



LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

Issue 1 • FREE • edited by Stet Press • Saturday October 12 2002

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

•
Eric Hobsbawm

Town Hall

2 - 3pm

•
Terry Eagleton

Everyman

4 - 5pm

•
Germaine Greer

Town Hall

8.45 - 10pm

•
Pick of the Slam Mix

Suffolk Arms

8.30pm onwards

Monty's affable Desert Rat

By NIC WALENTOWICZ

A photographic image of Michael Palin, dwarfed by the sand seas of the Sahara, and miles away from any other human being (except, presumably, the photographer), greeted the audience in Cheltenham Town Hall as they awaited his arrival.

This solitary and timeless image seemed a far cry and a world away from an early Friday evening in autumnal Gloucestershire and it was difficult to tell - given Mr Palin's low-key entrance and apparently self-effacing demeanour - which of these scenarios he would have preferred this evening.

Yet, after stoically enduring a suitably embarrassing introduction ("Ladies and Gentleman, I would like to introduce a man who needs no introduction...") he launched enthusiastically into a slide show of his holiday snaps.

It can surely be no surprise that the

BBC launches his new series, *Sahara*, on Sunday next and the cynics amongst us may be wondering whether the literary value of his latest offering merits inclusion in such august surroundings. However, his snapshots are interesting, at times illu-

minating and always accompanied by a suitably entertaining commentary.

Mr Palin's awareness of the need to entertain was never far from the surface, and a veiled reference to a famous Monty Python sketch about a deliberately misleading foreign phrase-book reminded us of his comedy roots. A serious literary occasion this evening's event was not, but as a seventy-five minute promo - complete with Power Point presentation - for a television programme with which the BBC hopes to woo us this Autumn, it was entertaining enough.

Michael Palin comes across in the flesh exactly as he does on the television: affable, erudite and engaging. Whether his journey around the Sahara will give anyone a deep insight into the human condition is debatable, but, should his writing appeal to an audience who might otherwise not dream of reading a book, then the literary merit of this evening's entertainment will not have been lost.



A novel ambition

By DANIEL HAHN

AS Byatt and Philip Hensher are, we're told, united by their high ambition for what the novel can be. One wouldn't quite know this from the passages each read - Byatt from her *Whistling Woman*, Hensher from his inadvertently topical *Mulberry Empire* (about the British in Afghanistan, last time around). Winning, certainly, and shrewd-witted; but ambitious?

The greater and more surprising satisfaction came in the ensuing discussion, which largely concerned the often uncomfortable relations between truth and lies, non-fiction

and fiction. How can one use history in a novel? Are there boundaries which mustn't be crossed? Can fiction have an impact on the real world just as it's inspired by it?

Answers were sought to these questions (fortunately nobody claimed actually to have found any)

with great humour and, perhaps unusually, with a sense that thoughts were being developed as we watched - none of the pre-prepared treatises these discussions so often provoke.

Byatt described *Whistling Woman* as being 'about too much, really'; the same could, perhaps, be said about the discussion, but there at least there was no doubting their ambition.



Scientists and bookworms

By JON ANDRIESEN

Science has a lot to answer for, but does it have any answers? Judging by the Institute of Ideas' first debate, What is it to be Human? well maybe, perhaps. An eager audience trundled in expecting a truth, a concrete meaning, expecting their lives to be somehow changed forever by the event, but would this be the case?

With three scientists and a token novelist, the debate was never really going to get to grips with the question, or indeed approach the subject as anything more than an object. Where was the creative passion, the search for essence and meaning? We were, for the largest part, a mass of genes, a mess of memes or simply 'moral agents'.



For novelist Maggie Gee, 'we are just animals, but animals have culture and selves as well'. She urged us to empathise with all life, but especially, it seems, worms, 'because they are interesting too'. Scientist Kenan Malik responded: "When worms have discussions about whether humans are interesting, I'll agree with you." Do you think they get out much?

Night of the Hunter

BY HELEN WILLIAMS

The 8th UK Allcomers Poetry Slam qualifiers met some tough competition at St James' Hotel yesterday afternoon. Poets from all over the country - and even from Australia and the USA - performed to an eager audience in the cosy surroundings of the hotel's public bar.

Twenty-five qualifiers then moved on to the main gig at the Town Hall; an exciting evening filled with cultural variety and inspirational talent.

Congratulations must go to Peter Hunter, who was this year's overall Slam winner. Hunter's work spawned howls of laughter from the audience as he tickled their senses



with his hilarious poems. In a deep snarling voice he revealed his alter ego, a virtual character called Daphne who he becomes whilst surfing through cyberspace. The words "I love it when I'm Daphne - I'm small light and sweet." slipped humorously from a character who is so large and gruff.

Returning hosts Marcus Moore and Sara-Jane Arbury carried the audience through the evening's event with amazing energy and enthusiasm. Mr and Mrs Albon - returning for their 8th event - said: "We take our hats off to Sara-Jane and Marcus because they do their job so well; they're the reason we come back year after year."

Enemies at the gate

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Best-selling military historian Antony Beevor, whose book on Stalingrad inspired the film *Enemy at the Gates*, gave a fascinating talk on his latest book - *Berlin: the Downfall* - and the horrors it revealed in the Town Hall yesterday.

Delivered in dry style, the talk touched on atrocities committed by both the Red Army and the Nazis as they closed in on each other in early 1945. Either side damaged and debilitated their own people: the Nazis leaving Prussian refugees to die in trains 'like concentration camp victims'; the Red Army drunkenly raping its own liberated women.

It was depressing to hear that Russia's new secret service is as restrictive as the KGB: "It says a lot that

there are computers to track foreign researchers but no money to computerise the actual archive," said Beevor. He also stated that 'no country has done more to face up to its past than Germany' but that 'Soviet victory in 1945 made it harder for the people to assess the horrors of Stalinism'.



Beevor finished with a stark warning regarding the European Union: "The Cold War was like a straightjacket on old ethnic resentments. Gunther Grass is correct; if you try to suppress these resentments - still around from the last days of the Second World War - you only make them worse."

This was a salutary, if rather glum, look at the moral abnegation of people before, during and after war. It was depressingly apposite given the world's current political climate.

Competition

BY STET PRESS

Literally Speaking is proud to launch The Cheltenham Personified Poetry Competition.

The competition is inspired by this year's Festival theme, 'What does it mean to be human?' and aims to induce the very best examples of personification in poetic form.

Simply put, we want human characteristics applied to non-human subjects in poems of 12 lines or less.

The winner and four runners-up will each receive a book donated by Hammicks Bookshops and the winning poem will be published in *Literally Speaking*.

Please send all entries and your contact details to: The Cheltenham Personified Poetry Competition, Literally Speaking, c/o Cheltenham Town Hall, Imperial Square, Cheltenham, GL50 1QA, or email them to stetpress@hotmail.com by Wednesday 16th October 2002.

A full list of the rules is also available from stetpress@hotmail.com. Please put the word 'Rules' in the subject line. Get writing and good luck!

Get your teenage kicks

BY KATHRYN HARPER

Bold writing which takes on 'taboos' such as teenage sexuality, homosexuality, child abuse and heroin addiction does not conjure up the usual images of 'children's literature' but that is exactly what this discussion was about - challenging stereotypes and preconceptions. One could not have chosen three better writers to open up the debate.

Melvin Burgess, author of *Lady, My Life as a Bitch* and Paul Magrs, author of *Strange Boy* were joined by Australian author Sonya Hartnett in a frank debate on what is increasingly called 'cross-over fiction' (fiction which can be read and enjoyed by 'kids' of all ages).

Hard-hitting fiction for a teenage-plus market is perceived as a relatively recent trend. Melvin Burgess was considered a ground-breaking author of this genre with his book *Junk*, a tale

of teenage heroin addicts. In Australia, Sonya Hartnett's books have long been controversial (unfortunately only one has been published here). It is highly unlikely that Paul Magrs' warm and frank book about a young boy and his homo-erotic action men will make it to the school reading lists.

However, as Sonya Hartnett pointed out, what are considered taboo-breaking issue books for teens here have actually been fairly common for some time in countries like Australia. After a while, the labels fall and the books can be seen on their own merits as works of fiction. The authors talked about the need to free Teen (sorry, cross-over) fiction from imposing moral values and happy endings.

However, having today won the prestigious Guardian Children's Prize for *Thursday's Child*, perhaps Sonya Hartnett is getting her own happy ending.



The Stoat

Memes, those little 'replicators of cultural transmission', espoused by the great Richard Dawkins, have been causing a stir at the Festival. In the interests of science & literature, we just had to pass them on.

'Memes have had no effect on the scientific community,' Professor Steve Jones told author of *The Meme Machine*, Susan Blackmore. 'So who's being stupid, me or you?' The Prof also admitted, one of his more fascinating habits was 'annoying Richard Dawkins'.

THE TEAM

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