

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE  
WEDNESDAY 13 OCTOBER 2004  
ISSUE 5/FREE/EDITED BY STET PRESS



## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

**CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE**  
TOWN HALL/2.30-3.30PM  
**Louise Welsh, Simon Barker** and  
**Rodney Bolt** discuss a colourful  
life and death.

**MICHAEL MEACHER**  
TOWN HALL/6-7PM  
**Michael Meacher** delivers the  
Green Nation lecture.

**DAVID LODGE**  
EVERYMAN/6-7PM  
**David Lodge** discusses his new  
historical novel on Henry James.

**FALLING FOR ICARUS**  
TOWN HALL/7.30-8.30PM  
Why should a grown man travel to  
Crete and attempt to fly like Icarus?  
**Rory MacLean** explains.

**RORY MOTION + SUPPORT**  
SLAK/8PM-LATE  
Three racy wordsters freewheel  
down an open road of sublime  
performance poetry.

## HUMAN RIGHTS & WRONGS

**ADAM HOROVITZ**  
**Peter Tatchell** took to the stage of  
the Town Hall Drawing Room in  
surprisingly unassuming mode last  
night. 'I may be a direct action  
veteran,' he said with a smile, 'but  
I'm a Cheltenham virgin, so be gentle  
with me!'

This unassuming mode did not  
last long. Tatchell has been involved  
in the campaign for human rights  
almost his entire life, most noticeably  
in Outrage!, which has campaigned  
for equality for gays, lesbians and  
bisexuals. This formed the basis of  
his lecture – the state of the 'Queer  
Nation'. And a fine lecture it was,  
delivered in rhetorical style – in many  
ways, Tatchell is the anti-Mandelson,  
possessed of all the skill and none of  
the spin.

He began by delivering an  
indictment of the recent past, from  
the 1960s – 'a period when the  
police raided bars, clubs and public  
toilets with impunity' – to 1989 when,  
in the wake of HIV and AIDS, as many  
people were arrested as 'in the  
McCarthyite gay witch-hunts' of the  
early 1950s. He is damning of  
Labour's slow movement towards  
change; in opposition, he said, they



made great promises, but it was the  
European Court of Human Rights and  
a few 'brave individuals' who ensured  
that there has been a shift towards  
freedom and equality for the  
homosexual community.

Still, he said, there are faith-  
based hospitals, hospices and  
schools that are free to discriminate,  
thanks to a clause enforced by the  
Labour government. Tatchell wants  
equality for all, whatever their faith,  
sexual orientation or skin colour and  
he is not afraid to step into the

headlights in his efforts to achieve  
that – this is what he fought a by-  
election for in 1983. He is horrified  
by the Civil Partnerships Bill: 'While I  
understand that many feel we need  
urgent redress,' he said, 'why should  
we settle for second best?'

He also foresees a 'new danger',  
that of 'moral weakness' in liberal  
and left-wing thinking. 'Moral  
relativism is gaining ground,' he  
claimed. 'This can mean colluding  
with barbarism like female genital  
mutilation... we wouldn't tolerate it in  
Britain. Why tolerate it elsewhere?'

'Much of the left is reluctant to  
speak out against abusers because  
they happen to be black,' he said,  
referring particularly to Mugabe,  
whom he has campaigned against,  
and 'murder music' – homophobic  
records by reggae artists which call  
for death to gays: 'Isn't incitement to  
murder a criminal offence?'

His lecture was a clarion call for  
universal human rights for all. We are  
in 'an emergency we have to address  
if we are to create a world that is...  
better than it is now'. Whoever you  
are, whatever you do and whatever  
you want, if you believe in freedom,  
Peter Tatchell is worth listening to.

## STILL STREET TALKING

**BRENDA READ-BROWN**  
**Many people of Janet Street-Porter's  
age were brought up by what would  
today be considered dysfunctional  
parents; but most of us don't have  
the wit or skill to turn these  
childhood experiences into best-  
selling books. But then, most of us  
keep our furniture for more than two  
years; most of us can spend more  
than 10 consecutive days in our own  
homes without feeling uneasy; and  
most of us have not been married  
four times, with several other  
relationships along the way.**

'I'm not a very nice person,' she  
said, 'but that's not problematic for  
me.' And this driven woman is indeed  
happiest with her own company. Not  
surprisingly, she has no children, and  
her main spare-time occupation is  
solitary walking. She was not  
surprised at the success of her one-  
woman show; she never considers  
the possibility of failure.

Ms. Street-Porter values

friendships and loyalty; only her  
friends could hurt her, she said. And  
she answered persistent questions  
with humour, patience and audacity.  
Perhaps she is not the 'cow' she  
claims to be; perhaps a child's pain  
lasts for ever.



## CHILDREN OF SLAVERY

**KATHRYN HARPER**  
**Mende Nazer had a happy childhood.  
She grew up in the remote Nuba  
Mountains of Sudan. She laughed as  
she recalled how free she was to  
roam as a child.**

When she was twelve, Mende  
found herself in a pick-up truck being  
transported with four other girls to  
Khartoum – the burning remains of  
her village behind her. She endured  
seven years of verbal and physical  
abuse as a domestic slave in a  
household where she was referred to  
as 'a person worthy of no name'.  
'Slavery is really enslavement of the  
mind – the destruction of any sense  
of self as a human being,' said  
Damien Lewis, journalist and co-writer  
of *Slave*.

One day Mende was told she was  
being sent to London. She could have  
been flying to the moon. However it  
was in London that she eventually  
managed to escape. 'Slavery is not  
persecution,' the British Authorities

told Mende. They turned down her  
application for asylum. Human  
trafficking is the second major  
clandestine business after drug  
trafficking. This is not restricted to  
the backwaters of Sudan. It is  
estimated that there are 1,000  
slaves in London, mostly African.

She later wrote *Slave* with Lewis.  
This put herself and her family, back  
in Sudan, at great risk. She was  
finally granted asylum in the UK after  
intense pressure from the German  
government.

A member of the audience asked  
her if in writing *Slave* she thought she  
could change the lives of others.  
'Who knows?' she whispered. Then a  
bit more confidently: 'Yeah, I think  
so.' As Mende was being readied to  
leave Khartoum for London, a 12-year  
old Nuban girl appeared in her  
master's house; her replacement.  
This was four years ago. This girl had  
probably had a happy childhood too.

## HG TIPS

POPPY CORBETT

Despite the absence of Michael Foot from the discussion on HG Wells, Iain Sinclair and Bryan Appleyard both spoke with conviction about their admiration for the author who has disturbed and intrigued a great many readers over the last century.

They believe that Wells deserves more recognition than he receives. Describing him as 'the greatest of all science fiction writers' Appleyard reminisced upon his Cambridge days where Wells was often considered a laughing stock. Sinclair concurred and voiced horror towards the narrow ignorance surrounding Wells. They advised that studying Wells is imperative as this will encourage education in a suppressed genre.

Even in the 1890s Wells was not regarded with high esteem. Henry James certainly wasn't a fan, but should have been, as Wells anticipated problems with technology that confront us today, correctly predicting the introduction of nuclear weapons. Wells' prophecies about the future allow him to enigmatically survive today and the message from the discussion was clear: it's time Wells is thrown back into the world of literature.

His ability in mixing the highest form of poetical language with the most interesting forms of science is breathtaking. Who knows, his musings over the arrival of aliens could present a surprising outcome.

## SURREALLY

REBEKAH CANE

Paul Durcan reading his poetry is a bizarre and delightful experience, a little akin to watching a genetic splice of Andrew Motion and Father Ted. He is all angular stage presence and finely-tuned surrealism and his voice booms and whispers around the fine meters of his verse.

In an hour-long reading from his new book, *The Art of Life*, he cascaded through characters and situations that you feel you might have experienced yourself.

From the haiku-like delicacy of 'Checkout Girl', in which he cannot stop bowing after returning from Japan, to the sombre closing poem 'Facing Extinction', this was an hour of poetry sans conversation in which the poetry became the conversation and the conversation continued long after the event was over.

Most memorable of all was 'Golden Island Shopping Centre', in which Durcan closes with this delicious, unlikely rant: 'I am a Golden Island Expectant Mother! I am a fifty-eight-years old male of the species/And I have been expecting for nineteen years.' Extraordinary stuff.

## JAMIE OLIVER: THE NAKED & THE FED

JON ANDRIESSEN

One of the largest crowds ever seen at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature greeted Jamie Oliver to the stage with a pot-clanging clamour of applause. Suitably graceful, the mock Bow-Bells-boy bowed low in a rare expression of humility.

In the chair sat *The Guardian's* food editor Matthew Fort who seemed loath to share the nation's favourite chirpy-chappy chef. 'We're going to have a conversation,' he said, smiling at Jamie, and then turning to the crowd continued 'which you're welcome to listen into.' In a concession to the massed ranks, Fort



finally confirmed that there would still be time for audience questions and any early thoughts of mutiny halted.

Oliver is currently on a book tour promoting his latest 'essential cookbook' *Jamie's Dinners*. This combined with the Festival theme 'The State of the Nation', is as perfect a match as 'prawns and Marie Rose sauce'. You see, Jamie is on a mission – and a good thing too – to return school dinners to the top of the educational menu.

His new book is dedicated to 'the school kitchen staff who care' or, as he referred to them yesterday, 'the dinner ladies'. With a team of production staff behind him, he's set out a game plan designed to achieve pukka school nosh. To cut a long story short it involves placing the responsibility for a child's diet on the schools and the parents, whilst force-feeding fruit to anyone in compulsory education. The only choice is the healthy choice or 'proper grub' as he calls it. Not exactly rocket science.

Still, at least he's saying the right things and, with a new TV series out soon – which, in a parting gift, he urged us to watch out for – he might well convince someone to listen; because with obesity rates surging in British children, they sure as heck aren't listening to anyone else.

## SCRABBLING ABOUT



LET'S PLAY SCRABBLE

For Marcus Moore, it's a 'fantasy almost erotic' to write 'quixotic' on a triple-word score. But when you can notch up 80-odd points for 'matinees', 'arrides' and 'replying' (plus several two-letter words) why

hang on such a dream? The expert tacticians at Cheltenham's Central Library last night gave a Scrabble masterclass, and some great games were enjoyed afterwards by members of the audience.

Picture and story by Alex Runchman

## HEROISMS

DANIEL HAHN

The bafflingly-named 'Heroes or Anti-Heroes' event promised to teach us about two lives: William Shakespeare and Annie Oakley.

Wiry, bespectacled and be-sweated, Rupert Christiansen spent his co-speaker's introduction gamely leaping about the audience waving the roving mic around, before taking his place on the stage to tell us all about the greatest playwright of all time. One boy in the audience had seen *Romeo and Juliet*: 'And what did you make of it?' (A pause, to be sure telling the truth wouldn't get him into trouble.) 'Boooring.' Some were clearly never going to be persuaded.

The audience did enjoy participating in the show, though, especially the exercise combining learning to project and learning Shakespearean insults; somewhere there's a boy who'll long remember standing on that stage, summoning all his courage and vitriol to bellow 'Thou impertinent beetle-headed huffer-mugger!'

Lucy Lethbridge then told the story of Annie Oakley, the pious, well-behaved Victorian girl with long hair, flowing skirts and a really big gun. This half of the event was tamer, a mixture of readings and questions to the audience: 'So, how do you think Buffalo Bill got his name?' 'As they rode the covered-wagons westwards over the American plains, what do you think they ate?' I can only assume the boy in the fourth row who answered 'Wagon Wheels' was joking. The correct answer, of course, was 'squirrels'. Squirrels?!? 'Apparently they're very chewy.'

## THE STOAT

'It's no good asking kids what they want when it comes to food,' said Jamie Oliver yesterday, espousing the virtues of healthy eating. 'You wouldn't ask them what they wanted to read in an English class. If they'd asked me I'd of chosen *Viz*, comics or porn.' Least we forget the importance of feeding the mind as well.

Steve Tasane, self-confessed ex-shoplifter, began his one man show *Klepto at The Beehive* on Monday with a short, wry dedication: 'To Festival booksellers Ottakar's. I owe them a lot.'

Pamela Armstrong on Jon Snow: 'We know he has a sense of humour. We've seen his ties!'