

Writers among the shelves

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Sarah Meyrick spent last week at a literary festival in north Wales

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GLADSTONE's Library is an extraordinary place. A Grade I listed Victorian building in Flintshire, it houses the former Prime Minister's personal collection of 32,000 books and his private papers, not to mention a further 220,000 volumes, making it the most important research library in Wales after the National Library.

Founded by William Gladstone himself, the library became the national memorial to his life and work after the statesman's death in 1898. Today it is a residential library, and also serves as a meeting place dedicated to dialogue, debate, and learning.

Through the year, writers and researchers find inspiration in the Victorian grandeur of the library, and sanctuary in the 26 bedrooms. But the year is also regularly punctuated by events, festivals, and debates, reflecting Gladstone's own interests: literary culture; religion and spirituality; and history and current affairs. For the past three years this programme has included Gladfest, a literary festival held over the first weekend in September.

The festival is small, and attracts an enthusiastic, but largely local audience, the Warden, the Revd Peter Francis, says. Many of the audience are Friends of the library or other loyal supporters. (One glamorously dressed woman in her forties assured me that it was "better than a spa day".)

Partnership with a regional arts organisation, Interact (Wales), means that the weekend includes a well-supported programme of activities for children and young people. There's also a craft fair and a tea tent.

To say that it all feels very cosy is not to diminish the quality of the speakers or the professionalism of the event. Rather, it is the fact that the venues are small — no more than 70 tickets for each event. And above all, perhaps, most of the speakers have been writers-in-residence at Gladstone, know the staff and each other, and as a result feel utterly at home.

There is no Green Room, and no special treatment for speakers. Everyone eats in the (excellent) dining room, and drinks in a bar furnished with large and comfortable leather sofas. As a result, the ambience is informal and friendly, and you feel more house guest than punter.

AMONG the speakers this year were **Michel Faber**, the author of an extraordinary range of novels, including *The Crimson Petal and the White*, and last year's *The Book of Strange New Things*, in which he told the story of a British missionary sent to evangelise an alien world. He himself is an atheist, however. "I have a lot of respect for faith," he said. "It's scary to be an atheist. Religion gives people a tool to bear the unbearable. I respect all that."

He has declared this sixth novel his last, saying that he has reached his limits. At Gladfest, he spoke about his struggles in life, his work as a writer, and, most movingly, about the death of his beloved wife, Eva. He is now writing poetry reflecting on his loss, some of which he read aloud. He has also set himself the task of finishing Eva's stories, and producing her biography. "I'm proud of my body of work," he said. "But I've got other things to be getting on with now."

Another writer who spoke about her ambivalence towards religious belief was **Sarah Perry**, author of the extraordinary *After Me Comes the Flood*. In a conversation with Mr Francis, she spoke about her unusual upbringing. "I was brought up in 1895," she said. In her household there was no TV, no visits to the cinema, no parties, and no wearing of trousers by the girls. At the age of seven, she was saved while sitting on a hay bale at a Baptist camp.

"I was so terrified I was going to hell I could smell the brimstone," she recalled. She confessed her sins and received salvation. "I was baptised at the age of 16, and was an ardent Christian until the age of 25."

At that point, she said, her intellect got in the way. She could no longer accept that her reason was the devil in disguise and had no value. "It became a logical absurdity." But she cannot quite let go of faith. "I still believe in God, but not a capricious one," she said. "I can't stop this love. It's the love that will not let me go. It's like unpicking a tapestry. The holes in the linen are still there, and I haven't worked out how to re-stitch it.

Matthew Bradley, the director of the Gladstone Centre for Victorian Studies, spoke about the companionship of reading. He quoted Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "No man can be called friendless who has God and the companionship of good books."

He talked about the massive thirst for novels during the 19th century, thanks to the growth of literacy and the benefits of industrialisation. It's estimated that a staggering 50,000 novels were written during the Victorian period, aided and abetted by the lending libraries.

One of the writers-in-residence who has had particular success is **Jessie Burton**, author of *The Miniaturist*, which was published to huge acclaim last year. She spoke about the difficulty of writing her second novel after her first attracted so much attention (and a huge advance, widely believed to be a six-figure sum).

A writer needed two personae, she said: the writer and the promoter, and she had found the promotion extremely exhausting. She read from her new work, as yet unfinished, which is called *The Muse*, and is set against a backdrop of the Spanish Civil War and 1950s Britain.

Sarah Dunant, well-known for her historical novels set in Italy, gave an illustrated talk, demonstrating how she uses research to inform her writing. Highly knowledgeable about the Renaissance, she described how she turned to works of art to find her characters and understand their world. She spoke with enormous passion about how this had provided her a new direction (she previously wrote psychological thrillers) after a personal crisis 15 years ago.

Patrick Barkham is another writer who has benefited from residency at the library. *The Guardian's* natural history correspondent, he spoke about his latest book, *Coastlines*, about the shores of Britain, which, at a startling 12,251 miles, has a longer coastline than India. His book brings stretches of the coast to life through stories associated with them.

The sea, he said, used to be feared. The early monks and hermits took themselves to pray by the sea as a matter of spiritual hardship, for example. But over the centuries this has changed beyond recognition. "For me, there is a solace," he said. "In a post-religious age there's a comfort in a power so much bigger than us."

A speaker who had not been to the Library before was the author **Patrick Gale**, who spoke about his latest book, *A Place Called Winter*. He explained that it was based on a family secret that he had discovered in some papers in an old trunk that had been handed down by his grandmother and mother.

His great-grandfather had disappeared off to Canada, leaving his wife and daughter behind in Britain. The precise reasons were shrouded in mystery, but what was known was that he had scratched a living as a homesteader in the Canadian prairies. Gale has created a story around this. "I have honoured the known facts, but also filled in the gaps," he said.