

LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

Martha Gellhorn

Everyman 4 - 5pm

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Staying Alive

Town Hall 4 - 5pm

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Time Travel

Town Hall 7.30 - 8.30pm

•
Winston Churchill

Everyman 8.45 - 10pm

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Julian Barnes: booking cooks

By ROBERT MORELAND

Julian Barnes has been unlucky. He has 'missed out' as a Booker Prize-winner for *Flaubert's Parrot* (he prefers to say he was 'runner up'). However there is widespread agreement that books such as *Metroland* and *England England* (and not forgetting his regular newspaper articles) are models of the best of the English language today.

At the Festival, his main task was to talk about his new book *The Pedant in the Kitchen* which demonstrates a combination of his talents as a writer and his knowledge of cooking (as shown in his regular Guardian writings on the subject).

His model was Elisabeth

David, whose name has already been mentioned with praise in other talks at the Festival. She certainly was a model of

clear writing and expression and possessed a superb knowledge of cooking. His pet hate is the cook who does not use precise language, preferring words such as 'melt' as expressions of action in the frying pan (do onions really melt?). Of current cooks he had a particularly good word for Jane Grigson. He believes a successful Italian recipe is one that leads to a meal that not only tastes

Italian but also tastes as if it had been made in Italy.

Julian Barnes is a man of many parts. He told the audience he has recently been a judge for a national architecture competition and gave some thought on what is good architecture. He showed insight into the merits and demerits of Britain's role in Europe, citing his original support for the idealism of the European venture and his concern that Europe has become too much a businessman's tool. He has written about a wide variety of events including the downfall of Mrs Thatcher in 1990. Unlike her, he declared a great interest in France, acknowledging its strengths and weaknesses (not surprisingly cooking is one of its great strengths). He also covered such topics as New York, the benefits of alternative endings for books (on which he is sceptical), the 'free market' and the 'Cripps/Attlee post-war policy' (which he admires). Truly a Renaissance man.



A curious humour

By ADAM HOROVITZ

In Mark Haddon and Douglas Kennedy's gratifyingly unrevealing talk about their new books yesterday, much was made of the idea that black humour is something missing from our lives. Both deal with subjects usually condemned to severe worthiness in print – Asperger's syndrome in Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and clinical post-natal depression in Kennedy's *A Special Relationship*.

Both books deal with painful things, but the authors have brought in humour to leaven matters and it became apparent in their talk that this dark wit is the stuff of their daily lives.

Haddon remembered laughing at the opening of his book – where a dog is impaled on a garden fork – but only once he'd found his character's voice and it was this dark laughter that propelled his writing. He acknowledged that the flatness



lent to the text by this character's condition left the novel's events open to interpretation – he recalled an Australian journalist, to whom he had mentioned the humour in the novel, berating him with: 'Whaddaya mean, FUNNY BITS? I wept

the whole way through!'

Kennedy, asked how he felt about the stigmatisation of such illnesses, was equally mordant; 'Stigmatisations? In real life they're ugly,' he said. 'But in fiction they're brilliant!'

We all like the nightmares of others.'

Both Haddon and Kennedy are clearly writers who engage the world in an inspiringly off-the-wall fashion, both in fiction and in real life, and both seem to have found their way into very interesting, very other, states of mind. It's a shame they were stymied by the surprise endings in their books, but both let out enough to encourage someone who had known nothing of their works to go and find out more about them.

An Amazonian adventure

By AVRIL STAPLE

The sun streaming through the glass roof of the Storyteller restaurant, onto chilli red and Mediterranean blue walls, all created a perfect backdrop for stand-up storyteller Peter Searles' *Adventures in Peru*.

Peter set off in 1987 to Peru with no set plans. He bought the cheapest ticket, which was his first mistake. His luggage went missing. Three days later and still no sign of the lost luggage he protested by taking off his clothes in the airport. He was then befriended by a stallholder who turned out to be a member of the revolutionary Shining Path.

Peter delivered his performance with energy and enthusiasm. Vividly illustrating the many characters he met on his journey with accents and energetic

impressions, and slipping into Spanish regularly, he even gave a Spanish rendition of *Macbeth*.

He told strange tales of a man using a false limb to traffick drugs, of a French shaman and German filmmaker, amongst others.

His first night in the Amazonian jungle was unwittingly spent sleeping in a public toilet surrounded by centipedes a foot long and beetles the size of a fist. He encountered rapids with a life-jacket that promptly sank, he almost got talked into wrestling with a crocodile and contracted amoebic dysentery. But amidst these hilarious and graphically-told tales, he spoke about his visit to a Peruvian prison where he witnessed evidence of torture, starvation and ill treatment.

This was only the first part of a long tale that he will be performing around the country. I look forward to hearing the next instalment.





Heavyweights

BY PETER WYTON

If Isaac Newton had been a boxer, he'd have died punch-drunk. Most of his adult life was a series of heavyweight encounters with contemporaries in the many fields which engaged his interest. Amongst the most serious contenders were Robert Hooke, Samuel Pepys and the entire circle of English Jesuits at Liege, but the Newtonian fists rained uppercuts of plagiarism, left and right jabs of professional jealousy and rabbit-punches of combative intellectualism on fellow members of the Royal Society and outsiders indiscriminately.

This grown-up belligerence contrasts sharply with the reclusive, bookish nature of Newton's early days at Cambridge. When he received his Bachelor's degree in April 1665 Newton had, in the course of his studies, discovered the binomial theorem, developed calculus, mastered and taken into new territory a wide range of mathematical techniques and laid the foundations for those who picked up his torch in subsequent centuries.

Mexicana

BY EMILY KOCH

Meaghan Delahunt and Robert Newman yesterday unassumingly discussed their most recent novels, both set partly in Mexico. Delahunt revealed that she was surprised to hear so much Spanish being spoken when she visited the Spanish-speaking nation - she had expected Mexico to be very American but in fact it makes few concessions to the English language. When the Mexican populace was described as 'without optimism', Newman was defensive - 'It's actually very rare to find people without any optimism. Except maybe in Swindon.' When Mexico was referred to as a 'magical place' Newman insisted that it wasn't actually much different to 'here' - full of 'hip-hop and protests over tuition fees'

They are both apparently happy with their novels: Delahunt is 'as pleased as you can be pleased with something. Which is always a little displeased' and Newman, though denying any narcissism, enjoys reading *The Fountain at the Centre of the World* and making mental notes to recommend this fantastic book to his friends.

Newman clearly had a lot in, and on, his mind - unfortunately he could only share a selection of his thoughts; Delahunt seems to be a bright fresh voice to anticipate more from after this, her first novel.

Send in the clowns

BY KATHRYN HARPER

If tales of tiger dung weren't temptation enough, then Mexican trapeze artists and an elephant named Flora couldn't fail to captivate. And Shazaam! off to the circus - sorry Jim Thompson's - we were swept by Katie Hickman, ringmaster Gerald Balding and a skeleton named Bill. Bill remained fairly enigmatic throughout the course of the discussion, but with first-hand experience of the circus, both Katie and Gerald managed to fill the void.

Landing one of those dream contracts which only other people ever sign, Katie Hickman really did run off to live with a circus - a Mexican one. This became a book, not surprisingly entitled *Travels with a Circus*. To prevent her from idling her time away writing, the Circo de Bells immediately pressed her into service. Proving not particularly gifted at 'aerial



ballet' she was relegated to riding an elephant in fishnet tights and a skimpy spangly outfit - what more could a girl want?

'The vast majority of wire-walkers in the States are born-again Christians,' was one of the many gems of information provided by Gerald Balding. Currently working with the wonderful Gifford's circus, Gerald lived and worked in the Circus Flora in the States for ten years. He bulked out the discussion with facts about the history of the circus and reflections on its current state - as well as giving us a demonstration on the inner workings of Bill. He replaced Nell Stroud who wrote *Who was Philip Astley?* - a book about the origins of the modern circus.

I can't really think of a better way to spend a Sunday morning. When it was over, I overheard heard a group of teenage boys - they said it was the best thing they'd seen. Now that must be magic...

Sayle of the century

BY EWAN JONES

Hold a deep malice against seemingly random objects and you're probably a neurotic. Do it with a cheeky grin and spiky beard, however, and you're endearing. Ben Elton and Bernard Manning, insurance policies and circus acts; these are a few of Alexei's least favourite things.

The Festival has become something of a stomping ground for Sayle, and the benefit of time that his veteran status allows has shown a man mellowing considerably. Gone is the effing, blinding, garrulous stand-up of yore. In his place is a nuanced and erudite humourist, whose satire tickles lightly rather than smashing you in the face. His latest prose collection, *Overtaken*, betrays an unexpected warmth of sentiment and generosity.

You can't keep a mad dog down, of course, and something of the old Sayle persona can't help creeping out. He side-steps the lectern to address the audience directly, and for a moment we're transported back in time: bulging eyes; contorting limbs, his crude tongue let off the leash. Even when reading, Sayle can't resist



a deviation. The most successful moments of the evening come when he uses his written humour as a launch-pad for those typically acerbic flights of fancy. You sense that on some level Sayle realises this; there are times when his fiction misses the rich spontaneity that stand-up provides.

Nevertheless, the printed word seems to be where he feels happiest, and most fulfilled. He gives us a self-reflective insight on the nature of the comic, deriding Manning and others for their 'misanthropy'. But he also cancels out much of the boorishness that can creep into an expressly literary context.

To this end Sayle keeps the evening light. And it wouldn't be complete without a few gems. He imagines making Osama Bin Laden see the error of his ways through open and informed debate ('Yes! What was I thinking?' will apparently be Osama's reply). His past fondness for expletives is memorably explained away through 'Tourette's Syndrome.' Humour exists for forced and unusual contrasts, and if Sayle's conflation of the literary and the comic makes for less abrasive fare than we're used to, that's not to say it's any the less relevant.

Lay back

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Laid-back and lyrical the poster said, and laid-back and lyrical this voices off night at The Playhouse was.

First up Dale Campbell, an idiosyncratic oddity of guitaring excellence unsurpassed. Strumming, tapping, fretting and dancing, Dale manages to make a single instrument hum, sing and drum like a magic, melodious orchestra.

Parm Kaur regaled us with poems spanning geo-cultural explorations, cosmology and time, with sure-fire vitality and charm, ably assisted by tabla maestro Sirishkumar. One time 'Fire Poet' Philip Wells was next up, accompanied by the dark and seductive sounds of the Inklin Quartet. Wells has come a long way since his slam-jockey days, with a depth and humility of performance which managed moments of poignancy and humour.

Finally, guitarist and singer Amy Wadge lifted the house with both high and low octane acoustic verve to send festival swingers swaggering home in anticipation of the week ahead.

The Stoat

'I do maths to relax,' asserted *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* author Mark Haddon yesterday. 'I often find myself in a prime number space.' But does it beat playing with your slide rule in the bath?



An unnamed volunteer is said to have met Robert Newman at Cheltenham Railway Station with the immortal greeting: 'I'm afraid you're not on my list. Could you get a bus?'

Perhaps Newman should start referring to his glory days on the comedy circuit a little more often.

THE TEAM

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