

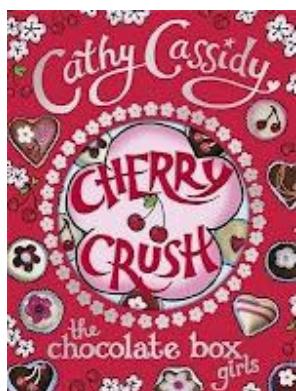
Sunday, 22 August 2010

Scotland: Cathy's Place, Edinburgh Festival, Writing Workshops, Fringe Plays, Japanese-Scottish B&Bs & Alone Lessons



For the past week I've been travelling around the glorious countryside of Scotland. My first stop was a short and wonderful stay at my friends' Cathy and Liam Gilligan's house near the small south-west town of New Galloway. Their little cottage is in the middle of nowhere and they have a teepee in their garden, being as they are, like many of their friends, true hippies.

If you or your children are readers you may know Cathy as Cathy Cassidy - she writes sumptuous, fun-filled and poignant books aimed at young girls, published by Puffin. Her new book *Cherry Crush* is out in a few weeks, find out more about her and the book at her website [here](#).



After eating lots and talking about life and how to write children's novels, I drove Cathy and I to the Edinburgh festival. She was doing a presentation at the book festival so I dropped her off before heading up to my B & B.

Now, I've been going to the Edinburgh festival every year for about the last six or seven years (for those of you who have never been, it is a tremendously over-the-top celebration of creativity, art, comedy and theatre...thousands of people block the city's streets; there are five main festivals that run simultaneously throughout August: the Fringe Festival, the Film Festival, the International Festival, the Book Festival and the Art Festival) and I've stayed in hostels, five-star posh hotels, rented apartments and one-star dumps with cockroaches crawling out the walls, but this year was my most unique living quarters.



I stayed with the warm and welcoming Japanese-Scottish Mr Kozo Hoshino (and his business partner John) in their bed and breakfast, the Morita - which is actually a registered museum, so I've slept in a museum (which is kind of scary). The Morita might be a 20-minute walk from the city centre, but after the Japanese-Scottish breakfast I had every day (porridge, toast, sausages with oyster flavour, vegetables and scrambled egg with miso sauce, bacon, beans, mushrooms, haggis, hashbrowns...), I needed the walk to stop my belly from exploding.

The Morita has a talking frog at the door which "ribbets" when you go in and out. Mr Hoshino said it either welcomed you to the house or wished you a good day, depending which way you were headed. Inside the place, there is an enormous, overwhelming array of pottery, paintings and collected silver antiques. I was a little taken aback by it all at first, but got used to the place's character when I'd talked with John and Kozo. Thanks to them both for making my stay so lovely and quirky. Find out about the Morita [here](#).



My main reason for going to Edinburgh was the book festival. I had several writing workshops, lectures and "writer's retreat" sessions I wanted to attend. These were as much about encouragement for my writing as learning new skills and gaining professional advice. I saw some intellectually stimulating talks - to make me feel clever - by the scientist Lord Robert Winston and ex-cabinet secretary and Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling. (And, yes, his eyebrows *really* are as big as they look on TV. But, no, I didn't get a chance to "do a Blackadder" and say "thankyou, darling, for that talk".)

I went to see some of the "Fringe" theatre plays too. The Fringe has been going for about fifty years and has, until recently, been seen as the alternative and challenging part of the Edinburgh festival; a kind of avant-garde reaction to the mainstream art. Last year it was sponsored by Microsoft. That, to me, killed its "on-the-edge" image forever.



However, there was a really great one-woman show called *A Way of Man* by Dutch performers Michael&Caja that I saw. This was just Caja telling a coming-of-age fantasy story to the audience (a kind of Alice in Wonderland adventure). It was no-frills theatre; just Caja and a chair, but she had a very enticing, hypnotic voice that painted vivid pictures and if she'd talked about growing bananas for an hour I probably would have listened open-mouthed. Michael&Caja's website is [here](#).

Whilst hanging out with myself in Edinburgh I also learnt several things:

- 1) that I've done a lot of advice-based learning in the past year - especially about writing - and at some point I just need to bloody well get on with the projects I feel passionate about.
- 2) it's starting to get hard spending lots of time on my own. I'm not sure if it's because being alone in a big city amongst thousands of people makes you feel even lonelier (although I never felt this way in Los Angeles), or because being alone makes you think, think, *think way too much*, or because I don't like myself enough to be alone with just me, or because I simply don't enjoy being alone. But then, who does all the time? Even if I am a writer, I am a very social being at heart.

Whatever it is, being on your own for too long sucks. Which is probably why it's a good thing I've signed up to be a temporary dog fosterer for awhile: someone who takes care of shy, abused and abandoned dogs for a few weeks after they've come out of kennels and before they're housed

permanently. I think having a dog will give me something to do every day with the walking and something to love as well (because I am soppy and need a sidekick).



After being in several long-term relationships, I guess I'm finding it hard to adjust to spending time by myself without someone always by my side to share thoughts, dreams and even the dreary everyday boring things about life with. Yes, violins.

Having been a "serial monogamist" in the past - moving from one relationship to the next with hardly a gap in between - I do think that, as hard as it might be, this is a very good time to remain single and keep learning who I am, what I like doing, what I want to be when I grow up (not that I ever want to)...and generally explore what I want out of my life. It feels important to do this before committing in any fashion to sharing my life with someone else again. So there.

For pix accompanying this blog, go [here](#). Stay healthy, happy and well everyone. Love and winks.