



Portobello Book Festival 2017: A Community Triumph


These days there are book festivals everywhere you look,  from the dizzy heights of Hay-on-Wye to the cultured calm of Cheltenham. Last weekend, however, I went out to the seaside to visit a festival that, in the words of one of the organisers, is 'just a little bit different'.

The Portobello Book Festival is now in its ninth year. It's run entirely by a group of enthusiastic volunteers, offers a wonderfully varied three-day programme of events – and it's all absolutely free. More about how they manage this astonishing feat later, but first the events themselves.

 I began my Saturday with ***Writers-in-Residence: What They Do and What They Learn***, and I have to tell you I learned a lot. The only Writer-in-Residence (WIR) I'd ever heard of was attached to another library, many moons ago. I assumed he helped people edit their work. Saturday's panel members had quite different stories to tell.

Local crime writer, journalist and musician (*Crash Land* is his latest), **Doug Johnstone** spent one day a week for a year with funeral directors William Purves as part of an Arts and Business Scotland initiative; what impressed him most were the employees' wonderful people skills, their empathy and their expertise;

'These guys have a week to organise what amounts to a sad
wedding'

By contrast, poet and writer (he's also co-editor of *Bella Caledonia*) **Thomas Clark** has a residency that many grown up little boys would fancy; he's a WIR at a football club. The fact that the club is Selkirk FC, the oldest established club in the rugby-obsessed Borders, does nothing to dampen 

Clark's enthusiasm, which was sparked when the club held a foodbank day. His hilarious, touching poems, written in Scots, are featured in match programmes and read out over the tannoy before games. People might have been suspicious about him at first, but he soon found a way to engage;

'The Borders' national sport is moaning'

Once he'd tapped into *that*, everyone wanted to tell him a story, and his love for the club is palpable;

'At Selkirk it's really about finding small consolations....Selkirk is about everyday life in a way that big clubs can't be.'

The club's archivist even dug out some poems written in the 1950s by the mysterious 'Ball Boy', proving that Clark isn't the first to find a connection between football and poetry – and as he points out, the Border Ballads have been around for even longer than Selkirk FC.

☒ Acclaimed author **Janice Galloway** is something of a WIR junkie. She's had residencies in art galleries, prisons, universities and even a distillery (she doesn't drink – 'what a disappointment I was').

In the prisons she encountered a 'huge sense of fun' (Barlinnie), but also much sadness (Cornton Vale), her greatest challenge being to persuade people to write at all – they just wanted to talk. Men tried to flirt with her ('they want to find out how to talk to women'), women wanted to tell her how awful their husbands were, but getting any of them to put pen to paper was another thing entirely; she had first to earn their trust. Some prison officers weren't too happy with her either – they felt that the sessions were a treat for offenders who did not deserve one. Taking her three year old into a prison was unexpectedly successful, and in one of her best sessions lifers wrote letters to the younger men. It's the women, however, that she still thinks of, and most of all

those who would never see their children again;

‘The ones you remember are the ones who were inconsolable.’

This was an outstanding session, thanks not only to the excellent panellists but also the chairing expertise of **Catherine Simpson**, an author herself (*Truestory*.)

Natalie Fergie, **Stella Hervey Birrell** and **Joanne Baird** are all bloggers who love books; Natalie and Stella have even written them. In ***Books, Blogs and Blethers***, they discussed blogging, debut novels, and how to get those novels published.


The inspiration for Natalie’s book *The Sewing Machine* came from an old machine she bought on Gumtree. Inside the bobbin she found a stash of old thread;

‘I realised I was holding people’s lives in my hands...that this sewing machine had a story.’

Stella describes her debut *How Many Wrongs Make a Mr Right?* as both chick lit and ‘a love song to Edinburgh’. It’s also about mental health, with a heroine who’s ‘better but not better’ and who makes some terrible mistakes with men.


Both writers achieved publication by non-traditional methods; Natalie used crowdfunding publisher Unbound, while Stella got a contract with Crooked Cat Books, an e-publisher who will also produce a paperback if an author’s e-sales are good enough. Stella’s were. The days of huge promotional budgets are long gone for most writers; Natalie and Stella had to handle their own publicity. Without book bloggers, they agreed, their books would be virtually unheard of – and that’s where people like Joanne come in.

She started the appropriately named **Portobello Book Blog** two and a half years ago because she loves to read – and to talk

about what she's read. The blog now has 4,000 followers.  Stella and Natalie have blogs too – blogs are, after all, fabulous publicity tools. Stella came up with the genius idea of keeping her posts to 140 words ('It stops me ranting'). A *Tiny Little Life 140* is a weekly snapshot of her days in an East Lothian village – but she's a busy woman, so guest posts are welcome; get in touch. Natalie's blog began as a way of reaching out to the knitting community, with which she was then heavily involved; now it's more eclectic – her most viewed post so far is on how to change the filter in a Dyson ('even Dyson read it').

Inspired? If you've always thought you'd write a book someday, look at these women – they did it and they're just like us with more *oomph*. And if you'd rather read than write, why not try your hand at reviewing? As Joanne says, every review makes a difference to a writer (they're especially keen on the nice ones...)



 It is a truth universally acknowledged that we are living in strange times. Brexit, climate change, independence – and that's not to mention the whims of the President of the most powerful country in the world (and indeed, let's not mention those). But should current events impinge on fiction? Do people want to hear about them or escape from them? And will they want to read about them in 10 or 20 years' time? Technology is a particular minefield – today's smartphone is tomorrow's dinosaur, and most of the social media we've ever heard of are already passé to our children. Jane Austen famously hardly mentioned the wars with France, whilst the plot of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* would be nowhere without the French Revolution. What is a writer to do?

In ***Character, History and Social Change***, novelists **Caroline**

Dunford (*Euphemia Martin Mysteries* – and many others), **Rebecca L McKinney** (*Blast Radius, The Angel in the Stone*) and **Lesley Kelly** (*A Fine House in Trinity, The Health of Strangers*) talked about how they deal with the modern world in their writing.

Lesley's latest book is about a deadly virus and its effects – social as well as medical – on the population. What would happen in such a situation? Would people pull together? Would government emergency planning work? This virus targets teenagers – would they, of all people, accept *diktats* to avoid social contact? Just how far could civil liberties be restricted? For Lesley, issues like Brexit and the Scottish Referendum were a bit of a pain; should she work them in to her story? and if she didn't, would readers wonder why she hadn't?

Rebecca, whose first book was about a soldier returning from Afghanistan, prefers to focus on personal, local stories – her latest looks at the politics of family relationships, but also touches on broader issues, from Alzheimer's to capitalism and Scottish Independence. For her, national and international events are rich material; she's even thinking of changing the period in which her next novel takes place so that she can include Donald Trump in the narrative. A handy thing about setting your story in 1910, says Caroline, is that in those days there were no forensics to worry about; write in the present time – one in which every other reader has seen *CSI* – at your peril.

Caroline wants to give her readers a cracking murder mystery in every Euphemia Martin book, but she also wants to look at ethical issues, such as the power that wealth and privilege can bring. She's also interested in the class system, and how World War One challenged it for the first time. She's careful, though, to include humour and romance in her writing; 'Otherwise why would people read my books?' All three agree that engaging characters are vital – they must

come across as 'real' people, with all their failings and foibles. Rebecca:


'We are all shades of grey, all our own baddies from time to time.'

Life changes; people stay the same. Today's readers may seek an escape from depressing reality, but it's characters that make or break a story. Or as Caroline points out;

'Story is character in motion'

And these three writers certainly know how to keep those characters moving right along.

Canoeing round the Cairngorms, swimming in Orkney storms and trekking through snow to reach mountain bothies are all things I'd rather read about from the comfort of my Edinburgh sofa. On Sunday morning, in a session ably chaired by **Rona Gray**, three authors who're made of sterner stuff than I am talked about the joys and challenges of the natural environment.

Photographer and writer **Geoff Allan** has visited all one  hundred and four bothies documented in his *Scottish Bothy Bible* and even trudged through frozen snow in pitch darkness to spend Christmas alone in one of them. Until 2009 the location of each bothy was a closely guarded secret, known only to members of the Mountain Bothies Association – then the MBA decided to put all the grid references online, so Geoff doesn't feel too bad about sharing his knowledge with all and sundry.

Will this lead to the overcrowding, or even desecration, of these much-treasured hidey-holes? Geoff doesn't think so; you still have to walk or cycle miles off any road to find them, and most are pretty basic – as Geoff says, don't expect a tap, much less a toilet. *The Scottish Bothy Bible* is full of his


wonderful photos; it's a true labour of love, and has already proved massively popular. I'm looking forward to reading it, and I'm even going to a real live bothy myself soon, albeit one with a composting toilet, which probably means it doesn't count...



'The importance of getting out of doors is profound; much more important is to go there again and again, to understand visceral nature.'

Robbie Nicol lives in Kingussie, so the Cairngorms are as local to him as the Pentlands are to Edinburgh. Yes we know the Pentlands are pathetic little hills, but we're weedy city people... As an Outdoor Educator, Robbie had been much affected by all the bad news about climate change. He decided to do something positive to extol the beauty of Scotland – and that thing, dreamt up whilst heavily under the influence of Robert Pirsig (*Zen & The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*), turned out to be a canoe and sea kayak trip from Loch Ness via Loch Linnhe and Loch Leven to Rannoch Moor, Tayside, and up the East coast back to Inverness.

Henry Thoreau once said that if you walked in a ten mile radius of your home for 70 years you would still never know that area really well; by Thoreau's standards Robbie's plan was extravagant, but he still wanted to find the beauty on his doorstep. His journey – which included more than a few hairy episodes – and his thoughts about nature and the wrongs wreaked upon it by his own species, gave rise to *Canoeing Around the Cairngorms*;

'My book', says **Victoria Whitworth**, 'is a love letter to  the seals.' Whitworth, an established novelist and mediaeval historian, lived on Orkney for ten years (she's recently moved back to Portobello), during which time she swam from the same beach, the Sands of Evie, almost every day of

every year. Why she did it, and what made her keep going back, became the subject first of a series of Facebook posts, and now of her fascinating book *Swimming with Seals*.

Victoria started swimming with the Orkney Polar Bears, a wild swimming club, in a desperate attempt to cure a foot problem, (*plantar fasciitis* – and it worked) but it didn't end there. Swimming in cold water is 'probably the most effective legal high there is'; she became addicted to it. The swimming became part of a much larger experience, as she worked through problems in her own life in this;

'extraordinarily rich resource of swimming environments'

She even joined in the Polar Bears' project to swim in every one of the Orkney parishes. She's still swimming here in Portobello, though she says the sea here is actually colder. Just wait till January, Victoria...

☒ These are only four of the 20+ events on offer over a weekend that included authors' visits to schools, a book quiz, a storytelling session at a care home and an evening of book-inspired music. This is what community events should be; well-run, well supported and open to all. So how *do* they do it? They keep it simple; everything is run by volunteers, all of the authors give their time for free, and only three ☒ local venues are used – the library, the Baptist Church Hall and the Dalriada pub, all of which open their premises free of charge (the library even opens on Sunday).

Tickets are available only from the library in person; they may be free but you have to make a little bit of an effort to get them, which seems to ensure that people do turn up (no-shows often being a problem for events with online tickets/registration). Every event I attended was packed out.

'It's about the love of reading and books, and the support of

public libraries. It's a little bit different from other festivals.' (*Joanne Baird*)

The next Portobello Book Festival will take place 5-7 October 2018. Keep up to date by following the festival on [Facebook](#) or checking the website [here](#).