

DIARY FROM HAY-ON-WYE

(Published in OUTLOOK magazine, June 2011)

King Booth of Hay

Crossing the majestic Severn Bridge, we are in Wales and very soon England's rolling downs billow upwards into soft green hills. These are the Brecon Beacons and Hay-on-Wye, 'Town of Books', is tucked away on the edge of the national park. This tiny town has become famous for being home to over thirty book shops, thanks mostly to an eccentric Welshman called Richard Booth who realized in the sixties that a second-hand books market could revive the flagging rural economy of this town. Booth went on to declare Hay a kingdom in 1977, appointing himself King with powers to give peerages and issue passports. It was a deliberate stunt that drew attention to Hay and led, many years later, to Booth himself being awarded a (proper) MBE for his services to tourism. The old boy still lives in Hay and continues to be much adored by his 'subjects' but, in a pragmatic passing of the old guard, his bookshop was recently bought by an energetic American rather appropriately called Elizabeth Haycox who, along with her British husband, has refurbished Booths into the most beautiful bookshop I've ever set foot in. It was the venue for the Hay festival's opening Authors Party and I drew in my breath as I entered and saw acres of soft wood paneling and capacious sofas, more grand private library than shop. Haycox is now partnering the Hay festival founders and organizers, having just bought the ancient crumbling castle in the heart of town with plans to convert it into, possibly, a book museum.

Pink Rooms & Polar Bears

At the moment, however, it is the annual literary festival that is bringing book lovers flocking here from all over the world. You see them scurrying down the mile-long stretch of road that connects the town to the tented venue, toting bags stuffed with – I like to think – well-thumbed books waiting to be autographed. Authors lucky enough to be invited to the festival are inevitably treated to 'Sold Out' black-board signs and queues for their events that curl satisfyingly around the marquees. I have been here in times past, excitedly clutching my tickets as a punter and a groupie, and cannot quite believe, as I am whisked past jolly crowds to the Green Room, that I am actually here as a participant this time. Whoever designed the Green Room knows a thing or two about soothing jangling nerves; it is pink not green, cosy with squashy cushions and, best of all, equipped with a kitchen churning out endless supplies of coffee and home-made cake.

At one of the weekend's first events, I'm on stage with best-selling Korean novelist, Kyung-Sook Shin, and we're both being interviewed by Rosie Goldsmith of the BBC, clearly a dab-hand who seemingly effortlessly juggles the disparate genres and languages that Kyung-Sook and I write in. Rosie works the crowd with ease and they appear to be smiling at us a lot, thank god. Hay audiences are renowned for being clever and confident and sometimes

riotous, leading wildlife photographer, Sue Flood, to declare at her event this morning that it's far more frightening to be facing them than a polar bear in the Arctic.

Murder in the Cathedral

A distinctive Hay feature is to get well-known people who are not necessarily authors up on stage and exercised about their favourite books and authors: Bill Clinton has been here in the past, famously dubbing Hay 'Woodstock for the mind', and this weekend's unlikely offerings are Hollywood actor Rob Lowe and the present Archbishop of Canterbury. While the former had his audience swooning, the latter had to work a little harder, understandably. The Archbishop's brief was to discuss Shakespeare with RSC actor Simon Russell-Beale and, when asked by an audience member which Shakespearean character he most identified with, the Archbishop confessed a fascination for Macbeth. He was quick to clarify in his customary mild manner: 'Mind you, I don't identify with him but am merely compelled by him, which is just as well because you don't really want a serial killer as the Archbishop of Canterbury, do you?'

Drunken Bishops

Shan Egerton, our effervescent landlady, tells us that the best way to get back to the house from the venue is by crossing two fields. We comply and realize too late that we are city folk and not best placed to deal with a herd of resident bulls. They advance on us with what is surely murderous intent but a bit of handbag brandishing does the trick and they suddenly turn tail to charge downhill in the opposite direction. Shan has a fund of similar stories of past guests. Vikram Seth and his parents were 'utterly charming' but Archbishop Desmond Tutu less so. After Shan had finished ironing his voluminous robes, terrified of leaving an iron-shaped burn mark on them, a member of Tutu's entourage appeared in the kitchen asking for a bottle of port. Not best pleased at having to go out to get a bottle that late at night, Shan learnt only much later that the Archbishop was not in fact getting plastered in his room but holding communion.

(The Hay festival in India will be held in Trivandrum from 18th to 20th November 2011.)