



Marina Grande

The Capri Literary festival

We visit a unique event held annually on this beautiful Mediterranean island

HERE'S A FEEL OF THE FIFTIES stepping off the ferry at the Marina Grande on the island of Capri. Is it the hotel porters in their white duck suits and their battered and jaunty nautical hats with the hotel name embroidered on them? Their faces so tanned they look like they've sailed the seven seas for centuries, instead they've been on dock side all along, piling the suitcases of the hundreds of visitors that arrive every day in midsummer onto electric trolleys for the journey up to the island's numerous luxury hotels. I notice the taxis. The taxi drivers are so sure that it's not going to rain, ever, that all the taxis have had their roofs cut off, replaced by a light canvas awning to keep the sun off.

WORDS and IMAGES : STEVE BISGROVE

The island in the bay of Naples has always been a spot that has attracted the holidaying jetsetter, ever since Roman times when the emperors Augustus and Tiberius made it their seaside retreat. Tiberius in fact spent the last ten years of his life on Capri and ran the empire from here, building himself no less than twelve villas on the ten-square-kilometre island. Only the ruins of three remain. The grandest, the Villa Jovis, is situated on the summit of the 354-metre high Mount Tiberio, the island's most easterly point. From the banqueting room, Tiberius could enjoy the stunning views over the bay and the Sorrentine peninsula. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Tiberius had disagreeable

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guests, disobedient servants and discarded lovers flung to their deaths from the precipice known as the Tiberius Fall.

A MAGNET FOR ARTISTS

Together with the international jet set (and celebrity-spotting is one of the attractions here on the island, Mariah Carey passes me in the Piazzetta and Quincy Jones gets into a taxi I've just got out of), Capri is popular with artists and writers. It's been so for a long time; Graham Greene stayed extensively in the forties and is buried on the island, as is Norman Douglas, who lived here from 1903 till his death in 1952, basing his novel *South Wind* on its residents and visitors. Thomas Mann, too, lived on Capri for a time. Another Scottish writer, Compton Mackenzie, came in 1913 and stayed for the next ten years, while Somerset Maugham set his novel *The Lotus Eater* in Capri. It must be the laid-back atmosphere that gets the creative juices flowing.

In which case, a literary event is all the more appropriate and I've been invited to act as official photographer for the second edition of *Le Conversazioni* (The Conversations). Running from Thursday 28th June to 8th July, *Le Conversazioni* is the brainchild of Antonio Monda, professor of film at New York University and Davide Azzolino, director of the Naples Cinema Festival. It is a series of interviews with some of the most interesting and often controversial authors around at the moment.

The theme for 2007 was the adaptation of books into film and the relationship between the word and the image, literature

and cinema. As Sig. Monda states in the booklet published for the occasion, 'How strong is the language of images over the written word?'

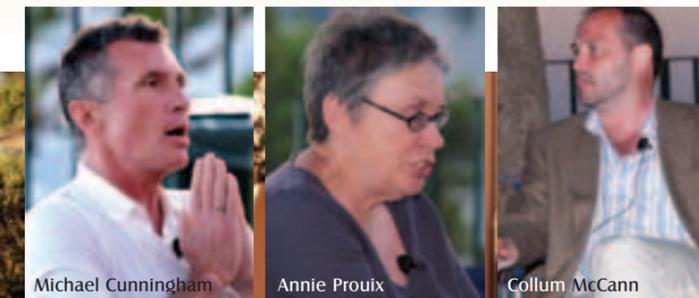
All the invited authors are well qualified to debate on this subject, their pens having been the starting point for several Oscar and Bafta nominations and awards.

The talks are held every night in the piazza Punta Tragara and are free to everyone who wants to come along. Starting at 7.30, just as the sun disappears behind the Monte Salaro and I lose the light, at least it starts to get cooler at that time.

SOME GREAT NAMES

The evening's programme kicks off with the guest reading a piece they have written just for the event, followed by a round of questions from Antonio and the public. The first night's speaker is Ethan Coen, the writing half of the Coen brothers whose noir films have been some of the most original on the screen for the last twenty years (*Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, and 2008 Bafta and Oscar winner *No Country For Old Men*.)

The following evening Annie Proulx, the film adaptation of whose short story *Brokeback Mountain*, taken from her book of tales set in Wyoming – *Close Range* – caused such a storm but at the same time gathered accolades on both sides of the Atlantic, takes the chair. She reveals a distrust of films, ever



Michael Cunningham

Annie Proulx

Collum McCann



Conversation with Michael Cunningham



Ian McEwan

since she saw *Bambi* at the age of seven and, having already read the book intently, felt horribly cheated by Walt Disney's sugar-sweet treatment, sowing a dislike of Disney ever since. Although she felt happily astonished with the two adaptations of her work so far (the other was *The Shipping News* with Kevin Spacey) she admits that film has to use different criteria and therefore will never be wholly faithful to the book.

Michael Cunningham takes to Capri immediately. At last, he says, after going to so many places that people told him were like paradise, he has found it. Jokingly he hints that he'll move here, alla Lotus Eater, and when all his money runs out he'll throw himself off the Tiberius Fall. He is so enamoured that one evening at dinner by the Marina Piccola, with a blood-red moon rising over a Mediterranean the colour of wet slate, he and his partner can't resist a bit of skinny dipping in the sea. His ebullient character is at odds with his Pulitzer prizewinning book, *The Hours* which traces a day in the life of three women suffering from a feeling of unfulfilment and drawing on Virginia Woolfe's character Mrs Dalloway.

TIME FOR THE BRITS

On Sunday night, two of the most important British writers around at the moment share the honours. Martin Amis, one time enfant terrible, and Ian McEwan, whose books often explore human obsession, and whose book *Atonement* is now also a Bafta-winning film. Both authors have also written screenplays for film but strictly not of their own work, although Ian McEwan made an exception in the case of a John Schlesinger film, *The Innocent*. Martin Amis was also an uncredited scriptwriter on *Mars Attacks* by Tim Burton. You can tell what he'd prefer when he tells the story of once writing a script for a film starring Kirk Douglas and Farrah Fawcett. Receiving a call from Hollywood late one night, Kirk Douglas told Amis to write in a scene five minutes into the film where he ends up naked with Farrah Fawcett. 'When writing a book you don't have to deal with Hollywood personalities,' he notes, adding that novelists have an infinite budget at their disposal; they can destroy the world if they want and write in a cast of thousands. Film directors envy them.

Media interest in the event has increased considerably with the arrival of the writer for the closing night's conversation, author of books that portray extreme, nightmarish situations like *Choke*, *Haunted*, *Invisible Monsters*, and the disquieting *Fight Club*, a cult figure before the film of the last with Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. In spite



Martin Amis



Chuck Palahniuk

of a packed schedule of interviews Chuck Palahniuk willingly lends me his time for a photo session and is more than co-operative. He tells me he sometimes carries bizarre props to book signings to sort of break the ice when he is photographed with his fans, like bits of shop dummies etc. Belying, perhaps, that in spite of his transgressive plots he is extremely courteous and

approachable. There was a time though, he said, when he was constantly getting into fights. Accordingly maybe he practises a style called 'dangerous writing' where in choosing subject matter the writer picks a part of his life that he can't fix or tolerate and after writing the book he is so exhausted by the subject that the problem has gone. He is also a great listener, gathering stories wherever he is, and not only; fans send him a host of weird tales and photos that at times end up in his books.  

details

the event

In 2008 *Le Conversazioni* will be held from **26th June to 5th July**. Some of the writers pencilled in to attend so far are **Paul Auster, Jonathan Lethem** and **A. M. Homes**. The theme: *'Memory.'*
www.leconversazioni.it www.capri.it

getting there

BY AIR and TRAIN: Direct flight to **Naples Capodichino airport** or by train from **Roma-Termini** to **Napoli-Mergellina** or **Napoli-Centrale**.

BY SEA: Ferries run throughout the day from **Naples, Sorrento** and **Salerno**. At Naples, hydrofoils sail every hour to Capri from **Mergellina**, 300 metres from the **Napoli-Mergellina railway station**. Ferries and hydrofoils also sail from **Molo Beverello** and **Calata Porta di Massa**.

where to stay

The five-star **Hotel Punta Tragara** is perhaps one of the most exclusive hotels in the world. Fabulous views over the Faraglioni. Two swimming pools and luxurious suites. Superb but friendly service.
 Tel: **(+39) 0818370844**

Villa Sarah *** A ten-minute walk from the Piazzetta going towards Villa Jovis. Situated in a quiet area away from the centre with a large garden and well placed for walking. Tel: **(+39) 0818377817**

Guarracino. * Friendly generations-old family-run hotel. Five minutes from the Piazzetta. Tel: **(+39) 0818377140**

Aiano. Bed and Breakfast. Family-run friendly b&b in typical Capri villa. Three rooms available, each with private bathroom and terrace. Guests' rooftop solarium. Tel: **(+39) 0818377878**

where to eat

Le Torre Saracena Restaurant since 1906 situated right on the beach serving fresh fish and seafood plus typical Capri desserts.
 Tel: **(+39) 0818370646**.

da Gemma Small intimate restaurant retaining the feel of *La Dolce Vita* era. Close to the Piazzetta. Tel: **(+39) 081 8374061/83**