

# A popular "professional" LitFest

With its mixture of fiction and non-fiction writers, the excellent pairing of interviewers with authors and the enthusiastic support of a local independent bookshop, West End Lane Books, the Proms LitFest appears highly professional – despite being run entirely by volunteers.

This year, Woman's Hour's Jenni Murray – now a Suburb resident – was the most renowned of the literary line-up, interviewed by Marie-Elsa Bragg, herself an author with a particular interest in women's issues (see page 9). It was fascinating to hear the struggles Ms Murray faced in being accepted on a par with men in broadcasting only a few decades ago, and yet that already seems like a different age.

Also harking back to a recent yesteryear was Nina Stibbe, one-time nanny (in the eighties) in Primrose Hill, counting among her neighbours Alan Bennett, who would pop round for supper most days. She talked with Hannah Beckerman about that and her latest book, *Paradise Lodge*, which she confessed was '87½ per cent autobiographical'.

Joel Morris and Jason Hazeley may be relatively unknown as writers, yet their work has sold four million copies. How come? They are the comedy brains behind the Ladybird Books for Grown-Ups series, and entertained the Proms audience with their slide presentation of their road to fame, discussing with Suburb resident and scriptwriter Ian Davidson the perils of translating

a very English sense of humour into other languages (not least, American).

Natalie Haynes, the stand-up comic and classicist, told Nicholas Clee about her new novel, *The Children of Jocasta*, a reworking of the Oedipus story, and architectural historian Dan Cruickshank related to Proms patron Sue MacGregor the history of Spitalfields, not only the place he lives but also the subject of his new book.

Guardian journalists Polly Toynbee and David Walker, in a session chaired by writer and broadcaster Liz Thomson, found most of their audience sympathetic to their views about the weakening of the public sector, described in *Dismembered*. And historian Laurence Rees, in conversation with Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg,

also struck a chord talking about the boundary between truth and lies and the insidious rise of the latter, not only in Nazi Germany but also today.

Truth, untruth and the grey area in-between were explored finally by the crime writers' panel, ably chaired by William Ryan, author of *The Constant Soldier*. For Erin Kelly, this was the fulcrum of her latest novel, *He Said, She Said*, focusing on events occurring during a solar eclipse, while for Susie Steiner in *Persons Unknown*, the story revolves around trust, even of your closest friends.

In its sixth year, the Proms LitFest (with its celebrated café) is becoming established not only as an integral part of the Proms calendar but also a fixture on the London literary scene.

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