

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

**Blake Morrison,  
Diran Adebayo,  
Patrick Neate  
& Fred D'Aguiar**

Town Hall 2.30 - 3.30pm

**Lavinia Greenlaw &  
Don Paterson**

Town Hall 4 - 5pm

**Jeremy Bowen**

Everyman 8.45 - 10pm

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## Estelle: art for our sake

By MARILYN HAMMICK

An audience of mostly women, with a sprinkling of youthful faces, nearly filled the Pillar Room for a keynote address on culture and creativity by Estelle Morris, the Arts Minister. She warmed up the audience with her homework on the origins of the Festival, shared her memories of Cheltenham and recalled speeches made here at key times in her political life.

Ms Morris admitted that changing from being a consumer of the arts to the minister involved learning a lot. She refrained from the celebratory speech she warned us she could have given, but we were made well aware of how good she thinks it all is at the moment. Classic FM, The Last Night of the Proms and Harry Potter got a mention at that point.

Instead, she explained her role: to build and argue the case for the arts and culture. What followed exemplified the difficulties of doing just this. Her arguments - about

excellence and access - were given after a somewhat anticipatory Sunday paper article. Her setting the record straight required several leaps of faith.



Excellence, not to be confused with elitism, is there to be unashamedly admired, but it will not necessarily always be rewarded. Neither is access a matter of just keeping the door open. Rather, it is

equipping children with the skills and confidence to go in - surely a reflective glance back at her former responsibilities.

And why would they want to go in the door? What can the arts, culture and creativity offer them and what can they do for our nation's well-being? Here, the Minister had three points to make. Unsurprisingly, they are for pleasure, providing a refuge from the rest of life. Secondly, they offer a contribution to the economy. Finally, they are the driving force for the 21st Century. As technology and a culture of measurement drove the 20th Century, creativity and innovation will drive future economic growth and make a difference to public service reform. Meanwhile, perhaps anticipating the challenges in making a convincing case for the arts, culture and creativity to her Cabinet colleagues, she advised that we buy a lottery ticket. And, as the applause faded, someone murmured: 'Still got to have the bring-and-buy, then.'

## Culture in conflict

By AVRIL STAPLE

Dan Cruickshank, the distinguished architectural historian, left safety and journeyed into danger to find out what happened to the treasures in Afghanistan as a consequence of human conflict.

15,000 years ago, Mesopotamia was the crossroads of the world, where the wheel was invented and theories on mathematics and theology moulded, resulting in a meeting of religious cultures. Sadly, owing to the systematic destruction of personifications of Buddha (described by the fundamentalist Islamic Taliban as idolatrous) and the tragic looting of the Kabal Museum including artefacts from the 1st century, much has been lost.

Cruickshank wanted to know what it meant to the ordinary people; if they felt a loss of national identity and pride. What he discovered was an astonishing respect for these artefacts.

Whilst being shown fragments of a sev-

enth Century BC city wall, buried where tanks had rolled over, he met with armed soldiers. 'I didn't know whose side they were on', he joked.

He showed slides of a 2,000 year-old circular temple - 'an adaptation of Roman style' - featuring a green man, a camel and a family with horns (a sign of divinity). He also showed a Buddhist monastery built into cliffs, designed and painted in a Classical Greek style, now inhabited by refugees. The huge Buddhas, set into niches, were sadly demolished. Cruickshank assures us that the Buddhist pillar, Minar-j-Chakri, something Byron once described as a 'monstrous flaccid bulk', could be rebuilt. But there is no money in a country still recovering from a devastating war.

Cruickshank spoke quickly and with obvious passion, but remains pessimistic. He plans to go there again next year, but says he doesn't know how much will still be intact.



## Reaping the whirlwind

By ADAM HOROVITZ

What a thoroughly depressing thing it is to analyse the conflict in the Middle East. As a full Pillar Room found out yesterday. Its (very recent) past, poured over by John Key in his new book, *Sowing the Wind*, was a Western creation born out of the pulling apart of the Ottoman Empire post-WWI: 'We are reaping the whirlwind now,' he told us.

The present is no less pleasant, born of the modernist, technology-driven West repeating its mistakes by trying to impose personal systems of democracy. John Gray, whose new book, *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern*, is equally damning of the current situation.

Both men agreed that what has been missing is a sense of history and of perspective. 'Democracy is not necessarily the solution for all countries,' said Key. 'Is any system that throws up George Bush, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ariel Sharon really such a great system?'

On the future for Iraq, Gray is pes-

simistic; actually, he was thoroughly pessimistic throughout the discussion. He foresaw a time when America must, of necessity, retreat and suggested that the most pressing problem might be how one deals with a humiliated USA. It may be that the situation there will negate the apparent need for further conflict, but 'anyone who has studied history will know that the maddest things do happen.'

Gray considers Al Qaeda a most modern animal: 'Some of its phraseology comes from 19th Century European anarchism - it has much in common with the Bader-Meinhof gang.' Tellingly, he also pointed out that that most modern of societies, America, has one of the largest fundamentalist groups in the world: the Christian Right.

There was one note of hope in this otherwise rather unremitting discussion, however: 'No doubt humanity will come up with some new system we don't even know about yet,' said Gray. It is only to be hoped that he is right. Of course, only history can tell.





## It's a writer's life for me...

BY PETER WYTON

Put three novelists on a stage to talk about their work and, in my experience, the chances are you will end up with more information than you want from one dominant individual and far too little from the subservient other two.

At Art on the Page, nothing of the sort was evident, in part due to the unobtrusively expert prompting and guidance of Stephen Gale. Additionally, Tracy Chevalier, Julia Blackburn and Christopher Peachment had gone to the trouble of reading each others' work, including the actual novels being profiled. This relaxed atmosphere led to some fascinating insights into the mind of the historical novelist.

There was general agreement, for instance, that in choosing the central character for a novel it is always best to choose someone whose life and career have been imperfectly documented. This allows the author much greater scope for filling in the gaps with situations and characteristics of his or her own creation. My only previous guidelines on translating work on canvas to the creative page came from Graham Mort, the contemporary poet who has made this a specialist subject.

Following his guidelines, together with the information I gleaned today, I confidently expect my own first novel, should I ever get around to writing one, will be about Villon, as obscure a versifier as you could meet in a long day's march. I pricked up my ears for further hints regarding a career in prose.

Chevalier describes the daily chore of writing as being akin to running. 'You feel terrible for the first ten minutes,' she says, 'then it gets better and afterwards you feel great.' Peachment recommends the 'deathbed confession' as a perfect approach for retelling the lurid details of a misspent life.

Blackburn's hook on which to hang the thread of her intimate study of Goya's later years turned out to be his deafness. All three, not unnaturally, I dare say, expressed a definite preference for the past, as opposed to the present, as the setting for their work. All in all, Art on the Page turned out to be an educative turning-point, as far as I'm concerned. I'm abandoning poesy as my preferred route to fame and fortune.

Here goes: 'It was a warm afternoon in Paris. A drunken poet-priest was eyeing up some very tasty nuns...'

## Postprandial patter

By JON ANDRIESSEN

Judging by the bulging audience at the Town Hall yesterday, the propensity for after dinner speaking is extremely high in Cheltenham, but whether this is purely a love of the art form, or a British inability to converse, was something we were unable to confirm.

Multifaceted Miles Kington joined golden Oldie Richard Ingrams in an attempt to define 'just what makes a great after dinner speech.' Since they'd both experienced the blunt and sharp edges of postprandial articulation, we were sure to



be in good hands; although Kington felt it necessary to lay down the caveat, 'we are not great speakers; they only turn up for a few grand.'

Tim Heald, trying his best to chair the debate, was desperate to discover what the secret ingredients of this challenging trade are, but despite their examination of jokes, strange stories and amazing, idiosyncratic, oratorical acts, they were unable to conclude anything more than the fact it

'helps when the audience is drunk.'

It seems that every successful speaker has his or her own particular talent, whether it's John Mortimer's long and laconic tales of absurdity, Colin Dexter's strange ability to remain mirth-free yet funny, or Giles Brandreth and his 'little something' that no-one seemed able, or overly bothered, to try to explain.

Kington recalled an infamous *Private Eye* after dinner speech by the late Peter Cook, which everyone present agreed was the funniest thing they'd ever heard; 'only nobody could remember a single thing

he said.'

The one thing they could all agree on was never to book celebrities. You see, it's not about who you are but what you have to say.

So that's it, the hidden element, the arcane truth: the secret of a good speech is all of the above and none of it, then something else again. Some things - the best things - defy explanation. And perhaps that's why we like them.

## A couple of Celtic beltlers

By EMILY KOCH

Poetry is not simply 'self-delighting', Bernard O'Donoghue mused yesterday. If in possession of lyrical talent, one can and should 'repay debt to the community' by means such as the elegiac reflections which O'Donoghue is renowned for.

O'Donoghue, author of a recent collection entitled *Outliving* and one of Ireland's premium poets, was joined by fellow Celt Robert Crawford, who uses verse to celebrate his native Scotland in his latest collection *The Tip of My Tongue*. Softly spoken O'Donoghue read a selection of emotive and unpretentious pieces, which revealed adroit precision and touching consideration. His calming Irish tones brought us poetry accompanied by brief anecdotal explanation.

Crawford is a considerably different individual. A member of the audience observed that in poetic style, O'Donoghue was like a photographer, on the sidelines observing the action, whereas Crawford could be compared to a



musician or a performer. I couldn't agree more - indeed I felt that in front of a slightly different audience, Crawford would easily be able to step out from behind the lectern and deliver his alliteration-littered verse with the engagement and energy of a poetry slammer.

Until recently, Crawford has actively avoided rhyme for fear of anything remotely reminiscent of radio jingles, but he admitted that when one takes such a stance,

'something evil in you wants to do a back flip'. His poems often twist with wit in their last lines, and show virtuosic command of rhythm and newly-adopted rhyme. His style is dramatic rather than colloquial and it could be this that led the event's host, Don Paterson, to remark that it seems Crawford, in his work, 'is attempting to make things strange again' - that is, to make Scotland 'strange again' in order to consider it differently.

The Scot and the Irishman were entirely different in personality and poetry yet pleasingly complementary. It was interesting to see that the Celtic culture is as diverse as any other.



*Banging on: Young drummers were telling rhythmic tales with their hands in a booming excellent Book It! event in the Waitrose Reading Room yesterday afternoon.*

## The Stoat

According to Richard Ingrams yesterday, 'Clement Freud was sacked from Radio 4's *The News Quiz* for cheating with crib sheets.' Is nothing sacred?

Miles Kington revealed that he was once asked to perform an after dinner speech 'for seventeen minutes and thirty seconds exactly.' It appears there was a sweepstake and the organiser wasn't about to hedge his bets.

John Gray on selective memory: 'I have a feeling that, for Blair, history began in 1993. Before that, nothing. Not even Labour history.'

### THE TEAM

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