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Sandi enters the sage age WAYS WITH WORDS FESTIVAL Sam Leith reports on the week's events at the Devon literary festival sponsored by the Telegraph

By Sam Leith

* We're into the seventh day of Ways With Words - the "festival of words and ideas" that the Telegraph sponsors at Dartington Hall, Devon.

The one thing you can rely on with Ways With Words is that the speakers will be good; so far we've had among many others Jon Snow, Kate Mosse, Martin Bell, Brian Patten, Katharine Whitehorn, Jonathan Dimbleby, John Sergeant and Penelope Lively.

The one thing you can't rely on is the weather. So far, it has been glorious. Nobody likes getting a postcard that says the weather's good, but it is.

So there.

* "It says something about the demographics of literary festivals," Sandi Toksvig told her audience in the Great Hall, "that I got a round of applause for saying I'd just celebrated my 50th birthday." The grey hair percentage in the Dartington crowd probably accounts for the acute and well-informed questions they ask.

For comparative young 'uns like me, it's salutary - people's curiosity about the world seems to increase, rather than otherwise, as they get older.

But we have all ages. On Sunday, we had the nonagenarian publisher and memoirist Diana Athill (who was thanked by one audience member for "making me feel young"); a couple of days later, I was introduced to the six-week-old daughter of one of our speakers, Hugh Miles (here to talk about Cairo life and conversion to Islam).

* Virginia Ironside - here to discuss her splendidly intemperate book about the sunset years, *No, I Don't Want to Join a Book Club* - recommends old age. "Grandchildren," she said, "are your reward for not killing your own children."

* Villain of the week is actor and writer Steven Berkoff, who, having petitioned as long ago as May to be invited, then decided at the last minute that he was "too busy" to come and talk to the audience that has paid to see him.

Boo to him. We can do without him, anyway.

He hasn't been any good since Octopussy, if you ask me.

* The Samuel Johnson Prize, I'm pleased to say, has also given us a Ways With Words exclusive.

Three years ago, our literary editor Kate Summerscale left the Telegraph to write a book. That book was her true-life 19th-century murder mystery *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, which this week won the country's biggest non-fiction prize. This afternoon, laurels still fresh on her brow, she'll be here to talk about it.

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'The Western media generally covers Asia through disasters, economic crises or stories with little substance, like technology,' he said. 'Al-Jazeera's remit is to cover stories on the ground, week in and week out. The last time we were in Myanmar was not only during the crackdown (in October last year). We were in Myanmar a week before Cyclone Nargis, and we have been there many times in the interim,' he said. In late 2006, Al-Jazeera scored a scoop by becoming the first foreign television station to film in Myanmar's new capital Naypyidaw and interview its information minister about the country's political situation.

Said Mr McCrudden: 'Our position is not to automatically assume that some government is bad...and then report in a biased way. My job is to report on what's going on and let people make up their own minds.'

While Al-Jazeera has enjoyed some success in Asia, its plans to break into the competitive US market have run into flak. For example, Mr Cliff Kincaid, editor of press watchdog Accuracy in Media, has charged that Al-Jazeera is 'terror television' and anti-American.

Not everyone agrees with him.

'I don't think there was a time when Al-Jazeera possessed the image of terror television,' media scholar Adel Iskander told *The Straits Times*. 'Few in the Arab region or beyond assumed there was a congruence between the network's philosophy and that of the militant group.'

Al-Jazeera has also received some bouquets. New York Times columnist Roger Cohen has written that Americans need 'to watch Al-Jazeera to understand how the world has changed. Any other course amounts to self-destructive blindness'.

Mr Hugh Miles, a journalist and author of *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story Of The Arab News Channel That Is Challenging The West*, notes that the network is also hated by many Arab governments for widening the boundaries of political debate in the region.

'Al-Jazeera is as hated in the palaces of Riyadh as it is in the White House,' he wrote in *Foreign Policy*.

Doubts about Al-Jazeera are nevertheless persistent. In March, Mr Dave Marash - a big-name journalist from ABC who joined the station in 2006 - quit. He cited, among other things, his discomfort with the station's American coverage. In particular, a documentary about poor Americans was 'execrable', 'stereotypical and shallow', he told the Columbia Journalism Review.

Mr Lawrie has only one message to his viewers: Watch the channel and make up your own mind.

He said: 'Since it was launched in 1996, Al-Jazeera has been accused of being a mouthpiece for everyone from Mossad and the CIA to Al-Qaeda. Luckily for us, our 50 million Arabic viewers are smart enough to see through these lies.'

williamc@sph.com.sg

MIXED RECEPTION

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