



**Shocking stage fright, drugs, drunkenness, outrageous demands ... when it comes to those naughty writers, almost anything goes come festival time.**

Photography/Jennifer Soo

**W**hen it comes to backstage antics and flamboyant behaviour, writers are amateurs compared with rock stars on tour and actors off set. But get behind the pleasantries of panels and book signings, lunches and launches, and the literati are not always genial in private – or in public.

In the decade or more that I've taken part in writers' festivals around the country, I've seen and heard stories that seem more suited to the world of fiction than to reality. It's often surprising to see who frays at the edges. Poor Alice Sebold was simply overwhelmed by the size of audiences on a tour of Australia and New Zealand in 2005 following the enormous success of *The Lovely Bones*. Homesick for her husband (the writer Glen David Gold) and dog, she unravelled to the point of wanting to pull out of events at the last minute, driving her publicist into a frenzy of cancellations and apologies.

Our sold-out Sydney Theatre Company session was one of the few that went ahead, but from the look on Sebold's pale face, she clearly felt it was going to be a dreadful ordeal. She refused my offer to pick her up so we could get to know each other en route. She would not even agree to attend the sound check. When I asked her what I could do to make the experience easier, she replied tartly and without irony, "I just need to know that you are not evil."

Backstage, the atmosphere was glacial as we waited for the stage manager's cue. At the last minute, I gripped her hand as she stood beside me in the wings. "Alice," I gulped, squeezing her fingers in supplication, "you just have to trust me. I am on your side." Then we walked out in to the bright lights, and she was completely, unequivocally wonderful. The unsuspecting audience fell in love with her vulnerable, candid, generous, damaged self.

”

**William Dalrymple wondered why his fans wore twinsets, while Jonathan Franzen's wore tight jeans and leather.**

Sharp-tongued *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd had an unexpected attack of the catatonics just before our chat at the Perth Writers' Festival in 2006 when she saw the size of the hall – filled to capacity with more than 1500 people. Only a stiff whisky or two backstage got her through it, though her answers were slightly off topic.

Some writers are competitive not only about the quantity but also the quality of readers they attract. Many years after his first blue-eyed-boy appearances here, a now middle-aged William Dalrymple looked enviously at the groupies clustered around Jonathan Franzen, riding high from the success of *The Corrections*, and wondered why his fans wore twinsets while Franzen's wore tight jeans and leather.

When they are feted far from home, bad boys and girls will be badder. Last year the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Michael Cunningham, off the leash from his long-term relationship in New York, went clubbing all night. The next day, even his natural fluency and charm could not disguise the effects of the night before.

Just weeks before his diagnosis of oesophageal cancer in 2010, the late, great essayist Christopher Hitchens dispatched the contents of his mini-bar in one night before prowling the bar of the Sebel Pier One in search of more lubricant. His publisher ordered him six double scotches, which he downed without missing a beat. Same night, same hotel: Irish writer Colm Tóibín reprised the Catalan folk song he'd sung earlier on stage at an Angel Place event while a wedding guest vomited into a drain, prompting Tóibín to comment, "This is great, it's just like Ireland." Ubud Writers & Readers Festival director and food writer Janet de Neefe was asked by five policemen to leave the same hotel after her high-spirited socialising disrupted more sober patrons.

When it comes to dress code, writers' festivals are casual affairs. But at the Brisbane Writers' Festival last year, Christos Tsiolkas (author of *The Slap*) was refused entry to the Hilton hotel nightclub for wearing sneakers – even though they were suede Converse. Frank Moorhouse, one of Sydney's more genial writers, led an irate mob of fellow writers to complain to the manager, who eventually caved in. Later at the same festival hotel, room service staff were taken aback by a corridor party at which Moorhouse and his entourage greeted them wearing only the hotel-supplied towelling robes.

Then there are the try-it-on demands: A.A. Gill complained last year that the chauffeur-driven car provided for him in Sydney was not big enough (he drives a Rolls at home). In 1999 Vikram Seth was unhappy with his hotel's pillow menu – could (former) festival director Caro Llewellyn perhaps come over with her own? American author Tama Janowitz insisted her publicist pack and unpack her bags for her, mistaking her for a personal butler. The publicist got her revenge, deliberately leaving one of the author's

so-called "lucky socks" behind. (Her career never recovered.)

International guests have asked (former) festival director Meredith Curnow to procure drugs for them, as well as requesting meetings with local celebrities as if they were ordering room service. "Hanif Kureishi told me to get him Rachel Griffiths, someone else asked for Nicole Kidman."

Trumping everyone when it comes to bad behaviour was gritty Scottish writer Irvine Welsh, who went missing every day of his Sydney stay in a state of complete intoxication. Curnow (now a publisher at Random House) remembers, "I had to literally lock him into the green room to make sure he'd show up for his big gig at the Town Hall but, of course, he escaped. When we found him, he was off his face, insulted the chair of the session, Louise Adler, with a sexually explicit comment and then dived off the edge of the stage. Fortunately, fans caught him."

But at least Irvine did not risk arrest. That honour went to American über-publisher Sonny Mehta. A police sniffer dog allegedly found traces of cocaine in the lining of his suit when he landed in Adelaide for Writers' Week in 1986. Local author Peter Goldsworthy – who had gone to the airport to pick him up – called former chief justice of South Australia (and poet) John Bray for advice. Mehta was released after a few hours but the story achieved mythic status with many embroiderings in festival war stories. All good material for a writer's memoirs – or their next novel. (s)

**A.A. Gill complained last year that the chauffeur-driven car provided for him in Sydney was not big enough (he drives a Rolls at home).**

**Hanif Kureishi demanded Rachel Griffiths, someone else asked for Nicole Kidman.**

**WRITERS' FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS**

There are talks, debates and discussions galore at this year's event, writes *Lucy Carroll*.



**Jeffrey Eugenides**  
His first novel was adapted into a hit film and his second won a Pulitzer. The American author of *The Virgin Suicides*, *Middlesex* and *The Marriage Plot* will talk to Caroline Baum.  
**May 17. 8.30pm-9.30pm. \$25-\$30. City Recital Hall, Angel Place, city.**



**Jeanette Winterson**  
Hear the feisty British novelist read from her new memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*  
**May 16. 9pm-10.30pm. \$25-\$35. Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, Bennelong Point, city.**



**Classic!**  
No such thing as great Australian literature? Authors Thomas Keneally and Kate Grenville debate the classic question with publisher Michael Heyward and critic Geordie Williamson.  
**May 18. 2.30pm-3.30pm. Free. Sydney Dance 1, Pier 4/5, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay.**



**Geoff Dyer Could Say Anything**  
Known as one of "the best living writers in Britain", Geoff Dyer discusses his latest book *Zona*, a study of the Russian film *Stalker*.  
**May 17. 10am-11am. \$10-\$15. Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay, 22 Hickson Road, Walsh Bay.**

**Diary of a Wimpy Kid**  
Cartoonist, author and kid-lit superstar Jeff Kinney tells the story behind his mega-popular series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.  
**May 16. 6.30pm-7.30pm. \$12-\$20. Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, Bennelong Point, city.**

**DIY**  
Get back to basics. Small garden expert Indira Naidoo and craft supreme Kelly Doust lead a panel discussion on the ever-growing appeal of do-it-yourself.  
**May 19. 10am-11am. Free. Sydney Dance 4, Pier 4/5, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay.**

**The Hare with Amber Eyes**  
In his only Australian appearance, Edmund de Waal discusses his best-selling memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes* – a family saga told through a collection of miniature Japanese sculptures.  
**May 20. 2.30pm-4pm. \$30-\$40. Opera Theatre, Sydney Opera House, Bennelong Point, city.**

**Janet de Neefe was asked by five policemen to leave the Sebel Pier One hotel after her high-spirited socialising disrupted more sober patrons.**



For details, go to [swf.org.au](http://swf.org.au)

