

LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE
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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

**JULIA COPUS
& CATHERINE SMITH
JIM THOMPSON'S
2.30-3.30PM**

Dark, edgy and incredibly stylish back-to-back poetry.

**TONY PARSONS
EVERYMAN/2-3PM**

A look at the dilemmas and decisions facing men today.

**75 YEARS OF TINTIN
CHELT. COLLEGE/4.30-5.30PM**

A celebration of Hergé's loveable little detective.

**WILLIAM TREVOR
TOWN HALL/7.15-8.15PM**

Rare appearance from the master of the short story. Not to be missed.

**LATE NATION: THE LAST WORD
TOWN HALL/10PM-LATE**

An extravaganza of poetry and frolics with words that may disturb.

BREEZING ON POETIC WINGS

ADAM HOROVITZ

The Wasafiri tour hit Cheltenham in a hurricane of words and music last night, and no roof of head was left unlifted. Mimi Khalvati, David Dabydeen, Keith Waithe and Jean 'Binta' Breeze were here to celebrate 20 years of Wasafiri magazine, set up to celebrate 'the many writers left out of the syllabus', a situation that has happily now changed.

The night started with Khalvati, whose fusion of delicate, littoral Englishness and forms of Iranian verse bring poems of love and migration, celebrations and elaborations of the past, poems of silence and the power of silence. 'There are many kinds of silence/none more radiant than the sun's,' she says. 'Our lives have more to answer to than love.'

She is followed by Dabydeen, reading a delicate passage from an old novel that explored the British attitude to people of a different colour, set in a South Coast cliff village. 'When they got over the shock of my appearance,' says the West Indian protagonist, 'they had a hard look at me and possibly saw nothing.' The sea was a strong metaphor in his

Jean 'Binta' Breeze, who celebrated Wasafiri magazine with Mimi Khalvati, David Dabydeen and Keith Waithe in Cheltenham last night.



reading last night; the tides of assimilation, acceptance and change run deep in his work.

The night closed with the almighty combination of Jean Breeze and Keith Waithe, whose sets blend into one another, Breeze's tender earthiness grounding the extravagant music of Waithe's flute. Last night Breeze celebrated Windrush and the housewife, Africa and life, in a

glorious four-poem set.

Waithe closed. Dancing through the crowd with an ocarina or pricking tears from eyes with his multi-layered, tipsytloptical, effects-pedalled, flauting streams of consciousness, he is to the flute what James Joyce is to the novel.

Last night's show was, in Khalvati's words, 'a living spark between the living and the dead'.

UNEASY INTERIORS

CHRIS CUNDY

Gijs van Hensbergen, a lecturer in the field of architecture, spoke yesterday of 'Guernica', that great painting of uneasy interiors.

'Guernica' was Pablo Picasso's monumental response to the appalling human tragedy of 1937, when the spiritual capital of the Basque region of Spain was indiscriminately bombed in the first example of a fascist *blitzkrieg* to happen on European soil.

Van Hensbergen made it glaringly obvious that there is no easy way to read the painting. For all its pertinent immediacy, the questions which 'Guernica' asks appear to be unanswerable, because the answers are unthinkable. So unthinkable, in fact, that in 2003 a blue shroud was ignominiously thrown over a reproduction of Picasso's original at the UN during a public address by US Secretary of State Colin Powell. As Powell put his case for war to the

rest of the world, the very presence of 'Guernica' would, we were told, send out too difficult, too complicated, a message.

'Guernica' influenced a generation of American painters – most notably Jackson Pollock's iconic action painting, but itself remains powerful in its silence. Out of a darkened Town Hall interior, van Hensbergen insisted: 'You haven't come to a lecture on 'Guernica' to be cheered up.' A dumbstruck audience shuffled away in silence.



BEE'S THE BEE'S KNEES

DANIEL HAHN

For a writer christened Bee (not, note, 'Bea'), a historian and a food writer to boot, the idea of writing a sort of social history of honeybees must have been an obvious project on which to embark. And yesterday at the Festival, Bee Wilson made a fascinating case for her subject's importance.

Wilson's book, *The Hive*, is as much about human nature and human behaviour as about *Apis mellifera* (which, Bee explained to us, should properly be *Apis mellifica*, but we'll just let that go). Wilson explores 'bee politics' (hierarchies and distribution of labour in the hive) but also, and more interestingly, how we humans have used it to represent systems of our own, changing how we interpret it as we change our own political systems *du jour* – it's monarchy, totalitarianism, communism or republicanism, depending on what it is that we're

trying to prove.

Now, Wilson's case for honeybees being the second most remarkable of species might be overstated just a little, but there's certainly something striking about the interest we have taken in them consistently over the centuries, the wildly imaginative symbolism our different cultures and religions have ascribed to them. Of course, most of the properties that have been assigned to bees and honey are no more than myth – unless you believe that bees are the manifestations of dead human souls, and that honey can cure baldness, impotence and, well, almost anything (and indeed the audience did seem unnaturally sprightly after a free sample...).

Although these pseudo-scientific misconceptions might not tell us much about how bees really work, they do offer an insight into the most fascinating species of all.

FAMILIES & FISH GLUE

BRENDA READ-BROWN

Michael Rosen says that he finds it really hard to write continuous prose, and pretty hard to write poetry. He has written his autobiography in three books: each consists of individual paragraphs and pages; each starts at the beginning and works through his life. It's up to the reader to make connections and find threads.

He read many pieces, dealing with Germany and Jewishness, France and fish glue, his illness and the death of his son. In each short piece, serious or funny – often both – his passion for words was patent. Irony glittered even as he portrayed his grief in snapshots with unforgettable images. A clock made by his son with the letters HOWTIMEFLIES instead of numerals falls from the wall, and the letters tumble to the floor; his son's last words, answering a riddle, were 'Your bum.'

'Why do you treat serious subjects in a humorous way?' he was asked. Sometimes, he said, he doesn't know that he's being funny; sometimes his family upbringing surrounded by the irony of Jewish humour is inescapable, and sometimes moments are so odd that he just has to leave them bald.

Rosen's reading style reflected his work – dry, almost offhand, making points with understatement and the smallest gestures, although with some panache when it came to the bits in French. But his replies to questions revealed his abilities to reach an audience with more than the written word.

Naturally, some of the queries were about writing for children and he replied with knowledge and authority. And then he gave a memorable exposition on understanding poetry. A lady in the audience apologised for not having understood the last piece he had read.

We 'do poetry' at school, he explained, worrying that the person in front understands much more than we do; then at 'A' level we have to read books about poetry, and we find that even what we thought we understood was wrong; and finally at university there are the people who wrote the books, and we are told that we can't even begin to comprehend the ambiguities – so we keep very quiet and give up. But, he said, actually you did understand the poem; it was in English, and you know what the words mean, and what they mean to you is what the poem is about. It's all open-ended.

The shame was that this event wasn't open-ended enough. Even another hour of Michael Rosen's excellent teaching would not have been enough.

NEIL KINNOCK: UNITED WE STAND

JON ANDRIESSEN

In an unsurprisingly partisan speech yesterday, Neil Kinnock robustly defended the position and future of the European Union in maintaining the stability and wealth of its member states in the wake of an obfuscating media. 'Sovereignty and freedom,' he assured us, will be safeguarded under the EU banner.

At pains to redress the continuous stream of anti-European hysteria, Kinnock pointed a dismissive finger in the direction of Michael Howard, UKIP and the BNP, but interestingly neglected to mention the opposition voiced by the left-wing syndicate led by the likes of Tony Benn. It seemed prudent to concentrate on the one single oppositional view of the right-wingers and racists – it's always good to polarise when making political testimony.

Kinnock sees Europe as something to be nurtured, steadily and with the consent of its members, whilst openly admitting to the many and varied inconsistencies currently obstructing this aim – the Common Agricultural Policy being a case in point. The long-term view seems to be of some multinational, yet individually responsible, gestaltist collective – something for everyone to benefit from. Whether it be clean water in the poorer nations, the latest scientific breakthroughs from those more educationally advanced or



simply sharing in the rich veins of culture from across the continent, a multinational feast of energies and resources combines to create an atmosphere of 'liberty and freedom. Globalisation and integration are the facts of modern life. Isolation is not an option, it's puny!'

Always quick to sing the EU's praises – as a Commissioner you might expect that – he was proud to announce that 'standards of mobile communications are better in Europe than anywhere else in the world. No one single state could achieve this', he told us. If only all communication between nations and their people was as advanced as this, maybe then we could really understand the term 'united' and agree on Europe.

LORDING THE FLIES

S. CHARRINGTON & A. HIORNS

50 years ago Golding's first published novel shocked the literary world with its terrifying portrayal of human nature and his notion of mankind's 'original sin'. Chaired by Alistair Niven, Melvyn Bragg, Dame Beryl Bainbridge and Professor John Carey took the floor at the Everyman Theatre to discuss what is regarded as one of the great novels of the twentieth century.

'There was a Nazi in me.' Lord Bragg reminded us of Golding's assertion regarding humanity's potential for evil, despite his having served as a Royal Navy officer himself. He believed all of mankind was susceptible to its inevitable flaw, 'original sin', and therefore could become reduced to the baser evil which is born within us. Coming from a background of progressive socialism, it is surprising that such an upbringing could spawn such a bleak and pessimistic view of mankind. However, as Bragg pointed out, the ending is essentially one of



hope, with the restoration of order and the saving of Ralph.

There was some argument about how close the final publication is to Golding's original manuscript, which was sent back marked: 'A lot of rubbish about boys on a desert island. Reject.' Despite this initial response from Faber the novel was finally accepted after editing, although the extent is still a contentious issue.

Bragg and Carey certainly disagreed, the latter informing us that much editing was undertaken.

PITY POOR PEREGRINE

ALEX RUNCHMAN

To govern effectively, Sir Peregrine Worsthorpe insisted at The Everyman last night, one needs a sense of tradition. Something as important as government cannot simply be left to the rat-race.

Furthermore, our current culture of 'Presentism' – 'a feeling that the less of the past you recall, the freer you are to move into the future' – is having a pernicious influence. The idea is 'philistine and barbarous', he argued, because it's impossible to think of the future without reference to the past. This claim was central to his outspoken argument in favour of a governing aristocracy.

Attired in regal bow-tie and russet corduroys, Worsthorpe explained his complex stance. In the past, public schools and Oxbridge trained the privileged in leadership, enabling them to give something back to the society that had benefited them. These days, he suggested, you might be at a disadvantage if you want a job in government and admit to having been to public school – and you certainly shouldn't own up to having a title. The privileged are instead becoming entrepreneurs and bankers, advancing themselves but doing little in the way of public service.

Worsthorpe's position is controversial, and he wouldn't concede any ground to detractors in the audience. The message now sent out to the titled is 'You're not wanted in politics', and that, he maintained, is undesirable since in the past this section of society has provided good public servants.

THE STOAT

During questions from the audience in Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo's event yesterday, a terribly nervous young lad stood up and asked: 'Mr Morpurgo, how come you've ruined – I mean written! – so many books?'

Even arriving late for his lecture last night, thanks to traffic delays, Neil Kinnock nonetheless found time to sign greasy scraps of paper for a pair of queue-jumping autograph-hunters, whilst the Festival's stage management tried to hurry him into the hall. The auditorium was packed at the time. What a nice man Neil Kinnock is; he's clearly not lost his interest in fringe groups.