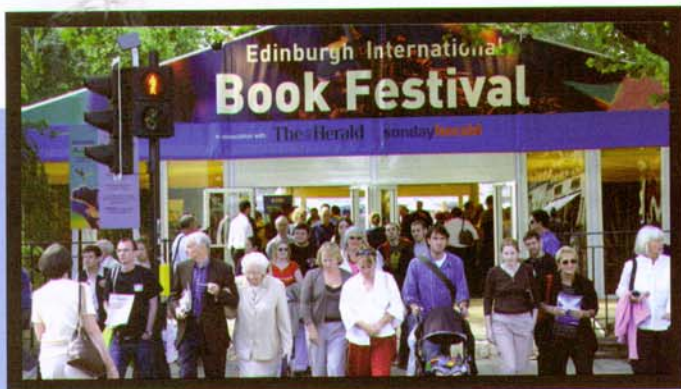


# buzzing with books

Every August Edinburgh – the world's first UNESCO City of Literature – buzzes with books as the Edinburgh International Book Festival flings open its pages and kicks up its heels. This year JESSE BLACKADDER was swept up in the general enthusiasm for all things literary.



▲ The Writers' Museum in the Old Town is dedicated to the works of Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson.

◀ The entrance to the Edinburgh International Book Festival, the largest in the world.

Edinburgh in August is a feast of festivals. The Edinburgh International Festival, the Fringe Festival, the Film Festival, the Military Tattoo and the Edinburgh International Book Festival turn the city into a teeming mass of performers, artists, musicians, visitors, readers and writers. To discover literary Edinburgh during festival month, I had to run the gauntlet of enthusiastic Fringe Festival performers who thronged the streets of the city, trying their hardest to convince me to come to their stand-up comedy, drama, dance, music or unclassifiable performance event.

Even once I'd fought off determined street performers and made it to the famous marquees of Charlotte Square, I faced some hard choices. Did I want to listen to Doris Lessing talk about her new futuristic novel, or Irvine Welsh read from his dark and hilarious *Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs*? Hear Scottish crime writer Quintin Jardine talk about the newest crisis facing his Edinburgh detective Bob Skinner, or science fiction writer Iain Banks give a preview of his latest work in progress? Extend my trip for another week to hear Booker-winner Roddy Doyle preview his new novel, or listen to Alain de Botton give a dazzling tour through *The Architecture of Happiness*? Gallivant on the literary pub tour, the literary bus tour, the Rebus tour or the *Trainspotting* tour? Or drop into the Scottish Storytelling Centre?

A combination of time, money and planning will ensure you can fit them all in – and even if you can't, a visit to Edinburgh is paradise for a book lover, which is why in 2004 it became the world's first UNESCO City of Literature. According to Anna Burkey, administrator of the City of

Literature Trust, the idea was initiated by four prominent local booklovers who wanted to share the literary culture of Edinburgh with the world.

'UNESCO was looking for three things: a strong literary heritage, a thriving contemporary scene and vision for the future,' she says. 'Edinburgh has all of these. As well as the city's incredible literary history, we are still home to many writers today. We have organisations like the Scottish Publishers' Association, the Scottish Storytelling Centre and Scottish Poetry Library. And of course Edinburgh hosts the world's largest book festival.'

I arrived for a two-week visit in August eager to put this promise to the test. Exactly what does Edinburgh have to offer book lovers?

A great starting place is to skip the ubiquitous guided bus tours of the city and join one of the special interest literary tours. In June this year the Scottish Literary Tour Trust launched the Edinburgh Literary Bus Tour, an offshoot of the Edinburgh Literary Pub Tour which has been running for 10 years. As the bus sets off from Waverley Station, tour guide 'Reikie' (referring to Edinburgh's name of 'Auld Reikie' from Robert Fergusson's 1773 poem) gives an engaging commentary on the Edinburgh of poets, philosophers, drunks and dignitaries.

Even in August Scottish weather can be unpredictable, but more than half the people on my tour were prepared to brave the open air upper deck of the bus despite the threat of rain. In one hour Reikie guided us through the geography of Edinburgh's literature, through the dark and winding cobblestone streets of the Old Town and the literature of

earlier centuries (Robert Burns, Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott), through to the New Town and more contemporary writing, ranging from the Scottish Literary Renaissance of the 20th century through to *Trainspotting* and Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus novels.

Having oriented myself in Edinburgh, the next step was the Literary Pub Tour. In this two-hour evening romp, two actors playing 'Clart' and 'McBrain' take small groups through the wynds, courtyards and pubs of the Old and New Town – with plenty of opportunities for a drink along the way. The marriage between alcohol and literary endeavour in Edinburgh is a passionate one, as the tour guides take every opportunity to remind us during their intelligent set piece, debating the lifestyles and preferences of Edinburgh's literati.

Edinburgh native and travel writer Allan Foster has written what may become the definitive guide book, *The Literary Traveller in Edinburgh*, comprising 280 pages of places with literary significance. He runs the Edinburgh Book Lovers'



◀ My way down the Royal Mile – the main street of Edinburgh's Old Town – was blocked by a nine-foot-tall punk dressed in silver with a mohawk I could have cut myself on. Not quite what I expected when I began my search for literary Edinburgh.

well as some of the greatest names in world literature,' says festival director Catherine Lockerbie. 'The festival stems from a passionate belief that inspiring and challenging words and thoughts have never been more important or more in demand.'

The 2006 festival coincided with the discovery of an alleged terrorist plot to blow up flights between the UK and the USA, and with the negotiation of a ceasefire in the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, lending immediacy to the program's wide-ranging exploration of the tensions and connections between the Islamic and Christian worlds. Some of the commentators included former Israeli soldier and novelist Alan Kaufman, leading political thinker Francis Fukuyama, Guantanamo prisoner Moazzam Begg and Palestinian human rights lawyer Raja Shehadeh. The program also included Nobel



◀ The famous marquees of Charlotte Square host readings, discussions, bookshops, book signings and gatherings.

'Clart' and 'McBrain', played ▶ by professional actors, lead the Literary Pub Tour in a spirited debate about the lifestyles of Edinburgh's literary greats.



Allan Foster, ▶ author of *The Literary Traveller in Edinburgh*, rubs the toe of David Hume's statue – a custom said to ensure that some of his wisdom will rub off.



Tour twice a day during festival season and on weekends for the rest of the year.

'Edinburgh is the first UNESCO City of Literature, but it's going to take a few years for it to find its feet,' he says. 'Many of the important literary places aren't marked in any way and are hard to find, which is why I wrote a literary guidebook for the city.'

Unlike the polished dramatic performances put on by the Scottish Literary Tour Trust, Allan's walking tour is like taking a ramble with a friend who stops every so often and leans close to impart a secret confidence. He steers clear of some of the larger tourist sites and instead introduces his group to places like Parliament Hall – now a law court – where both Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Walter Scott practised law, and sites which mark the birthplace of famous literary characters, such as the Old Royal Infirmary where Robert Louis Stevenson visited his hospitalised friend, the one-legged WE Henley, who was the inspiration for Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*.

With tours out of the way, it's time for the big one: the Edinburgh International Book Festival, the largest of its kind in the world, with some 650 events featuring authors from 35 countries – including 200 from Scotland.

'The 2006 program brought some of the world's foremost political and economic thinkers to Scotland, as

Prize winners Harold Pinter, Seamus Heaney and Joseph Stiglitz.

Alongside explorations of the critical issues of the day were delightful, challenging, inspiring and entertaining sessions from writers of fiction, biography, crime, history, comedy, media, environment, food, travel, poetry, philosophy and more.

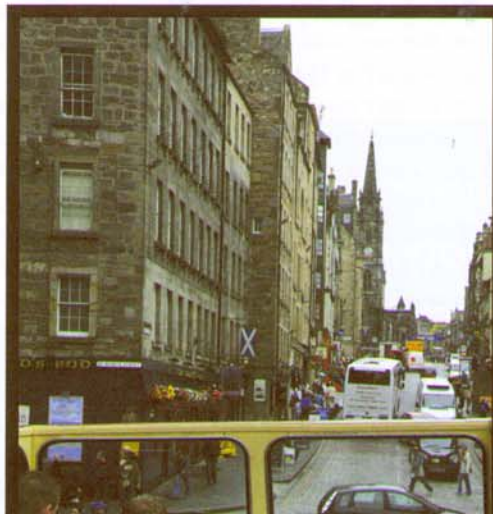
The Book Festival runs for a staggering 17 days – though I had to leave after 10, missing the opportunity to see some extraordinary writers who were appearing at the end of the program, but grateful for the opportunity to see some of my long-time literary heroes in the flesh.

Foster's book on literary Edinburgh finishes with a series of quotes from great writers about the city. For brevity, I liked Edinburgh crime writer Quentin Jardine's judgement:

'Edinburgh is a two-faced bitch.' But as a romantic, I'd rather leave you with Charlotte Brontë's words: 'Who indeed that has once seen Edinburgh, but must see it again in dreams waking or sleeping?' Or as George Eliot said: 'When I looked out in the morning it is as if I had waked in Utopia.'

It is certainly that for visitors who love books and reading. **gr**

For more information, go to [www.cityofliterature.com](http://www.cityofliterature.com), [edbookfest.co.uk](http://edbookfest.co.uk) or [Edinburgh.org/events](http://Edinburgh.org/events)



◀ The Literary Bus Tour is a great way to orient yourself in Edinburgh.