

LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE
MONDAY 11 OCTOBER 2004
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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

**RICHARD DAWKINS
& LALLA WARD**

EVERYMAN/115-2.15PM

Enter the time machine and travel back four billion years to the dawn of time.

**SIR ANTHONY SHER
TOWN HALL/6-7PM**

The eminent actor and writer **Sir Anthony Sher** replaces Ian Holm.

**BEATRIX CAMPBELL
TOWN HALL/7.30-8.30PM**

Beatrix Campbell, academic and broadcaster, on the gender agenda.

**STEVE TASANE IN KLEPTO
THE BEEHIVE/7.30-8.30PM**

Peek inside the mind of a professional shoplifter in **Steve Tasane's** one-man show.

**PETER & DAN SNOW
TOWN HALL/8.45-10PM**

Find out from **Peter** and **Dan Snow** how it felt to face a cavalry charge.

SHEILA HANCOCK: LIFE WITH AN 'EXTRAORDINARY' MAN

HELEN WILLIAMS

With a wicked smile and a glint in her eye, 71 year old Sheila Hancock does – in her own words – look 'perky for her age.' She also acts it and, paired with her friend Sandy Toksvig for this discussion of her biography of John Thaw, she couldn't have been on better form.

When the biography was first published Hancock suddenly felt 'embarrassed'. Having been completely immersed in her research, she had forgotten that it was actually going to be read. Since its arrival she has received several letters from readers dealing with alcoholism and/or bereavement, telling her how much the book has helped them. I think we can safely say her embarrassment has passed.

Hancock cannot get enough of talking about Thaw. Since his death she has been unable to watch any recordings of his acting, but she is able to talk about it with pride and rapture. She is also able to discuss Thaw's early years in the profession with honesty, recalling that he was 'awful' in the very first play she saw

The late John Thaw, whose life was celebrated by his widow Sheila Hancock at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature yesterday.



him in. Indeed she confesses that she is 'the most outspoken' woman ever and dramatically proclaims that it has 'blighted her life'. But she also reveals that she has no regrets, which suggests that her openness actually adds to her charm and probably her success.

As expected, the event was packed full of stories about the highs and lows of Thaw's life, but she also entertained with interesting insights into her own. One minute we were

hearing about Thaw's poverty-stricken childhood and awkwardness with women, and next the hypnotism Hancock has been through to conquer stage fright and help her give up her addiction to smoking.

The hour was over far too soon. It was certainly a celebration of her success, and a testament to the fact that there is no better person to write about the life of this sorely-missed and, again in her own words, 'extraordinary' man.

DIVORCE BE WITH YOU

ALAN MADDRELL

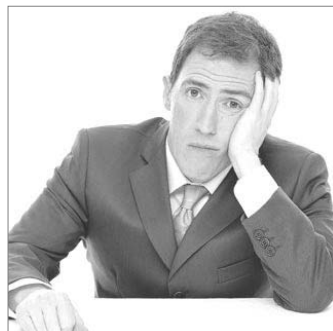
It feels something of an injustice that not more people have heard of Rob Brydon. His best known creation is Keith Barret, the hapless Welsh taxi (taxis?) driver in the series *Marion and Geoff*. From the second host Marcus Moore tumbled onto the stage, it was clear that laughter was the order of the day.

Keith has just brought out a wonderfully self-helpful book, *Making Divorce Work*, taking aim at the kinds of books Paul McKenna writes. Rather graciously, Paul has provided the foreword.

Brydon has the genuine actor's canny knack for impersonation, and he couldn't resist lapsing into Hugh Grant, Anthony Hopkins, Tom Jones Alan Partridge and even his friend Steve Coogan. In typically self-effacing fashion, Rob is keen to acknowledge the unseen forces that coincide to create his unique brand of comedy, namely the editing and the

relaxed, intimate circumstances in which *Marion and Geoff* was made.

It's likely there might be an enjoyable biography somewhere in the future, as Rob has now been caught by the writing infection. He also has a store of fun anecdotes lightly seasoned with a quick, sharp wit. Among the drama and the issues, it's good to have an intelligent laugh.



OUT OF THE SHADOWS

ADAM HOROVITZ

In their joint reading yesterday, Don Paterson and Kate Clanchy reached out remarkably well across the echoing Pillar Room with subtle, intimate readings from their respective collections, *Landing Light* and *Newborn*.

Clanchy read first, leavening the delicacy of a sequence of poems about raising children with a keen humour. '*Newborn*,' she told us, 'tells the story of birth to early years – and if that doesn't sound dramatic, then you haven't read the book!'

She has taken the urgency and pungency of her early works and turned their clarity on herself; all this became obvious as her exquisite phrasing and acute eye for detail (she describes her baby as having a 'misericord face' for example) cut through her rather nervy reading style, drawing the listener deep into poems like the superb 'On Breastfeeding', a surprising look at

how a mother's breasts become public property.

Paterson, usually an assured reader, didn't fare so well; his normally effulgent voice was edged with tiredness. The beautiful poems for his sons were a little lost in this weariness, but with 'The Landing' and excerpts from *The Book of Shadows*, a collection of aphorisms, he sparked into life. He even offered a barbed aphoristic statement on reading aloud: 'Writers often end up as humourists if they read in public too often... laughter is the only audible response we can ever elicit. The silence of the unbearably moved and that of the terminally bored are indistinguishable.'

The event concluded with a revealing and witty discussion on their various processes of writing. It's safe to say – from this side of the stage – that any quiet moments were not fuelled by boredom.

GAMMON OF GUILT

EMILY KOCH

Under The Storyteller's glass roof, and care of voices off, an audience of around 40 festival goers and a pigeon (watching through the roof) were treated to a taste of raconteuse Shonaleigh and her wealth of tales yesterday afternoon.

In between stories about bread and butter falling butter side up for the first time in history and about being a Jewish girl in a Catholic school (she had 'double the guilt'), we heard where the stories came from. She and her Muslim best friend used to sit under the stairs eating pork scratchings, secretly listening to raunchy tales being told in Yiddish.

Amongst the selection, about 'food, guilt, and food and... guilt', were tales from *The Bible* and *Arabian Nights*, told in her unique way. An animated and vibrant performer, she suffuses each story with wit and intelligence. The audience's attention was constantly held by her active narration and was frequently surprised; for example when they were treated to a melodious camel call.

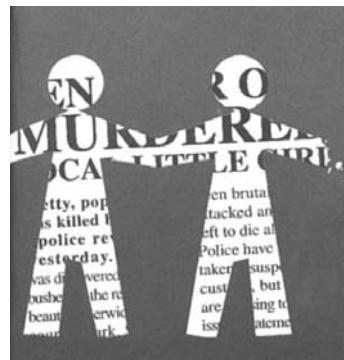
'Words,' Shonaleigh says, are 'the sweetest and harshest thing... they can build bridges and create the deepest chasms.' Her passion for them was infectious; this was a most amusing and moving afternoon.

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

JON ANDRIESEN

There was something unmistakably Channel Five about the title of yesterday's 'Children Who Kill' Book It! event, but thankfully that's were any potential unfounded comparisons ended. In place of the tacky exposés of tragedy-turned-to-ratings we witnessed a well-judged discussion on the circumstances that force children to become murderers.

Both Anne Cassidy and Matt Whyman have written award nominated teenage fiction with central characters that commit what Cassidy called 'the final taboo'. Neither approached the subject from any moral or didactic viewpoint; rather they sought to try and understand the social and cultural climate that turns 'ordinary' children into murderers.



Cassidy spoke at length about the media revulsion towards the Bulger killers and the Mary Bell case, trying to understand why we seem all too ready to accept murders committed by male adults and yet despise with such intense vitriol any child who commits the same act. 'Is it,' she asked, 'because we place our children on such high pedestals that they have so much further to fall when they do something wrong?'

Whyman made no apologies for the extent of violence portrayed in his novel, *Boy Kills Man*, preferring to set out a truth. So much so that his American publisher asked him to change to a happier ending. He vehemently declined.

Perhaps most striking were the many similarities both Cassidy and Whyman's characters shared, in spite of the fact that one story was set in Britain and the other in Columbia. If their protagonists are anything to go by then exclusion of prostitute mothers and an under-18's ban on baseball bats would soon nip the problem in the bud.

Few subjects arouse such emotions and confusions, but in this difficult, yet sensitive and illuminating talk, I couldn't help wondering how many victims arise when a child becomes a murderer.

GUNS AND VERSES

ROGER TURNER

What was unusual about Jon Stallworthy's lecture on war poets was that it was actually about the poetry. No tittle-tattle about poets' lives, or mistaking content for poem.

Instead we were given a cool and masterful analysis of actual poems and a multi-page handout, allowing us to follow line by line. In this way Stallworthy could home in on the skill of particular lines and keep his spellbound audience with him. It was a pleasure to be introduced to a new poet (to me) – John Balaban, who worked in a Vietnam orphanage.

As a poet, literary critic, biographer of Wilfred Owen, and anthologist of war poems, Stallworthy was ideally suited for this year's 'Laurie Lee Lecture'. He only lacked actual experience in the trenches. Yet this was the issue that he focused on – can you write a good war poem from an armchair in Oxford? Auden, for instance, went to Spain – even though he 'only' drove an ambulance. Stallworthy asserted that Robert Lowell's posing as a Vietnam veteran was 'not one of his best'.

If you're a Hardy or a Tennyson, it seems that you can do it. With lesser mortals, the absence of truth to experience will show. Ultimately, econdhand experience will generate secondhand emotion.

ORC TALK

DANIEL HAHN

You might be forgiven for assuming that not having read a particular book would make it extremely difficult to launch a spirited attack on it. Not so.

Adèle Geras has never managed to read Tolkien - she just can't. Her aversion is deep-seated, and incurable: 'You know, the way some people are allergic to gluten.' And yet armed with nothing but blind conviction and a firmly-held 'position of complete ignorant prejudice' she launched herself boldly into a hilarious and passionate tirade against 'anything trollish, gnomish, anything vaguely Nordic-overhanging-craggish'. She especially distrusts anything with a map at the front. Sounds reasonable. Even the movies, 'Tolkien-lite', made her eyes glaze over.

It's surprising that Geras wasn't met by rabid ranks of offended Tolkien fans ('probably waiting for me outside with javelins or something'). We might then have been treated to just the sort of epic battle that she finds so off-putting. But if I'd disagreed with her (which I don't) I'm not sure I'd have dared to challenge her in full flow either.

QUANTUM SINGH-SONG

AVRIL STAPLE

Generations of boffins and cosmogers were not only inspired but entertained yesterday by Simon Singh's accessible explanation of the Big Bang Theory.

Simon Singh's unusual approach to explaining Cosmology included a clip from the 1945 film *Dead of Night* and a backwards rendition of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' which he used to excuse Fred Hoyle's understandable unwillingness to accept that the universe was expanding. The audience was easily persuaded to hear the word Satan in the song, just as Hoyle's education and upbringing convinced him of a static universe.

How do we know it's expanding? Basically, by measuring tiny bits of light and soundwaves emitted by the cosmos. To further help us understand this he played 'The Cosmic Doppler Song'.

So what's going to happen? The universe might go on forever, or it might turn round and come back the other way, or it could even reach that static state. However, there is

apparently a school of thought that seeks to return to the idea of a static state universe following the discovery that the universe is expanding at rapid speed. Confused? Me too. It became apparent, listening to the questions afterwards, that the theories themselves are not in a static state. While our universe quietly continues to expand, my own expanded brain is aching.

In spite of the complicated subject matter I found Simon Singh's attempts to explain the inexplicable amusing, thought provoking and thoroughly entertaining.



THE STOAT

Simon Singh, who says he can explain the Big Bang in ten minutes, is pleasingly fallible about some things. Offered a fountain pen to sign a book yesterday, he politely declined saying: 'I'm afraid I don't understand them.'

Matt Whyman on researching his novels: 'I didn't go to Columbia [to research *Boy Kills Man*] because my wife wouldn't let me. It was too dangerous... my new novel's set in Kazakhstan.' He didn't go there either. I think we can guess why.

Adèle Geras doesn't like fantasy books. She stated yesterday that she only read Philip Pullman because it begins in a recognisable Oxford. 'I'd have shut the book if he'd given me an armoured bear on page one,' she laughed. What she thought the daemon mentioned on the first page was is anybody's guess...