

LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE
SUNDAY 10 OCTOBER 2004
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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

SIMON SINGH

EVERYMAN/12-1PM

Simon Singh attempts a very brief explanation of the Big Bang.

LOUIS DE BERNIERES

TOWN HALL/12-1PM

Louis de Bernieres returns with his new novel, *Birds Without Wings*.

SHEILA HANCOCK

TOWN HALL/4-5PM

Sheila Hancock discusses her life with and without John Thaw.

BREAKING THE RULES: CHILDREN WHO KILL

TOWN HALL/5.45-6.45PM

Matt Whyman and Anne Cassidy discuss their tough new novels.

ROB BRYDON

TOWN HALL/7.15-8.15PM

The man behind *Marion and Geoff* reveals the inspiration for his latest character, Keith Barret.

MARR MIGHT: SPREADING THE BODY POLITIC

ALICE PALMER

Just as people associated images of Ethiopia with Michael Buerk, Andrew Marr's appearance at this year's Festival was inevitably overshadowed by the terrible circumstances which delayed his talk until Saturday.

However, the last-minute changes unexpectedly served to underline the real focus of the event. As well as clearly substantiating Marr's description of a journalist's life as 'unpredictable', it also seemed to give more impetus to the festival's theme – the State of the Nation. Pleasingly, he managed to deflect the intense discussion about Iraq that has almost suffocated other festival events. He balanced observations on current affairs with a potted history of his 'trade' which was peppered with anecdotes from his own career.

From gossip-collecting in the 1680's, via the scorn of journalists in the 18th century, to today's obsession with celebrity, one can see why Marr was keen to dissociate journalism from 'real' professions – most of which seem to require more exams and less time drinking. He

'Charmingly self-deprecating' BBC Political Editor Andrew Marr, who appeared at Cheltenham Festival of Literature yesterday.



PICTURE BY
Rex Features

ably conjured a captivating world of newspapers owned by eccentric foreigners, staffed by wily drunkards and ruled by obscure diktats – such as the banning of peacocks in the *Daily Herald's* premises.

Marr's own career wasn't spared his self-deprecating wit – descriptions abounded of him fluffing his first interview at the BBC, and of a stint at *The Independent* where he was by his own admission 'not the youngest broadsheet editor, but by a long way

the most idiotic!' On a more serious note, Marr took time to consider the challenges to print journalism from television and the internet, both in addressing a public with an attention span shattered by a 'TV culture', and faced with the proliferation of unreliable stories on the web.

Despite Marr's charmingly self-deprecating look at his own talents and those of his peers, he can be said to be an exemplar of that rare breed – a truly professional journalist.

LESSING OFF STEAM

HELEN WILLIAMS

Unlike many authors, Doris Lessing does not seem to be afraid to congratulate her own achievements, as readers of her new book *Time Bites* will find. Among others, it refers to her novel *The Golden Notebook* which she says is 'full of vitality' and 'a useful testament to its time.' Hearing her speak this way was both refreshing and uplifting.

Lessing promotes herself as a fiercely intelligent and worldly-wise author. Indeed, her views of Africa seem to leave people feeling she transcends the role of writer to become a social healer. This was most apparent during her question and answer session when the question arose: 'Can you tell us what we can do to help Zimbabwe?'

'I don't know,' Lessing replied, 'tyranny can be extremely effective.' Yet she does encourage intrepid journalists to venture into Africa, so long as they pretend to be tourists.

Contradicting the confidence I mentioned at the start, Lessing revealed her confusion at hearing other people's responses to her work. When described as 'sensuous', she said: 'I never know what people mean. I just try to tell the truth; don't all novelists tell the truth? At least they try to.' Despite being loved by many, Lessing doesn't shy away from controversy, and while she may offend at times, it doesn't seem intentional. Indeed, it always makes for an entertaining literary event.



FILLING IN THE HOLES

DANIEL HAHN

In the current climate of anxiety and strife, it is a tribute to children's authors Theresa Breslin and Julia Jarman that they were able to conduct a discussion about war that was not just impassioned and intelligent, but also level-headed and often surprising.

Both Breslin and Jarman have written novels about war, but their discussion was mainly concerned with the questions that arise when dealing with such an affecting subject for a relatively young readership. Should children be protected from the darker side of human life, or do writers have a duty to tell the whole truth?

Both Jarman and Breslin were insistent on the importance of telling the truth, however gangrenous – 'not only the literal truth, but also the emotional truth'. After all, reading about terrible things that happen needn't necessarily depress, said Jarman; they can also help readers to

understand, to put things in perspective. A question from one of Breslin's young readers confirmed this; he had read *Remembrance* just after September 11th, 'when I was quite sad. The book made me feel better.' The best solace was to be found in the power of stories; said Breslin, 'Fiction is the key.'

And there could have been no better proof of this power than the following event: Louis Sachar. The huge success of Sachar's *Holes* meant that the event was buzzing; eager children were standing watching from the balcony. If there had been rafters I have no doubt children would have been swinging from them. And Sachar's reading made the event extraordinary. Ten days ago he completed *Small Steps*, a follow-up story to *Holes*; and we were the first to hear a chapter of it. Theresa Breslin was right.

Book It! gets better every year.

WHAT HE WROTE

ALAN MADDRELL

It's likely you won't have heard of Eddie Braben, unless you pay attention to the writing credits of *The Morecambe and Wise Show*. He was the hidden third member of TV's best loved comedy duo.

Unexpectedly, it turns out he is a skilled, quick-witted and intuitive performer. He held court at the Everyman last night, giving a taste of the story of his career. Host Marcus Moore had the Sisyphean task of periodically tossing the lariat round Eddie's neck to bring him back onto the right track.

Peppered amidst tales of Eric, Ern, Dear Daddy, Bill Cotton, the great Bob Hope *et al* were the kind of elegant, offhand one-liners Eric used to deliver. Eddie sprang from working-class Liverpool, forming an enduring love affair with radio shows from the likes of Arthur Askey and Charlie Chester. A lifetime later he's one of the finest comic light entertainment writers of the kind only Peter Kaye still is. He reinvented Eric and Ernie's comic relationship, pumping Ernie up into the ego-inflated playwright, which just made more material for Eric.

Eddie says writing is a tough job, performed under intense scrutiny, but he couldn't do anything else about the stream of silly gags running in his head. Good thing too.

SLAMMING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

AF HARROLD (SLAM FINALIST)

There are three certainties in Poetry Slams that I've observed time and time again. Firstly, one poet gets a prize at the end of the evening and that's always nice to see, since poets tend to get little else.

Secondly, another poet (sometimes more than one) nurses a bitter little twist in their stomach as they mutter to themselves on the trip home 'Damn it all, I was robbed.' And

thirdly one poet loses out to another poet and doesn't mind all that much because the first poet thinks the second poet is actually really quite good and probably deserved to win. These three facts are as certain as rain in August and chocolate at any time of the day.

In this year's UK Allcomers Slam the winning poet, with the big pile of books to carry home (which quite frankly I couldn't have fitted in my bag anyway), was a dashing young man by the name of Elvis McGonagall (pictured left), with designer stubble and beautifully typed poems pasted into a sturdy notebook. The losing (but happy to do so) poet was myself, the occasionally yak-obsessed AF Harrold. Obviously there were other poets who lost too, and many of them were very good, but if you think I've got time or space enough to write their names down here, like a lyrical war memorial, you'd be wrong.

I don't know who's nursing that twist of bitterness, that bubble of bile, so I shall mention it no more. They lost.

The real winner though, of any slam, is the audience, who got almost three hours of magic in the shape of a sampler of some of the finest performance poets to grace this land. They should be very happy.



DUO-VERSE

ROGER TURNER

At first sight they had nothing in common: the essentially English, post-Jane-Austen, post-Wildian wit of Sophie Hannah and the engaging, quasi-rapping confessions of Patience Agbabi. In fact both have an appealing ability to deal with pain by packaging it with humour.

Like Alexander Pope, Sophie Hannah hides a surprising amount of savagery and bite under the surface of her accomplished verse forms. It's the tension created by that disjunction that makes her poems so satisfying: 'What oft was bitterly thought/but ne'er so amusingly expressed' is the conclusion of her readers.

Compared with Hannah, Patience Agbabi gave us emotion straight. She has seen more of the real world than Hannah – if that means the world outside middle class gentility. The seed bed of a foster-parented upbringing and the predictable problems of not belonging might well have flowered into bitterness or angst, but instead have produced a warm-hearted largeness of vision which leaves poet and reader smiling.

WORDS ON THE STREET



PAVEMENT POETRY

The streets of Cheltenham were transformed into a frantic poetry frenzy as Thom the World Poet startled shoppers and passers by with verse. Grabbing bits of chalk

Thom inspired new bards to paint Cheltenham's Promenade with words. 'It was like tiptoeing through a chalky rainbow' said Chloe, the temporary Town Crier. Word up! Picture and story by Chris Cundy

A VOICE OF THUNDER

ADAM HOROVITZ

Alan Garner is an author tied to the landscape he writes about and lives in – the edges of the Pennines in Cheshire. It has informed everything he writes, from his early books for children to his latest, *Thursbitch*.

In Cheltenham last night, he brought that 'sentient landscape' with him. Not for Garner the dry Q&A session; he gave a lecture, illustrated with slides, that he announced was the 'story of a journey, though it's something of a Wild Hunt'. It told the tale of his research into *Thursbitch*, which began in the early 1950's with his accidental discovery of a stone in the hills around Thursbitch – translated out of Anglo Saxon, it means 'the valley of the demon' – of a stone marked with the record of a mysterious death in 1755, and finished with the release of the novel.

The talk was much in the manner of his extraordinary essays in *The Voice That Thunders*; it made concrete the welter of myths that swarm around Thursbitch in 'an epiphany of stone'. It is hard to state in this short space the impact of this wry, sly and invigorating talk, as it took in Orphic and Dionysian myth, neolithic stonework, the pagan rites attached to John the Baptist, big, mysterious things lurking in the hills of Britain and Garner's own thrilling journey amongst them.

THE STOAT

'Kids today have different brains because they're never read to and just watch television,' said a doomy Doris Lessing yesterday. 'Reading has come to an end! We need something else.' The Stoat recommends that she be taken on a quick tour of the Book It! events...

BBC Political Editor Andrew Marr: 'In my book I call journalism a trade rather than a profession... because a profession has standards.'

The sounding of bells during a spine-tingling talk on 'The Valley of the Demon' might have had a mundane explanation, but not for lecturer Alan Garner. When the announcement came that it was a false fire alarm, he turned to look at the slide of the startling Pennine landscape that inspired the talk and said 'After this, I wouldn't be so sure'. The audience laughed. Nervously.