



LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

Mike Atherton & Jonathan Agnew

Town Hall
6 - 7pm

Words At Work

Cafe Rouge
6 - 6.30pm

Charles & Elizabeth Handy

Town Hall
8.45 - 10pm

The Self-proclaimed man

By JON ANDRIESEN

Say what you like about Will Self the writer, but he's a bloody good reader. Theatrically placed at the Everyman, Self was at his ruddy best whilst performing an hour long reading from *Dorian*, his latest book by Oscar Wilde.

It's been ten years now since Self launched himself on the literary world with the excellent collection *Quantity Theory of Insanity*, but somewhere along that dusty path his notoriety outweighed his scribblings. Appearances on TV replaced literary awards and aircraft restrooms restricted any hope of respectable journalism, but the story still continues.

It has to be said that the audience demographic would not be the one

he'd be performing to this Tuesday night without these little aberrations of character. The young er crowd, who giggled at each and every expletive and knew nothing of Wilde's original, seemed desperate to ask after Vic and Bob, but were perhaps frustrated by this adult Jackanory session. We only received one word outside the text, a simple 'Thank you', as

he exited stage left as enigmatically as he had entered.

And of course he really did read beautifully, with all the panache and presence of a man at home on the stage, detailing each syllable with a flick of an eye or twist of his feet. He sucked us in and we wanted more, but was the book any good; I've no idea?

We were watching Will Self, a franchise, a commodity, a product so seemingly mysterious we'd probably buy shares in it if he asked us to.



Waugh on Heaven

By NIKKI SHEEHAN

Alexander Waugh and Peter Stanford are not afraid to spill the beans on a big name. Their refreshing, irreverent and contradictory views would refill the pews of any church. Waugh's latest book, *God*, moves on from the usual question of His existence to a far more interesting one; what is He like?

God, like everything else, is subject to fashion, and Waugh cannot hide his disdain for the current model which has been melted into 'a sugar-lump called love'. The *God* Waugh evokes is a mass of contradictions who is not afraid to put haemorrhoids up the backsides of Philistines, and thrashes fig trees for not producing fruit out of season. To understand him, apparently, it's vital not to adhere to any formal religion. As for

worship, Waugh argues, if He's so great, why does He need your flattery?

Heaven, a new book by Peter Stanford, author of *The Devil*, may offer the answer. In a marketing sense Stanford, broadcaster and former editor of the *Catholic Herald* points out that heaven is the best thing religion has to offer; yet, along with the Devil, hell, and the second coming, the church is now strangely quiet on its top attraction.

Stanford, whose book is apparently placed in the travel section of one bookshop between Heathrow and Holland, is optimistic about the future of heaven despite our current preoccupation with youth, as apparently 70% of us still believe in an afterlife. But if you want to know what to wear, you'd better buy the book.



Strong hairy pillagers

By RACHEL BARWICK

Julian Richards, presenter of BBC2's *Meet the Ancestors* and author of *Blood of the Vikings*, took to the stage yesterday to demystify the myths that surround this savage race. In his relaxed, informal style, Richards set out to prove that there is more to the history of the Vikings than the 'strong, hairy pillagers' of our imaginations.

Richards' discussion began with the disappointing disclosure that Vikings did not wear Asterix-style horned helmets. The only part of Viking history which fits our common perceptions is the fact they were extremely blood-thirsty; one set of remains found in the north of England boasted a litany of wounds, including two spear thrusts to the head and a devastating

blow to the groin.

Richards also remarked on a tomb found on the Orkneys, where graffiti can be found which boastfully lists the Viking women of the island who 'were most loose with their favours!' From this evidence, it would appear that Britons haven't progressed very much at all since the eleventh century.

This isn't surprising when you consider that most British people share Viking DNA.

Richards underwent DNA testing to prove that he was part Viking, (thinking it would make him braver and stronger); sadly the test was negative.

However, Richards consoled us (and himself) by saying that there is a bit of Viking warrior in all of us... a comforting thought to remember next time you battle your way through rush-hour traffic.



Jamesian fun

BY MARINA BARNDEN

When host Alastair Niven introduced novelist Toby Litt only 'hesitantly' as a 'Jamesian scholar', he set the tone for a discussion which was at its best, hesitant.

Smiling his way around the intricacies of his subject, 'true' scholar Philip Horne expressed admiration for Henry James' handling of 'things so intangible they could never be written about'.

Clearly, these 'things' proved tricky for Litt, who concluded his speech on obscurity and 'the anti-cinematic thing' with: 'So, he's fun.' Litt found more fun in his own verbal obscurities, personifying James' novels as '...this kind of colossus trying to traipse its way round the world'.

Horne carefully addressed the question of morality, calling James 'not a moralistic writer but a morally serious writer'. However, Niven's final plea for the 'kids of the 21st century' was only a gesture towards the topic of this event: James' position in our literary age.

The Stoat

Michael Parkinson asked a volunteer rhetorically if he should serve himself with a cup of tea in the Writer's Room two days ago; 'No, it's fine. I'll get it,' said the (female) volunteer.

At this point, Susie Orbach sidled up to the volunteer and said in a loud aside: 'Ooh, this must be a gender issue.'

The Stoat understands that Parky laughed irritably. Is tea now a feminist issue too?

THE TEAM

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Considering Rebus

BY GILLIAN MURDOCH

deeper things on bigger issues, so the writing gets more and more difficult.'

What is evil? Where does it come from? And what do we do about it? Scotland's premier crime writer, Ian Rankin, might not have all the answers, but at least he's not scared to look at the big themes.

Big themes have dogged his characters, sold his books, and earlier this year, won him an OBE for services to literature, but he admits they have their drawbacks.

'It does piss me off because it means that the writing gets more difficult as you go on,' he told the audience. 'I'm essentially a lazy person, but each book you write must say



short-list - where are the here and now problems in urban society? You might not be better able to answer the big questions at the end of the experience, but that shouldn't stop you asking them.'

Earth Father

BY BILL KEMBLE

David Bellamy remains one of the great communicators in biology. He combines an academic credibility with a genuine earthy enthusiasm for the planet. As a broadcaster, he remains one of the icons of ecology, a personal hero and the educator of a generation. His commitment to conservation and continued enthusiasm for his subject are worthy of great admiration.

Bellamy's hour at Cheltenham brought a fast-flowing flurry of ideas and jumped from past memories to pertinent comment on today's society. His tone remained optimistic and emphasised good news and success rather than the pessimistic coverage of world disasters we hear about on the news.

His delight to discover and publicise the fact that 'Ethiopia is now self-sufficient in food' and has escaped the struggle for existence and fight against starvation proved this. Bellamy even nominated Sir Bob Geldof for a sainthood; we await a response from the Pope with baited breath.

It is reassuring to know that

Bellamy's career path was not too smooth. He confessed to disappointing his parents and failing at school, setting out deck chairs and wandering in sewers before realising it was time to use his brain.

Within five years of that, he found himself lecturing in botany. Now, nearing 70 years old, his gruff tones still burst through his thick beard. Here is a man energised in his beliefs, sharp and ready to play a vital role as a campaigner for the environment. We should all listen carefully.



Don't forget *Literally Speaking's* Personified Poetry Competition. The closing date is Wednesday October 16th 2002

Tackling God and poetry

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

'Today, we're tackling poetry and God,' said Christina Patterson from the Poetry Society. 'The way poetry expresses yearning for the transcendental.' Here, a baby cried. 'Hello baby,' said Christina, 'I hope you're going to be quiet this afternoon.'

It wasn't, but this was for the best because poet Michael Donaghy (who actually knew the child in question), was talking about how 'language limits our experience of the world' and here was a tailor-made example.

Donaghy's speech was akin to listening to an infinite number of monkeys experiencing epiphany - on listening hard one gleaned some wonderful facts but struggled to make sense of the all, as it rolled restless and insecure around the brain. Until he read poetry, that is. First Andrew Marvell's, then his own; his voice slowing at last into the stillness of his own, remarkable poem *Pentecost*. 'Undaunted, we began to mewl and roar/As if desire had stripped itself of words.' Indeed. And the baby murmured and baahed in sympathetic rhythm throughout.

Lawrence Sail's talk on Emily Dickinson was more considered but no less brain-stretching. He made much of the quizzical, riddling nature of her poetry, with which, as co-editor of *The New Exeter Book of Riddles*, he cannot help but share an affinity.

In my ignorance I knew little of Marvell and only read Dickinson as a mourning teenager, so one might say that this review, to quote Sail's *Kaddish*, is '...the song of a song gone missing'. Thanks to this afternoon, I am at least prepared to get out and listen to that song again.

'It isn't perhaps surprising that we haven't managed to fit God into two neat 20 minute slots,' joked Patterson at the end. What was surprising is how much was stuffed into this dense, difficult and rewarding hour. It might take time to unscramble, but, as Dickinson said in a letter, 'Nothing is worse than yesterday's riddle to which you know the answer.'