

The Diary: Amanda Foreman



Published: May 27 2011 22:06 | Last updated: May 27 2011 22:06

It's the start of the literary festival season again. For the people who go every year to Charleston or Hay – or any of the other literary festivals popping up everywhere – it's just another event in the calendar. But, for most writers, it is their one chance to feel part of something bigger than their tiny study or office. I haven't spoken at a festival for 10 years but I'll never forget my first time. It was at Hay in 1998 and I had never appeared in public before. I was so frightened that my agent made me gulp down a whisky before going on stage.

My fear was that I would forget how to speak. That the English language would vanish from my repertoire and nothing would come out of my mouth. I was so ignorant of public speaking that it never occurred to me to prepare by practising beforehand. It sounds extraordinary, I know. In fact, I look back at my younger self and want to give her a good shaking.

As it turned out, Hay made me. As I walked on to the stage, my terror dissipated. I spoke for an hour about the fascinating and tragic story of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (the subject of my then-forthcoming book), never once losing my stride.

When I was in my twenties, I was haunted by a recurring dream that my mouth was a bloody mess of loose teeth and tangled wires that prevented me from talking. It doesn't take a genius to recognise its meaning. But, after that appearance at Hay, I never had the dream again.

...

In real life – the just hanging out, chatting after dinner sort of life – I am still not particularly scintillating or articulate. Sitting next to [Henry Kissinger](#) last Saturday at a dinner to mark his book launch in London, I died each time he turned to me and asked, "What do you think?" I didn't care what I thought. I wanted to hear from him since he's the expert and I'm a lifelong student. But this was a difficult if not impossible thing to say without sounding stupid. In the end I forced myself to make the odd comment but I much preferred listening.

The other guests at the dinner included fellow historians Niall Ferguson and Sir Alistair Horne. When they began discussing international relations with Kissinger, it was like having my own little Hay.

...

As soon as I have finished touring here, I shall head to the US for the hardback publication of my history of the American civil war, *A World on Fire*. Last year the American embassy in London gave me a launch party and, in a generous display of "special relationship" reciprocity, the British embassy is hosting a similar event in Washington.

The presidential state visit this week notwithstanding, I confess that for some time I have been of the belief that the "special relationship" between the UK and the US belonged to the past. But when I brought this up with Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Britain's ambassador in Washington, he told me point blank that I was wrong. But, I argued, what about Barack Obama ordering the removal of the bust of Winston Churchill from the Oval Office on his very first day in office and having it returned to the British embassy? If you needed just one symbolic act, that was it.

Well, it turns out there was no "order" to get rid of the statue. It had been on loan and the embassy had been asking for its return for some time. Finally, with all the moving and shuffling associated with a new presidency, someone in housekeeping remembered to get round to the task. Sheinwald doubts that Obama was even informed about the bust's removal.

Even though the ambassador has told the true version of this story to several journalists, he has never seen it in print. So I am writing it now and declare *mea culpa* since I was one of the people who referred to the non-existent event and, therefore, helped to create the sense of crisis.

...

A real crisis, on the other hand, is affecting the white working class and black Caribbean British youth. Eighteen months ago, the rightwing think-tank, the Centre for Policy Studies, published a report called "Wasted: the Betrayal of White Working Class and Black Caribbean Boys." Written by Harriet Sergeant, the report was the result of her year-long investigation into why so many black Caribbean and white working class boys fail to make the transition to a successful adult life. The rot, she claimed, had less to do with home life than with what happened in school.

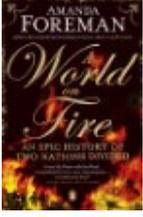
I bumped into Sergeant this week at a reception in London. She had spent the day in prison, visiting a gang leader nicknamed Tuggy Tug who was one of the youths in her report. Despite her efforts to introduce Tuggy and his south London gang to the broader possibilities of life, three of them have ended up behind bars.

Yet, to her immense surprise, the corrections system isn't all bad. One prison officer has grown so close to Tuggy that he calls her "mum". In place of his old life of thieving and fighting, he has three healthy meals a day and exercises in the prison gym. But, says Sergeant, and it is a major caveat: the government's fundamental sense of purpose regarding prison is fatally confused: "Every time I try to help Tuggy and the other two, it means a battle with social workers, youth offending teams, and probation." No one really knows what to do with these lost boys. Is the point of the system to punish them or to save them?

Sergeant is now writing a book about the three years she has so far spent with Tuggy and the gang. She has grown to love them as though they were part of her family. One day she will be appearing at literary festivals herself. One of her greatest wishes is that she will see Tuggy, Sunshine, Mash and the others in the audience. I will be thinking of them all next week, when I break my decade-long festival silence and return to Hay. I will have only nerves – and the wretched roads – to overcome in order to get there. Tuggy and co will have far, far, further to travel.

'A World on Fire' (Penguin £12.99) by Amanda Foreman is published in paperback on June 2. She will be speaking at the Hay Festival on June 4

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2011. Print a single copy of this article for personal use. [Contact us](#) if you wish to print more to distribute to others.



[A World on Fire](#)
Dr Amanda Foreman
[Best Price £6.89](#)
or Buy New [£6.99](#)
[Buy from amazon.co.uk](#)

[Privacy Information](#)

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times.
© Copyright [The Financial Times](#) Ltd 2011.