



The Festival Experience

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AS A NOVELIST YOU SPEND much of your time alone in a small room talking to yourself about imaginary people doing imaginary things. Then, once a year, your new book is about to come out and off you're sent on the festival circuit by the publisher's publicity department where you get to talk about the same imaginary characters from a stage — this time hopefully not just to yourself. And after your talk there are always the questions.

My first festival appearance went quite well; the audience, though small, didn't *visibly* go to sleep, I successfully talked about my book and didn't stumble over my reading and finished my talk to a polite round of clapping. 'Are there any questions?' the organiser asked. The audience sat silently as I shrivelled inside.

'Any questions?' I could hear the panic bubbling in their voice. There had to be questions — how else would they fill the remaining fifteen minutes? 'Anyone? *Anything?*'

Finally, a hand slowly rose. 'Where did you get your sweater from?'

I don't blame them for wanting to know — I too have sat in the audience wondering where the author has got a belt or a pair of shoes from or, in one case, wondering if the author had by mistake put her gardening clothes on. I bought a special outfit for festival appearances, thinking that even if my *words* weren't memorable, my Barbie-pink silk shirt printed with Dalmatians would give people something to think about.



Luckily, as a novelist who makes up stuff, I can't get caught out by the local expert on the subject, although I did once have a confused discussion with an audience member who couldn't seem to accept that I'd made a place up. I have also been flummoxed by a reader asking about a character I simply couldn't remember writing. It was embarrassing to discover a reader who knew far more about my book than I did, and my excuse that it was several books ago sounded pathetic even to me.

Over time I have developed a few tricks to make question time easier. If I know I am going to have a friend in the audience, I supply them with a ready-made question (or two) to ask should there be silence when question time comes around. Dropping into the talk section a phrase such as 'The second-best thing to happen to me in York' (or wherever the festival is taking place) is guaranteed to lead to someone asking what the best thing was. And there will be at least one question along the lines of 'How do I get published?' or 'How do I write a novel?', so I have a page on my website to give that advice.

Since that first time, though, no one has *ever* asked about my wardrobe. At some point on the festival road the pink Dalmatians shirt was left in a Premier Inn wardrobe. It was probably for the best.