# LITERALLY SPEAKING

*The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal*

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

**Norman Davies**
Town Hall 10 - 11am
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**Xinran & Jenni Murray**
Everyman 4 - 5pm
•
**Full Epiglottal Throttle**
Slak 8.30pm - late
•
**Alec Guinness & David Niven**
Everyman 8.45 - 10pm

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# Urban warfare

BY THOMAS JENKINS

At a time in which writing on far-off wars and even further-off peaces fills our papers like never before, it was only appropriate that Cheltenham gave staged to a discussion of reports from the battle-field. Military history breathes through the quickened heart-beats of such brave men. Our audience was lucky enough to hear two of Britain's bravest: General Sir Michael Rose and Allan Mallinson, talking with *Newsnight's* Mark Urban on the question of whether a book may ever accurately depict war.

The urbane Urban began by observing that 'the first thing a war correspondent will have grasped is the short straw', but such humorous intent belied the serious way in which both audience and speakers approached a tricky subject. At times the talk was positively troubling and often veered from its initial intent.

Rose questioned the motivation of journalists covering UN actions, whilst Urban spoke forebodingly of a West possibly 'sliding into a war of civilisations with an Islamic East.' Both agreed that neither was conducive to impartial observation. Even when Mallinson said, of his own Napoleonic novels, 'no-one minds reading them because it's us fighting the French', one sensed he did so partly to lighten the mood.

Urban went on to explain elegantly how the speedy evolution of war reporting has given the public an abundance of information that is worthless. He seemed to sum up the views of all three speakers when, with one long choice passage from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, he outlined 'the inevitability of falsehood in military descriptions.' Here's one reporter that'll be avoiding CNN in future...

# Man of steel?

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

Simon Sebag Montefiore gave a thrilling lecture introducing his new book on Josef Stalin yesterday, translating reported speech into English vernacular and behaving rather like Hercule Poirot at the dénoument of another mystery as he described the events of a fateful dinner party in the Kremlin in 1932.

He stalked the stage much in the same way as he described Stalin doing at meetings, glistening with nerves and knowledge as he packed in fact after fact. The effect was startlingly like finding a wooden doll of Stalin that split open to reveal ever more itty-bitty Stalins. Montefiore was one of the first people to have had access to the man's papers, which became very apparent as he revealed increasingly intimate details about the court of the Red Tzar.

'The Kremlin was a mediaeval village, a secret world,' he said. 'It had all the bitterness and hate of an Oxbridge college.' He described life within this village as insular - almost incestuous - and rather like the life of a rock band: the leaders married trophy wives, had affairs within a community of only 50 people and were corrupted by the decadence they publicly reviled. Many of the Bolsheviks had started in religious training - even the Jews were Orthodox - but politics came to take the place of prayer (though hymns were sung at dinner parties for old times' sake), but as they became more corrupt, they became more ruthless.

The main drive of Montefiore's narrative focused on Stalin's relationship with his wife, Nadia, whose borderline schizophrenia ended in her suicide after the aforementioned dinner party, where Stalin had been flirting with the film star wife of one of his close comrades. 'It's hard to imagine a less sympathetic world in which to suffer from schizophrenia,' he said.

Montefiore is an excellent speaker, with a wealth of facts up his sleeve. He built up a vivid picture of a genocide-in-waiting, masterfully employing a welter of detail. I still can't get over the idea that Molotov might have regularly borrowed cups of sugar from Stalin, the actually less-than-steely Man of Steel. What sort of cocktail might that have been for?

# Winston's wish

BY ALAN MADDRELL

In a market flooded with books on our Greatest Briton, what contribution can usefully be made to the debate on Winston Churchill? Concentrating on specifics helps - grandson Winston S has edited a hefty tome comprising roughly 5% of Churchill's speeches and Andrew Roberts brings us a consideration of his leadership qualities.

Winston S evokes the ghost of his grandfather not only physically and in his delivery, but in forceful patriotism. Illustrating Churchill's prescience, Winston provided evidence that Saudi Arabia is behind many of our world's most monstrous circumstances. Roberts, however, spent a worrying amount of energy debunking claims of any similarities between Churchill and Hitler. Churchill was prolific; alongside hours of speeches, he produced 300 canvasses and 30 books. Without doubt, our speakers managed to provide useful and illuminating insights into this emblematic figure.

# Staying alive and kicking

BY AVRIL STAPLE

Neil Astley has been publishing poems for 25 years. Although compiled before September 11th 2001, his anthology *Staying Alive* has struck a chord with people who remember that day. 'Poems were pinned to the perimeter around Ground Zero,' he explained.

Some of the poems included were sent in by his readers; poems that have given hope, been stuck on the fridge, kept in wallets or written on the walls. Poems that have had an impact on the ability to extend empathy beyond human experience. Things we secretly thought but never said.

'Poetry cannot mend broken legs but it should be strong enough to help... it affirms - establishes - a common humanity,' said Astley. He has chosen '...poems you can swallow in a moment but will permanently change your brain' for the anthology. Several of the poems in the collection are translations by poets that distributors are too wary to stock; which, regardless of their time and place, say something about the human condition.

The poems were beautifully delivered, but this was a sombre event. Esther Morgan read WH Auden's 'Funeral Blues' and Astley and David Constantine remembered their friend and fellow poet, the late Ken Smith. 'The voice is gone but the words are still here' said Constantine before reading one of Smith's poems.

The audience got one or two chuckles, with Esther Morgan's witty rendition of 'Bitcherel' by Eleanor Brown and with Astley's reading of Adrian Mitchell's 'A Puppy Called Puberty'. All three read from the page most of the time, giving a tight, clinical performance. There was a definite avoidance of anything too uplifting, but it's well worth buying the book.

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## Glam fiction

BY KATHRYN HARPER

It always happens: you blink and another fun author goes all serious on you. Well perhaps it's a rather long blink, more like an extended coma.

Esther Freud and Louise Doughty do not immediately conjure up images of historical fiction. We of the popular and slightly flaky imagination associate them with semi or completely autobiographical contemporary fiction. However, the more recent work of both authors marks a departure - one that both of them consider a sort of coming of age as writers.

While still on the glam side of coming of age, they're definitely going back into it. Freud sets her story, *The Sea House,* in the Norfolk of today and of fifty years ago. Doughty's tome, *Fires in the Dark*, traces Central European Roma characters for a span of 18 years - from 1927 onwards. There is still a very loose link with the autobiographical in both their books - it's just more in the sense of the ancestral.

Time - and trusting the reader to interpret it - were Doughty's initial lessons. In the first hardback edition of her book, she wrote five paragraphs in which the political climate of the second section of her novel was painstakingly set out, only to realise that it was completely unnecessary. Many publishers' tears later, subsequent editions are minus these five paragraphs (this might be taken as tip-off for any rare book collectors in the house).

Enter the tyranny - or inspiration - of fact. 'The dead hand of research' reflects Freud's ambivalent attitude to starting with the research. Hers often consists of fact-checking after the writing has been completed. Doughty, on the other hand, draws inspiration from fact and readily admits that there has been so little written on the Romany culture that it is a gift to a writer to be able to do so.

We'll forgive them their seriousness and buy their books. After all, let's face it girls, we all just want to be them.

# Fair to Middleton

BY EMILY KOCH

Introduced as 'the only explorer' in the Writers' Room, Nick Middleton emerged to deliver an account of his survival of climatic extremes: 'the driest, the hottest, the wettest, the coldest'. Challenged by his producer to find the most inhospitable environments and endure them, mid-latitudinal Middleton made his way to four contrasting corners of the world. He lived alongside various groups of people: the Inuit on the icy expanses of Greenland, pygmies in the tropical forests of the Congo, nomadic traders on the sand seas of the Southern Sahara desert and a Kombai clan of Papua New Guinea's swamps.

Aided by some spectacular slides and armed with a laser pointer, Middleton described the survival of the inhabitants in these regions and his experiences with them. With understandable trepidation in Greenland he accompanied Inuit hunters in their flimsy kayaks as they attempted to harpoon whales 'the size of minibuses', and found the experience of travelling by sled led by huskies a malodorous one: 'dogs fart and crap as they go'. Going to Papua, Middleton had serious concerns about the Kombai people, who are renowned for their skills as head-hunters. For those who may have been confused, he clarified that these were of the cannibal variety and not Western business recruiters.

Unfortunately, what could have been an engaging event was mostly bland and uninspiring. Middleton has obviously had some extraordinary experiences but at times the audience was forced to survive the extremes of boredom whilst listening to them.

## Working on the frontline

BY OLIVER FRENCH

Kick-started by Ernest Hemingway's rather blunt instruction to 'write about people' when in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, Martha Gellhorn went on to become one of the most respected war correspondents in history, working right up until 1993.

John Simpson perhaps summed up her life best when, in his opening words, he described it as 'magnificent'. At the end of our hour, none of the audience could be in any doubt about this.

Despite this, the shadow of Ernest Hemingway (her one-time husband), often looms over conversation about her; a great shame as she deserves, in her own words, not to be 'a footnote to someone else's life'.

It was this fear that made the topic of her six years with Hemingway such a sensitive issue in discussion and, as such, the insights of close friends Caroline Moorhead and John Simpson are a rare pleasure indeed. Suggesting that their time together was much happier than most people assume and identifying the move from lovers to married couple as the reason for their eventual split, it was suggested that her fierce sense of independence challenged Hemingway's view of her as a 'possession'.

It was this fierce sense of independence that saw both of today's speakers label her as an 'instinctive radical' who approached her subject with a passion that saw her take sides in her work, 'but never against truth or honesty'. Her commitment to truth was such that she had, in her time, tricked her way on to a landing craft on D-Day, and been thrown out of Saigon for her reports on the Vietnam war. Being partly Jewish and having visited Dachau soon after its liberation, she was, however, never able to utter a good word about Palestine.

Her disgust at the actions of the American government in Vietnam was the reason for her move to England, where she eventually settled. John Simpson claimed that this was typical of a woman who was always interested in the victims of war, working tirelessly because she felt that she *must* use her voice where others had none.

## Pour on water

BY ROBERT MORELAND

Londoners in the 17th century were suspicious of a year with three sixes. 1666 was going to be a bad year. It was! After the Plague, sectarian troubles and a minor pro-Cromwellian rebellion, there was the Great Fire of London.

Adrian Tinniswood, in a talk on his book *The Great Fire of London*, described the progress from its start in Pudding Lane. The fire gutted 80% of London, destroying 13,200 houses, nearly half the churches, 44 out of 51 livery halls, St. Paul's Cathedral and Guildhall. Although loss of life was low (around 100 people) 70,000 fled to live in refugee camps in Clerkenwell and Islington.

Rumours spread that the fire had been started by terrorists. Mobs looted and attacked foreigners. Indeed - with shades of 'weapons of mass destruction' - searches for, and rumours, of possible weapons of attack were also rife. To some extent these problems were controlled - not least through the bravery and hard work of the Duke of York (later the ill-fated James II). Nevertheless, the fire was traumatic and led to a very different City of London.

## The Stoat

In his event, Alexei Sayle confessed that in visitors' books in guest houses he only writes 'very nice.' So it was no surprise to read on the big board by the Book Tent on Monday, in big letters, 'very nice'.

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One of our volunteers is missing a wooden Hong Kong Police pen and some notes after the 'Writing from Life' event. Has anyone walked off with these?

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Speaking of how Churchill and Hitler were both self-educated, Andrew Roberts commented: 'Winston *had* to be self-educated - he did of course go to Harrow.'

**THE TEAM**

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