



The Festival Experience

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MY FIRST BOOK FESTIVAL experience was more than thirty years ago when I was a student actor performing in an Anthony Minghella play at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. One afternoon I snuck away to the Edinburgh Book Festival tents on Charlotte Square and bought a ticket to hear a talk by a writer I'd never heard of called Michael Ondaatje. Afterwards I queued up to get my paperback copy of *Running in the Family* signed (I couldn't afford *In the Skin of a Lion*, the new hardback he was promoting), and I remember how thrilled I felt to be in the presence of a real live author. Oddly enough Anthony Minghella later directed the film version of Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient*.

A decade later, while working as a freelance publicist covering maternity leave at a children's publisher in London, I was sent to Cheltenham Literature Festival to shepherd two actors dressed as Asterix and Obelix. I was pregnant at the time and not far off Obelix-shaped myself. When I moved to Gloucestershire a few years later, I got further involved in Cheltenham – the UK's oldest book festival – first as an event manager and later as an event chair. Now, when there isn't a pandemic on, I take to the stage at book festivals around the country, doing around twenty to thirty charring gigs a year. I've looked Derren Brown in the eye, facing down predictions from friends that he would hypnotise me into talking gibberish (he was actually a pussycat who did nothing of the sort); I've acted as warm-up woman for David Baddiel; I've felt downright dowdy while sitting next to eighty-year-old supermodel Daphne Selfe; I've gone all goose-bumpy while interviewing Philippa Langley, the woman whose



sixth sense prompted the discovery of Richard III's bones in a Leicester car park; and I've also had the privilege of sharing the stage with such outstanding contemporary writers as Maggie O'Farrell, Alexander McCall Smith and Claire Tomalin.

Whilst chairing on stage at a book festival might *seem* a world away from my solitary day job writing books, features and reviews, there are parallels. In both cases, research and preparation are vital, as is the ability to create structure and flow, whether it be through the considered placing of words or the considered order in which you ask your questions. And then, like the best laid plot that goes off-piste, surprising things can happen in a live interview too. In both cases, the ability to go with it when an interesting tangent opens up, and not be thrown, is vital.

Ultimately, the book festival experience provides great inspiration and motivation when it comes to my own work. Last year I was fortunate enough to interview Ali Smith about her novel *Summer*. Asked by a member of the audience about the meaning of a certain aspect of the book, Smith turned the tables. 'What do *you* think it means? That's what's important. It's your book now, not mine', she declared. A less precious, more reader-centred approach to writing you could not hope to find, and it's a festival experience I've never forgotten.