



## The Festival Experience

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I HAVE BEEN TO PERHAPS thirty different literature festivals, and some of them I've been to twice. It's been a slow accumulation. I imagine bestselling authors sit down with their publicists whenever they have a new book out to review the list of festivals they've been invited to — and they will be as likely to refuse as to accept any invitation.

With me, it's more a case of the publicist sending me an excited email: 'Andrew, we've got you into a literary festival!' I am politely asked whether I'd like to take up the offer, but that is a mere formality.

Literary festivals are the cherries on the cake of writing. You are almost always paid to attend the festival, and if there's one thing more luxurious than being paid to write, it's being paid to talk about your writing. The festival is usually held in an attractive location, so you are, in effect, being paid to go on a little holiday.

On arrival at the town, I check into the hotel, experiencing that little surge of pride at saying, 'I'm an author, here for the festival.' Ideally, I will not have to say my name, because I will be recognised by some festival staffer on hand. Even more ideally, I will then be given a lanyard reading 'Author', and various permits allowing me free access to things. I then go on my orientation walk around the town, and I remember my pleasure last year at discovering that Stirling (location of the Bloody Scotland crime writing festival) had everything I could want in a small town: in particular, a second-hand record shop and a retailer of Havana cigars.



One's ego is usually pretty safe at literary festivals. You wouldn't have been asked if there weren't a reasonable expectation of an audience. But I *have* suffered some blows. At a festival in a small northern town, my event was held in a small anteroom of a community hall. I'd drawn a 'crowd' of about a dozen. The event lasted an hour, and throughout that time, there was a constant clanging as festival volunteers set out metal chairs in the main room for the principal attraction: Michael Morpurgo.

And I recall the provincial theatre where I waited nervously backstage as the festival compère introduced me. I had no idea of the audience size, but his voice did seem to be ringing rather hollowly. 'In a minute,' he said, 'I will be bringing Andrew on to the stage and I'd like you to make up for the shortage of numbers by giving him a really big round of applause.' Well, the first two rows were...*almost* full.

As I gave my performance, I was distracted by the question: *Is this humiliation worth it for the fee?* The fee was modest, but then again the humiliation was only relative (I once turned up for a bookshop event to find that nobody else had done); and if the audience was small it was quite enthusiastic.

So it was...a very close-run thing.