



◀ arms, friends' laps or the floor, and, between acts, swarm to the bar for their free Hendrick's G&T.

Just as the performer-public barrier is breaking down, so is the barrier between those who are in the know and those who'd like to be. Via Facebook you come across such charms as the Book Club Boutique, a raucous weekly event in Soho, with a line-up of poetry, new writing and music, attracting the likes of performance poet Murray Lachlan Young and novelist Sophie Parkin.

When the literary-go-round in London becomes too much, it's time to book in for a restful Reading Weekend with Damian Barr at Tilton House in Sussex, former home of the economist and Bloomsbury insider John Maynard Keynes, and a few steps from Charleston, the country meeting place of the early 20th-century Bloomsbury Group.

'The idea occurred to me as I was walking in the garden at Charleston: could we re-create Charleston today?' says Damian. His inaugural Reading Weekend was just that, a bohemian getaway with fireside storytelling, gourmet feasts, wind-blown walks, damson gin and X-rated charades. The star-bright guests (Damian discreetly vets would-be Weekenders with a few questions, such as, 'What are you reading at the moment?') included Eleanor Moran, drama producer at the BBC and author of a clutch of chick lit novels, author Alex Heminsley, and author and publisher Laura Lockington, along with a dozen other interesting, mainly 30-something women – plus one valiant husband. Orange prizewinner Naomi Alderman read a sex scene from her new novel *The Lessons*, which had some guests choking over their guinea fowl, while Sathnam Sanghera read from his memoir *The Boy with the Topknot*, about growing up as a Sikh in Wolverhampton.

Overseas literary events are the ultimate lure: intellectual stimulation, revels and sunshine. The Hay Festival has branched out with events in Beirut,

the Maldives, Colombia and Spain. And Vanessa Branson, Richard's sister, curates Arts in Marrakech, a biennial festival held largely at her chic hotel, Riad el Fenn, and attended in 2009 by Raffaella Barker, Kim Cattrall and John Boorman.

Current leader of the international pack is the Jaipur Literature Festival, co-directed by Indophile biographer William Dalrymple, who has magnetic pulling power when it comes to top East/West authors such as Vikram Seth and Thomas Keneally. At this year's festival in January, Roddy Doyle gave a hilarious talk about growing up in Ireland, later joining Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears in discussion about the film industry, while Tina Brown discussed the 'complex, scheming, mischievous,

vain, tender-hearted, quite sexual girl' that was Princess Diana, subject of her book *The Diana Chronicles*. Other speakers included award-winning novelist Vikram Chandra, Alexander McCall Smith and Esther Freud. Despite drawing 15,000 guests, the festival, held at the historic Diggi Palace Hotel, maintains the air of a private shindig, with a lavish buffet lunch, vibrant Rajasthani folk music, performance artistry and dancing into the night.

Hot on Jaipur's heels is the Galle Literary Festival in Sri Lanka – this year featuring Claire Tomalin, Michael Frayn, Ian Rankin and Wendy Cope, with whom punters enjoyed literary lunches in historic private homes. Founded by British expat hotelier Geoffrey Dobbs, this is another glorious house-partyish event, where you wander from witty poetry at tea time to seafaring stories at sundown, with artistic performances premiered by night.

If you can't quite stretch to such exotica, head to the eclectic Port Eliot Festival, a long weekend of creative revelries in the grounds of the Earl of St Germans's stately home in Cornwall. Here, there are hosts of treasures, such as the walled garden, where last year designers Barbara Hulanicki and Luella Bartley, who lives locally, created outfits for guests from foil and paper, or *Caught by the River*, an unlikely twinning of fishing with live music.

Last year, Catherine St Germans was bemused to discover unprogrammed events sprouting up in her grounds – a seance in the woods, a masked ball at 3am in the maze – and declared, 'The festival has taken on a life of its own.' Expect the same fresh spirit this year, with culinary delights courtesy of Rose Prince and other top chefs.

Finally, a word of advice for would-be Reading Weekenders. When Damian asks you what you're reading, don't say *The Lost Symbol*. 'I welcome eccentricity, and one person's boring is another's fascinating,' he claims. 'But if Dan Brown is the only author you've ever read, the answer is no!' ▼

## BOOK NOW: WHERE TO FIND THE NEW LITERATI

**Soho House Literary Salon, monthly at Shoreditch House, Ebor Street, London E1. Details on Facebook.**

**Reading Weekend at Tilton House, Firle, East Sussex, 19-21 February, [readingweekend.co.uk](http://readingweekend.co.uk).**

**Althorp Literary Festival, Northants, 12-13 June, [althorp.com](http://althorp.com).**

**Port Eliot Festival, St Germans, Cornwall, 23-25 July, [porteliotfestival.com](http://porteliotfestival.com).**

**Guardian Hay Festival, Hay-on-Wye, Wales, 27 May to 6 June; Hay Festivals in Beirut, Lebanon (15-18 April), Segovia, Spain (24-26 September) and the Maldives (Sept/Oct), [hayfestival.com](http://hayfestival.com).**

**The Times Cheltenham Literary Festival, 8-17 October, [cheltenhamfestivals.com/literature](http://cheltenhamfestivals.com/literature).**

**Henley Literary Festival, Oxfordshire, 1-3 Oct, [henleyliteraryfestival.co.uk](http://henleyliteraryfestival.co.uk)**