



A new chapter for THE GLITTERATI

There was a time when the literary social scene was a closed book, so to speak, a club peopled by publishers, authors and literary agents, who lunched at certain London restaurants and frequented the Groucho and the Garrick clubs. If you weren't part of the charmed circle, there was no point of entry, short of becoming a Booker nominee. Now, literature has not only become more democratic, but more hip, with a global calendar of glittering soirées, holidays and festivals which are open to all.

Britain's leading literary extravaganza, the Hay Festival, at Hay-on-Wye, and its middle-England rival, the 61-year-old Cheltenham Literature Festival, are hugely successful, with the resources to attract big-name speakers. However, as they grow more commercial and them-and-us-ish – green rooms, exclusive invitation-only parties – so events such as the Jaipur Literature Festival in India and the Port Eliot Festival in Cornwall are gathering a following of like-minded souls who love the intimate house-party atmosphere, where you may find yourself queuing for a curry with historian Simon Schama or rubbing bare shoulders with *The Wire* actor Dominic West in the hot tub. And there's the Henley Literary Festival, started in 2007 – last year's line-up included Diana Quick, Jeremy Paxman and Sarah Dunant – and the Althorp Literary Festival held at Earl Spencer's stately home, where the likes of Bernard Cornwell mix with Fern Britton and Sandi Toksvig.

Back in London, the places to go are Damian

Reading is sexy again – from highbrow festivities at Hay-on-Wye or Cheltenham to louche gatherings at smart London salons and hedonistic weekends in deepest Cornwall. Are you sitting comfortably? *Sue Carpenter* will begin

Illustrations ANDY WARD

Barr's Shoreditch House Literary Salons, the Book Club Boutique, hosted by poet/singer Salena Godden and books editor Rachel Rayner, LitroLive, an itinerant festival night hosted by the lit mag *Litro*, and Glittering Scum, occasional cultural salons run by networker supreme Palash Davé.

At such fiestas, the intermingling of authors and readers is proving a win-win situation. Writing is a painfully solitary profession. Most authors welcome the chance to meet their readers socially. It's also a great way to meet fellow book lovers or even a beau – Damian reports that several dates have resulted from his gatherings.

The Shoreditch House Salon germinated from journalist and playwright Damian's brief incarnation

as reader in residence at the Andaz Liverpool Street hotel, London, reading bedtime stories to guests (the most popular stories were by Jackie Collins and Jane Austen). 'Shoreditch House asked me to set up a literary night,' explains Damian. 'I didn't want it to be a book club – I wanted there to be something for every taste. I wanted authors to be on the same level as the audience, so that it's interactive rather than author-on-high versus the poor person who buys the book. I wanted it to be open to all – so it's the only event at this exclusive club where you don't have to be a member.'

His winning format – which started out with an audience of 40 and now, a year on, has guests cramming into every crevice of the room – consists of two authors reading from their books, followed by a Q&A compered by Damian, plus the Story of My Life slot, where an author talks about the book which has most affected them. Damian's chosen authors could double as stand-up comedians – Geoff Dyer (*Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*), who delivered a deadpan essay on artist Jackson Pollock ('Pollock was not a happy bunny, not by a long chalk'), Alex Heminsley (*Ex and the City* and books editor of *Elle*), with her homage to *The Valley of the Dolls*, and David Nicholls (*One Day*) reflecting on origami. Each reduced the audience to tears of hilarity.

Unlike the more formal author events at Hay and Cheltenham, where the audience pays to sit in serried ranks and, too often, is faced with a sold-out notice, Shoreditch House salonistas sit on sofa ➤