

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

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## Quiet alchemy

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Clare Brown, until recently head of the Poetry Book Society, was joined by poets Sean O'Brien and Jamie McKendrick at the Town Hall yesterday for an edifying and quietly electrifying reading, followed by a discussion on the meanings and motivations of their poetry.

McKendrick, a wafer thin stripe of a man whose apparent nerves belie the assurance of his work, began with a reading from his latest collection, *Ink Stone*. His poems have a delicious quality of space when read aloud; on the page they are dense and beautiful, but let out into the air they bloom like ink in water. His poem 'Good Hedges', born of a surprising obsession with the gutter TV show *Neighbours from Hell* and personal experience is a fine example of the acuity of his language; 'Next he'll want the hedgehog's spikes filed down, the mole's claws bound up with green twine/ - already he's replaced his own hair with ginger nylon.'

O'Brien is an altogether different poet; his use of language is blunter though no less beautiful. Sometimes he can be dogmatic - most notably in 'The Thing', a witty poem about working in the theatre - but O'Brien leavens this with a dry humour, in person as much as in his verse. 'Theatre is a collaborative art,' he says, 'which means that someone else gets to dick about with your work.'

Both are translators: McKendrick gives his translations an airy touch, whilst O'Brien weighs in with a version of Canto III of *The Inferno*. He filled the room with dark and persistent images thrillingly littered with vernacular, describing Charon's eyes as 'Catherine wheels of flame'. Quizzed afterwards about what drove their writing, both agreed that it was place. It 'is at the root of language' said O'Brien. For McKenzie, place is 'a point of contact'.

What a pity, then, that so few turned out to share that contact, because those that were there could not help but have their perceptions of the world altered by the quiet alchemy of poetry.

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## Winston lose some

BY JON ANDRIESEN

No one doubts the excellent career of Robert Winston, a man who has reached an almost godlike status in the eyes of the many once childless couples he's assisted, but in spite of his finely-honed professionalism and charm, we didn't find out much about the brain.

Winston was in Cheltenham to promote the book of the TV series *The Human Mind* and he did this for a while, until breaking off into a justification of GM and genome research. He began by apologising for being 'only an amateur neurologist' which makes you wonder why the BBC didn't commission this ground-breaking series from someone with a little more knowledge of the subject. Perhaps that's the problem: people don't really want to know the facts, they prefer a fluffier, dumbed-down approach to anything more complicated than the National Lottery. And that's what we got:



that men have larger brains than women, 'which explains why women can't read maps', that sniffing t-shirts can help us find an ideal mate and how he was amazed to realise that even criminals share the 'ability to love.'

Winston is an accomplished speaker; he draws you in with a paternal air and learned expression, mixing fact with Winstonian supposition in the way a one-sided TV documentary could have you believing in aliens and crop circles. It's just that he's so revered we find we are forced to take everything at face value, even when he claims that scientists are not responsible for the way their discoveries are bastardised for the sake of western commerce.

It wasn't a bad talk - at times it was hugely entertaining - but like the TV show it left most people, seeking knowledge of that most elusive of organs, simply scratching their heads.

## Life on the waves

BY ALAN MADDRELL

'I don't like tears. But tears can water our spirit, our hope.' Xinran, for many years, ran a late-night Radio Nanjing show telling the stories of Chinese women denied full lives by enforced humility, lack of sex education, bereavement and a culture of emotional suppression. She finds solace in the UK's greater openness.

These stories - unearthed by good old-fashioned legwork and honest research - and published in *The Good Woman of China*, are intensely moving. When discussing her own childhood on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* she broke down into tears. The Everyman's rapt audience was never far from such a moment. Xinran is a passionate speaker on the great inequity between the liberated, educated cities of China and a countryside scarred by grind-



ing poverty and an almost unbelievable lack of education about life's basics.

Although the subject was ostensibly the intimacy afforded by radio, Jenni Murray and Xinran discussed, and gave touching examples of, the emotional ties that bind not only Chinese women but Western men. Without Murray's soothing, funny presence it is quite possible that the Everyman would need to launder its seats for sheer weight of tears. *Woman's Hour* has consistently been at the forefront of discussing taboo subjects since 1946 and Murray was a great counterpoint to Xinran. Warm and witty, she recounted her son's rebellion by demanding Princess shoes and how the show was the first for public discussion of the menopause.

This was a superbly programmed event, with Gillian Reynolds playing umpire between these kindred spirits from such different backgrounds. We left with the same daze you get from a Mass or a Greek tragedy - unmediated human experience is the most powerful intoxicant of all, save love.

## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

Patrick Leigh Fermor  
Town Hall 2.30 - 3.30pm

UA Fanthorpe &  
Hugo Williams  
Town Hall 4 - 5pm

Dear Diary  
Town Hall 7.30 - 8.30pm

Under Milk Wood  
Everyman 8.45 - 10.15pm

## Homer gain

BY CLAIRE TRACEY

'They arrive, they fight, then it's all over.' This is how Christopher Logue describes Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*. A rather flummoxed Alexander Niven, presenting 'Iliad Echoes' at the Town Hall last night, passed the question of the relevance of the epic poem to the poet Tom Paulin. Paulin - who had arrived armed with a large glass of wine - delved into his large pile of books and proceeded to give examples of *The Iliad's* inspiration to other writers, although his dour, introspective style made them difficult for the bemused audience to appreciate.

The three-way conversation digressed into a polite discussion on modern literature, war and heroism. After half an hour, the glazed audience was sharply awoken as the debate moved on to the state of the youth of today. Logue's statement that 'there are many stupid young people and I wouldn't bother with them' revealed the true hero of the evening, as Alastair Niven fought valiantly to return the discussion to its original theme.

The highlight of the event was undoubtedly Logue's reading from his books inspired by *The Iliad*. His gravelly voice enthralled the audience, who finally understood what this challenging evening had been all about.



## Cue gardeners

BY EMILY KOCH

In one of yesterday's garden-themed events, Diarmuid Gavin and Charles Jencks gave a very informative and impassioned insight into garden design. Horticultural heart-throb Gavin explained that he believed a contemporary garden 'should be of its time'. As a young man in Dublin he found little to inspire him: it seemed to him that although art and architecture reflected modern ideas, gardens did not. Even the design of sunglasses was more advanced than that of landscape: Gavin told how he bought a snazzy pair of shades ('I don't really know why,' he said, 'I can't wear them because they make me look like an ejjit') and wondered why the same progressiveness couldn't be accepted in gardening.

Jencks is the designer of one of Europe's most extraordinary landscapes, The Garden of Cosmic Speculation: a grand name that is certainly deserved by its physical embodiment, which the audience saw projected above him. The garden is in essence a representation of various aspects of the universe around us. In it, Jencks is 'using nature to speculate on Nature'. He explained part of the design process where he will sit down with a scientist colleague and sketch to try and come up with the metaphor behind a scientific concept; for example, exploring the Black Hole by trying to find the essence of the 'blackness' and 'holeness' of it.

Gavin agreed that, although not in exactly the same way, 'the natural world is the basis of everything' for him. Whenever he sees a 'natural' environment it makes him 'realise the arrogance of creating a garden.' However, he justifies his work well: 'I do whatever I want to do when creating a garden because I'm never going to recreate what the hell is out there in the natural world'. Gavin's journey to where he is now really began when someone told him that a garden he had designed was of Chelsea standard. He went to London and knocked on the door of the Royal Horticultural Society. This is simply not done - he was told to write in instead. Cue an 'outrageous letter' with claims such as his next project being a roof garden in Beirut ('it was in the news a lot at the time'). Eventually he succeeded, winning a Bronze Medal.

Both spoke with clarity and emotion about the work that they love. 'Gardens aren't divorced from everything else that's happening in life', Gavin said. The passion generated certainly brought these gardeners' ideas effectively into the lives of the audience.

## Freedom's cause

BY KATHRYN HARPER

Is it only 100 years since the founding of the Suffragette movement? How much have we progressed and how do you judge progress? What is its relevance today? Hold on, they only had an hour!

Jenni Murray, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Fran Abrams rolled up their sleeves and set to. And so, they started from the beginning. Fran Abrams, who documented the movement in *Freedom's Cause till Death*, eased us in with a twist. Women would probably have earned the vote without the Suffragettes she claimed, but what they did create was a precedent of protest within the political arena.

The Suffragette and Feminist movements have largely represented the views of middle class white women and ignored the needs of their Asian and Afro-Caribbean counterparts. With great agility,



Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, columnist and author of *Who Do You Think We Are?*, provided the cultural balancing act. She rounded off with a plea for a true world history with different groups feeding into it as opposed to separate histories for women, black and Asian people, as if they have no influence on each other.

In fine form, Jenni Murray took up the bat for the gender question. Her recent book, *That's My Boy*, provides a timely defence of boys in the midst of a radically altering gender landscape.

Unfortunately the clock ran out before they could draw any real conclusions. Perhaps that could have come from the make-up of the audience itself: a highly-educated, mainly white, female, middle class group still able to talk ideas, walk about and express themselves with relative freedom. Could this be cause for muted celebration? Cheers!

## Novel history

BY REBEKAH CANE

'Inventing History'? It has to be worth a try in these days of the coarse but effective narratives of Simon Schama and David Starkey, whose biography of Elizabeth I is said to have been constructed in the manner of a Mills & Boon novel.

Yesterday's event in the Town Hall with historical novelists Philippa Gregory and Andrew Taylor and historians Ann Wroe and Ben Shephard on this topic certainly threw up a few game ways of trying, without ever deviating from the known facts.

Of course, 'history always belongs to the winners, especially in popular history', but Gregory has a great way of working through a problem - she has formulated the 'bus stop theory' of historical fiction writing, which allows the narrative to deviate on all sorts of interesting detours 'as long as it stops in the right place at the right time... and in the right way'.

But the novelists can't have it all their own way: 'I couldn't write fiction,' said Shephard, 'because in research I so often find real people saying things... so strange it's hard to believe them.'

History blurs into myth in the end, but the process is made slower - and the myths are made better - by people such as the four here today, picking over the bits in a careful, informed and humane manner.



*Chris Cundy playing his bass sax at the voices off Perfect Pitch event in the Festival Tent yesterday. More excellent musicians will be playing throughout the week at 5.15pm.*

## Clive on poetry

BY AVRIL STAPLE

Clive James is normally recognised as a journalist and performer. Anyone who has watched him on TV would expect the usual social satire and sarcastic humour. So it was surprising to see a shy-looking gent delivering a serious, rather personal set of poems taken from his new book, *The Book of My Enemy*.

His poetry was moving and his humour gentle, touching on themes such as the abuse of women and lamenting his time in Australia. He spoke nostalgically to the older age group, apologising for references that might need explaining to a younger audience and joking about the unnecessary use of footnotes in poetry, but 'Bring Me the Sweat of Gabriela Sabatini' met with general laughter and applause.

He described the book as a nutritional volume full of 'all the verse I wish to preserve' and explains that the title, taken from the first poem, was chosen because he himself fears his book being placed on the remaindered pile. Not for some time yet, I'm sure.

## The Stoat

GM protester Lord Winston is clearly not on the look-out for further approbation from the royals. Yesterday he described Prince Charles as 'the most genetically-modified organ in the country'.

A member of Festival staff is reported to have had a little accident with their mobile phone at the launch party on Friday. During the speeches the phone, set to vibrate and tucked neatly into said staff-member's trousers, rang and slipped down where no phone should go. Apparently three calls came before anything could decently be done about it. The Stoat hopes there was no permanent damage done...

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