

Friends of Chester Literature Festival

Newsletter June 2014



Dear Litfest Friend,

Here at last is the promised Summer edition of our newsletter, designed to keep you up to date with events past and future. We hope you will agree that this year's programme has been a varied and interesting one, with the usual mix of literary-themed visits, theatre, writing and performance. Reviews of the various events are included in this newsletter, as well as details of what's in store for the rest of the year. Those of you who were able to join us for these events hopefully had a good time, and will spread the word about the benefits of joining the Friends! As usual renewal reminders will be going out in October.

The Friends also sponsor literary-themed events for local children, and so far this year we have organised a book giveaway for Cheshire Young Carers as part of the World Book Night festivities. We think that theirs is such a good cause that we shall be supporting them again this year, by hosting a special outing to Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre in August to see a production of 'The Secret Garden'.

As concerns future events, tickets for the Autumn theatre trip went on sale recently to see a matinee performance of 'Hamlet' at the Royal Exchange in Manchester on Wednesday 1st October, preceded by a behind the scenes workshop. These are going fast, so don't delay if you would like to come along. We have also started planning a full programme for next year – more on that in the next newsletter.

Dates for this year's Literature Festival are 12th to 26th October, with priority booking open to Friends on 4th August followed by public booking on 11th August. The programme has yet to be finalized, but we have been given a sneak preview by Chester Performs and there will be plenty on offer to appeal to all tastes. Some of the names booked so far include the Costa Book award winner Nathan Fyler, Sheila Hancock, James Naughtie, Esther Freud, Paddy Ashdown, Tristram Hunt, Suzanne Dunne and Ranulph Fiennes. As in previous years we shall be sponsoring one of the Festival events, and we hope to combine that with a small gathering for Friends – further details will be circulated nearer the time.

As always the Friends' year will conclude with the annual coffee morning at Bishop Lloyd's Palace, on Thursday 27th November, featuring a guest speaker. We do hope that as many of you as possible will be able to join us for that, and in the meantime we look forward to seeing you - if not on the forthcoming theatre trip then during the Literature Festival.

All the best,

Elizabeth Lambrakis/Gill King/Carol Archer/Norma Duffill/Marie Hughes/Helen Hill

OVER TO YOU!

We very much welcome suggestions from Friends for future events or articles for the newsletter and are currently looking for new committee members, particularly someone to take over from Gill as **Treasurer**. Please contact Elizabeth on 01244 323032 (elam@talktalk.net) or Helen on 01244 823655 (helsapoppin@hotmail.co.uk).



Catching poems in Waverton!

Catching poems is not to be likened to catching a cold (unpleasant) or attempting to catch a lion (dangerous) but rather to catching a melody springing from Radio 3 that inspires you to find out more. Gill McEvoy and Judy Ugonna ran a superb session in February for 20 poem hunters. There was quite a range. Highly experienced wordsmiths set words tripping around the room, while some of us wore “L” plates and ventured in a little more warily.

Whatever level we started at, I think it would be true to say that we all progressed. Gill shared her poems to inspire, but just as importantly, led us by the hand through a series of exercises designed to make us more reflective. The whole afternoon was absorbing, challenging, engaging and really good fun. By the end we may not have been ready to become future Poet Laureates, but we had all gained an insight into the process of writing poetry. Each of us could offer as little or as much as we wished. Criticism was constructive, but superbly focused.

Gill is an excellent teacher – all very well planned and delivered. Judy’s role is clearly more managerial, and all went very smoothly. Libby Riddell kindly provided a superb setting, and ensured our creativity was fuelled with tea and cakes – with a little help from her friends. *Campbell Russell*

For more details see: <http://www.poemcatchers.com/>

‘The Seagull’ theatre trip

50 Friends set off to Salford Quays on a sunny March day to see this final play put on by Manchester’s renowned Library Theatre Company under the helm of their long-serving artistic director Chris Honer. Anton Chekhov used his 1896 tragi-comedy to consider the future of theatre itself, so there was something particularly poignant about this being their very last production before relocating in 2015 to an impressive purpose-built venue under the new banner of ‘Home’ (a future trip perhaps?). As Chris Honer is stepping down after 25 years, we were privileged to hear his farewell pre-show talk before he hands over to his successor. As ever it was filled with insightful commentary on the playwright and this new version of his play, which enhanced our understanding and enjoyment of the performance that followed.

It proved to be a fresh re-imagining of a Russian classic by the award-winning young playwright Anya Reiss, in which the setting was relocated to the world of contemporary middle-class Britain. The drama therefore unfolded against a backdrop of I-pods, laptops and mobile phones. However it all worked well to give the action immediacy and relevance, and the talented cast did an excellent job of drawing us into their circle of angst-ridden relationships. Did we like any of the characters? Probably not that much, but we certainly felt their pain as the tragedy unfolded towards its inevitable conclusion.

While perhaps that all sounds a bit on the heavy side, the fact is that we had a great time watching it and a lovely day out. So bring on the next theatre trip in October! *Elizabeth Lambrakis*

GLADFEST! 5-7 September

This year’s affordable mini litfest takes place in the beautiful surroundings of the Gladstone Library just over the border in Hawarden. Look out for internationally renowned writers, journalist and poets such as Douglas Hurd, Hugh Pym, Sally Vickers and Katrina Naomi. The festival now includes its own bookshop, craft market and children’s activities.

More details from www.gladstoneslibrary.org/01244532350.

World Book Night

World Book Night is an annual celebration of books and reading which takes place on April 23rd (appropriately, Shakespeare's birthday). It is organised by the charity, The Reading Agency and is supported by the BBC, publishers and authors. The aim is to encourage as many people as possible to enjoy reading. Their strap line is "a million books for a million readers". Each year, twenty books across a range of genres, are selected and produced in special World Book Night editions. Members of the public are invited to bid for a set of books to give to a nominated group of readers.



In November, Elizabeth Lambrakis and I entered separate bids on behalf of Friends of Chester Literature Festival. Our nominated group of readers was Cheshire Young Carers and the volunteers who support them. In February, we were thrilled to learn that our bids had been successful. There are Young Carers groups in Chester, Ellesmere Port and Northwich. Members of each group will receive books; however, on World Book Night it was only logistically possible to meet the Chester Group.

On April 23rd we arrived at the Scout HQ in Upton to meet the Young Carers and to give our books; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne and *A Collection of Short Stories* by Roald Dahl. The young people were delighted with the gifts and talked enthusiastically about books and reading. We began discussing early memories of reading and favourite books from childhood. It was fascinating to hear that Enid Blyton is a favourite childhood author of this generation just as she is of many earlier generations of readers! It was a delightful evening, a true celebration of reading and books.

Carol Archer

The Birmingham Library

We spotted it from the coach, a wedding cake of a building, its golden bands glittering in the sun (yes sun in April!), the intricate metalwork covering its windows distinguishing it from the concrete blocks around.

Inside the building was no less impressive, full of space and light, the huge rotunda of books visible from the foyer beneath. Our tour whisked us from the Victorian Shakespearean Memorial Library at the top to the music library and amphitheatre at the bottom, via moving floors, escalators and glass lifts with a brief stop on one of the roof garden terraces. The golden-boxed area was out of bounds for us, as it contained treasured archives, including a rare copy of a Shakespeare First Folio and J. Audabon's wonderfully illustrated *Birds of America*. Sadly these were not on display but could be seen on the website and on the discovery table (a giant screen), just by touching an icon and magnifying it. Hours of fun!

This is not only the largest public library in Europe, but one of the greens and certainly one of the most innovative users of modern technology. Books are self-served, fitted with radio frequency ID tags for security scanning in and out. E-books can be *borrowed*. Precious books are kept at reduced oxygen levels and huge windows filter out UV light. Film booths are available for watching free films, sliding presses are automated.. The building is well used by the community and open for exhibitions, readings and performance as well as health advice and tourist information. An amazing library and well worth a second visit! *Helen Hill*



Hay Festival

After Carol Archer had counted heads before the return journey she asked: 'Have you all had a good day? Shall we do it again next year?'

The forest of arms testified that, yes, we had had a good day on the first visit by the Friends to the legendary Hay Literary Festival in the charming little town of Hay-on-Wye on the Welsh, Herefordshire border.

And that's hardly surprising considering the beautiful location and the attractions of the event, which draws world-famous writers, historians, actors, journalists, politicians, comedians and so on, to speak in the purpose-built venue, a series of massive marquees built around a grassy quadrangle on a site just ten minutes walk out of town.

There had been rain, so you risked muddy shoes if trying out the deck chairs on the said grass! But we had only showers which didn't spoil enjoyment of the Festival and the town was packed with bookshops and easily accessible by shuttle bus if you didn't fancy the walk.

On the day of our visit celebrity speakers included historian Simon Schama and writers Tony Parsons, Toni Morrison, and Sebastian Faulks, the latter talking about his bestselling World War One book, *Birdsong*. This drew many of the Friends and we weren't disappointed. Faulks proved as engaging a speaker as writer, and we learned a great deal of the background and ongoing success of his remarkable novel, which has since been made into both a film and stage production.

William Dalrymple was another attraction for us, with his talk on 'Princes and Painters in Mughai Delhi 1707-1857, an era bursting with artistic endeavour. He showed some of the masterpieces created and told their stories. Others went to hear John Lewis-Stempel on 'Meadowland', describing an English field through the changing seasons.

This is just a snapshot of the day's varied programme and between events everyone enjoyed wandering the trade stands, browsing the Festival and Oxfam book tents, buying souvenirs at the Festival shop, and enjoying refreshments and people-watching at a range of cafes, bars, coffee shops and ice cream stands. So, see you next year!

Peggy Woodcock



Joy Winkler Brings her 'Town' to the Cheshire Cat

On a lowering June evening, one room of The Cheshire Cat, Christleton was lit up by Joy Winkler's performance of her verse/drama, 'Town'. The capacity audience was captivated by Joy and her highly talented companions - the poet and former Cheshire Poet Laureate, Andrew Rudd, and violinist, Daniel Axworthy. The entertainment began with Daniel playing a moving rendition of a traditional Irish melody followed by a duet with Andrew Rudd on guitar. Andrew then moved centre-stage to read some of his poems. One person commented to me that 'you could almost smell the bread', when he read 'The Baker', based on his memories of his father. 'Instructions for a Mathematics Lesson' provoked smiles and laughs from every teacher and parent in the audience who recognized the distraction strategies of bored children.

After a brief interval to refill wine glasses and stretch legs, Joy took the floor. A backdrop of townscape paintings by local artists, Karen Ross and Carl Longmate was projected behind her to generate an urban atmosphere and she was accompanied by music, composed and performed by Andrew Rudd. 'Town' is the story of 16 year old Rosie's search for both her mother and her identity and begins with the wonderfully evocative words, '*Rosie knows that her questions are dangerous. Auntie will hang them out like dead moles on the back fence. The stench will turn milk sour.*' Everyone in the audience could relate to this. We have all known those dangerous questions and so, from that point on, our full attention was guaranteed. On her journey of self-discovery, Rosie meets a kaleidoscope of intriguing characters. 'Town' was a tour de force, delivered with Joy's characteristic Barnsley warmth and humour. Thank you Joy, Andrew and Daniel for a delightful evening.

Gwen Goodhew

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