

# MK Lit Fest 2019

A fabulous festival of books, words, writers and ideas that celebrates everything literary, bookish or wordy



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Chair, Arts Gateway MK

This month I'm writing about the forthcoming MK Lit Fest, back for its third year in September and this time moving to MK Gallery. I say "I'm writing" but in reality it has been my good friend Dave Wakely—writer and fellow member on the Lit Fest Organising Committee—who has done all the work. My role has been just the finest of tuning. As every year, we're very conscious of the need for a growing city of arts and culture to have a full set of events and activities. Milton Keynes is getting there: this spring and summer we've had a fabulous programme around the opening of the new, state-of-the-arts Gallery extension. What better venue to hold our third Lit Fest, happening from 18th to 22nd September?

## WORDS AND IDEAS, CHICKPEAS AND BICYCLE PUMPS...

If you've visited our website at [www.mklitfest.org](http://www.mklitfest.org) – designed and implemented by Dave – you'll see that Lit Fest describes itself as "A fabulous festival of books, words, writers and ideas." One of the differences you may notice comparing this year's programme to previous years is that we've put a greater emphasis of the last of those elements: ideas. 2019 has been, according to publishing industry insiders, a bumper year for non-fiction. In a year where realities and social issues have impinged on everyone's lives as never before, our line-up of speakers this year includes a wide range of non-fiction authors whose work addresses social issues. We've tried to be topical.



Paul Mason, Thursday evening

On Thursday 19th, we welcome journalist, film-maker and author, **Paul Mason**, who describes his new book, *Clear Bright Future*, as 'a call for resistance against the politicians and corporations who are trying to exert new forms of technological control' as it explores a world defined by technological euphoria and political gloom.



Carrie Gracie, Friday evening

**Carrie Gracie**, on Saturday 21st, is another journalist and broadcaster who is taking the opportunity to deliver her own story in her book, *Equal*. Her resignation as BBC China Editor over unequal pay triggered a parliamentary inquiry, and the messages she received from women all over the UK drove her to investigate the wider questions. Equal tells her own story and the story of every woman: moreover, it tells us what can be done to change things for this generation and the next.

Food writer, anti-poverty campaigner and award-winning cookbook writer **Jack Monroe** will be in conversation on Friday 19th with John Marshall of MK Food Bank about *Tin Can Cook*, which brings together seventy-five recipes can rustle up from tinned and dried ingredients available in any supermarket. Another proud campaigner, **Jools Walker** – aka Lady Vélo – will be talking about her book, *Back in the Frame*, which explores how her love of cycling helped her through a diagnosis of depression, a mini-stroke and the isolation of being a woman of colour in a traditionally male-dominated industry. Jools



Jools Walker – aka Lady Vélo, Thursday evening

appears free of charge thanks to A Festival of Creative Urban Living which runs in Central MK from the end of September.

Our writers also explore the physical world around us and our relationship to it. Architectural historian and regular BBC presenter **Dan Cruickshank** will take us on a journey through time and place from the ancient Egyptian pyramids to the soaring skyscrapers of Manhattan to introduce his most recent book, *Architecture: A History in 100 Buildings*. Dan explores key buildings in architectural history, such as the Pantheon, the Taj Mahal and the Forbidden City, as well as less obvious structures like Liverpool's Oriel Chambers and Moscow's Narkomfin Apartment Building. **Kassia St Clair** will be in conversation with textile artist Jane Charles in a special free Heritage Open Days event to discuss *The*

*Golden Thread*, a fascinating collection of the social histories of different textiles that was a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week.

## "But it's the truth even if it didn't happen."

Non-fiction writers don't have a monopoly on delving into the human condition and experience, as Ken Kesey's quote underlines. Our Lit Fest 2019 Book Club Choice – **Lissa Evans' Old Baggage** – is a case in point, as it introduces us to Matilda Simpkin, a woman with a thrilling past and a chafingly uneventful present. Mattie was a militant during the women's suffrage campaign, and nothing since has had the same depth or excitement. But what starts as a brilliantly idealistic plan is derailed by a connection with Mattie's militant past. Join us to put your own question directly to Lissa and hear extracts from the book.



Preti Taneja, Saturday afternoon

Fiction can also give us 'state of the nation' addresses to equal those of any politician. **Preti Taneja's** *We That Are Young* is a modern-day King Lear that presents a startling insight into modern India, showing us the rise of religious nationalism, the clash of youth and age, and the intensity of life in one of the world's fastest growing economies. Closer to home, **Sam Byer's** *Perfidious Albion* is a needle-sharp black satire set in a near-future English small town where technology, politics and social media in a post-Brexit Britain have delivered a future that is not quite what anyone had expected.

**Toby Litt**, meanwhile, grew up in Amptill and has worked as a teacher, bookseller and subtitler. *Patience*, his sixteenth book, is a remarkable story of love and friendship, courage and adventure when Elliott, who lives in a wheelchair in an orphanage, meets blind, mute but headstrong Jim. Toby will be in conversation with Gary Budden of Influx Press.

Fictional truths are also available in smaller packages: Lit Fest 2019 introduces new voices as we present the authors of two debut short story collections. **Lisa Blower's** stories tell tales of working lives in contemporary Britain, while **Chris Power** writes stories peopled by men and women who find themselves at crossroads or dead ends.

We're also delighted to introduce two dazzling young poets: **Mary Jean Chan** is a poet and editor from Hong Kong. Her debut pamphlet, *A Hurry of English*, was recently followed by a full collection, *Flèche*. Central to the collection is the figure of the poet's mother, whose memories of political turmoil in 20th century China are

sensitively threaded through a book that entwines complex themes of multilingualism, queerness, psychoanalysis and cultural history. **Luke Kennard** is a poet and novelist whose tricky, acerbic and laugh-out-loud funny fifth collection of poems, *Cain*, was shortlisted for the International Dylan Thomas Prize.

## DRAWN FROM LIFE: SECRET OPS, BLACKBOARDS AND PUNK ROCK

While some writers present mosaics of their experiences or use the written word to let their imaginations soar, others draw more directly from lived experience. **Chris Ryan** spent 10 years in the SAS, involved in overt and covert operations. After writing about his experiences in the bestseller, *The One That Got Away*, he turned to writing thrillers to tell the stories that the Official Secrets Act stops him putting in his non-fiction. Chris will be in conversation with Rob Gifford of Stony Words, talking about his latest novel in the hugely popular Danny Black series, *Black Ops*.

In an altogether different arena, **Jack Sheffield** was headteacher of two schools in North Yorkshire in the 1970s and 1980s, and began to record his many amusing stories of village life in the best-selling Teacher Teacher series, of which the twelfth—*Changing Times*—was published earlier this year.

More real-life experiences come in the shape of poet, musician, journalist and political activist **Attila the Stockbroker's** autobiography, *Arguments Yard*, a tale of ranting verse, punk rock and his relationship with the ever-changing, increasingly corporate minded politics of the last five decades. He closes the programme on Sunday 22nd.



Colin Butcher's rescue dog, Molly

## IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

**Colin Butcher** offers a different kind of detective work. When the ex-policeman set up his own pet detective agency to search for lost and stolen pets, he quickly realised he needed a partner. Enter Molly, an unloved and—until then—unwanted cocker spaniel. The combination of Colin's detective skills and Molly's intelligence, tenacity and sense of smell meant that it wasn't long before they were cracking cases and solving crimes across the country. Meet them both as Colin relates the stories behind his book, *Molly & Me*.

And canine lovers should also make an appointment to join us to listen to **Simon Garfield**. After a canon of wide-ranging non-fiction titles that have explored (amongst other things) miniaturisation, typography, letter-writing and the colour mauve, his next book—*My Life as a Dog*—digs deep into the history, culture and science of man's best friend, and was written with the help of his 12-year-old Labrador, Ludo.

## A REGIONAL FLAVOUR

While MK Lit Fest has cast its net far and wide to bring you a wealth of treasures, we are also bringing you local voices and a look at the life of a national figure with a vital local connection. We start this year's Festival on Wednesday evening with a special edition of local poetry event, **Ouse Muse**, which will showcase the finest local talents and includes a headline performance by the poet **Kate Noakes**, who has recently published her seventh collection, *A Filthy Quiet*.

As the home of Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes can also take pride in the recent naming of Alan Turing as the Nation's Icon of the Twentieth Century (and his forthcoming appearance on fifty pound notes).



Slate statue of Alan Turing by Stephen Kettle, Bletchley Park

On Sunday afternoon, Turing's biographer, **Andrew Hodges**, will reflect upon the forty years since the original publication of *Alan Turing: The Enigma* and the secret histories that were involved in uncovering Turing's extraordinary life and death. Andrew will be joined on stage by Turing's nephew, Sir Dermot Turing.

## FROM LITTLE ACORNS... WORKSHOPS FOR WRITERS

As much as we love promoting such a diverse range of writers and voices, we're also concerned to promote writing as well as reading. This year, we're offering workshops that cover: **Editing your own writing**, **How to pitch your novel to agents and publishers**, **Screenwriting**, and the launch of **Memor Club**: a collaboration with the **Open University** and the **Cowper and Newton Museum**. Tickets are strictly limited, so emerging scribes should not delay.

## FREE TICKETS TO BRING PEOPLE TO LITERATURE

We're able to put on this 24-event programme thanks to another grant from the Arts Council. And MK Council have also helped financially. As we continue to learn that the majority of our audiences haven't previously been to a literary festival, we're grateful to MK Community Foundation for a grant that once again allows us to offer free tickets to targeted groups or individuals in 2019. If you know an organisation who might be able to place these with people who wouldn't otherwise attend, particularly teenaged audiences, please contact the festival team at [mklitfest@gmail.com](mailto:mklitfest@gmail.com). And in the meantime, if you really want to see the best in words and ideas, there's no better deal than a day-ticket for Saturday or Sunday. It's all on the website at [www.mklitfest.org](http://www.mklitfest.org). ■