



'This was a case for Anti-Censorship Woman! So I nipped into the nearest phone booth, hopped into my cape and coiled my magic lasso, and swiftly cancelled my own appearance....How stalwart!'

Margaret Atwood, aka Anti-Censorship Woman, on the 'Dubai debacle,' in *The Guardian*, 21 Feb. 2009.

► Criminally good

Q: What's more fun than a barrel of monkey-detectives? A: Bristol-based CrimeFest, the International Crime Fiction Convention where the pen is bloodier than the sword. Now in its second thriller-centric year, the 14-17 May weekend features author panels, interviews and crime-writing workshops, with novelists, readers, editors

and publishers from around the world including Icelandic Yrsa Sigurdardóttir, Swedish Håkan Nesser and Brit Ann Cleeves.



Competition!

We've got a pair of CrimeFest tickets to give away with access to all the panels (NB: The tix do not include accommodation, travel or the Gala Dinner). Plus, four runners-up will win the first three volumes of Ann Cleeves' Shetland quartet! Just visit our website, www.mslexia.co.uk, to enter.



► A breath of fresh air

Once upon a time, on the slopes of the Acropolis, Heather Reyes and her partner Malcolm Burgess were enjoying the city of Athens, but felt that something was missing. 'We had guidebooks,' explains Reyes, 'but we really wanted a something that would capture the feel of the city through good writing, so that we could get under its skin.' They couldn't find such a book, so they decided to create one – and thus Oxygen Books was born.

A series of anthologies built (so far) around Paris, London and Dublin – with Amsterdam and Berlin soon to come – each volume offers what it says on the tin: City-Lit – Perfect Gems of City Writing. 'I like looking at aspects of cities through the eyes of a writer,' says Reyes. 'Often I find through their eyes the kind of perception and the kind of detail and the kind of feel for a place that is unique, that can only be captured with a writer's sensibility.'

With freshly-commissioned

introductions for each book, the series thus far is name-checking everyone from Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys and Colette to the



more contemporary Kate Mosse, Catherine Sanderson, Sarah Turnball, Maeve Binchy, Stella Duffy and Xiaolu Guo: 'There's some great atmospheric writing. Segments like the beginning of Ruth Rendell's *Portobello* is just several pages of brilliant description in our London guide. She's really setting it up, drawing the place with her words.'

Variety is the key note. Reyes looks for a variety of tone – humorous, sad, descriptive; a variety of lengths – extracts run from 200 to 2000 words; a variety of form, which can include blogs, journalism, fiction, travel writing, history ('Just about any form of writing makes an appearance,' says Reyes); and a variety of voices, both national and international ones. Paris, for example, includes Iranian Shusha Guppy's account of being a young woman in Paris, as well as French-Algerian Faïza Guène, on not going up the Eiffel Tower ('She's a real discovery,' says Reyes. 'She's wonderful.'). alongside stalwart Parisienne Simone de Beauvoir.

Allons-y!



The Bards in the Bog poetry competition, open to all ages and any subject – as long as the poems are no longer than 12 lines. Six poems will be selected every three months, and will be displayed in all Shetland leisure centre toilets, as well as at other locations. Project judge, local poet and 2008 TS Eliot winner Jen Hadfield approves: 'I've always loved the idea of sneaking poetry into unexpected places.'



National treasure The British Library appears to have mislaid over 9,000 of its volumes. Although it's likely that most are simply mis-shelved, until they are located, readers searching for certain first editions by Oscar Wilde, Ezra Pound, Charles Dickens; an 1876 illustrated Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; and a table of 1930s London cab fares, are out of luck.

Mslexia reads

A selection of the books thawing us out this spring:

- *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion (HarperPerennial). Didion's spare, heartfelt tome, written immediately following her husband's unexpected death, offers unflinching insight into a time when you've painted a picture of life as it's going to be, only to find yourself faced with a blank canvas. Its analytical and intellectual edge only serves to enhance the book's poignancy.
- *The Number* by Jonny Steinberg (Jonathan Ball). A fascinating ride through the underworld of prison gangs in South Africa. Part reportage, part biography, Steinberg's book examines a community born out of banditry lore; Cape Town's unique cultural mix; and the continuing devastations of colonialism and apartheid.
- *Weeds and Wild Flowers* by Alice Oswald (Faber). In this volume, Oswald's new poems sit aside etchings by Jessica Greenman. Both aspects of the book are given equal space and importance, work together and challenge each other in a way that brims with elegance and sorcery. A feast for the senses at the onset of spring.
- *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (Penguin Modern Classics). Willy Loman is a salesman whose career is in sharp decline. Masterfully written, witty and powerful, Miller's perception of American suburbia is as timely now as it was at its conception, more than half a century ago.
- *The Lace Reader* by Brunonia Barry (HarperPress). Set in modern-day Salem, this accomplished debut revolves around a cast of extraordinary women who read the future in pieces of lace. A tightly-woven narrative of mystery, suspense and passion.

Knockin' on Grazia's Door

KnockBack magazine is a 21st Century rebellion, an antidote to those publications that judge, criticise and presume to know the minds and bodies of women. Within its compact size, *KnockBack* delivers empowering, entertaining features (such as the tongue-firmly-in-cheekiness of 'Lose 85 pounds in two hours' – about lightening your purse instead of loosening your jeans), cannily ensconced in an engaging design of sleek, minimalist colour and a retro feel. There's not a whiff of patronisation here: instead, features like 'The Feminine Razor: A Consumer Guide,' highlight the awkward, often comical, realities of female existence. *KnockBack* contains no ads; it is funded through readers' donations and, as it is a labour of voluntary love, be sure to keep a watchful eye on www.knockback.co.uk. –Victoria Levay

Guerrillas in the Round

Frustrated with the lack of new, experimental drama being produced in the founders' native Wales, Dirty Protest Theatre's simple premise was set: create a stage on which established and emerging writers can showcase their work, then take it round the pubs and clubs in a bid to bring theatre to new audiences. From its first sell-out performance in a pub garden's Mongolian yurt, DPT's homebase of Cardiff became the centre of a revolution. Staging a mix of short productions and works-in-progress, each writer is given four weeks and one stage; established reputations are not a prerequisite, and in under two years Dirty Protest has produced a barrage of exciting, engaging plays. To find out about future events – or how to submit your work – visit their website www.dirtyprotesttheatre.co.uk or their Facebook pages. –VL