and snogging bursting through the tautly beautiful writing like newly discovered life-forms. The poems can be, in her own words, 'leaner than a bubblegum string'.

Pollard is also remarkable and highly assured. She clearly knows herself rather well, introducing herself as liking 'unrequited love, extended metaphor and bruised fruit', and is able to express this in verse without naff even appearing on the horizon. Occasionally, she sounds like a wiser, more introspective Fiona Pitt-Kethely, as does her new book's title, *Bedtime*.

She can run into trouble when dealing with the world outside herself, however. Her attempt to get inside Eva Braun's mind in *The Bunker in Berlin* - an unpleasant but well-written dramatic monologue that attempts to assess the relationship between sex and evil - leaves a rather bitter taste in the mouth. This, happily, is washed away by the excellence of her other work.

A Greer-ble!

By ALEX RUNCHMAN

'I've been harbouring this viper in my bosom'. Germaine Greer's response to an ex-housemate's portraying her in his novel began an illuminating talk on her unease about writing and her contempt of literary biography.

Trying to discover and write about who her father really was she discovered what a flesh-eating bacillus she was herself: she'd turned her family into text. Ultimately, she insisted, the work must live: novels tend to reduce their subjects and deny the possibility of alternative outcomes.

Greer would rather have an amazing fact than all the amazing inventions in the world. Delivered without notes, her speech was erudite, opinionated, humble and even moving.

In the company of authors

By RACHEL BARWICK

Jeff Noon and Marina Warner's discussion of Angela Carter sparked with the same wit and style as Carter's own writing. Slipping easily between topics as diverse as feminist reactions to Carter and the difficulty of finding an Internet domain name, the speakers engaged the audience in a discussion about one of this century's most enchanting writers.

Noon summed up the reaction of many readers to Carter's works when he said that upon opening the book *In the Company of Wolves* you feel as if an electric charge is going through you', hardly surprising when you consider that Carter herself has been



described as 'an enchanter, witch or wise woman, always on the verge of bestowing something'.

In fact, as the discussion testified, Carter constantly bestowed her audience with her gifts, whether they be her wit, or with her gift for delving into the 'wild imagery' of the human brain and celebrating the darkness that she found therein.

This gift for consistent entertainment is evident in the fact that, as Noon commented, Carter's work can be read by anyone and although her work hasn't influenced enough writers yet, hopefully the fantastical strain in her writing will be more evident in the future, a hope that I am sure all fans of Carter's share.



Well done, Fay

BY KATHRYN HARPER

When asked who her favourite character was, Fay Weldon laughed and said she quite liked Bridget Jones.

Critics often accuse her of portraying women as silly but her response was: 'Well, they are often silly, aren't they?'

Having written the first of what will be three autobiographies, Fay Weldon no longer needs to worry about impressing people - if indeed she ever did.

Grinning through the session, she was effortless: 'My mother was desperate to stop me from being a lesbian. I wasn't one. I just kept falling in love with girls.'



Writing about a complex character like Fay Weldon, what with all the layers of her past, would be a very daunting job - luckily she's the one who's ended up with it. Her reading from her book about her grandmother's views of the London literary figures of the 1920s was hilarious. A shame she didn't do more of it.

Her response to criticisms about the Bulgari novel was unrepentant. She was equally happy with her present role as writer in residence at the Savoy (she makes bacon sandwiches from her breakfast bacon for lunch).

Her upcoming book will apparently be based on the premise that 'boys are the new girls'. Now what would Bridget Jones make of that?

Banks of Scotland

BY AMY TOLLEY & SOPHIE FAUSET

Laid back comfortably in his chair, legs crossed, hand frequently at his beer, this was an unexpectedly intimate conversation with the writer Iain Banks.

Focussing on his new novel *Dead Air* at the start, the discussion moved on into a more relaxed talk about his experiences over the years as a writer. After delving deeply into one anecdote, the next minute he would be halfway into another. He was totally engrossing; your concentration needed to be on full, as jokes were made out of the most serious of matters.

Usually limiting himself, by his own admission, to one rant per novel, *Dead Air* was to be an exception;

'basically the whole thing is based around rants'. John Wilson described his new novel as a 'fast, furious, funny thriller', which 'starts high, and ends on a low'. Having already planned most of the novel when September 11th happened, Banks knew that it must be included as his central character was highly involved in the media; but he considered it 'too important just to say in passing' and so it came to be that the story would open on that day.

After listening to his attempt at a cockney/Scottish accent as he read a passage from the book, it became apparent that his personality really shines through in his work. If *Dead Air* is as vibrant and witty as he was when talking about it, then reading it will be just as exciting, fresh and fun.



Promenade Poetry

BY BRENDA READ-BROWN

As the tired prostitute said, 'it's not the work, it's the stairs'. Performance poets Stuart Butler and Brenda Read-Brown puffed ten times up and down the stairs linking the platforms at Cheltenham Spa station, pausing each side to perform railway poems - entertaining some of their captive audience, and no doubt irritating others. Delayed diesels easily drowned the polite applause.

Passengers on the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Railway were rather more receptive. Although some serious trainspotters seemed bemused, families out for the day were amused by Auden, bewitched by Betjeman and mesmerised by McGough.

Tannoys and tunnels, pistons and points all added atmosphere, and this unexpected incursion of literature inspired crew members to philosophical thought: 'Why do people wave at trains?'; 'Where does all the steam go to?'; 'It's just hot air, really. Perhaps poetry sent them a little off the rails?'

To be sure (or not so sure)

BY NIC VALENTOWICZ

If Professor Eagleton were able to take time off from the lecture circuit to investigate the family tree of William Shakespeare, it might come as no surprise if we were to find that the Bard was of Irish descent. In the Cheltenham Lecture, *The Strange Case of English Modernism*, Eagleton suggests that the odd thing about English Modernism is that it was, in fact, Irish.

Citing Joyce, Yeats and Beckett among others, he proposes that England's shame was that this



country lacked the capability to breed home grown modernism. His claim that the Irish wrote most of England's great literature is supported by his notion that 'provincial' England had a parochial outlook because of the vast tracts of empire that it controlled, and whilst England was struggling with

the notion of 'abroad' as being another country, Ireland was successfully nurturing the cultural requirements for a modernist revolution. Posing the essential duality of the Irish literary psyche as the reason for that country's prolific literary output, he

suggests that England - with the possible exception of Woolf and Lawrence - represents a 'missed moment of modernism'.

Whether one agrees with his Irish patriot slant on recent

English literary heritage or not, Professor Eagleton's lecture was absorbing, although perhaps not the 'mind-expanding stuff' of his earlier work which, allegedly, was instrumental in changing the syllabus for teaching English (or should that be Irish?) in Higher Education.

The Stoat

Question to Germaine Greer: 'How come you were on television last night and here tonight?' 'There is life after TV!' she replied. A life in books is clearly befuddling someone.

Max Hastings yesterday pronounced the Currie affair as 'the final nail of absurdity in Major's political coffin'. 'Of course The Telegraph did not make front page news of the liason,' said Hastings. 'You might expect that from the News of the World or that gutter paper, The Times!'

THE TEAM

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