



Local author talk

Jill Dawson: ‘“Mud and light”’: a talk on writing’



Local author, Jill Dawson, at home in the fens

Jill Dawson admitted to feeling some unease when asked to talk about her writing. Is the author the best person to interpret her own novels for us? What are we seeking when we ask her to do so? She concurs with fellow novelist Ursula Le Guin, “What the book says, the book says best in its own words.” We must therefore be especially grateful that she was able to overcome the urge to reticence, and instead treat CLG members to a very enjoyable and illuminating talk on her craft.

Jill Dawson’s novels have won her short-listing for the Orange Prize and the Whitbread Novel of the Year, among other accolades. Her varied CV also tells of accomplishments as a poet, editor of anthologies, and as a teacher of creative writing. At the March CLG meeting, held in Newnham College, she talked about the origins of her most recent novel, *Watch Me Disappear*, which tells the story of a quest to disinter the truth behind a young girl’s disappearance from her home in a Fenland village, thirty years before. The book was partly inspired by the true story of Sandra Brown, a Scottish social worker who came to believe that her own father was guilty of murder.

Watch Me Disappear takes its place in a tradition of Fenland literature in which the desolate landscape harbours murky and disagreeable goings-on. But unlike Graham Swift, we learned, Jill Dawson doesn’t find the fens oppressive at all. On the contrary, she delights in the freedom and light of the wide open spaces around her Soham home. If this is slightly unconventional, then so is the construction of

Watch Me Disappear, which sets out to overturn many of the rules of traditional crime fiction.

For this is no conventional whodunit. Indeed from the outset there is little doubt who is responsible for the disappearance of ten year old Mandy Baker. Rather than lead the reader through a progressive unveiling of the truth by a smugly omniscient author, Jill Dawson has written a book in which the reader is invited into partnership with the writer in the reconstruction of the truth, and the wide Fenland horizon always leaves room for another interpretation.

Jill Dawson explained that she enjoys using unreliable narrators. In this case the main character, Tina, experiences what appear to be disturbing flashbacks, and has to decide how far she can trust her own memory. This, for Jill Dawson, is not unlike her own situation as a writer, weaving a tale out of disconnected fragments. *[Continued on p. 2]*

Programme extras!

See pp. 3 & 5 for further details of two exciting additions to the annual programme:

**Wednesday 4 June
5.30 for 6.00pm
Downing College**

Alison Dickens, ‘Grand Arcade: Archaeology on the Grand Scale’

**Tuesday 17 June
8.00pm
Churchill College**

**Screening of the film
The Hollywood Librarian**

Cambridge Library Group Events for your diary

- 7 May, Visit to Library at Milton Road Primary School, **5.30pm start**
- 4 June, Alison Dickens: ‘Grand Arcade: Archaeology on the grand scale’, Downing College, **5.30 for 6.00pm**
- 17 June, CLG screening of ‘Hollywood Librarian’, Churchill College, **8.00pm**
- 24 June, Visit to the Library at HMP Littlehey
- 3 July, London visit: Parliamentary Archives (House of Lords) & British Library
- 17 July, CLG Garden Party, Ancient India & Iran Trust, Brooklands Avenue, **6.00-7.30pm**

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Milton Quatercentenary

Sophie Read: 'Eyeless in Islington: Milton and Samson Agonistes'

On 29th February the CLG hosted a lecture in the Morrison room at the University Library to complement the year-long programme of events commemorating the 400th anniversary of the birth of John Milton.



Libby Tilley (English Faculty Library) writes:

Sophie Read (Christ's College & English Faculty) gave the Library Group a fascinating glimpse into the researcher's world – where nothing is simple and obvious, all things problematic and debatable, and opinions varied and conflicting.

Milton, blind and a resident of Islington, wrote *Samson Agonistes* in the second half of the seventeenth century, though precisely when is a source of confusion and uncertainty. It was published in 1671, but was almost certainly composed before the Restoration in 1660. Milton was engaged in political debate for much of his life, and it is thought likely that the work is a deliberate commentary on the political situation of the time. Other quibbles that researchers have about the composition of *Samson Agonistes* include issues over whether the work is related to Milton's other works, especially *Paradise Regained* which could be considered to be a companion piece, and whether the work should be considered a poem or a play – a problem familiar to the classifier and cataloguer.



“To read Milton without the Bible is negligent.” Sophie compared the biblical story of Samson in the Book of Judges with Milton's version, noting many differences between the two texts. For example, in Judges, Delilah, the Philistine traitress, is Samson's concubine; in Milton's version she is his wife. Sophie herself is not convinced by the character of Samson who is not portrayed admirably, and makes no moral advance or progress during the course of the story. Milton's interpretation is telling, to the extent that even at the close of the poem/play, he has still not explained why Samson did what he did. Milton hesitates to explain his character's motivation. Sophie suggests this may be because the moral status of Samson's actions are not high – does he commit suicide (a sin), or is it a case of simple revenge tragedy? Milton's chorus implies that it is the latter, which Sophie neatly summarises as: “an eye for an eye, or two thousand Philistines for two blind eyes.”

Further discussion included the drawing of parallels between Samson and Milton (both 'eyeless' and enjoying riddles), and comparisons between events of modern history such as the terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York with the story of Samson. Essentially the conclusion that Sophie reaches is that, to the modern reader, *Samson Agonistes* is less the story of Samson than a reflection of Milton himself.

This enjoyable paper set out to inform and amuse, and so it did. It was an opportunity to admire the researcher's art and the ability to query an individual word or phrase or nuance. It was also a good opportunity and a pleasure to be able to enjoy the display in the UL's Exhibition area on Milton: *LIVING AT THIS HOUR: John Milton 1608–2008*. This exhibition runs until 12th July 2008.

Other celebratory events marking Milton's Quatercentenary can be found at: <http://milton-2008.lib.cam.ac.uk/index.html>

Jill Dawson, 'Mud and light', continued from p. 1

What does authenticity mean to a storyteller? Jill Dawson recalled how she began her career striving to find her own 'real' voice. Now, she works equally hard to speak convincingly in other people's voices: a notorious murderer in *Fred and Edie*, or the poet Rupert Brooke in her forthcoming novel *The Great Lover*. In each case she researched the character almost obsessively, reading and re-reading their surviving letters until she could inhabit the character convincingly. (She insists that it is she who is doing the inhabiting — although being possessed is the image that some writers prefer.) Her advice to young writers seeking an authentic voice is, “Practice using someone else's voice, someone else's vocabulary, someone else's syntax.”

So why “Mud and Light”? The title of her talk, drawn from a Margaret Atwood poem, was not a reference to the characteristic elements of a soggy Fenland landscape, but a metaphor Jill Dawson used to explain the predicament of the creative writer. The novelist and the poet alike struggle for the word, phrase or image that is rooted in the particular – concrete and credible as mud – yet at the same time open to the illumination of multiple interpretations.

Ian Douglas, Cambridgeshire Libraries



Pictures from
<http://www.jilldawson.co.uk>

HIGHLIGHTS FOR SPRING & SUMMER

Extra event!

'Grand Arcade: Archaeology on the Grand Scale'

We are very pleased to announce a return visit to the CLG by Alison Dickens, MIFA, Archaeological Manager of the Cambridge Archaeological Unit at the University of Cambridge Department of Archaeology on **Wednesday 4 June** at **Downing College**. Alison entertained a capacity audience at Christ's College in December 2005 with a talk illustrating some of the archaeological finds discovered under the former Robert Sayle site, excavated as part of the Grand Arcade development. With construction now complete, we are very pleased to welcome Alison back to guide us through the process of planning for and carrying out a large excavation, looking at the results of the first phase of analysis of the excavation and the building recording - together with one or two surprises and some star finds.

LONDON 2008

Visit to Parliamentary Archives (House of Lords) & the British Library

3 July 2008

11.45am—12.45pm Visit to the Parliamentary Archives at the House of Lords (Palace of Westminster)

2.45—3.45pm Visit to the British Library (Euston Road)

Cost: £6

Travel: please arrange individually

Bookings are now being taken for these visits; copies of the form can be downloaded from the CLG website, or picked up at a meeting. Numbers are limited to 15 and will be allocated on a first-come first-served basis.

Contact: Candace Guite (Christ's)
cjeg2@cam.ac.uk

Wednesday 7 May Meeting at Milton Road Primary School



Milton Road Primary School moved to a purpose-built site on Ascham Road in June 2006. The award-winning library was recently featured in CILIP *Gazette*, and we are grateful to Headteacher Mrs Sue Romero for allowing us to visit this special learning environment for young people. The evening begins with a talk from Mrs Romero at **5.30pm** (*please note earlier start time*), and will continue with refreshments and time to look around the library from 6.00pm.

Visit to Littlehey Prison 24 June 2008

Bookings for this visit are now closed, as names of participants had to be submitted for security checking in advance. However, there will be a chance for all members to hear more about the library at HMP Littlehey on 11 November, when Librarian, Cherith Durant, will deliver a talk entitled 'Books behind bars' in the Graham Storey Room at Trinity Hall.

Calligraphy workshop

On a wet Saturday in January 20 members of The Christ's College Friends of the Old Library, and of the CLG met at Christ's College for a day with Penny Price, Master Scribe to the University. Members will remember her talk given to a packed meeting in February 2007.

To begin, Penny explained the materials and tools of the craft, and then invited us to choose an illuminated letter or subject from a great array she had brought with her, or else to work on one we may have brought with us. I was amazed by the speed with which we were set to work and happily chose to copy one from Penny's collection: a magnificent simple picture of a peacock from an Ashmolean manuscript. We first traced our image, then rubbed Armenian bole (a red coloured earth powder) over the reverse of the tracing, and then carefully placed the tracing onto vellum or fine quality paper, and drew over the tracing again in pencil, which transferred the image to the paper by way of the bole. Then came the difficult part: we were issued with 2 sheets of pure gold leaf, and a jar of gum Arabic, which we carefully painted onto the parts of the image to be gilded. When that had dried, we huffed and puffed to moisten it just enough to allow the gold to stick, pressed the gold leaf onto the section, and rubbed carefully. It was really difficult to achieve a good covering, so I think a few more years of apprenticeship are needed. We were also shown how to paint the coloured parts of our drawing: another challenge, to build up thin layers of gouache to achieve a nuanced colouring. Most of us had run out of time by 4.30, so another session is anticipated, when we will be taught to go over the outlines of our drawing in black ink, to make the image stand out clearly.

We had a lunch break, with a generous picnic supplied by Candace and her team, as well as cakes and coffee or tea throughout the day. Many thanks to Candace, Penny and Christ's College for a really wonderful experience.

Jillian Wilkinson, Divinity Faculty Library



Full concentration on display at the Calligraphy workshop

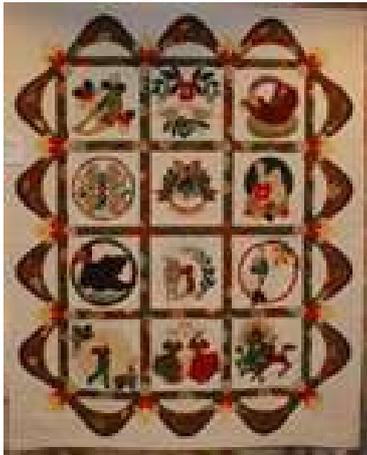
WANTED!

Books for the Immigration
Reception Centre at
Oakington.

Material in Arabic, Chinese,
Turkish and the languages of
the Russian Federation and
South Asia would be particu-
larly welcome, as would illus-
trated books in all languages
(but must not contain maps).

Please contact CLG member
Jillian Wilkinson
(jillian@quodlibet.demon.co.uk)
for further information.

On the tenth day of Christmas...



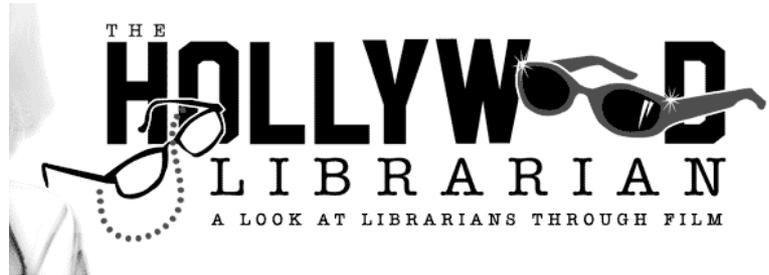
...the CUP bookshop opened its doors once again to host the annual CLG Twelfth Night party, held just short of the feast, on 4 January. Numbers were slightly down on last year, due perhaps to an adverse weather forecast and some vigorous bugs in circulation, but the organisation and hospitality were as well-run and welcoming as ever. CUP hosts many such events in a year, but it was pleasing to hear from a new employee that few clients are considered as agreeable as the CLG!

Staffing for these events draws from a wider pool than the regular team at the Trinity Street shop, the oldest bookshop site in the country. My drink was served by Sue Wiseman, who works on CUP's main Shaftesbury Road site. This happens to be a part of Cambridge I know very well, since one of the two libraries that merged to form what is now the Faculty of Education Library was, until January 2005, housed in a 1960s building on CUP land, with the other half of the Library service at 17 Brookside (an Edwardian building now occupied – at least in part – by a nursery school, I believe). After the Faculty of Education move, the “Fitzwilliam Building” (as it was renamed) in Shaftesbury Road was occupied by the Press for a while, but now it is being converted to a new, state of the art, Sixth Form Centre for the Perse School for Girls.

These changes took place after the publication of the final volume of David McKitterick's definitive history of the Press, which I noticed displayed prominently by the door, and which was the subject of his illuminating talk to the CLG a few years ago. Nonetheless they form part of a story of ongoing adaptation and change in properties all over the University which would be a fascinating subject for a future meeting.

All that now remains is to convey our thanks once more to Cathy Ashbee and her staff for making us feel so welcome, and to thank the Committee for setting up the tradition in the first place.

Elin Gerslund
Library Assistant, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road



The Hollywood Librarian claims to be the first full-length documentary film to focus on the work and lives of librarians. “Using the entertaining and appealing context of American movies, the film will hold some surprises for people who may think they know what librarians do.”

The CLG will be hosting a screening of the film at the

**Wolfson Hall
Churchill College**

on

Tuesday 17 June

at

8.00pm

Free entry

Parking is available at Churchill College and the bar will be open for drinks beforehand.

<http://www.hollywoodlibrarian.com>

And finally, don't forget...

GARDEN PARTY

We will have another opportunity to visit the beautiful house and gardens of the Ancient India & Iran Trust in Brooklands Avenue for the CLG Garden Party on

17 July

**with entertainment by
*Women of Note***

Booking details to follow