

DIARY

Joseph Connolly



And so the Olympics are done. I am still reeling from the information — I simply cannot unremember it — that two million people applied for tickets to the final of the men's 100m, 80,000 of them succeeding. The race was over in less time than it has taken you to read this little nugget. I thought it insanity rampant, but then I know nothing of sport — despite having been at the Atlanta Olympics way back in 1996, in order to write some fairly flippant pieces for the *Times*. British Airways had managed to lose all my luggage, though it was restored to me one hour before my flight home — where the following day I learned that the Press Centre, where I had been spending most of my time, had just been blown to smithereens by a terrorist bomb. All the proper journalists on my plane were lamenting having missed such a story. I wasn't.

I am the restaurant critic of the *Hampstead & Highgate Express* (*Ham & High*, to its mates) and during the years I have been doing this rather strange thing, I have absorbed the following constants: banquettes are always three inches lower than the chairs that face them; slices of wood and slate are now employed quite as regularly as plates; there has yet to be born the waitress who does not instruct you to 'Enjoy!' In the restaurants I keep going back to — the Wolseley, Wiltons and J. Sheekey — one very often sees off-duty food writers, basking in relief.

Here's a little jeu d'esprit: how many publishers does it take to screw in a light bulb? Three — one to do the screwing, the other two to hold down the author. Well I am delighted to say that my new publisher is nothing at all like this. Having published ten novels with Faber and Faber, the new one — *England's Lane* — comes from Quercus, who are quietly magnificent. The novel is set in 1959, England's Lane being a real street in the Belsize Park area of London. Now for some bookish tittle-tattle: Quercus entered it for the Man Booker Prize, and a few weeks ago at a literary party, one of the judges approached me to talk of the novel's profound and lingering impression, which I considered to be jolly

good news. Sir Peter Stothard — chairman of the judges, and an old friend — was also there: we agreed to meet for dinner quite soon. Dan Stevens was full of bonhomie, and yet another judge was highly chatty and complimentary. Ion Trewin, also a chum, is the administrator of the prize, and he on another occasion had asked me to sign his proof copy. So how could I be surprised

when the novel signally failed to make it even on to the bloody longlist?

Ever since Kingsley Amis had one of his peeved American characters say 'Armageddon pier staff', I have been assembling some phonetic constructions of my own. One of my Yankee ones is 'Wine chew sedan?' Among the home-grown are the incredulous expostulation 'Jubilee-vit!' and, from the bored receptionist, 'Nye hell pew...?' I was thinking of Kingsley just the other day, when reading some Wodehouse. I was with Kingsley in 1988 when the Queen Mother, as patron of the Wodehouse Society, unveiled a blue plaque on the Mayfair house that Wodehouse had lived in during the 1930s. 'I always read two pages of Plum before I go to sleep,' she was trilling. Kingsley whispered, 'Something of a double-edged sword...' During the drinks before the celebratory lunch, Her Majesty was gaily knocking back that ghastly combination of gin and Dubonnet. She would occasionally hold out the glass, whereupon some blank-faced flunkie immediately ran to relieve her of its weight, a refreshed measure instantly placed into her hand. In Cornwall this summer, the younger holidaymakers are enjoying a tippie even more unspeakable: it comprises port, cider, Bailey's and Guinness. The youths, when they can speak at all, refer to it happily as Elephant Snot.

I received a mail order catalogue in the post the other day. Among the desirabilia on offer were a book called *The Art of Napkin Folding*, a leather fly swat, a broom stopper ('designed to prevent brooms from falling over when propped up'), egg pillows ('whatever the size, eggs will sit comfortably on the coloured pillows'), a musical cake slice, Mummy Mitts ('no more cold hands when you push a buggy'), tree faces ('add character and personality to any tree with our Funny Tree Face'), modesty panels ('there are times when too much cleavage is inappropriate'), hair mascara, Earpal ('the safe way to clean your ears') and, finally, Shewee ('this clever device allows women to pee without removing clothes'). The name of the catalogue is Essentials.

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