

## OPINION

# Proof positive why you can't beat a bookshop



## GRAY MATTER

**CHRIS GRAY** braves the football fans for a literary encounter

**F**rom the heavily policed Baker Street station branch of boozier JD Wetherspoon, rammed with lager-swilling Spurs supporters en route to a crunch match at Wembley Stadium, we crossed to Marylebone High Street – ah, the cultural shift! – and the elegant Edwardian premises of Daunt Books for a date with London's literary elite.

Before the night was over, there would be cause for satisfaction both for the football fans and us. They saw their team beat Inter Milan 1-0, helping them towards a place in the knockout stages of the Champions League; we had the privilege of meeting one of the more remarkable figures of our time in the shape of publisher and journalist **Naim Attallah**.

A bonus came in the acquisition of a splendid book we had been keeping an eye out for. This was **Patience Gray's** 1987 publication *Honey From a Weed*, concerned with cookery and much else besides, which was reissued a few years back by Prospect Books at £20.

My much-missed friend and one-time Osney neighbour, The Independent's pioneer food writer **Jeremy Round**, dubbed Gray "the high priestess of cookery". He also called her a witch – as did others, including **Paul Levy**. Add the fact that she was resident for a time where we partly dwell, on the Greek island of Naxos, and her book clearly demanded to be read.

We'd drawn a blank at Blackwell's, but the well-informed assistant at Daunt Books led me straight to it and, for good measure, found me a copy of **Adam Federman's** newly



Chris Gray with publisher Naim Attallah at the launch of his latest book

Picture: Rosemarie Perry

published biography of Gray (no relation, by the way), *Fasting and Feasting* (Chelsea Green, £12.99).

This seemed typical of the sort of excellent service famously offered by Daunt Books, which was founded by **James Daunt** in 1990 and now has a number of other shops in the swankier parts of London.

By coincidence, Daunt was profiled in *The Times* last Thursday, the day following my London visit. Now at the head of Waterstones, he told **Robbie Millen** of his almost mystical belief in the power and importance of bookshops, as places to mooch and browse.

He said: "A book bought within a bookshop is a better one than the identical one that pops through your letter box [from Amazon]."

One controversial decision made by Daunt was the removal of the apostrophe from Waterstones' name. The same thing was tried at Blackwell's a couple of decades ago, until its boss thought better of it and reinstated the mark.

My trip to Daunt Books was made for the launch of Naim Attallah's new book, *No Longer With Us* (Quartet Books, £30), featuring 49 interviews he conducted for *The Oldie* magazine, at the behest of its editor, **Richard Ingrams**.

In a witty speech, Naim paid tribute to Ingrams, whose *Private Eye* magazine had made him one of its targets.

He recalled: "As the editor he lambasted me mercilessly as 'Naim Attallah-Disgusting' and as such he

gave me a notoriety which in retrospect did me no harm at all. On the contrary, I became a figure which attracted an attention that catapulted me to celebrity status. For that I'm eternally chuffed."

Attallah's involvement with Ingrams could cause trouble with his interviews, though, including the one with solicitor **Lord Goodman**, Master of University College, Oxford, who *Private Eye* always called 'Lord Goodmanzee' or 'Two-dinners Arnold'.

As Naim writes in his blog: "I saw him over a lavish breakfast at his London flat, initially to be assessed for my suitability to be an interviewer of this giant among men. I outlined the concept of the book for him and mentioned several people who had agreed to participate.

"Evidently I passed muster because a month later I conducted the interview itself. Then, a few days later, a letter arrived from Lord Goodman withdrawing his permission for publication on the grounds that Richard Ingrams would be appearing in the same volume: 'It was inexcusable to have lured me with a number of respectable names and to have withheld the fact that Mr Ingrams is to be included in the book.'

"I replied with a soothing letter, reminding him of his avowed opposition to censorship and questioning the wisdom of bowing out in vexation. The strategy worked."

## Spurred on in our search for seats in the pub

THE football fans I mention above supplied an interesting – if surprising – example of good manners when we encountered them in The Metropolitan Bar, the huge Wetherspoon pub in front of Baker Street tube station.

Packed with punters as it was, the place naturally had nothing in the way of empty seats.

Thus it was necessary, as at other pubs in the chain, to hunt around for a table that looks likely to come free.

Rosemarie is rather good at this, as with most things to do with pubs. Her familiarity with their modes of operation began in her student days,

when she worked as a barmaid at The Old Rising Sun, in Marylebone High Street, which we passed on our stroll to Daunt Books.

So while I was busy ordering the gin and tonics, she was loitering among the tables waiting for someone to come to her aid.

Eventually, she was rewarded, when a couple of bearded blokes told her they were just finishing and would soon be on their way.

As we slid into their seats a little later, thanking them as we did so, one of them told us: "You wouldn't get this from an Arsenal supporter."

If not as polite, though, Arsenal fans

clearly cheer on the better team, as was shown in their 4-2 victory over Tottenham on Sunday.

Another incident relating to seating arose on our journey to London on one of the big X90 coaches where you are forced to sit upstairs, with a steep climb to get there.

It is quite nice to be able to look out of the front window. What usually happens, though, is you find someone plonked in the middle one of the three seats, thereby hogging the lot, in effect. It was so this time.

I mischievously suggested we should sit on either side of him, but this seemed likely to cause a row.

## Bon viveur & academic was one of city's sights

THERE was a generous obituary in *The Times* on Saturday, couched in appropriately elegant prose, on the Oxford cramming school founder Edward Greene, who died on October 17 at the age of 81.

He was a significant figure in the lives of a number of my friends, both as an employer and educator, if at one remove from the coal face of teaching. In fact, I do have one pal who was taught by him in person, in his two-year stint at Magdalen College School, which ended when he set up the crammer in 1967.

The obituary made much of Greene's respect for tradition, both in his dress and mode of living.

His three-piece suits, worn with Old Etonian tie, came from Henry Poole on Savile Row, his shoes from Lobb and his bowler hats from Lock.

Calling him "almost Wildean in his aestheticism", *The Times's* obituarist hailed him as "very much one of the sights of Oxford, navigating Carfax on his Dutch bicycle, the brakes of which worked by pedalling backwards".

His centre of operations work-wise was a Dickensian office in Pembroke Street where the warren of rooms were heated by coal fires and a grandfather clock kept time. Computers and all forms of modern technology were taboo, an edict that ultimately led to the demise of the business.

His gourmet tastes were indulged at Raymond Blanc's *Quat' Saisons* in Summertown and at The Elizabeth in St Aldates whose proprietor always telephoned to let him know when his favourite grilled scampi was on the menu.

The obituary ended: "If anyone may experience heaven as eating foie gras to the sound of trumpets, it is surely he." (The quote was lifted, without acknowledgement, from the Rev Sydney Smith.)

In both his old-fashioned dress and tastes, Greene was reminiscent of another "confirmed bachelor", Canon Brian Brindley. He died of a heart attack during his seven-course 70th birthday dinner at the Athenaeum, in between the dressed crab and the boeuf en croute.



Edward Greene in his Dickensian office in Pembroke Street