The Gazette

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(Continued inside...)

Day 3: Round Up

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Inside:
Paul Auster & Jeanette Winterson

Written for Festival & Co. by Adam Biles. A collection featuring his work The Place In Which We Find Ourselves is available instore or from www.findourselves.com

Books are available for purchase at Shakespeare & Company and in French at the independent French bookseller stand outside square René Viviani. There will be a signing by authors following most Festival events.
Into the Light
Paul Auster Reads from his new novel “Man In The Dark”

A man lies awake in the dark. Alone. When sleep refuses to come he lies there and tells himself stories. This night his story puts a man, Owen Brick, in a hole, for it seemed like a good way to start, a hole he will be unable to escape from...

So begins Paul Auster’s newest book, not to be published in English until the Autumn – he was, so he told the crowd, “reading from the galley.” Mr Auster’s second event at the festival this year attracted a large and determined crowd – Anglophone and Francophone – that spilled out of the tent and sprawled across the Square René Viviani. Passers-by, noticing the crowd stopped and then, noticing Paul Auster, stayed.

The extract – lasting forty heroic minutes – read like vintage Auster. The narrative of several strands, the sensation of approaching disaster and a writer as the narrator were all present, as was the state of Vermont. After the reading, one fan was overheard to say, “he sounds exactly as you would expect, doesn’t he?” The fan was not wrong. Auster’s voice when he reads, embedded in a pronounced West Coast accent, moves with a flat, humming tenor. Somewhat emotionless, enigmatic and, as a result, oddly hypnotic.

The audience, some of whom had crossed continents to be here, hung with a sniper’s attentiveness on his every word. The previous evening, in the astonishing Salle Des Fetes of the Hotel De Ville, another layer of Auster was revealed. Sharing the stage with Walter Donahue, from the outside, from the bigger velveteen suit, Grayling argued that Descartes’ seemingly purposeless travel around Europe spilled out of the tent and sprawled fixed, consistent across the Square entity. Auster describing it as a “continuum” and Hustvedt preferring not to speak of “the self” at all, but rather of “the selves, the multiple selves that we all have within us.” This was, she stressed, not a condition peculiar to writers or poets, but a phenomenon common to us all and one that she would encourage everyone to explore.

Siri Hustvedt, together with Ian Jack and A.M. Homes, will be participating on the Memoir and Fiction Panel that will close this year’s festival. 17h15 in the marquee.

Fiction Can’t Lie

Also appearing for the second time at this year’s festival Jeanette Winterson took to the stage alone – and impressively bereft of notes – to talk with the audience about truth telling in fiction. Kicking off with an extract from her first novel, Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit – in which the lead character shares her name – Winterson went on to speak with striking honesty and authenticity about living in literature. “I believe completely and passionately,” she said, her manner demonstrating that these words were not empty rhetoric, “that fiction and poetry is a place where you can not lie. If you start to lie to yourself as a writer the work will simply come apart because it won’t allow you to lie.”

She also addressed the role of how literature and the writing process are crucial means not only for affecting internal change but also bringing about external change and helping lead the world onto a better course. Perhaps contrary to popular belief literature, she said, “is incredibly sane. The people who write it are often bonkers, I know [...] but I think that in itself is evidence of this great urge to bring things back to the centre and to know that that can only happen if you are prepared to move towards the extremes. You can not live a life that is a lie, and by that I mean a life which does not admit as much truth as possible.” She went on to say how this can then affect the wider world: “I’ve never felt that social change comes from the outside, from the bigger picture. I think it comes from the inside and then works outwards.”

Nothing in history, she argued, had changed as a result of a mass philosopher and sculptor of the French psyche was in fact a spy. After his death, brought on by the gruelling study habits of his then pupil Queen Christina of Sweden, Descartes’ body was exhumed and the head stolen. Grayling delighted in the irony that the one from the centre of their beings. Also appearing for the second time at this year’s festival Alain de Boton spoke about his concept of “status anxiety,” a sickness he sees as becoming ever more acute in modern society. That de Boton could take such a serious subject and succeed in making it entertaining without trivialising it is a testimony to his intelligence and gift as a speaker. He also gave several examples of how status anxiety might be cured.

Closing the day was the New York Review of Books panel, discussing the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama. Although a rather one sided discussion (a Republican in the audience might have feared for his safety) the panelists explored the questions of race in American politics and discussed the crucial question “Can he win?,” to which their response was, in general, cautiously optimistic. The event took an unexpected turn when Mr. Lawrence Ferlinghetti – legendary poet and political activist from the “left” coast of America – stood up to ask the panel if they thought Obama was tough enough to take on the entrenched powers in Washington.

Round Up
(Continued...)

A.C. Grayling seduced the festival audience with his presentation of a very human Descartes. Sketching his subject as a small, proud man, often got up in a green velvet suit. Grayling argued that Descartes’ seemingly purposeless travel around Europe made it rather likely that this great philosopher and sculptor of the French psyche was in fact a spy. After his death, brought on by the gruelling study habits of his then...