

# LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE  
SATURDAY 9 OCTOBER 2004  
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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

### DORIS LESSING

TOWN HALL/2-3PM

Doris Lessing joins Helen Dunmore to discuss characters.

### PATIENCE AGBABI, SOPHIE HANNAH & JACKIE KAY

TOWN HALL/3.30-4.30PM

Readings from the **Next Generation Poets** list.

### LOUIS SACHAR

CHELT. COLLEGE/5.30-6.15PM

A chance to meet master storyteller **Louis Sachar**, author of *Holes*.

### ALAN GARNER

TOWN HALL/7.15PM-8.15PM

The author of *The Owl Service* and *Thursbitch* speaks.

### UK ALLCOMERS POETRY SLAM

TOWN HALL/8.45-LATE

More **Slam-tastic** poetry at the 10th Slam. With added samba.

Picture credit:

James Kelman by Murdo Macleod

## DOWNING A HASTY CHERIE AT THE FIRST WIVES' CLUB

PETER WYTON

**Life in your standard issue pet shop goldfish bowl holds few surprises.**

**You don't need a committee to choose the imitation seabed ornamentation. You don't get a battalion of Special Branch to keep the cat at a respectable distance.**

You can poke your scaly head out of the plastic castle without having to comb your fins first. The deluxe model, however, as marketed in the half-century of the Elizabethan era under the Downing Street trademark, is altogether a different sub-marine experience. Life in Number Ten, a house in a terraced street nearly as famous as the one Oop North where they have the Rovers Return, was examined in detail in the Pillar Room at Cheltenham Town Hall yesterday afternoon.

The focus was on those residents who had not been elected to live there, but inhabited the place more or less on sufferance. In attendance to examine the lives of the most recent six women and one man who have occupied the post of Prime Ministerial spouse were co-



authors of a new book, the appropriately titled *Goldfish Bowl*, Cate Haste and Cherie Blair (or 'Liberarchie', as she is known to her friends in Anagramists Anonymous).

From 1953 to 1997, the book bulges with anecdotes about the minor triumphs and tragedies experienced, firstly by Clementine Churchill, all the way to a brief look at the present incumbent of a post

which is still officially unrecognised by either the government or the Civil Service. One of the most extraordinary examples of this Unperson Status – and one of the most repetitious – occurs at every election resulting in a change of Prime Minister.

The new First Family (or in the case of Ted Heath, First Bachelor) poses on the famous steps for the massed ranks of photographers. Eventually the newcomers are whisked inside and the door closes on the clamour. At this point the new PM is spirited away to begin the task of choosing the Cabinet. The family is invariably left (a) in the hall, and (b) to its own devices.

Incredibly it seems that no-one in the building has any responsibility for ushering the bewildered and suddenly disorientated family to its quarters. One pictures them climbing stairs, cautiously opening doors, withdrawing apologetically under the outraged glare of some garbled Permanent Under-Secretary, to roam the corridors like lost souls.

## THE SIGHTLESS SEER OF BUENOS AIRES

ROGER TURNER

**Can any good thing come out of Argentina? Could I even be sure enough how to pronounce Borges' name, before dropping it into a conversation?**

Evidently Edwin Williamson felt it was worth devoting nine years of his life to writing the 'definitive' biography of Jorge Luis Borges, a man who everyone agrees is of major importance but whose greatness is hard to put a finger on – 'the most influential writer in Spanish since Cervantes' being the likely tag.

A fascination with labyrinths, mirrors, tigers, daggers, infinity, total libraries, Anglo-Saxon literature, detective fiction and the history of eternity doesn't necessarily make you a writer of genius, though it can help. Yet anyone who reads Borges somehow feels that he is speaking

for them in ways no other writer has attempted, that he belongs to the World and his roots in Argentina are a mere accident. Williamson pointed to Borges' personal aura – creating a hush when he was led like a blind Homer onto a platform to give a lecture.

One possible cause for Borges' 'deracination' was his sudden uprooting at the age of fourteen, to spend his crucial years growing up in Geneva. Another was the fact that he wasn't sent to school, but spent his childhood in the 'universal world' of his father's library.

Other sources of Borges' inspiration, in the fields of love and politics, were explored by Williamson, whose book, *Borges: A Life*, admirably roots out the great man's unusual obsessions.

## PLAYING THE NEWELL

ALAN MADDRELL

**Rarely for a Festival event, there was a quite unorganized, spontaneous feel about the unholy trinity filling John Cooper Clarke's absent pointy shoes. It is a terrible ask, but who better to tackle it than his friend, Essex's own hybrid of JCC and Jasper Carrott, Martin Newell?**

The first part of the uncouth triptych was Steve Tasane, the floppy-haired one with a child-like grin and a handy line in infectious schoolyard cheek. He had to introduce himself and never really recovered, making less of an impact than those who came after. Mister Social Control, with those staring, inquisitive eyes, bears an oddly appropriate resemblance to the comic-store owner from *The Simpsons*. He delivered some superbly boggling blends of scientific philosophy, stirring croutons of quantum mechanics with anti-capitalist bile.

After a boozy, CD-buying interval,



The Main Event – Mr. Martin Newell – strode swiftly through the audience, all teddy-boy jacket and black drainpipes. He is just as funny as the man he replaced, with a similar tendency to chuck the odd classy one-liner in between heady poems which by turns exhibit blinding comic wordplay and gross-out gags about 'Cupid's toothpaste'.

It was all this sort of event should be: overwhelmingly funny, at brief moments poignant and full of variety. Sometimes you can replace the irreplaceable...

## ONLY TONY

LAURA DAVISON

**Cheltenham is Tony Benn's latest stop on a world record attempt to circumnavigate Britain single-handed, clutching just a pipe and a set of political ideals.**

He claims to be a lifelong opponent of organized religion but clearly has a strong faith: in progress and in fighting for what you believe in. He is an optimist who thinks that democracy is the most revolutionary thing in the world and who points to the successes of movements like the Suffragettes and the Tolpuddle Martyrs as indications that minority protests eventually become mainstream policies.

The subject of Iraq occupied a great deal of the evening – Benn's anti-war views are well known. We learned that he has written to the International Criminal Board to ask for a judgement on whether the war was legal and that he believes people have been systematically and deliberately lied to over the issue.

Despite the serious nature of the subjects discussed, the event was cheering. Benn himself remains uncowed and after eighty years as a witness to the world is a testament to the rejuvenating power of saying what you believe and acting on it. As he himself remarked he can't be cynical when the population is, for the first time, on the left of the ruling political party. And he had a nice cup of tea beside him.

## LAST LETTERS FROM AMERICA

DANIEL HAHN

**Veteran BBC broadcaster Sue MacGregor hosted this tribute to Alistair Cooke, an hour with equally-veteran Political Editor John Cole and Cooke biographer Nick Clarke, who has himself notched up three decades of service to the BBC.**

But these old hands were upstarts compared to the man they came to celebrate. When Cole was given his first reporting job in 1956, Cooke had already been presenting his trademark *Letter from America* for a decade; Clarke, I dare say, had not even been born when it first aired. When Cole retired from the BBC, many, many decades later, Cooke was still there; and when 2004 rolled in, yes, *Letter from America* was still filling its regular thirteen-minute slot.

When he died earlier this year, Cooke had written and broadcast 2,800 of them. In the last forty years,



he missed only three broadcasts, a record he achieved by filing reports not just from his Manhattan apartment but often from San Francisco, from London, even from his hospital bed. He guarded his territory jealously; on learning once that during his summer holiday the programme was to be presented by a colleague, Cooke didn't even bother arguing with the BBC – he simply cancelled his holiday.

Cooke was nothing if not bloody-minded; he knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. His break into journalism came in the 1930's, when he approached *The Observer* claiming to have secured interviews with some Hollywood superstars, and then approached these same stars claiming a commission from *The Observer*; everyone capitulated, of course, and the interviews were run.

Clarke and Cole were ready to concede those elements of Cooke that were less than heroic – his difficult relationship with his children and his stubbornness and profound self-absorption, amongst other things.

But above all this was an amiable and affectionate recollection of a broadcaster much loved, the man described in a Guardian leader article as 'a bloody nuisance, but worth it'.

## ALIVE AND KICKING

ADAM HOROVITZ

**It's not often you get sequels in poetry, but after the success of Neil Astley's *Staying Alive* – the anthology with more celebrity endorsements than most diets – it was almost inevitable that *Being Alive* would come out.**

That numerous readers sent in their suggestions for what could or should go into any sequel can only have added to Astley's need to release the book; it adds to the organic feel of both collections which has made them so popular with readers and poison for critics. Poetry, of course, can survive pretty well without critics (that's me out of a job then), so anything that engages readers – and makes them go out and hunt down those poets whose work they like – is to be encouraged. As are book launches like this one in Ottakar's yesterday evening.

With finely judged readings from Esther Morgan and Sara-Jane Arbury – from work by the lesser-known poets in *Being Alive* – and Astley delightedly waving metaphorical fists at what he calls 'the Poetry Police', the evening trod a careful line between entertainment and the excitement of hearing fine new ideas. In the words of Elma Mitchell's 'This Poem...', which opened the show: 'All poems must carry a Government warning. Words/ Can seriously affect your heart.'

## SWINGERS

ALICE PALMER

**Jazz Stories, last night in the Town Hall, told the tale of a honey with a horn – the prodigiously talented jazz musician Valaida Snow – under the expert guidance of former Hollywood screenwriter Candace Allen.**

Allen's novel charts Valaida's life, from her mysterious origins in Chatanooga through a vaudeville education and performances in far-flung locations like China, Paris and even a stint in Nazi-occupied Denmark. For a black woman in the 1930's, Valaida's wide travels and blossoming career required a steely determination as well as undisputed talent. She was determined to play in 'serious' groups rather than the derided all-girl jazz groups of the age.

After her Hollywood career, Allen seems to have found freedom in the medium of the novel. Her readings sparkled with colourful metaphors and certainly conjured the spirit of mid-20th century black America.

I'm sure many members of last night's audience would agree wholeheartedly with Valaida herself, that 'swing is the thing'.

## WELSH DEVOLUTION

JON ANDRIESEN

**If literature has geographical boundaries, then Scotland must be the place on the map that reads 'here be monsters.' In response to this apparent London-centric RP obsession – middle-class dinner-party-nightmare lit – Scots James Kelman and Irvine Welsh came to sound out their Celtic timbre in a two-fingered salute towards the literary establishment. Well, sort of, anyway.**

Staring out through thistle-tinted glasses, both gave readings of immense passion. Their now-trademark phonetic realism said far more than a *Microsoft* spell checker could wish for and the honesty of endless expletives revealed a world we actually live in; not tainted by *Grange Hill*-style rewrites for the 'let's pretend' school. It's uncompromisingly real and yet fantastic at the same time.

On the downside, Welsh's recent stay in the States and insistence that the American voice is saturating the media has not aided his ability to read first person narrative in the said dialect. His gay USA chef circled round Stallone, dipped into Ken Hom then



verily flew through the host of accents Connery mangled together in his Oscar-winning performance in *The Untouchables*. Frustrated actor? Let those who saw his cameo in *Trainspotting* decide.

Ultimately, it's hard to agree that these talented writers are really suffering at the hands of the so-called literati. If awards and book contracts are the yardstick of success then they may well be considered the privileged few; but for all that, it's bookshop window space that counts. As Kelman said: 'Unless you're John Grisham, or that kind of shit,' then it's shelf space only, I'm afraid.

## THE STOAT

**James Kelman, speaking with a certain ambivalence about his lack of acceptance into the literary establishment: 'I'm still spoken of as a newcomer, but I won the f\*\*king Cheltenham Literature Festival Prize seventeen years ago.' And a Booker Prize too back in 1994. A literary Hadrian's Wall?**

**At the launch of *Being Alive*, the sequel to *Staying Alive*, Neil Astley was in combative mood towards the book's detractors: 'I'd be disappointed if *Being Alive* didn't get more attacks from the Poetry Police,' he said, before telling us gleefully that the *TLS* had published a nasty review. The Poetry Police are 'mostly poets, not very good ones I'd say' who are 'disappearing up a linguistic cul-de-sac' in their 'house magazine' *Poetry Review*.**