

## DRACULA READS DICKENS?

In 1989 the Ceaucescu dictatorship in Romania collapsed. Two years later a Nottingham college lecturer Wendy Pratt, whilst doing a little exchange teaching, discovered the near impossibility of teaching English without a single English language book. These, and all other western language books had been banned under Ceaucescu. She decided to do something about it, and a hectic year later; spent fund-raising, negotiating with endless Romanian authorities, fighting bureaucracy and collecting 20,000 books, opened a library in Brasov in the Carpathian mountains — Dracula country!

The library was very popular, and other cities in Romania started asking for their own library. Over the next few years, more people were recruited by Wendy to help, a charity was formed (English Outreach) to give better official standing, and get the vital tax concessions, and more libraries appeared.



Romanian cities wanting a new library had to conform to a few basic rules that we insisted upon. Firstly, the library had to be open to all: not restricted by politics, profession, sex or age and secondly it had to be an "English style" library. This was a radical change from Romanian libraries, where the books were kept in the back and the reader selected a book from a card index. We insisted on books being displayed on shelves. The local authorities supplied premises, librarian and a very basic level of equipment and support from their meagre resources. We supplied an initial stock of 20,000-40,000 books, and gave what support we could, including equipment like computers and faxes from our own even more meagre resources.

13 years later, a number of libraries have been opened. Most have been very successful, some have floundered, but we and the Romanian authorities have learnt how to make things work. We currently have four main libraries in: Campina an hour's drive north of the capital Bucharest, Brasov another 1½ hour north, Medias — further to the north-west, and Slatina to the west of Bucharest. We are currently negotiating for others, and there are always "odd shelves" in a few other libraries.

A decade ago, we were not very selective about what books we sent — we couldn't be, but now things are a bit more sophisticated — the librarians know what is popular, and order from lists we send them of what we

have. A taste for English classics and more modern quality fiction is the most sought-for area, but with business, economic and management books also very popular, and children's books always in demand. Technical and scientific literature go down well, but date quickly.

If you have any of these kinds of second-hand books, in good condition, we would be delighted to receive them, and take them to Romania, where they will be very much appreciated and utilised. If you wanted to go further and really have an impact, modern magazines like *National Geographic*, *New Scientist*, *The Economist* are incredibly popular. We are looking for "subscription sponsors", who take out a subscription in the library's name, for one of these sorts of monthly publications — please contact us for more details. Finally of course, our overheads are very small, but the cost of transport to Romania is very high... any financial help would be gratefully received (and if you are a tax earner, we can get your income tax back from the Government, through Gift Aid).

**Please contact Wendy Pratt:**  
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or send cheques (made out to English Outreach), 136 Radcliffe Road, West Bridgford, Nottingham

Tony Marson



## CONTRIBUTORS

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## editorial

## small publisher news

### THAT'S THE WAY (NOT) TO DO IT

The Scottish poet Don Paterson, who is also poetry editor at Picador, recently gave a world-weary TS Eliot lecture calling for the elimination of “amateur poets” who do the odd evening class, have a mildly traumatic life experience then submit 100 pages of poetry to leading poetry publishers like Faber. This is not an original comment, but likely to be a view shared by any editor, poetry or otherwise, when opening the mail. A recent letter to a local publisher included the statement: “I am looking for a (fiction) publisher on a long-term basis. Once established I anticipate being able to submit material for editorial consideration as regularly as two novels per year. Hopefully you will see that I am an exciting opportunity.” Entertainingly the exciting opportunity in question claims to be “reasonably familiar” with that particular publisher’s list and “can see similarities with my writing and your current authors.” The publisher dared to differ. Worryingly, the writer was keen to point out that he had recently completed an MA in Creative Writing.

Another budding writer should certainly go on a course of some sort, to stop her writing a single sentence speculative letter “I was wondering if you would care to look at a novel I wrote?” Equally speculative was the “Dear Sir/Madam” letter asking “Could you please give me your valued opinion on the literature I have sent you, I am particularly interested in the possibility of publishing this work. I hope this does not inconvenience you in any way...”

We’ve mentioned this before – but if writers do want to be published they need to spend some time thinking about what they are doing with their submissions before sending them off. At the very least enclose a stamped, addressed envelope; send material to publishers who publish in the same field as the submission; do not boast about how important the writer is, or how good the work; read something about the publishing industry (eg *From Pitch to Publication* by Carole Blake). I would not agree with Don Paterson. Professional poets and other professional writers do not spring fully-formed from the ether, with publishing contracts in their pockets. And never mind that there are very few professional poets, in the sense of people making a living from their work. But a moment spent giving some thought to what the recipient might think on opening a submission letter would be good for everyone.

In this issue of *County Lit* we report on recent literature projects, critically, as you would expect. Next issue we will return to more extensive review coverage once we’ve recovered from what has been our busiest season ever.

Ross Bradshaw

Nottinghamshire is the home of the Evacuees Reunion Association, and their monthly journal *The Evacuee*. A recent sample issue of the magazine included articles on the major Jewish “kindertransport” evacuee centre of Shefford in Bedfordshire, many individual stories of evacuees from London and the South Coast and a “lost touch” section for people who were evacuees or homed evacuees. The ERA can be contacted at The Mill Business Centre, Mill Hill, Gringley-on-the Hill, Nottinghamshire DN10 4RA, 01777 81, [era@evacuees.org.uk](mailto:era@evacuees.org.uk).

Nottinghamshire Festivals Directory is now available. This free booklet includes everything from top tips on how to run a Festival to addresses for hiring everything from marquees to your nearest Samba band. Just the job if you need to hire a portable toilet and electrifying if you need a generator. Copies are available from 01623 825035, [nextstage@nottsc.gov.uk](mailto:nextstage@nottsc.gov.uk).

**Sheds is the outcome of a joint commission** of poet Pat Borthwick and photographer Jonathan Legge, based round the Newark Harvest project on allotments sites in Newark. The full colour photographs are stunning – from the cover image of a set of keys in an allotment shed (the shed of Rupert Vinnicombe, librarian at Newark Library, since you ask) through to the last image of a mysterious shed lit up at nightfall. The Newark Harvest project is running to its close now and it’s not clear where to get further copies of this beautiful booklet from, but we guess that the most important people in this, plotters in Newark, will find it somehow! The project was supported by any amount of groups. A whole forest of logos appears on the inside back cover. And the poems are good too.

**Paging Doctor Jazz** is Shoestring Press’s most ambitious book yet – the first anthology of jazz poems to be published in the UK. 55 poets contribute 100 poems and the book is a must for those who know the work of Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, John Coltrane... Several of the poets are local, the ubiquitous Derrick Buttress, John Harvey of course, and the book is edited by John Lucas who adds a short history of jazz in the UK as an introduction. It is hard to read the book without a backing track starting to well up at the back of your mind. Which is how it should be. As Roger Burford Mason writes (in “Three for the Duke”): “The song ends/ but the storm goes on.” *Paging Doctor Jazz* costs £10 from Shoestring, 19 Devonshire Avenue, Beeston, Nottingham NG9 1BS.



## ON THE BUSES

### DIARY OF A BUS POET

Ok, the idea, as you may or may not know, is that I produce one poem for each Nottingham City Transport (henceforth NCT) timetable. Maybe you’ve seen one. You might even have picked one up on a bus. When the project’s finished it should wind up a bit like a jigsaw puzzle of Nottingham and Nottingham people. It’ll be up to you how many of the pieces you collect. If you don’t want to travel the entire NCT network, you should be able to pick them up in the travel centre and in libraries. But why you wouldn’t want to travel the network is, frankly, beyond me.

**Day one.** I am on the 13 feeling ridiculously self-conscious. I have with me a notebook, a map of Nottingham and the NCT Journey planner. I don’t know what to put in the notebook. I put the date and the time and the bus number. Now what. Nothing comes. Before I began this I was always getting ideas for poems on buses. What is wrong with me? I get off the bus and walk across Abbey Bridge, maybe something will strike me and anyway, I am looking for a timber yard because I can’t complete this project without shelves. I find two men leaning against a wall as though it’s their job. They tell me the timber yard is several miles away and in the opposite direction but I’ve met their type before and I find it just over the bridge. It’s no good to me, we’re talking quality like you’ve never seen. Lovely people though, they told me where I could go to get soft wood with knots in it.

So it’s later on the same day and I’m on the 48. Nothing so far seems like a poem. I am reduced to writing down the route in obsessive detail. At this stage, if anyone had asked me what I was doing, I would have lied. I get off at the riverside industrial estate and go to the timber yard where I meet another comedian. This one thinks he is Peter Kay but we get the job done and I order my shelving. Still nothing looks like a poem. I see a bit of water, no way is it a river and there are damselflies darting about and fish swimming tight packed in a hurry as though they have a lunch date further down the cut. I have a vague idea they might be poetic. Then I go home.

**Day two.** On the Mansfield Road, I am trying to relax, to let ideas come to me. Mansfield Road seems

sad, there are more and more boarded up shops, litter everywhere and the people waking up and down seem depressed. I have a bit of an idea for a poem about sitting on the top deck and seeing how different things are from up there but this is a bendy bus – one deck. I go to Arnold and try not to be rude to a man who has attached a hooter to his mobility scooter and really does think he’s incredibly funny. What he’s not is poetic. Not even slightly. I am trying not to panic. Earlier, I had half noticed a bit of waste ground covered in wild flowers/weeds and on the way back into town I get off the bus to look at it. I count at least twenty different types, which make a nice contrast with the way I was seeing Mansfield Road earlier. I know quite a few of the flowers already but I pick samples of the ones I don’t recognise and am standing on a mound of broken bricks ready to go back to the bus stop. A car passes with a young lad leaning precariously out of the window. He shouts at me: ‘Hey, lady, are you married, because if you’re not, will you please marry me?’ Which was nice.

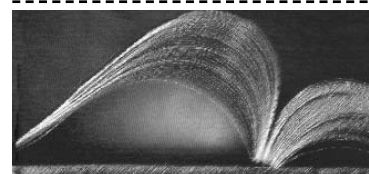
I go home to my shed. I waste a lot of paper. I have ideas about damselflies and marriage proposals but little comes of them. And then something begins to work. I write a poem about the Xylophone Man and one about men in timber yards who think they are comedians.

To be continued.

Rosie Garner

### OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED FOR REVIEW

*The Creation Myth*, a comic novel by Clare Brown (Bloomsbury, £10.99, published January 05); *After the Gold Rush*, a travel narrative by John Stuart Clark (Five Leaves, £9.99); *Jewel in the Attic and the Adventures of Tiger*, a children’s book by Janet Kimmons (Paul Mould, no price); *A Will of Iron*, a long narrative poem about Ironville by Kevin Fegan (Five Leaves, £4); *The Long and the Short of It*, new poems by John Lucas (Redbeck, £8.95); *The Falcons of Montabard*, historical fiction by Elizabeth Chadwick (Little, Brown, £17.99); *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, fiction by Susanna Clark (Bloomsbury, £17.99); *Finding Voices, Making Choices*, community arts edited by Mark Webster and Glen Buglass (Educational Heretics, £10), Some of these will be reviewed next time.



## County Lit

To join Nottinghamshire County Council’s literature mailing list please return this slip to Literature Mailing List, Arts Marketing, 4th Floor, Nottinghamshire County Council, County Hall, West Bridgford, Nottingham NG2 7QP.

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tend to ramble. I liked the poem 'Drawing the curtains' which though quite recent is reminiscence from his childhood. His poetry was entirely retrospective. He did not do his poem about the Gulf War but as I recall even that harked back to Sunday school. He was friendly and touching but seemed hopelessly out of touch and the performance itself was sloppy. Clearly there had not been time for a sound check because the microphone was a good six inches too low. He did not attempt to adjust it at first and stooped until near the end when he did try to swivel it up in the holder. And of course we had the inevitable 'this next poem if I can find it...' Why must poets act like this? I think it must be a symptom of English middle-class obsession with amateurism. It drives me mad.

Saturday afternoon at the Minster Centre definitely had a PG rating... **John Lucas** kicked off with a riveting introduction to the amazing story and awesome poetry of the Dark Age Icelandic hatchet bard, Egil, which many people had heard performed the night before by the **London Sinfonietta**. It was a fascinating tale, which at the same time gave an excellent insight into the excruciating complexities of the business of translation. **Mario Petrucci** followed this with a reading from *Heavy Water*, poems written from first hand accounts recorded by Svetlana Alexievich in *Voices from Chernobyl*. These were moving, harrowing and delivered well but were perhaps a wee bit too literal at times. Poetry and journalism make strange bedfellows. Mario is currently poet in residence at the Southwell Workhouse and he gave us a taste of his work in progress. 'Shanty' likens the life inside to life on board ship, a very apt analogy. Mario's ability to write so credibly from another viewpoint will serve him well here.

The Workhouse committee room was the venue for another joint venture on Saturday: **Julia Darling** and **Elizabeth Smither**, a visitor from New Zealand. Sadly this time the two poets did not seem to gel and despite an atmosphere redolent with mystery right in the heart of this captivating building, it fell rather flat. For Elizabeth Smither in particular it was the wrong place at the wrong time. She should really have been reading in the home furnishings department of John Lewis. Her poetry was mundane to the point of banality and she went on far too long. Julia Darling was better. She read vivaciously from her poignant collection of poems that chart her journey through the experience of breast cancer, *Sudden Collapses in Public Places*. These were sensitive, perceptive and often wryly amusing. In the second half she read from a more recent collection and it was good to see that she has moved on from being the 'Cancer Poet' now. The subject matter was more varied, though it has to be said all the family-domestic stuff was a bit predictable.



Rosie Miles, Nicola Slee, Rowena Edlin-White

George Orwell invented a category of poetry that he called 'good bad poetry'. I think he included Kipling in this and I'm fairly certain that if their lives had overlapped he would have included **Simon Rae** too. There is no doubt that Rae is a very clever writer. His ability to produce witty and apposite poems to tight deadlines at the *Guardian* for ten years was remarkable. But on Sunday afternoon in the Refectory he seemed to be stuck in doggerel mode. Apart from some of his Oxford poems, particularly 'Abandoned Cottage' it was all rather samey, good-bad stuff.

The Festival came to a close on Sunday night at the Minster School with a beautifully written and presented account of **Isaac Rosenberg's** life and work. Its author, Jean Liddiard, narrated and the actor Sam Dastor performed Rosenberg's poems. A bit like his contemporary Edward Thomas, I have always felt that apart from a few exceptional poems the bulk of his work is rather pedestrian. Although this excellent presentation did nothing to change my view, it certainly taught me a great deal about the man, his life and his work. It was a deeply moving testimony and a particularly fitting finale to the Festival.

On the drive back to Nottingham I reflected on the weekend as a whole. I had certainly enjoyed my poetry pilgrimage in the sanctuary of Southwell's cloistered walls. The organisation and programming was flawless and the atmosphere enchanting, but something was missing. As we sped towards Nottingham I recalled that on Friday I had dropped a friend off in Forest Fields on the way home from the first night. We drove down Berridge Road where the streets were alive with excited passers-by on the cusp of the weekend's Diwali celebrations. As I set my friend down I involuntarily glanced over my shoulder as if to catch a glimpse of the Minster's twin spires in their floodlit distances which I'd got so used to. They were too far away of course. Not just in physical distance.

Ian Collinson

## RESIDENCY

**Lynn Adgar finishes her writer** residency at Victoria Centre and the Royal Centre with the launch of the two wall plaques she has created with poems embedded. The poems have been written from conversations with shoppers and theatre-goers throughout the Residency. This launch will take place on Friday 14 January at 10am in the Upper Mall of the Victoria Centre and the plaques will be on display for that day only, before they move to the Royal Centre.

## nottinghamshire reviews

### Sum Total

by Ray Gosling (Pomona, £9.99)

This "sort of" autobiography was written in 1961 when Ray Gosling was twenty-one and was first published by Faber & Faber the following year. If this forwardness seemed like tempting fate, happily, as his preface to the new edition confirms, forty years on Ray is alive and (fairly) well, living in Nottingham, with a terrific back catalogue of radio and television documentaries and assorted writings. Their golden thread is his passionate advocacy of the odd, the unconventional, the outsider, the underdog, the 'C' streamer (among whom he somewhat implausibly places himself).

He's also feeling a little grumpy about the conformism of today's young and especially their mobile phones. You take his point. The style and the politics which surge through this fiercely precocious book are a world and a couple of generations away from the importance of trainers. And would Ray's characteristic elusiveness have survived his mates texting him "WER R U?"

His new publishers are "dedicated to bringing before the public the work of prodigiously talented writers" (some publishers aren't, of course) and the blurb offers *Sum Total* as "a lost masterpiece of British literature, a restless, hungry riposte to America's finest beat writers". The dread this inspires is misplaced. It really is a very good book. Astonishing, in fact, from someone barely out of his teens — such poise, such self-awareness, such sharp deconstruction of his own egotism and self-indulgence, leaving readers far in his wake as they try to formulate these for themselves.

And sometimes frustrating. Young Ray was also a precocious traveller and there are teasing glimpses of Paris, London, Liverpool, Manchester, Blackpool, Nottingham which never quite reveal why he went there and what he got up to. Exceptions are made only for Northampton, his home town, and Leicester where, 'C' streamer as he was, he went to university, dropped out in his first year and got himself embroiled in an ultimately disastrous attempt to set up a self-governing youth centre.

The book begins shortly after this with Ray's traumatic departure from Leicester, accompanied by a black eye and an interior monologue mournfully addressed to the beloved "You" left behind (never identified by name or sex). The rest of the book describes both the life which led to the disaster and the development of the anarchist instincts which were partly responsible for it.

There is plenty of adventurous writing in and among, including several pages of Burroughs-style cut-up (seemingly a kind of revenge on typescripts which refused to organise themselves properly). Though it works well enough, I confess a lowbrow preference for the more conventional account of his eccentric childhood and adolescence. This, a large chunk of the book, is classically well written and I could almost regret the lost autobiography which would have been entirely like that.

But a hugely enjoyable book, highly recommended to anyone interested in a unique, idiosyncratic character and an inside view of the moment when fifties rock 'n' roll rebellion was morphing into wider, more politicised sixties hedonism.

John Sheffield

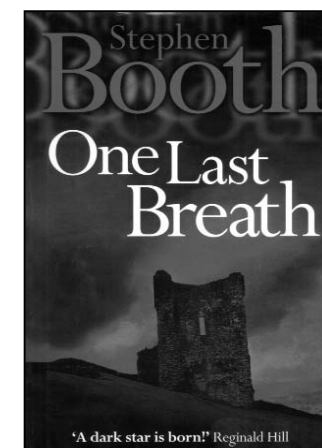
**One Last Breath**  
by Stephen Booth  
(HarperCollins, £10)

Once again, **Stephen Booth** manages to add to his reputation as a writer who not only shapes his crime stories along traditional lines, but has enough literary strength to raise his work above the general run of the mill detective story.

In this, his fifth book, the central Cooper/Fry relationship continues to stumble on, although the involvement of Diane Fry's reformed drug addict sister, Angie, adds some interesting new tensions and opens up a little more of her mysterious and complex past.

As ever, Booth brings all the glories of the Derbyshire countryside right to your armchair. This time it is Castleton and its world famous system of caves that are the centre of attention. The early sequence with Ben Cooper apparently trapped underground is so brilliantly written that you being to feel as claustrophobic and panic stricken as he is. It is a great relief to find that he is only assisting in a simulated cave rescue training session. And all this before you get involved in the actual detective quality of the book.

The prologue describes a murder that took place in Castleton back in 1990, when Mansell Quinn was arrested and eventually convicted of killing his mistress in a fit of drunken rage. The murder of Quinn's wife, almost immediately after his release from Sudbrook and his subsequent non-arrival in Burton-upon-Trent, launches a manhunt that covers ground between Hathersage and Castleton.



One of the features of the story that I found most intriguing is the questions that are raised about the probity of Ben Cooper's father, the hitherto hero-worshipped police sergeant killed in a pub brawl some time ago. He was the officer first on the scene of that first murder in 1990 – was the scene properly secured? What exactly did go on? Why did Quinn's two best mates refuse to support his alibi? And who, connected, however tenuously, to that crime 14 years ago is going to be the next to fall foul of the present series of murders?

Janet Fox

## Alphabet

by Kathy Page

(Weidenfeld and Nicolson, £14.99)

**Kathy Page spent a year working as writer-in-residence** at HM Prison Nottingham in the early 1990s, and over those twelve months she probably met a lot of men like Simon Austen, the main character of her latest novel, *Alphabet*. The book takes us into the world of high security prisons, and into the head of a murderer who is beginning to come to terms with his actions. Page brilliantly evokes the environment of containment and punishment, and is equally accomplished in drawing us into Simon's world of frustration, denial and anger.

The book is structured around the idea of language, how it is used and abused by people; how people construct themselves from the language they have to hand. Thus Simon learns to write in prison, takes up correspondences with pen pals, and begins to deal with his offending behaviour by writing about his crime, and how it makes him feel. But prison is never that simple or easy; Simon cack-handedly tattoos his own body with words that other people had used to judge him, and the pen pals he writes to are not always who they seem, creating their own well-written fictions. And has Simon ever thought about what Angela (his girlfriend) felt before he killed her? Simon is transferred to a therapeutic unit where he is challenged to confront his fundamental values by writing, talking and listening.

*Alphabet* delineates the gradual transformation of a damaged man with great skill. On another level, I think Page is also writing about what it means to be a writer-in-residence in prison. After all, she worked in a place where she asked men to be creative with language, to write fictions freely. When Simon's own words are purloined and adopted by someone else, what follows is one of the most violent incidents in the book. Words, and how they are used, matter that much more inside.

As the book comes to an end, that there is no neat conclusion makes the narrative more powerful in the telling. This is a very strong novel, profound and deeply moving, and I would recommend it to all.

Chris Jones

## Open Wide

by Tom Barber, illustrated by Lynne Chapman (Chrysalis, £9.99)

**As someone who has always been the biggest coward** when it comes to going to the dentist – having to surrender to that big chair, the smell of antiseptic and the dreadful noise of the drill – I was heartened to discover a children's book which dealt with this subject in such a humorous way.

Mr Murgatroyd the dentist invites a frightened Sam into a menagerie rather than a surgery. He entices him with stories of his brave treatment of various animals, including a tiger, crocodile, beaver, cobra and even the beak of an inebriated toucan. Sam's imagination runs wild, of course, and all fear of his own impending treatment is abated.

Lynne Chapman's colourful illustrations of larger-than-life animals in such bizarre circumstances bring a lot of humour to the story. Children, I am sure, will laugh at the peculiar pictures of crocodiles and hippos having their teeth checked whilst they may identify with Sam having his treatment, shown in the colourful insets.

I shall have great fun reading this story to my grandson, as it's full of opportunities to bring the creatures to life. If Tom Barber's story not only amuses children but helps them to overcome any fears they may have of entering the dental surgery then I'm all for it.

Kathy Doust

## Midlands Medley

(Fosseway Writers, £2),

## The Race in Between

(Mansfield and Ashfield Writers Group, £2.99),

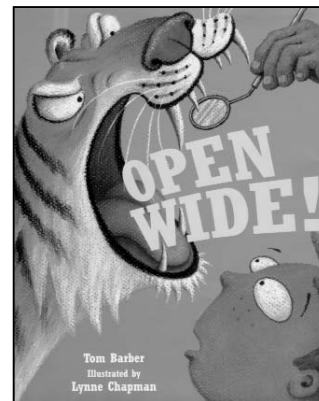
## nought point three

(Lauderette Books, Nottingham Trent

University, £4.99)

**The more eclectic the anthology**, the less easy it is to review meaningfully or usefully as a whole. This is another way of saying that a specific theme or subject makes a reviewer – or purchaser – better able to see how well aims are fulfilled. So... collections present a problem when there is no common link beyond the group to which the authors belong. This applies regardless of any piece's excellence.

*Midlands Medley* and *The Race in Between* come from local writers' groups, *nought point three* collects work from graduates and staff of Nottingham Trent Uni: many, though not all, being Creative Writing MA course members. This volume selects a higher



## POETRY IN THE COUNTY THE 2004 SOUTHWELL POETRY FESTIVAL

**This festival has a comfortingly collegiate atmosphere.** The ecclesiastical architecture creates a rarefied ambience and pilgrims progressed round Southwell's campus ready to be enlightened. Welcome to Christminster.

Let's dump the chronology, which was rather distorted anyway by the inclusion of **Dannie Abse's** reading in the Minster a full week before the Festival's launch, and click straight through to the favourites' menu. From the eleven sessions I attended the best poetry was by **Michael Symmons Roberts**; best by reading the 'Two Poets': **Katrina Porteous** and **Alice Oswald**; and the event I loved best was Sunday's rollicking Remembrance Day tour of the Minster led by local writer **Rowena Edlin-White** and poets **Nicola Slee** and **Rosie Miles**.

The whole festival enjoyed wonderful crisp, radiant autumn weather and the Minster tour benefited most from this blessing. The sun streamed in through the east windows flooding the interior with light until you felt the walls must surely all be made of glass. Just as important, this trio was obviously loving working together. Their enthusiasm was infectious. They revealed how the building itself could be said to have memory in its features and scars and scuff marks. The balance was just right, Rowena's commentary was upbeat and not overburdened with facts and the performers demonstrated how uniquely versatile and effective poetry can be in this context. They moved freely through the gears, from the solemnity of remembrance in the Polish Airman's chapel, where they combined for a moving reading of Edith Sitwell's 'Still Falls the Rain'; to Rosie's incisively witty monologue, 'Gargoyle.' In this she articulated the pithy response of the facially challenged female grotesque adjacent to the hunky new Millennium Angel statue. It was evident that a lot of effort had been put into this tour and it was justified as the three worked flawlessly together to conjure the Minster vibrantly into life.

'Two Poets' was the title of the Saturday teatime reading in the Refectory by Katrina Porteous and Alice Oswald. Although they read independently and in contrasting styles you still got the impression that they were comfortable sharing and this resulted in a very positive mood in this brimful café. Katrina is famous for her Northumbrian dialect poems and her mission to preserve the culture of a region that has lost so many livelihoods in mining, fishing, and agriculture. Her poem about the decommissioning of the cobbles in her home village of Beadnell, where these traditional wooden boats had to be burned, was particularly moving. Her poems have rhythm and musicality and her animated delivery is compelling. This is not to suggest her work lacks subtlety. Her poem about Hadrian's Wall skilfully cuts and pastes tales of how inhabitants of the region have suffered, and still suffer, at the hands of remote rulers and raiders over two

millennia. Alice Oswald's style is less vocal but she still delivered her work emphatically and with great poise. She certainly held her own coming on after a more energetic performer and this is probably why they worked well as a pairing. Her writing is more mysterious and incisive, playing tricks with perception and reality. 'The woman who lived her life backwards' was a particularly good example of the edgy feel to her work. This, 'Moon Hymn' and 'What is water?' made me want to seek out her first collection.

The recent short-listing of *Corpus* by Michael Symmons Roberts in the poetry section of the Whitbread Prize clearly came too late to boost ticket sales at Southwell. Sadly only about twenty people attended this excellent reading on Sunday afternoon in the Minster Centre. Michael gave us a thorough and informative introduction to his poetry. The striking thing about his work is that he always writes thematically. His collection *Burning Babylon* was a sequence of poems about growing up in the vicinity of Greenham Common that grew into a book. Now he cannot imagine writing any other way and *Corpus*, which considers the body, is his latest example. His background is philosophy and theology but he is comfortable with the scientific, mostly genetics in this book. Of his earlier work, the poem 'Soft Keys' impressed me most. It was cleverly written, constantly switching between different meanings, making you see the familiar in new ways. Michael talked at some length about the importance of his Christian faith. There is nothing overtly religious about his writing yet he seems perfectly at ease with the tag 'Religious Poet'. I think this is unfortunate. There is a world of difference between a poet who is religious (like Alice Oswald for instance) and the 'Religious Poet', a label that rather misrepresents the poetry of Michael Symmons Roberts.

Talking of labels, poor Dannie Abse is festooned with them. They dominated the first half of his reading in the Minster choir stalls on November 4th when he ran through the Jewish, the medical, and then the Welsh poems. It was only in the second half, once he had fulfilled his obligations to these stereotypes that we finally got Dannie the man himself. He read a lovely sequence of short poems describing each member of his family as a different flower. These were a delight, spontaneous, simple and charming. The highlight for me was his famous love poem 'Epithalamion'. The second half was as short as it was sweet, but for an old 'un he did very well. Darkness transforms this venue into a cavern that tends to swallow poets whole. Dannie did far better the Kit Wright and Kathleen Jamie last year but that would not have been difficult.

**Andrew Motion** had a better venue, launching the festival proper on Friday November 12th. The Great Hall, adjacent to the Minster, is dripping with history and perfect for poetry, atmospheric but still intimate. There was a full house for the Poet Laureate. A big name but something of a light heavyweight poetically, he came across as a sincere and modest man and the audience really warmed to him. He introduced each poem at length, which was interesting though he did

## POETRY BOOK ROUND-UP

Jane Bluett

### MENAGERIE – ANOTHER ANIMAL ALPHABET

by Richard Bonfield

(Coypu Publications, The Maltings, 18 Poppy Close, Leicester, LE2 6UR, £9.99)

**The follow up to his well-received 1993 collection, *A Bestiary – an Animal Alphabet*, *Menagerie* is a delightful collection of animal poems in the tradition of alphabet sequences that encapsulates the animal kingdom, both real and imagined, in an impressive variety of poetic forms. All animal life is here, from the Ant Eater ‘*the Dyson of the termite groves*’ to Zoo Plankton ‘*Phantasmagoric bubbleflies*’. These poems possess a delightful deftness of touch as well as a wry sense of humour, combining traditional style with a twenty-first century imagination. There are some enjoyable responses and celebrations of other poets in here too, from Ted Hughes to John Cooper Clark. A thoroughly enjoyable read for animal and poetry lovers alike.**

Some lighter moments:

**P** If a pelican  
Why can't a Parma ham...?  
Or an Elvis fan...  
Or Desperate Dan...?

**S Sun Fish**  
Vast and round is the Sun Fish  
A Salvador Dali kiss  
Wobbling across the Pacific  
Like a love struck satellite dish.

### SIGHT READING

by Peter Day

(Poetry Monthly Press, 39 Cavendish Road, Nottingham NG10 4HY, £4.00)

#### Consequence

The lunatic present  
ruins stars,  
forces silence,  
unbalances time,  
shakes identity,  
puts out reason's eyes;  
ghosts  
transform  
unreality,

find words.

**Peter Day is a poet and musician.** *Sight Reading* is his third collaboration with artist John Light. There is a quality of otherness and unreality to this collection that at once unsettles and entices. Day has a clarity of voice that speaks of nature and human emotion with

deceptive ease. The awareness of language both on the page and in the world is one of this collection's great strengths that combines effectively with Light's drawings in a most compelling, and pleasantly alphabetical, way. A very rewarding read.

### COLUMBINE

by Kate Koppana

(Phlox Publishing, Phlox Publishing, 17 Carlton Road, Newark NG24 4HD, £2.50)

**Kate Koppana is a member of the Newark Poetry Society.** She is also a keen gardener. This collection combines both these passions. A volume of poetry dedicated to the wonders of garden life, observed in great detail with a warm romantic eye.

### CONGRATULATIONS TO...

The Inside Out project – the team of writers who have been working in Nottingham Prison, and who have been successful in their application for funding from the Arts Council to continue their excellent work.

Carol Whitfield and Georgia Unsworth (11), winners of the Poetry in the City Food Poetry Competition.

Jeremy Duffield, winner of the Poetry in the City Poem from a Photograph Competition and commended poets Janice Fox and Clive Allen.

Both the above competitions were adjudicated by poet Ruth Hobson and Lakeside Arts Centre.

Pat Winslow, winner of the 2004 Nottingham Open Poetry Competition, adjudicated by Neil Astley, Bloodaxe Books.

Her winning poem is printed below:

#### A Different Kind of Minute

There's a different kind of minute  
where time goes backwards,

where diamonds re-enter rocks,  
and factories suck back their waste.

A baby might return to its womb  
and a mother might climb down from the tree.

Floods will recede and clouds drink rain,  
a dead boy will breathe in his father's arms again.  
Missiles will leave a hospital,  
Legless children will step back from mines.

Arms deal signatures will unwrite themselves  
and ink travel back up inside the pen.

In time a fist could become a hand again.

proportion of multi-page prose, while the writers' groups use slightly more poetry. It's reasonable to assume, too, that the "themed exercise, manuscript meeting" structure, often associated with writers' groups tends to favour shorter work.

In *Midlands Medley*, Ann R Parker's deft satirical observations on the British National Party make me want to hear the poem's next performance. "Harvesting" by Cynthia Keeping reflects on creative processes themselves in a form which will prompt smiles of affirmation.

Mal Leicester's "The One-Legged Seagull", included in *nought point three*, is a thoughtful picture of friendship, evocative in its detail. "Signs of Life" by Philip Hudson vividly depicts a location and occupants during a disturbing episode. In this book, however, some misspellings and grammatical lapses have eluded editing despite the comprehensively credited editorial and proof-reading team. Too many of the pieces are also distressingly undisciplined.

"Grave Goods" from *The Race in Between* sees Sharon Clancy in the house of a late friend, "trying to piece

in short

### Gone ... but not forgotten

**Several writers influential** in our live literature programme have died recently. Perhaps the most shocking was the untimely death of Michael Donaghy, the Irish-American poet. One lucky audience will remember Michael performing with the band Redstart at one of his poetry readings. Michael met the group just before the event but they immediately gelled in a memorable impromptu concert, which formed part of our long Irish programme. Michael also read at the 2003 Southwell Poetry Festival. Pete McCarthy also died young. Pete launched our Irish programme with a packed event at Lowdham Book Festival three or four years back and had an outstanding engagement with us to run a workshop on being second-generation Irish. Finally, Bernice Rubens also died this autumn. Bernice was a great supporter of libraries and appeared at Angel Row many times over the years, as well as appearing at a Jewish Book Week activity in Nottingham.

### Dementia Project

**Sue Allen, poet of this parish** (and ex-social worker for the elderly) recently completed a pilot project involving poetry and people living in Clarence Residential Home in Sutton-in-Ashfield. The project was funded by NCC's Community Initiatives Fund and resulted in a small pamphlet of poems by, and photographs of, residents. For further information

her together from things she would never have told me..." The result is memorable and moving. "Between Midnight Phenols and Three O'clock Batch Stills" is a coherent account from Andrew Giles. Its narrative flows to a conclusion free of false certainties. This book is an auspicious first anthology by the Mansfield and Ashfield group, formed but two years ago.

There is a perpetual demand and purpose for compilations of short prose and poetry, and publications by writers' groups take an honourable place among them – besides forming a valuable exercise in production for their creators. Perhaps the biggest favour groups might do themselves would be to conceive a book and its theme before most of the component parts were written. Such commissioned anthologies could supplement, without supplanting, existing forms of published collection.

(Eds note: the Newark book is available from Buy the Book in Newark, the Mansfield title – I think – from Mansfield Library and the Old Library Arts Centre.)

Jeremy Jago

please contact Sue Allen on 07966 395319,  
[fudgiesue@ntlworld.com](mailto:fudgiesue@ntlworld.com).

### Lawrence resources

**Nottinghamshire abounds with material about old DHL** (no relation to the parcel company). A handy new leaflet lists all the special collections of books, manuscripts, memorials and museums. There's more than you think. Everything from dialect readings (Local Studies Library, Oral History Collection) to the small collection at Greasley Beauvale Infant School in Newthorpe is included. Copies of the leaflet are available from libraries, DH Lawrence connected sites and on [www.lawrenceinnotts.org.uk](http://www.lawrenceinnotts.org.uk).

### Erewash success

**Erewash Writers** won the *Writers News* Publishing for Charity Community Cup, while their secretary, Janet Devereux, came first in the adult section of Derby County Council's 1-2-1 annual writing competition out of over 1,000 entries. The group are looking for new members... 0115 849 519.

### Skin Deep

**Congratulations to Li Jiang** for her first publication – under the pen name of Chu-Ching Chen – a short story in Tony Bradman's collection *Skin Deep* (Puffin, £4.99). *Skin Deep* is a collection of gripping short stories on the explosive issue of racism. Li is in excellent company, other contributors include Farrukh Dhondy. Li's story, "The Returnee" is told from the perspective of a Chinese schoolgirl in modern Japan.

“And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty will end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals.”

ANNE FRANK WRITING IN HER DIARY  
SATURDAY 15TH JULY, 1944.

## ANNE FRANK EXHIBITION: A REPORT

15,000 attend Exhibition  
3,000 children take part in arts workshops  
1,000 adults attend arts events  
150 volunteers staff exhibition  
30 youth clubs organise projects  
50 youth leaders trained in peer education against racism



Children's artwork on display at The Minster

Beyond these bald statistics on the recent Anne Frank Exhibition at Southwell Minster lies an impressive range of activities: young adults in Ollerton working on what it means to be human; new songs written by youth club members, exploring issues raised by the Anne Frank story; a twenty minute play written by Bassetlaw Youth Theatre, now touring round other youth clubs; a community group in Manton exploring Jewish storytelling; a stunning performance of Yiddish tango music in The Minster; a play on Shylock, also in The Minster and another on the musician Gustav Mahler at the Minster School. And there's more to come. Many of the schools that sent pupils to the exhibition are carrying on their work with arts work and project work on Anne Frank; youth workers will be meeting to further their work on combating racism and anti-Semitism...

Spin-offs from the Anne Frank Exhibition abound. Here are some examples in one field alone. The related East Notts Travellers Association exhibition will re-appear in Newark Parish Church; each regional library authority has agreed to buy in a special collection of books on Romanies/Travellers; new partnerships are being formed to encourage an interest in Traveller culture; Beth Shalom – the Holocaust education centre at Laxton – is planning to include Romani literature in its 10th anniversary series. This reflects an increased awareness of the impact of the Holocaust on Romani/Traveller people and the need for continued work in this area.

The Exhibition brought together a number of new partnerships, including Nottinghamshire Constabulary sponsoring arts workshops as well as their useful presence at the Exhibition to discuss modern day racist attacks/bullying with schoolchildren. The police representatives stood next to panels highlighting the case of Stephen Lawrence. Meanwhile, the Alderman White School in Bramcote has developed a direct link with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, and has organised video conferences with staff there, and a live video tour of the building.

None of this would have been possible without the commitment of the Dean and Chapter (and vergers) of Southwell Minster. It can't have been easy for them giving up many parts of the Minster for a month. Fortunately there were few incidents – here might not be the best place to mention the accidental security alert or the loud collapse of one of the ancillary exhibitions, both during quiet services elsewhere in the building... And none of this would have been possible without the volunteers guiding people round the Exhibition, dealing with endless video showings and generally stewarding the whole show.

Many people found The Minster's two-minute “on the hour” prayer very moving, and the lay readers were mostly able to have calm when they read. For that month many of the prayers were from Jewish sources (in fact they all were, given Jesus' background). There was one discussion session on Jewish and Christian stories. This

includes retelling of the Books of Ruth and Esther. Perhaps the most effective part of that event was the personal story of Dorothy Stein, a Quaker, who told of her school experience where a Jewish school friend was bullied so badly because he was a “German” that he killed himself. Dorothy later married a Jewish refugee her family had taken in, her whole family also being involved in such refugee work. Dorothy talked about the benefits her family gained by understanding and working with another culture.

For me, much of the impact of the exhibition was in the many short conversations with those attending. I give two direct examples. I asked one youth club group how much they knew about Anne Frank – one member replied “Yeah, she was a Jewish kid who had to hide for a couple of years and then she was killed.” And after that precise summary his group showed me the work they had been doing on what I might call citizenship, but they called being themselves. The second was chatting to an elderly woman who had attended evensong and who moved on to the Exhibition hall. She told me about her school friend, Rosa Cohen, who came to Nottingham as a child refugee – in the *kindertransport* – who always planned what she would do “when her mother came”. After the war she discovered that her mother and family would never join her, having been killed in one of the camps. I confess that I wept when that elderly stranger told me that Rosa Cohen killed herself as she could not bear to live without her family.

In contrast, on the crowded opening night of the Exhibition, the choir from Nottingham Progressive Jewish Congregation sang the Yiddish song of the partisans *Zog nit kainmol* (Never Say). They were followed by Esther Brunstein – who survived Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen – saying how moved she felt by that as she recalled first hearing the song in the Lodz ghetto. She recalled also her pride when word

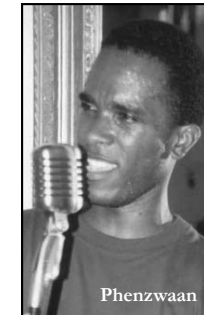
# POETRY NEWS AND REVIEWS

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## POETRY IN THE CITY, OCT 2004

2004 Poetry in the City, with its theme of food, offered the poetry punter a feast for the ears. The variety of events was tremendous – as a friend commented on seeing the programme: “We may never have to watch telly again!”



On National Poetry Day, I was impressed by 11-year-old Georgia Unsworth, whose winning entry to the **Snap!** Competition showed admirable sense of rhyme and rhythm. I was even moved to wonder if there was political intent in one of her couplets: ‘Uncle Sam / Likes his ham’. A comment on American corporate greed perhaps?

**Words on Your Street** in Lakeside Arts Centre was a vibrant evening, with young (and some not-so-young) people displaying an impressive array of talent. The atmosphere – as lively as a rock gig – proved that poetry can be exhilarating, edgy and entertaining for all ages. Rap, beat-box and hip-hop brought rhythm to the most versatile and varied audience I have ever seen at a poetry event. Well done Creative Room for bringing this about.

Poetry in the City is commendable in its showcasing of local poetry presses and groups along with better-known writers. A range of home-grown talent was on show at readings by the appropriately autumnal-named **Leafe Press** and **Five Leaves Press**. Performance poetry was well represented by **DIY Poets**, who waxed lyrical at the Wax Bar, and **Living Poets** a-Maze-d us at The Maze. **Black Drop** put on a remarkable evening at Canal House Bar. Despite raucous competition from revellers downstairs, Phenzwaan, ShortMAN and Lisa Jackson displayed their poetic and dramatic prowess, with Lisa in particular turning in an engaging performance which introduced us to a whole range of characters. Her piece struck me as one which would work brilliantly if developed into a one-woman show.

A highlight of the Festival for me was the reading by **Matthew Sweeney** and **John Hartley-Williams** at Waterstone's. They formed a hilarious double-act, with Sweeney being particularly funny, but maybe that was just me succumbing to the charm of his Donegal accent. Yes, I admit I *was* actually kneeling at his feet while he signed a book for me.

The pleasure of **Carol Ann Duffy's** poetry was enhanced by a workshop beforehand run by Cathy Grindrod. Duffy's poetry is now just about ubiquitous, and on this showing, she proved what a fine Poet Laureate she would make if only the Powers-That-Be had half her wit and could recognise her abilities. The audience was on her side from the opening line, and on what was possible the wettest night of the year, it thundered and lightning outside while storms of applause filled Lakeside.



I was under-whelmed by **Blake Morrison**, but (in keeping with the theme of food) suddenly understood why people bring rotten cabbages and bad fruit to pelt at performers. Morrison's representation of his Irish mother as a bewildered, impossible-to-understand misguided individual infuriated this particular Irishwoman. If only he had bothered to read some of the many books available on Irish women in Britain, he might have begun to understand his mother's re-invention of herself. I have now re-titled his book *Things My Mammy Never Told Me (Because I Wasn't Listening)*.

Despite that sour note – and what feast does not contain one lemon? – I had a wonderful two-and-a-half weeks, culminating with the **Poetry Free-For-All** at the Victoria Centre. I was disappointed that Radio Nottingham didn't play my chosen tracks, Van Morrison's version of Patrick Kavanagh's “Raglan Road”, or Bob Dylan's “The Times They Are A-Changin'”, as I'd picked them because they both mentioned writing, but I enjoyed making posters for the backs of the busy writers' chairs, as they produced poems on demand to feed the appetite of a word-hungry public. My efforts were chiefly notable for their plagiaristic qualities: “P-P-Pick up a Poem!”, “Poetry For the People, By the People, Of the People!”.

With at least one event on most days throughout the festival, it might be thought that the appetite for poetry would be dulled, but I found the opposite – the more events I attended, the more I wanted to go to, so that I felt bereft when the feast finally ended. It is possible that I am addicted, but I can't think of a better addiction than writing, in whatever form. Poetry in the City beats *Sex in the City* any time.

Deirdre O'Byrne

## reports

### TURNING POINT: A NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Despite the involvement of many young adult writers (and one stray literature officer) this important conference, held in Nottingham a day or so before our print deadline, had a less than inspiring title. But that was about the only part that was uninspiring.

Turning Point was part-funded by Notts County Council, and some of the 200 attenders comprised local writers and librarians, but there was representation from most parts of the trade, from most parts of the country.

The first and last speakers were particularly outstanding. Nicola Morgan's talk was based on her forthcoming book, *Blame My Brain*, on the teenage brain. She described how the chemical changes in the teenage brain (it is rare to find the words "pre-frontal cortex" mentioned at a literature event) lead young adults to process emotions differently. Raw emotions, not mediated the way adults' brains mediate emotion, lead teenagers to take risks as they encounter new fears and new experiences. She reminded us that teenagers are not children or adults and that it is essential that young adult fiction reflects this – by taking risks, by questioning, by being fast moving, by providing pleasure on teenagers' own terms... in short to provide the books their parents are worried about.

Melvin Burgess certainly does that. His books tackle sensitive issues – early sexual experience, drug taking, promiscuity. His – at times rambling – conclusion to the day raged hilariously at those "completely barking" people who were invariably put up by the media to discuss these issues with him. Such as the person who said "Our mental institutions are full of young psychotics who've read books like yours." Burgess remarked "We don't know what to do with teenagers – there's a whiff of the criminal about them."

His biggest objection was to those who were "dishonest, inauthentic" about teenagers' lives, who wanted to "tell people what to think." He quoted from a teenager who said "It's not books that corrupt you, it's people." Actually, no, Burgess's biggest objection was to Chris Woodhead: "you could tell he was evil by the way he walked."

Between Morgan and Burgess appeared a range of speakers, and some inspiring comments by school librarians. We knew what we were up against – that books are not widely read by teenagers. To those who "know little and are offered almost everything", reading is as exciting as "catching a ball in a cup". Various solutions were suggested to this but the *Guardian's*

Julia Eccleshare upbraided the conference for being too negative saying that this was the "best time (young adult fiction) has had for a long time". I would tend to agree with her. Young adult fiction is fairly new – Judy Bloom's *Forever*, a landmark book in the genre, appeared only in 1972. Eccleshare pointed out how much teenage fiction hits the headlines – Burgess's books being a case in point. Elsewhere several speakers referred to Elizabeth Baird's *Little Piece of Ground*, a book written from the point of view of a Palestinian child, hitting the headlines. In our conference pack were samples of Rosemary Stones' *Books for Keeps*, and *Carousel* – both highly rated magazines about children's books, and we have the website *Achuka*. All a far cry from Rosemary Stones' tiny circulation *Dragon's Teeth* of years gone by.

The make up of the conference was interesting. By definition young adult fiction is written by adults who were teenagers, compared to, say, lesbian fiction or black fiction which is written by people who are from the target audience. This was a gathering of professionals, with the target audience specifically excluded – it was for over-18s only. And who were these professionals? There were more – seven – men on the various platforms than in the whole audience of almost 200. The writer Bali Rai pointed out that he was only one of a couple of black or Asian people in the room, not unusual for a literature event sadly, but why are so few men involved in young adult fiction?

Of those on the platform, watch out for Keith Gray – his talk, which was mostly about buying a ladder (the relevance of this escapes me now), was the funniest speech I've heard in a long time. And there is the vexed question of bow ties. The one publisher on a panel (David Fickling) wore a bow tie and was loudly self-opinionated. Why does this not surprise me?

Ross Bradshaw

### REGIONAL READERS' DAY

About 100 representatives of reading groups from around the East Midlands gathered in Nottingham to hear speakers on everything from the history of reading groups to workshops on graphic novels, Asian and Irish writing. The aim of the day was to deepen people's reading experience and to learn from each other. Surprisingly the most popular workshop was on book reviewing, which led one of the presenters, James Urquhart from the *Independent* to engage in this interesting little dance. There is no follow up directly planned, but it was obvious that bringing readers – as readers – together is altogether a good thing. Several Nottinghamshire writers were among the workshop leaders, including Jon McGregor (currently a writer in residence on ship in the Antarctic!), Stephan Collishaw and John Stuart Clark.



Rupert Vinnicombe

reached Lodz of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Many people were in tears listening to Esther, whose speech, which echoed the positive world view of Anne Frank, ended with a standing ovation.

As an outsider I am not sure of the full effect of the Exhibition on the Minster community. Having 15,000 extra people through the doors is an achievement of course, and many people also visited the Minster afterwards or said they would come back later. The Minster Shop reported greatly increased sales on all parts of their stock and the Minster Refectory was run off its feet, extending their summer season for a further month. The town as a whole benefited from the extra visitor spend. Many of the visitors – even from as near as Mansfield or West Lincolnshire had never been in The Minster before. The combination of the Exhibition, the Poetry Festival and the Southwell Open Studios brought the local paper to lead on the beneficial effect of arts work on the local economy. Arts administrators tend to bang on about this (it helps justify our existence), so it was great to see this issue being raised without our prompting.

And one evening I got to ring The Minster bells summoning their faithful to prayer!

Ross Bradshaw

## GRAHAM GREENE CENTENARY

**Graham Greene, one of the most important literary birds of passage who lived in Nottinghamshire, has just ended his centenary year. We are pleased to print an excerpt from David Belbin's introduction to the Graham Greene Centenary Lecture, outlining Greene's stay locally. The lecture itself was by Penelope Lively on "The Writer as Reader". Penelope is the current Honorary President of the Bromley House Subscription Library on Angel Row in Nottingham.**

Graham Greene was one of the greatest English novelists of the last century. But when he arrived in Nottingham 79 years ago, an Oxford graduate just turned 21, he had published nothing beyond an embarrassing collection of poems called *Babbling April*.

Greene wanted to become a journalist, and, although he had the offer of paid work in Birmingham, calculated that a brief spell as an unpaid sub-editing intern on the *Nottingham Journal* (now part of the *Evening Post*) would stand him in better stead for the London job he craved. So he came here, on the first of November 1925, and moved into lodgings on Hamilton Road, in Forest Fields, Nottingham. "When I read Dickens on Victorian London," he wrote in his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, "I think of Nottingham in the 20s. Trams rattled downhill through the goose-

market and on to the blackened castle. Against the rockface leant the oldest pub in England with all the grades of a social guide: the private bar, the saloon, the ladies', the snug, the public. I had found a town as haunting as Berkhamstead, (one) where years later I would lay the scene of a novel and of a play."

Greene visited many of the town's cinemas, where matinee seats in the stalls cost fourpence. He loathed his boarding house, though he mined it for material. After two weeks he moved from Hamilton Road to Ivy House, on All Saints Terrace. He was most impressed by the city's fogs, remarking that during one two day fog he twice lost his way on the thirty yard walk from the tram stop to his bedsit – a scene we might repeat with the return of the trams this year. Ivy House was, it is claimed, the model for disreputable houses in several of his novels.

In *A Sort of Life* Greene describes how, on overcast mornings, before working on his 'hopeless' novel, he would take his dog, Paddy, for a walk in the Arboretum. The only writer Greene met in Nottingham was Cecil Roberts, now best known for the room named after him in the City library but, in his day, a prolific and popular novelist, who invited Greene to tea. They talked for an hour, after which Greene wrote "an educated person in Nottingham is as precious and rare a find as jam in a wartime doughnut!"

Although he later talked about the city affectionately ("I don't know why a certain wry love of Nottingham lodged in my imagination," he wrote in *A Gun for Sale*) we cannot pretend that Greene enjoyed his time here. "This town makes one want a mental and physical bath every quarter of an hour," he remarked. Yet it was important, some argue crucially important, to his fiction, presenting him with a first hand experience of the working class that may have prevented him becoming yet another chronicler of upper middle class life in London.

Nottingham was also important to Greene because it was here, in the cathedral on Derby Road, that he converted to Roman Catholicism, under the tutelage of Father Trollope, once a West End actor. Catholicism would become very important to Greene, but initially he converted in order to marry his fiancée, Vivien. Greene only stayed in Nottingham for four months, a period he shortens by a month in his autobiography. He left without a job to go to, and wrote to Vivien from London "Thank God, Nottingham is over. It's like coming back into real life again, being here."

Ten days later, Greene got a job on the *Times*, a job he wouldn't have got without his experience on the *Nottingham Journal*. So this city probably did Greene more favours than he did for it – which is nearly always the way with writers. But Greene set one of his best early novels here – *A Gun for Hire*, mentioned earlier, as well as his play *The Potting Shed* and a plaque in his memory is on the wall of the old *Journal* building on Upper Parliament Street.

David Belbin

# ONCE UPON A TIME: A GUIDE TO STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM

**Finding the heartbeat of a tale** is something I do a lot in my occupation as a storyteller. If there's ever a magic formula to the oral tradition of storytelling, and engaging an audience whatever the age, it is this. For where would we be without knowing the real value of tales and learning from them? It is this morality, this core truth that touches adults and children alike. You might be forgiven for thinking that storytelling is a new trend to hit the streets. Its roots stem back to a time before time, to the Celtic bards of old who knew the real benefits of this tool. In those days storytelling was seen as a way of documenting history, of passing on wisdom and discovering your particular place in the world. Today storytelling can have a revolutionary effect on literacy. It is immediate and entertaining. It is exciting to watch the creative windows of an imagination being opened. Through my work in schools I've come across this many times. As a writer and a storyteller I've seen the effect a tale can have and the way different pupils grasp the concept of creating a story in the oral tradition. Children who otherwise struggle with language, whose reading difficulties are such that they grapple with written stories, become animated and involved. They are encouraged to use words, to broaden their vocabulary and create tales. Children also develop better communication skills by working in groups and learning how to express their ideas to others. On a multi-cultural level storytelling is a way of getting children to appreciate and learn the value of other cultures. Regardless of age or ability, storytelling activities fire the imagination. They motivate and capture young minds and are an excellent way of getting a message across.

*Sounds good*, but what happens if you can't get a professional storyteller into your school? Teachers can easily implement storytelling activities within their classes. Entire lesson plans can be arranged which include starter, main and plenary exercises. In essence, it's about having the confidence to have a go. Anyone can tell a story. We base our lives on stories; it's the way we pass information on. To tell a good story, to capture your audience (whatever the age) and hold them with every breath, you need two things; belief and presence. The first allows you the conviction to impart your tale; the second gives you the colour and resonance to connect with your listeners. Children want to believe, they want to get lost in the story and so you're half way there. The key is to pick the right story to start with. It doesn't have to be a complicated plot with twists and turns. A simple tale with a clear meaning can be far more entertaining and effective. If you can write your own, then do so. The characters will have timbre and developments in the plot will be driven by your imagination. Remember that when delivering a tale, you are in complete control. As the

narrator anything is possible, and you can deviate from the path at your leisure. If you choose Cinderella and you would like her to turn her back on the prince and make a new life out of town, then that's entirely up to you. As long as you can see this clearly in your mind's eye, then it will hold truth. Finding the truth of the tale you want to tell is imperative. Fables are an excellent choice for this, being part of the National Curriculum. Children love to discover the moral lessons and in turn create their own fables. Treat each story in this way, discover the message beneath and you have a head start.

*Once you have decided on a story*, whether it be written or taken from a book, the next step is to recall the piece from memory. This is important because when you read to a class, the book can act as a physical barrier that detracts from the tale. The minute you put the book down and begin performing, you make that tale your own. You engage the class with eye contact. Your actions and words draw the children in, and they become instantly involved in the drama. This also demonstrates to children that they can construct a tale and tell it, regardless of the level of their reading or writing skills.

## The following is a brief guide to help you do this:

- ❖ Picture the story in your head. See it as a storyboard, a series of images that you move through to reach the final scene. It may help to draw the storyboard on paper. Make three sections for the beginning, middle and end.
- ❖ Draw an image to represent each section (beginning, middle, end) and give it a title. This will help you define where the story is going and bring it to mind quickly.
- ❖ Give each section a couple of sentences, key words that will jog your memory. Spend a little time moving back and forth between these pictures so that you have a clear view of where the story is going.
- ❖ Consider how you reach the next box on your storyboard. What words will provide the bridge to move the story forward? How will you keep up the pace? Write these words down in order to familiarise yourself with them. They will be essential to the flow of your story.
- ❖ Think about winding the story to a close. What sentence will you use to finish it? Does it sum up the heartbeat of the story? Imagine that this sentence is underlined and then think about how it can have prominence when spoken to the class.

You don't have to know exactly what you are going to say, but it helps to have a few key lines as points to hold on to. I find it useful to visualise a ladder. Each rung is a sentence, a part of the tale that allows me to climb from A to B. It is then easy to move freely through the tale from beginning to end without getting lost.

*Once you know the story* you can add special touches that will bring the narrative alive and form the basis of activities in class. For instance, younger children at Key Stage 2 enjoy repetition. So insert a key phrase that is repeated and get them to say it along with you. Ask questions within the tale; get them thinking about where the story is going. Remember the tale is fluid; you can stop and start at any point. Sometimes it's a nice exercise to get the class to decide how they think the story should end. There will be a number of opportunities to use storytelling to illustrate something you are doing in class whether it is an element of history, a mathematical problem or even a religious festival. Storytelling is flexible.

*The trigger that makes a good story* into a truly fantastic piece is presentation. There are a number of tools that can help you, voice being number one. Here are a few tips to help you on your way.

## Top Tips

- ❖ Speak slowly and clearly, projecting to the back of the room.
- ❖ Don't be afraid to pause, or take a breath for effect. This will add power to your words.
- ❖ Use your face, hands, arms and legs to add expression. When a child tells a story every part of their body is involved in the telling. Remember this and use the same skills to reach their imaginations.
- ❖ It sounds obvious but if there's a wicked king in your tale then speak with a deeply evil drawl. Introduce light and dark tones into your voice to show changes in character.
- ❖ Demonstrate as much as possible. As any good writer will tell you, show not tell. If the king has stomach ache, show this by clutching your stomach and rocking forward in pain.
- ❖ Whenever you can, draw the children in. Get them role playing. Ask them to imagine that they are one of the characters in the tale. Ask questions about how they feel, what they think and what they saw within their role.

*Depending on your class*, you may choose to do a storyboarding exercise. I find this works well in groups, and can instigate some exciting discussions. You may follow the procedure outlined earlier for learning your story. Get out large sheets of paper and give each group three sheets, one for the beginning, middle and end. Let their imaginations go wild in whatever form that takes as they fill in each section. Allow some time at the end of the session for each group to stand up and show their storyboards, while going through the tale with the rest of the class.

## Do's and Don'ts for Storytelling

- ❖ Do keep the story simple and the meaning obvious.
- ❖ Don't rush through the piece, take your time, speak clearly.
- ❖ Do vary your tone to illustrate a change in character or atmosphere.
- ❖ Don't worry about getting it absolutely perfect; remember the story is yours so take control of it.
- ❖ Do write down and learn key sentences that will help you move the story forward.
- ❖ Don't try and recite your tale in a word perfect manner.
- ❖ Do picture each scene in your head.
- ❖ Don't forget to smile and enjoy telling your tale.

*Storytelling motivates*. You only have to look around a class whilst a teller is working to see the sparkle of eyes. It can be used to promote discussion, to develop an idea, or simply to hone communication skills. I have worked in a number of schools, and the joy of watching children create stories from picture storyboards, of seeing them work in groups to deliver a tale, is amazing. Children who struggle with words on a page can suddenly see a way forward. They enjoy being creative with ease. I am personally hopeful that the introduction of storytelling in the classroom will encourage even more exploration into the wonderful world of language.

If you are interested in learning more then why not try a storytelling course?

The following links will point you in the direction of courses or workshops in your area.

The Storytellers of Nottingham work within the Midlands area and provide a number of specially tailored courses to suit your training needs. They are available for school visits and other bookings and can be contacted through the web site, which also details forthcoming events:  
<http://www.tellingtalesinnotts.co.uk>.

The Society of Storytellers is an open organisation that aims to promote storytelling. It offers a comprehensive list of events and festivals along with regular club meetings. You will find a list of Storytelling publications and also details of courses dotted around the U.K. The web site can be found at  
<http://www.sfs.org.uk/>.

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Alison Davies can be contacted by email at [alr\\_davies@hotmail.com](mailto:alr_davies@hotmail.com). She is available for events, and school visits and is happy to provide further information on storytelling and its applications. This article first appeared in the *Times Educational Supplement*.