

AT DR JOHNSON'S HOUSE

"Dictionaries are like watches: the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true" — Dr Johnson

It is a wet, unwelcoming evening. I have been invited to a dictionary launch at Dr Johnson's House in Gough Square, north of Fleet Street, and am wondering whether or not to go. Although I have accepted the invitation, I know I won't be missed. On the other hand, it is an opportunity to look around the house where Dr Johnson gave birth to his great dictionary, and to see and hear in person the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature — 'the Laureate' — who is to be the principal guest. It is this that decides me.

Waiters fill our wine glasses while rain falls steadily on the marquee that has been erected in Gough Square. I'm beginning to regret having left my coat at the door. Competing conversations bubble about in the damp air. Then a pause. A hush. The crowd parts. They have arrived.

They are an incongruous pair. Our host, known to his subordinates and detractors as 'the Head Boy', is a howitzer of a man; huge, square, bespectacled, brick-cheeked. His fixed smile is untouched by mirth. The Laureate is small, neat, delicate, cinnamon; a Brahmin. He is wearing a light grey scarf and dark overcoat.

The Head Boy mounts the steps of the stage while the Laureate takes up a position two steps below and four steps to one side. The Laureate's eyes are lowered but there is nothing remotely deferential about him. Nothing at all. The Laureate is unquestionably a presence.

The Head Boy, a clutch of index cards in his right hand, begins with a short speech of welcome that seems to indicate how fortunate we are to have received an invitation. He then extols the virtues of the publishing house he runs, the dictionary that is being launched, the team that has worked on it and those who have made the whole enterprise possible — by which he must mean, principally, himself. Two steps below the

Laureate may be smiling. It's difficult to see from where I'm standing. If he is smiling, it is not at anyone or anything. He is simply smiling. The Laureate, we know, has a reputation for being 'difficult'. Will he be 'difficult' this evening? His smile seems to indicate that he will not; but smiles — like words — can deceive.

The Head Boy, who has now spoken too long, is sharing with us the details of some spurious-sounding academic research. Examples of various authors' works have been submitted for analysis by a computer which has calculated the number of unique words they have employed and ranked the authors accordingly. Bending in his direction, the Head Boy is pleased to report that the Laureate has scored highly in this test although, naturally, no one has approached the score registered by 'The Bard of Avon'. The Laureate, still smiling, gives no indication of his response to this intelligence. The Head Boy, now reading from his final index card, introduces the Laureate.

The Laureate ascends one step but moves no closer to the Head Boy. For several moments he says nothing, head slightly bent to one side, a bird on a branch, rehearsing his song. When he speaks, his voice is soft and delightful. I am rapt, entranced, enthralled, enchanted, mesmerised ... transfixed.

There is appropriate applause when the Laureate finishes and it is agreed that he has spoken well and shown no sign of being 'difficult'. Although, it is added ominously, dinner with the Head Boy is still to come. Conversations move on to other topics but I am left stunned. Am I the only person present who has heard what I think I have heard? Perhaps I have imagined it? Because — although I should not dream of putting words in the Laureate's mouth — this is what I believe he said:

That, as a writer, he rarely needs a dictionary.

That, although the less literate may require dictionaries, he does not.

That most of the words a writer uses he has learnt in his youth.

That as a writer becomes more accomplished he needs fewer — and not more — words.

That the writer's mission is to choose the right word.

That on all occasions the right word is the simplest word that will say what the writer wants it to mean.

Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps he's said nothing of the sort. No one else appears to have registered that we have been listening to a most seditious message for a dictionary launch. Having no one to share this with, I decide it's time to go home. I retrieve my coat and am putting my right arm through the sleeve when I find I am standing before the Laureate who is collecting his umbrella.

I hear myself saying: 'I very much enjoyed your speech.'

(Can this really be me? It's so completely out of character.)

'I'm so glad,' says the Laureate, and smiles most graciously.

There was no more to it than that. But it is enough to thrill me.

(Did I really write 'thrill'? This is not an emotion I normally associate with myself.)

The Laureate joins the Head Boy at the front door. I put my left arm through the other sleeve. Outside, in Gough Square, it may still be raining but I am indifferent to the weather.

On the Piccadilly Line home, my book unread in my pocket, I am still basking in the moment. I have been — what is the right word? — 'proximate' to greatness.

*"No man rises to such a height as to become conspicuous,
but he is on one side censured by undiscerning malice,
which reproaches him for his best actions,
and slanders his apparent and incontestable excellences;
and idolized on the other by ignorant admiration,
which exalts his faults and follies into virtues." — Dr Johnson*