

## BOOKS

# Festival fever

The season for literary festivals is upon us and that means some big-hitters from the world of books, says **Jo Nightingale**

Just when you thought the festival season was over, here come the literature festivals. Recent years have seen an explosion of literary flag-waving weeks across the region each autumn, as readers pack their beach towels away and seek word-based stimulation to fill those lengthening evenings.

Like its musical cousins Glastonbury and Reading, the northern literature festival is a child of the early 1970s when the Yorkshire Arts Association's first director, Michael Dawson, realised that only Cheltenham focused on literature and saw a gap in the market for something similar in the north.

Now in its 37th year, the resulting Ilkley Literature Festival remains the biggest in the north, attracting more than 22,000 bookworms to its 200 events and free fringe. "There's a huge, exciting history behind this festival and we have a rich mix of events," says director Rachel Feldberg. "Most people read a wide range of material and we try to bring together the best of that, via the writers with the most exciting ideas."

As well as a commissioned poetry project with Simon Armitage, highlights for 2010 include novelists Roddy Doyle, Audrey Niffenegger and local boy Blake Morrison, poet Ruth Padel and art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon. Politics and history are key themes, with appearances by Alistair Campbell, Peter Hain and Peter Snow, while local hero Michael Parkinson and comedians Alexei Sayle and Jenny Eclair promise a lighter tone.

With 90 per cent of Ilkley's ticket buyers hailing from surrounding Yorkshire, founder Dawson was clearly right about the local appetite for such an event. And there are now plenty of rivals for his festival's crown, with Sheffield's Off The Shelf programme also boasting over 20,000 attendees. Now in its 19th year, the council-run festival positions has attracted such notables as Will Hutton, Jonathan Coe, Paul Muldoon, David Peace and Tony Benn this year.

Further north, Morley Literature Festival is just five years old but the big names are still happy to turn out. As well as readings by Toby Litt, Iain M Banks and Will Self, and a star turn by Leeds-born Barbara Taylor Bradford, festivities include a street market, a book fair, a book swapping scheme, and a workshop for budding writers.

"We'd like to include more community events and



Coming to a festival near you (clockwise from above): Shazia Mirza is in Liverpool, Iain Banks in Morley and poet Antony Dunn in Ilkley



**The Ilkley Literature Festival remains the biggest and most popular in the north**

writing commissions but we'll need to raise arts funding or sponsorship to do this," says festival director Jenny Harris. "We deliberately keep our prices low so that the festival is accessible to as much of the local community as possible."

Community is also the focus of Beverley's festival, organised by the East Riding's libraries. Throughout its eight year history its team has prioritised small events, which allow authors and readers to talk.

"We believe that talking about books allows people to approach ideas and emotions that are not everyday topics of discussion but which shape all our lives," says festival director John Clarke. This year punters can chat to Roy Hattersley and novelists Louis de Bernieres, Michele Roberts and David Nobbs, or join discussion groups and workshops on Larkin, creative writing and theatre directing.

Over the Pennines, Manchester Literature Festival, now five years old, is host to 60 events and an audience that has doubled since its launch. It has upped the ante with some attention-grabbing programming for 2010.

Novelist Lionel Shriver and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney will book-end the festival, while the specially commissioned Manchester Sermon, to be given by Jeanette Winterson at Manchester Cathedral, should be another highlight. "The cathedral wants to reinvigorate the sermon as an art form and we're keen to demonstrate that ethical issues can be explored using creative language," says festival director Cathy Bolton.

Although increasingly attracting big names, MLF still showcases young and international talent, including New York slam poet Saul Williams, New Orleans jazz poet Chuck Perkins and a new