

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

Issue 2 • FREE

www.stetpress.co.uk

Sunday 12 October 2003

## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

### Partners in Crime

Town Hall

11.30am - 10.30pm

### Julian Barnes

Town Hall 2 - 3pm

### Laid-back and Lyrical

The Playhouse

7.30 - 10.30pm

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## Blair under surgeon's knife

By PETER WYTON

Stanley Baldwin, surveying the massed ranks of the newly elected House of Commons following the Conflict to End All Conflicts in 1918 saw only 'A lot of hard-faced men who looked as though they had done very well out of the war.'

The pundits assembled on stage for the Blair At War event certainly looked as though they had made a few bob out of Iraq Mark Two, but to call them 'hard-faced' would be an injustice. They resembled - if anything as they crowded round the hypothetical form of our Prime Minister (the corporeal reality being unavailable) - a team of highly-qualified surgeons conducting the first vivisection ever staged at a literary festival.

Furthermore, it was a more humane operation than might have been expected, following the uncompromising protest notice at the Town Hall entrance which



bellowed 'NO MORE LIES, BLAIR'.

According to Doctors Stothard, Kampfner, Naughtie and Clarke, their incisions into the vital organs of the Right Dishonourable Member for Sedgefield revealed that Tony was suffering from severely inflated hubris, malignant naivety and a lamentable amount of good intentions. The word 'messianic' occurred on several occasions, but this particular piece of gizzard was stuffed away hastily, in case any of the audience were grossed out. As it happens, the bulk of the audience

appeared to be made of sterner stuff than the medical team. I had the distinct impression that most of them wanted their leader's guts fished out by the hand-ful and thrown to them for raw consumption.

A woman behind me was muttering 'Bush's Poodle' like a mantra more or less continuously for the entire hour, but the experts were having none of it. The parliamentary patient, they seemed to suggest, had every chance of making a full recovery and if he didn't - well, there were plenty more political corpses where he came from. Of the anecdotes on offer - and there were many - the best concerned the Great Satan and President of the USA who was asked, during his presidential team, to sum up the difference between him and Al Gore. After some thought, he leaned towards the camera and snarled 'STRATAGERY'. I heard that at the Cheltenham Festival, so it must be true.

## Wish you were here...

By TOM BURGIS

The Drawing Room hosted a world premiere yesterday as Tobias Hill and Mauricio Montiel, Mexico's darkly comic prose master, read for the first time the material they penned as part of the Across Continents experiment. As its name suggests, the programme entails the flinging of established writers into the depths of foreign parts, there to write without the safety nets of familiar studios, libraries and cosily preconceived ideas.

Tobias Hill, erstwhile poet-in-residence at London Zoo, travelled to Cancun, an 'artificial, unreal' city lost in the Mexican clouds. There he feasted on beetles, watched the WTO meeting descend into squabbling, and conceived the tale of *Aura*, a Mexican Cinderella who works on Cancun's bizarre hotel strip; a 'fantasy zone' where mock pyramids and faux jungle ruins have been erected to house the



sojourners from north of the border. 'Tourists,' observes Aura's colleague, 'are like thieves who rob your house and then shit on the floor'. Hill's eye for an image, even far from home, is brilliant.

Mauricio Montiel arrived in England 'completely naked.' Initially at a loss, he almost embarked on 'A Mexican Werewolf in the Cotswolds.' In a London summer 'too hot, too irretrievable,' he looked skyward and wrote the story of

Frank, a man for whom the chaos of the world is distilled into the wordless language of clouds on celluloid. The prose is, as ever, electric. 'Cameras, friends, women came and went, but the lens remained immobile.'

Over the coming week, at 3 o'clock on Radio 3, Montiel will read *The Cloud Collector* while Hill (Aura's seduction by her Prince Charming being too steamy for an afternoon audience) will read from his travel journals.

## A little trouble at Big Read

By EMILY KOCH

James Naughtie was joined by a 'cornucopia of talent and charm' in the form of Kate Adie, Tony Benn and Robert Harris in what promised to be a celebration of reading and what the book means to a reading individual - including a discussion of each of the speakers' favourite novels.

The audience of The BBC Big Read event did not get quite what they expected. We were informed that Benn's favourite novels are the Bible, a work by 'the last of the old testament prophets' Karl Marx, and that great piece of fictitious prose, the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Naughtie had his work cut out trying to keep the discussion even remotely linked to literature, as Adie and Benn got into heated debates over politics and anything and everything unliterary (including an enlightening argument over the difference between sound-bites and slogans). Benn revealed that he finds the oral tradition much more important than the



written word. As a butterfly crossed the stage and landed on Harris, Naughtie commented on an ancient theatrical superstition about such insect invasions - if it had anything to do with the gods conspiring against the chair of an event then at that point in time Naughtie was probably a very superstitious man.

This all made the event highly entertaining, with plenty of tangential anecdote. Benn, brought up on the Bible, reminisced on his first R.E. lesson. Miss Babcock told the class that 'God is angry' at which Benn stood up and put her right: 'No, you're quite wrong' he insisted, 'God is Love'.

Harris eventually brought the conversation back to books, declaring that Orwell is 'the proof of the power of literature' - had he written essays (his usual medium) about Big Brother we wouldn't be talking about him today: it is the characters that make it unforgettable. 'Nothing's replacing the book,' said Harris, 'not even films. Which is great news. Especially for authors.' What isn't such great news for authors is that an event dedicated to the novel often became an intellectual spat, albeit an amusing one.



## Parker knows

BY EWAN JONES

Alan Parker and Patrick McCabe convened yesterday to discuss the relationship between film and literature. Agreeing that the relationship was largely dysfunctional. Authors desire textual fidelity, film-makers hard cash. The author elaborates, whereas film-makers prune and excise.

Interestingly Parker, the prolific film-maker, has recently crossed the fence to write a novel of his own. Unsurprisingly, he was slightly coy, but the departure has proved ultimately liberating. An author is subject to 'that magical special effect, called the word.' McCabe, best known for *The Butcher Boy*, itself successfully transferred to film, spoke incisively on the epic potential of literature.

The acerbic cockney and the rum, cantankerous Irishman really clicked over filmic excess, and, most vehemently, the shallowness of the critic. And they agreed, of course, on the refuge offered by literature. In McCabe's phrase, 'Most of your life as a novelist is spent disguising your tracks.'

## Sex and death

BY JON ANDRIESEN

Patricia Duncker and Tibor Fischer, two of the country's most innovative and experimental writers, joined forces for a discussion of black comedy and the like yesterday, but were invariably drawn to a greater truth: 'most literature is really about sex and death.'

Just as well then that *Sex and Death* is the title of Duncker's new collection, seven tales accidentally inspired by the 'late night slasher movies' she watched during hot, sleepless nights in the South of France. Reading beautifully, Duncker portrayed a comic, sexual darkness, which seemed to reaffirm the *Emmanuelle* in Arkwright's Nurse Gladys.

Fischer is currently listed as 'cool' by those magazines that feel they need to impart such knowledge. He certainly has an ability to touch on subjects à la mode, from female computer game designers to guns and exploding helicopters, but much more than this he's inventive, entertaining and prepared to take knife fighting lessons for character research. Now that is cool.

You might think that these writers had little in common, but they drew on each other, juggled ideas and pulled in the audience until I began to feel they'd melded into some new gestalt super-writer, ready to take on the literary world.

## Pullman coaches

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Philip Pullman really is one of those people one would love to have had as a schoolteacher - he exudes passion for ideas and stories from every pore and particle of his being. Far from being the rather dusty character one expects of writers of children's fiction, he is an engaged and vigorous man right down to his (rather funky) British racing green socks.

He is clearly in love with the benign power that storytelling offers - he started a number of his books as plays at the school he worked in: 'When you do a play at school you have more power than anyone,' he said with a gentle smile.

Not that his most famous books - the trilogy *His Dark Materials* - were started that way. 'I didn't expect anyone would want to read them,' he said. 'I thought it would have eighty readers.'

Unsurprisingly, then, he was 'very flattered' when Nicholas Hytner wanted to make the trilogy into a play at the National Theatre this Christmas. 'I said thank you,' he recalls, pausing before

adding darkly that 'I wished him good luck.'

He believes that stories are 'more democratic than religion' although both start with the same imperative - the need to make sense and engage with the world around us - and he is caustic about CS Lewis' escapist drive in the Narnia books, where poor Susan essentially gets sent to hell for growing up.

He is equally caustic about the National Curriculum, which he sees as 'crushing imagination into a tiny cage'. Children 'need space and time' to imagine, he says. 'It's bloody stupid to make them conform.'

'Children are deprived of even the basic physical engagements with the world (nowadays),' he said. 'I would like every child to experience real dark and real silence... for the very best reasons we don't allow our children to take even the smallest risks.'

It is marvellous, then, that Pullman is here to offer children an intellectual, risky escape from the controlled escape mechanisms of PlayStation et al. Without doubt school-teaching's loss is literature's - and the world's - gain.



## A night in the slammer

BY HELEN WILLIAMS

'This is a cracking good evening' said Marcus Moore just before the interval of the 9th UK Allcomers Poetry Slam, and indeed it was. The adrenaline that swarmed the stage at this year's show was phenomenal, as 25 qualifiers performed an outstanding array of verse to an energetic audience of 400-odd Slam fans.

The qualifier at the Playhouse was dedicated to Joyce Bridle, an infamous and much-loved elderly contender who made herself known at the original 1995 slam. Apparently she heckled a poet for repetitively using four-letter words in their performance and then had to be 'told off' for eating sandwiches in the auditorium. Sadly Joyce died of cancer in August this year.

From Rachel Pantehnicon's *Elves on Shelves*, to the overall winner Jude

Simpson's comic illustration of her childhood sweet shop owner Lilly Grady, the humour displayed in this year's slam tickled the armpits of many (if only there was space to plug a few more!) Simpson is a truly professional slammer, who no doubt has many more successful gigs ahead of her. First stop is the Suffolk Arms this Friday.

Anti-war poems were a prominent part of the evening, with Bush and Blair being obvious targets. Adam Horovitz performed a dramatic and impactful poem about the Trojan War, which held strong resonance with the wars of today.

Overall, such poems left me feeling both depressed and uplifted but that is the power of the poetic voice - to evoke such mixed emotion.

So what is Slam? Last night, several poets attempted to define it but in the end, Slam is where you find it.



## Ignite the war?

BY TOM FLEMING

At yesterday's Cheltenham Lecture, Michael Ignatieff suggested to a packed Everyman that Britain and America were right to have gone to war, for humanitarian reasons. It is painful to watch politicians sitting on the fence over the Iraq issue, so it was refreshing to be reminded of Ignatieff's ability to present a strong argument whilst remaining open-minded and diplomatic.

He quickly got into his stride as a personable and wry speaker. The primary thrust of his argument - that potential, moral good can only be realised by very real power - underlaid his support of the invasion of Iraq. If it sounded like a 'might is right' credo, then he was happy to admit that a deteriorating situation in Iraq could well prove him wrong.

From the millions marching for peace to eloquent men such as Ignatieff celebrating the removal of Saddam as a human rights triumph, it seems that something has swung around, making the pro-war camp fashionable. An undismayed idealist and a realistic exponent of globalisation ('I'm an unapologetic believer in free markets; the problem is we don't have any'), he's also a convincing orator. If only Blair could have expressed himself with the same sophistication.

## The Stoa

Tibor Fischer talking about the cover of his latest novel, *Voyage to the End of My Room*: 'the publisher took five weeks coming up with a cover I didn't like, so I spent five minutes in the Erotic picture library in Waterstones Piccadilly and came up with the one we used.'

Philip Pullman in Ottakar's: 'Do I get a performers discount?'

### THE TEAM

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