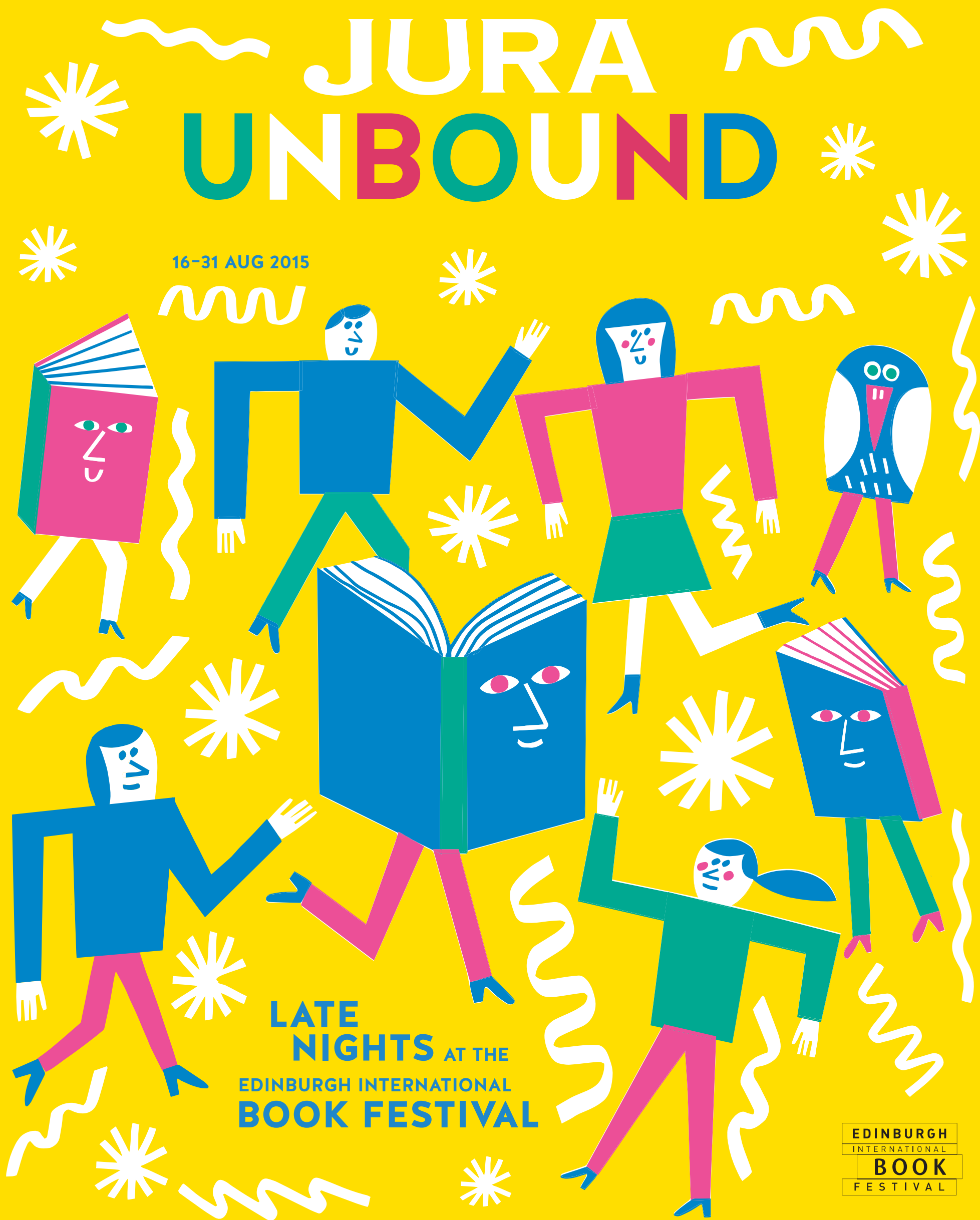


JURA UNBOUND

16-31 AUG 2015

LATE
NIGHTS AT THE
EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL
BOOK FESTIVAL

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FESTIVAL



From Cutting Teeth to Cutting Edge

Six years ago, the improper child of the Book Festival proper was born. So to celebrate an eventful journey and introduce 2015, we share some wine and words with **Roland Gulliver**, the man we must all thank and blame

Interview: Alan Bett

So, you're in the Spiegeltent, sipping a cold beer on a warm summer's night as laughter ripples around you. You're watching a team of Britain's finest performance poets, dressed ridiculously in superhero outfits, locked in a three-way rap battle in a homemade wrestling ring. But while you're taking in this curious scene you suddenly notice the real show. A front row table of unsuspecting elderly ladies, trapped in place by the sheer force of the crowd, mouths forming exaggerated O's at the delicious vulgarity of the salty insults spit on stage. Scurrilous slurs aimed at girlfriends and mothers. Claims of indecent acts performed upon each other's... erm... pillow cases. This is most certainly not turning out to be the free Book Festival poetry event they expected it to be.

This is Jura Unbound you see, which each year bares its teeth in smile and snarl. The real fun in life always begins when the sun sets, as proven true in Edinburgh's Charlotte Square Gardens for sixteen eventful nights each August. This is where a glorious combination of words and melody meld as a gang of the world's top writers and musicians let their hair down for an audience's entertainment.

To 2015 then, and in vino veritas. So, in the bowels of the Book Festival HQ, wine is poured as Roland Culliver explains himself and Jura Unbound, his baby, born six years ago to reflect Scotland's burgeoning live literature scene. Between then and now Unbound has grown into a strong and healthy (bastard) child of the festival proper. And uniquely for Edinburgh International Book Festival it places performance on the same high pedestal as word. "Offering the opportunity for authors to do different things," Roland says. "Particularly musicians who have written novels or memoirs, giving them a space to be musical and perform." For example Nile Rodgers in 2012, treating a lucky audience to a rare acoustic show. It was an evening which added a skill set to Roland's CV. "It was quite bizarre becoming Nile Rodgers' security to get him out of the Spiegeltent, and then two years ago having to do the same for Neil Caiman." Caiman simply popped up one evening as surprise judge for the Literary Deathmatch – these things happen at Jura Unbound. "Some of the nights are programmed in completion very early on, but with some others we deliberately leave space for people to be added in or for the audience not to know what they're going to come and see." It just might be your favourite author or performer skulking at the back, swigging on a beer, perhaps even deciding to take to the stage. "Stewart Lee doing a little set was really good," Roland says, adding with a smirk born of the memory, "He received the worst heckle ever."

"It's quite funny the Book Festival being challenged by heckling," he adds, neglecting to elaborate on what said heckle was. "It's so alien. It's like 'we don't do that here.'" There are many things Jura Unbound does that the main festival programme would never dream of. "There's a change from during the day," Roland agrees, "when there are these quite intense and intellectual events, to where you can come and have some fun and enjoy storytelling and not have that stereo-type of books being heavy and dull. You can be entertained," a pause, "...and have a pint."

"There's more performance, there's more storytelling, there's more music," he continues. "One of the things I've learned over the years is

that although it's all about having storytellers it's always nice to finish with music." A task made simpler by a natural convergence of word and song on the Scottish cultural scene. "That connection between the Scottish indie music scene and Scottish writing is so close. It's trying to get those audiences from King Creosote or who go to Born to be Wide nights to come and just flip over into Book Festival nights which have similar themes to those they're interested in."

"One of the brilliant things is how musicians have responded to coming in and being part of the Book Festival, so people like Stanley Odd [the Edinburgh hip hop crew contributed to a notable 2014 Empire Café event, challenging Scotland's colonial past] came and discovered the Book Festival, and having Willy Vlautin perform last year."

“It finished with everyone dancing around the Spiegeltent in a joyful celebration. That for me encapsulated what Jura Unbound can do”
Roland Gulliver

An essential ingredient to Jura Unbound is the setting itself, the majestic Spiegeltent. "People warm to being there and being part of it," Roland suggests, "particularly at night – it has a quite magical atmosphere." And it has hosted and witnessed many things, especially one fateful evening celebrating the life and work of a certain Scottish poet. "The Paul Reekie tribute night was a seminal moment, but I think that the lesson there was not to programme on the same day as a Hearts v Hibs derby match," Roland says, remembering an evening of raucous revelry in a tent bursting at the seams. Also, "The James Yorkston, Vic Galloway, King Creosote granny joke has gone down in history." He winces. "I think it's probably the rudest joke ever told on stage." We can't possibly divulge the details in print, but Roland will happily relate it to you should you succeed in tracking him down come the Book Festival.

But for all this painting of Jura Unbound as an unruly child – challenging preconceptions of what a book festival event can be – it remains intrinsically linked to the valuable and vital subject-matter discussed during daylight hours. "It's exploring the same themes but in a different way," Roland says. It holds a carnival mirror to the festival proper, distorting its concepts into delightful forms. A night of debauchery might be followed in the programme by one of quiet contemplation. Some manage both. "One of my favourite events



was when we had Scottish and Iraqi poets reading each other's work. At the beginning it was personal and political and quite moving, really amazing poetry, and then it finished with everyone dancing around the Spiegeltent in a joyful celebration. That for me encapsulated what Jura Unbound can do."

Come along day or night and you will also discover the lush green Charlotte Square Gardens, hidden in plain sight in the centre of this beautiful city; surrounded by cafés and bookshops. A place to soak up the sun and atmosphere while you languidly turn a page or tip a glass. We really shouldn't neglect to mention that although the programme boasts talents of the very highest order, these performances won't cost you, the audience, a single penny. Jura Unbound is a gateway drug. A free taste offered up to unsuspecting fans of music and verse – soon to have you hooked on £10 hits of hardcore literature in the full festival line-up, mainlining Martin Amis. "It's trying to break down that barrier of 'Oh the Book Festival's not for me because it's formal events' but actually you can come along and enjoy amazing international, Scottish and British writers and artists in a really informal setting, all for free."

It's a parallel offering of international writing on a Scottish stage combined with Scottish writing on the international stage of Edinburgh in August, including our home-grown heroes seen elsewhere throughout the year "...grinding away in cold wet Novembers and doing brilliant stuff, like Neu! Reekie! and Rally & Broad... we as a Book Festival are really lucky because in August most of Britain is looking north and the rest of the world sees what's happening here." But geography is irrelevant in the grand scheme; storytelling is a timeless and universal art form. "Storytelling is in everything," Roland agrees. "It's in music, it's in film, it's in theatre, it's in *The X Factor*... quite an important part was showing that you can go out for a night and have a drink and be entertained but not lose that literary storytelling element."

It's easy to wonder, with all its antics, just how Jura Unbound has been accepted by the main body of Edinburgh International Book Festival, being as it is that little bit dangerous, naughty and late night. Ask anyone at the Book Festival about Jura Unbound and they say "That's Roland's baby, it's his fault." Roland looks up, takes a gulp of wine, slowly nods his confession. "It is all my fault."

Jura Unbound, Charlotte Square Spiegeltent, 16-31 Aug, Free

Theremin Lies the Truth

Over 10 years The Skinny has grown into Scotland's cultural barometer, so we will throw our hands in the air and throw a party. Author **Sean Michaels** witnessed our very beginnings so brings his magical and melodious new novel to our gathering

Interview: Ross McIndoe
Illustration: Marcus Oakley



The Skinny is ten years old. Moving on towards teenage days of angst and acne, hormone-fuelled drama and faces filled with broody disdain. The Skinny is ten years old. We've spent a decade covering the artistic scene in Scotland and now in England too, shouting out for the next big thing, throwing spotlights on local artists of all descriptions and offering a one-stop guide to everything that's going down in the beautiful and bizarre cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Manchester and Liverpool.

The Skinny is ten years old and we'll do honour to the occasion at this year's Jura Unbound with a night just for us (and you). A night of words and music; laughs and libations. We shall assemble a harmonious crowd unto Edinburgh to hear tales and good tunes, drink and live a little. Testament to everything The Skinny stands for. Or leans drunkenly against the wall for. Or lies prone on the grass outside the Spiegeltent for. Whichever. You are invited.

Back in its earlier days, when it was young and crazy and not quite so wise as it is now, The Skinny had a writer named Sean Michaels. Sean mostly covered the music scene, dipping occasionally into the literary section too, and made a name for himself as one of the first journalists in the UK to write about the likes of Arcade Fire, Beirut and Feist. Sean's highly anticipated debut novel *Us Conductors* hits the UK this month: a freewheeling, fascinating tale from the 20s about the inventor of the theremin and his adventures across continents, skipping in and out of danger, prison and love. He sat down with us to discuss, in his syrupy convivial Canadian tones, his book, his time writing for The Skinny, his appearance at our upcoming Jura Unbound event and his general thoughts on music, life and art.

The Skinny: You sound much more Canadian than I was expecting.

Sean Michaels: Yes, alas my original accent was a fine Stirling brogue but I lost it upon moving as a wee lad to Canada.

So your novel, *Us Conductors*, tells the tale of the inventor of the theremin – what drew you to tell his story?

I think I found myself drawn to it from a couple of different directions. One was just learning about the strange, tumultuous, catastrophic, inspiring story of the theremin's inventor Lev Sergeyevich Termen and seeing what a colourful and tragic and hopeful and odd tale that was. How it felt like a story that someone had to have made up. I've always liked true stories that sound as if they're fibs. And the more I learned about it, the more I found it intersected with the kind of story I'd been imagining in my mind. It was a story about true love and untrue love – maybe the idea of lying about true love – and also about the intersection of music and life and science and human beings.

And then there was an experience I had almost ten years ago. I knew about the theremin as this strange gizmo you hear in the background of weird psychedelic rock songs or indie rock gigs, but then one night I was out for a drive in my parents' car listening to the radio and I heard this just gorgeous piece of music, this opera aria. This singer was just singing with this incredible voice, so fragile and perfect at the same time. And then at the end of the segment the presenter explained that we'd not been listening to a human singer but to someone playing on the theremin. That realisation that this really queer instrument that felt more science experiment than musical instrument, that this could produce sound and music as beautiful as that – that was something that stayed with me and kind of haunted me until I got down to putting pen to paper and writing.

As someone who has written about music and literature (for illustrious publications such as The Skinny), it makes sense that you would blend those two interests in your prose.

Yeah, though I think it was mostly happenstance. I've actually wanted to be a fiction writer longer than I've wanted to be a music journalist. I'd been writing stories for years and then I landed

on a story that was very musical and that was the thing that sort of took off, so it feels like completing the circle of my work.

A lot of your work as a music journalist has focused on locality, on bands emerging from a specific place, and that relationship between place and music plays an important role in *Us Conductors* too.

When I started thinking about this novel, I really got excited about the idea of a novel that takes place in Russia and New York, the Soviet Union and the Jazz Age, that's about classical music and jazz but also about electricity and people falling in love and having a thrilling, electric time in a period that was so full of all these new discoveries and new types of music.

“... This incredible voice, so fragile and perfect at the same time... we'd not been listening to a human singer but to someone playing on the theremin”

Sean Michaels

I felt a really strong connection between that and living in Montreal as the Indie Rock scene really exploded there, and then in Edinburgh and

having the same kind of experiences going to gigs there and in Glasgow while you're still so young and everything feels so new and exciting, and I was seeing bands like folk bands and indie rock bands, but also bands with this electric flame to them that was scary and exciting. I really wanted to capture that younger and newer experience I had had, a book set almost a hundred years ago that nodded to that very contemporary feeling. I wanted to write a book that took place in the 20s but evoked some of the music of the 80s, so all the chapter titles are nods to the post-punk, new wave era of that kind of time. If the book were asleep, its dreams would be of Kate Bush and Joy Division.

So on to your upcoming Jura Unbound event. You'll be there to celebrate the 10th birthday of The Skinny, reading from your novel, perhaps accompanied by a theremin?

I'd love if we could do that, I did a book tour of the United States last summer where I read with thereminists all around the country. It's a really vivid rendering of the book and it's fun.

How did you get involved with The Skinny?

I saw a notice in a café, before it was The Skinny, during an earlier life as Noise. I went to one of the first meetings in a pub – just a whole whack of people – and there was such a hole in the cultural landscape in Scotland for this kind of alternative paper that was just concerned with grassroots and what was happening at the humblest levels. And it was so exciting being there when people were trying to build this, I remember getting our first big name interviews, getting the chance to interview MIA when she was promoting her first record. It felt like we were kids pretending to be grown-ups, making this paper and putting it out. I'm just so proud of the tens of thousands of words that have filled those pages now and how it's become such an institution in Scotland.

The Skinny & Sean Michaels party kicks off at 9pm Sun 23 Aug in the Spiegeltent, part of Jura Unbound

Riots, Race and Reality

Ryan Gattis hollers the sound of one famous city – LA – engulfed by fear and fire in '92. Here he discusses his novel *All Involved* and the visceral vignettes he will bring to **Sounds of the City** at Jura Unbound, alongside fellow authors Marlon James and Lisa McNerney

Interview: Angus Sutherland
Illustration: Marcus Oakley

A *All Involved* is already drawing comparisons with *The Wire*, not least by Ryan Gattis's publishers, who see common cause with the Baltimore-based HBO series about gangs, police, politicians and the civilians caught in their wake. The author admits to us that he watched the show "a lot, over and over," though insists that any echoes of it in his book are not deliberate, if indeed they exist. "I remember thinking very concretely that I will never write anything this good. So I hope, at the very least, that it planted a seed in my mind, subconsciously, to at least realise that this is what can be accomplished, with truly transcendent storytelling about an urban environment and crime and also the people who live in the margins."

Gattis's work is set in early 90s Los Angeles County, a decade earlier than *The Wire* and three time zones away. And where the TV show concerned a predominately African-American urban area, *All Involved* focuses instead on the largely Latino-Hispanic city of Lynwood. So the comparison is, on the surface, at least a little trite, a link made to tap into a demographic of potential book buyers more than anything else. Beyond the differences in subject matter, though, the show and the book share common ground in their authorship.

In the years since *The Wire*'s last season in 2008, creator David Simon has become one of the most high profile critics of America's racial inequalities, and of the people and institutions that perpetuate them. This should come as something of a surprise given that, like Gattis, Simon is white and therefore not a direct victim of said inequalities. Still, Gattis, a self-described "white-boy writer from Colorado", and Simon before him have endeavoured to tell stories on behalf of communities of which they are not part. Both have done so with every effort at honesty, sensitivity and nuance – and both with a degree of creative bravery. When white authors take on the voices of minority characters, hamfistedness is quickly and rightly ridiculed. Kathryn Stockett's bestseller *The Help* serves as a cautionary tale. Commercially popular, and adapted for the screen, some critics and viewers were less than enthusiastic about its treatment of race relations and black subjectivity. *The Wire* seems to have weathered these critical waters quite smoothly; whether *All Involved* will fare as well remains to be seen. Gattis is undoubtedly a deft storyteller though.

The book takes the 1992 Los Angeles race riots as its focal point. Over six days in April and May of that year, in response to the acquittal of the police officers videotaped beating Rodney King in March of 1991, Los Angeles erupted into one of the largest episodes of civil disturbance in US history. *All Involved* is a series of first-person vignettes spanning this period that brought race relations clattering back into focus. Similar to *The Wire*, the book is populated by both gangsters and the so called 'uninvolved' – those not affiliated with gangs – from nurses and firefighters to the homeless and, crucially, the police. In the Angeleno storytelling tradition, diverse character arcs interweave and collide throughout. In this, the book shares a formal grounding with Paul Haggis's 2004 film *Crash*, itself an attempt at broaching the city's racial disparities, though one that met with a response even more iffy than

The Help did (as it happens, Haggis is slated to direct David Simon's forthcoming HBO miniseries, *Show Me a Hero*). Gattis's story cycle is, mercifully, more carefully assembled than Haggis's effort.

All Involved opens with the murder of a young man on his way home from work. It's a heavy, unsparing introduction to Gattis's written world, and to LA violence. We bear witness to multiple stab wounds, a broken jaw and a 'skull skidding over asphalt.' The attack sparks, inevitably, a series of reprisals between rival Chicano 'clicks'. Ernesto, the victim, though not a gangster himself, has relatives who are. They and their adversaries use the race riots as cover for exercises in retribution and conquest. With swathes of LA County caught up in the unrest, the very police that played such an important role in inflaming tensions are unable, or sometimes unwilling, to protect its inhabitants. After countless killings and burned out buildings, following an encounter with a barely teenage pimp, one character on the fringes of the gang activity can only say that 'LA has gone fucking crazy. All the way crazy.' Though there's little attempt, here, to unpack the place and the time, he does get at the scarcely believable extremes to which the city succumbed during those six days in 1992.

“I think that people are awakening to the fact that not as much progress has been made as perhaps we'd like”

Ryan Gattis

It's drug addicted Antonio 'Lil Creeper' Delgado, one of Gattis's most compelling characters, who is most direct in trying to make sense of the chaos. He wonders at the cyclical nature of unrest in LA's black and brown neighbourhoods. After the violence between service personnel, predominately white, and Mexican-Americans in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1944, people – white people – were quick in forgetting. 'They forget about it,' he says, 'and they forget they even thought it was bad, and for a while nothing happens, but nothing got fixed either, it's just getting drier, ready for another burn.' Then came the Watts riots of 1965. 'And shit hasn't changed since. So that's, what? Twenty years apart for race riots? Enough time for everybody to forget again, right? Cuz it's nineteen-ninety-fucking-two, and this's what? Like, thirty? Probably a little less? Doesn't matter. The way it's blowing up, this one's overdue.'

Gattis himself is of a similar mind. "I think that people are awakening to the fact that not as much progress has been made as perhaps we'd like. In '92 camcorders were only recently commercially available and now every single person has a video camera in their pocket. I'd like to think that this will lead to change but I don't know



how hopeful I am, if only because a lot of the underlying issues that tend to lead to rioting: lack of education, lack of after school programmes, lack of healthcare and certainly a lack of jobs in some of these neighbourhoods, when you combine all of that with police brutality or injustice, it's unfortunately only a matter of time."

And so on to the present day. Some 23 years after the Rodney King riots, minority communities across America are once again clamouring to be heard and to be treated fairly. The role of law and its enforcement is central, just as was the case in 1992. And in spite of the fact that there are ample spokespeople from within minority communities – indeed, it seems slightly absurd even to make the point – it is the David Simons of this world who seem best able to gain popular traction. Ryan Gattis, in writing a book as ambitious as *All Involved*, has taken on this same mantle, acting as intermediary, flagging the inequity that many are so ready to ignore and forget. He'll doubtless be aware of how potentially fraught is the role he's

assumed, and he hopes the next book from Lynwood is written by a local: "Certainly, in America, there are those who are given bullhorns and those who are not. There are an awful lot of obstacles that exist for the folks in Lynwood in order to be successful. One of the reasons why I wrote this book is because I'd really really love for the next book about Lynwood to be coming from an author who grew up in Lynwood and who knows it and saw it every day. So, I'd like to think that, if my book had anything to do with something like that happening, I would be really happy indeed." As would, no doubt, many of the city's residents. Until such time as that book is published, and until such time as wider audiences are more willing to engage with the works of minority writers, there will be books like *All Involved*. And if the confidence of Gattis's prose is anything to go by, he may prove as prominent an advocate as Simon before him.

Sounds of the City is at 9pm Fri 28 Aug in the Spiegeltent, part of Jura Unbound

White Van Man

John Darnielle, the mind behind The Mountain Goats, graces Jura Unbound under his novelist guise – with Mull Historical Society's **Colin MacIntyre** adding melody. We ponder the gaps his work explores: between childhood and adult life; reality and fantasy

Interview: Ross McIndoe

John Darnielle came to Glasgow in 2013 with The Mountain Goats. The dear departed Arches, its dim wide space and subterranean vibe, made the perfect setting for their strange folk rock stylings: a place to retreat from the real world and the city into the odd twilight zone beneath the bridge, to spend an hour or two lost in their dark Americana fairytales. To add to the oddness, the crowd arrived to find the room lined with fold-down chairs, school assembly style. A seated gig is usually in name only – the moment any half decent band hits its flow, no-one is staying on their ass – but being locked in knees-to-chair like that kept everyone packed in place and created a whole different tone: like worshippers at temple, everyone took their places and sat up straight while the man at the front spun out tales of hard times and strange occurrences, blurred collusions of fiction and reality. A lesser artist might have been thrown by this, might have struggled to energise a room so primly arranged. Darnielle thrived.

Bouncing between songs with an unrelenting energy, filling the gaps in between with jokes and fragmented anecdotes, he magnetised the crowd completely from the first word to an encore in which he dropped the microphone, descended from the stage and walked down through the passage between the pews to finish a cappella. With only the natural power of his voice and its reverberating echo rebounding off the Arches' cavernous walls, the effect was spellbinding.

This same voice will fill the Spiegeltent this summer when Darnielle returns to Scotland. This time for Jura Unbound, this time as a novelist. His debut novel, *Wolf in White Van*, was published last year to critical acclaim and a nomination for the National Book Award. In a way that will be deeply satisfying for fans of his work under The Mountain Goats moniker, it feels a lot like his music channelled into novel form. Specifically, it is a lot like the music's darkest undercurrents – often submerged under upbeat rhythms and a kind of manic gleeful irony – allowed to flow freely and spread across the pages of a book.

Like many of his songs, *Wolf in White Van* is largely a form of coming-of-age tale. It takes place in the same type of anonymous American small-town, a place that feels suburban to everywhere, sitting quietly on the outskirts of the real world. This recurring childhood home is never an entirely happy place: The Mountain Goats tell countless stories of its sleepy stillness being torn apart by alcoholism and abuse, an everyday maelstrom with a small child at its centre doing his best to escape.

This idea of escapism, of fleeing the harshness of the real world to hide within something else, is a central thread that runs through much of The Mountain Goats' extensive discography and into Darnielle's novel. His songs tell tales of young men seeking freedom on the open road and security at the bottom of a bottle, making nods to videogames, horror films, heavy metal and Russian novels as they explore the myriad interests an oddball kid might use to veil themselves from the world around them. In his latest album *Beat The Champ*, it's the world of professional wrestling where he seeks shelter: a small child in a hard and unfair world gazing onto images of Herculean heroes willing to fight for good, able to restore the world to order by force of will and a well deployed steel chair. In *Wolf in White Van*, the hero Sean submerges himself in a fictional world of his own creation,

drawing inspiration from the Conan books he loved as a child.

Sean, like the heroes of many of the Goats' songs, is reminiscent of a Holden Caulfield raised in a different time and place. He's stuck in the same liminal zone between childhood and adult life, isolated by his inability to fully assimilate into either. Even as teenagers, they both feel a kind of unspecified nostalgia for those even younger days when they were more free to live in imagination, before reality pressed in to colonise more and more of their world. As a kid, Sean could run around all by himself completely immersed in fantasies of Conan, happy enough in his own way and a bother to no-one. As we get older, the expectation comes that we'll pull back from imaginary realms and move gradually into the real world. People like Sean find they don't quite fit in there, that they seem to be a little at odds with everything around them. And as they retreat into what they know – the worlds inside music, games and literature that make sense to them – those around them find them weirder still and the distance grows. For most people the intensity of their fandom is, as Sean's mother puts it after gesturing to the contents of his teenage room, "just too much."

'As we get older, the expectation comes that we'll pull back from imaginary realms and move gradually into the real world'

The protagonists of many of Darnielle's songs are as tormented by abusive step-fathers as Holden Caulfield is haunted by past tragedy. In both cases, their struggle can be more easily understood because it's anchored in a clear and tangible element of their lives, a horrible thing that has occurred or keeps occurring that makes life hard for them. Sean's disillusionment is harder to place. There's no clear root to his problem and even as the novel unfolds and we learn more about the actual circumstance of his 'accident', we almost understand less about how he feels and why he is the way he is; only that he is equally unsure. It's a vague, unplaceable, powerful sense of alienation, the simple sensation of not belonging. In some ways, this makes his tale more universal. The particular niches he picks to hide in are extremely obscure – Conan-inspired heavy metal and mail-based role-playing games – but Sean's story is essentially about the period growing up when nothing really makes sense. In his 40s now with kids of his own, Darnielle continues to come back to this alienated feeling in both his music and now prose. He dresses it in the scenery of his own childhood, fills it with the paraphernalia of the fandoms that coloured it, but it's this deeper, simply human thing dwelling underneath that his work looks to stir.

On the night, under the Spiegeltent's roof,



John Darnielle

Credit: D.L. Anderson

Darnielle will appear in novelist form to read from *Wolf in White Van* alongside a talented and eclectic gathering of fellow scribes: Helle Helle and Etgar Keret. Colin MacIntyre of Mull Historical Society fame takes charge of all things musical, performing for all those packed into the tent on the night. With his melodies and Darnielle's words, together they'll take on the coming-of-age

conundrum and see if they can't riddle it out. And if there are no answers to be found, a summer's night in Charlotte Square Gardens with whisky to hand and music in the air should be a pretty marvellous place to escape to.

There Was a Crazy Guy is at 9pm Mon 17 Aug in the Spiegeltent, part of Jura Unbound

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Poetic Justice

Find out how and where to get your word fix on these upcoming summer nights

Interview: Alan Bett

Jura Unbound offers a banquet of poetry and spoken word this summer across four separate events. These wonderful words will be delivered by those poets and programmers we are lucky enough to have on our Edinburgh doorstep, alongside nights featuring the finest word-smiths from further afield, uniting under the banner of Babble On. We asked some principal practitioners of the form – poet and author Tim Clare, Neu! Reekie! helmsman Michael Pedersen, Jenny Lindsay and Rachel McCrum (aka Rally & Broad), and Eddie Argos, lead singer of the band Art Brut – to enlighten us a little about perceptions of poetry and whether or not it's connecting with an ever-broadening audience. We received a vivid and varied set of answers.

The Skinny: Do you feel that there remains a pretentious stereotype of poetry and a misunderstanding of what's currently happening on the scene?

Michael Pedersen: "Naw, aw cunt's writing poetry – good and bad – and rightly so. Spoken word is ever present in the stems of the country's top records; it's integrated into all the best festivals; and is throbbing and thriving under the banner of many regular salons, outfits and nights. It's an enviable time to be a poetry fan or indeed a poet."

Tim Clare: "Hmm... I think there's a stereotype of the public that they're hostile to poetry because they think it's pretentious. Actually most people are either indifferent – in the same way I don't have particularly strong views on regional motocross races or the best way to sheetrock a garage – or they think it's crap."

"Anyone can join in. That is the scene's strength, and its terrible, terrible curse"

Tim Clare

"The accusation isn't that the poet gives themselves airs – the accusation is that they're bad at what they do. And I think that second belief is not without foundation. Of course there are superb poets on page and stage who I admire immensely – but the bar to production is much lower than, say, live music, where you at least

JURA
SINGLE MALT SCOTCH WHISKY

Immerse yourself in literature with Jura Unbound at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Join us for a free dram in the Spiegel tent in Charlotte Square Gardens.

Free whisky valid from 16th–31st August in the Spiegel tent during the Jura Unbound sessions between 9pm–11pm. T&Cs apply.

WRITE YOUR OWN STORY
www.jurawhisky.com

drinkaware.co.uk
for the facts



Credit: Bertrand

need to spend some time learning the guitar. The average quality across the poetry scene is several orders of magnitude lower than in live music. Anyone can join in. That is the scene's strength, and its terrible, terrible curse."

Eddie Argos: "Well, I'm not a poet and know very little about the scene so it's hard to tell. I just did a spoken word tour (I tell a long story about forming a band) and most of my supports were poets. I think I'm very fortunate that the first spoken word performers I was introduced to were Luke Wright (programming and performing at Babble On) and John Osbourne. It did give me the misapprehension that a lot of poetry was that good though. About 40% of the poets I saw on my tour had seen a bird's corpse in their front garden as a child, never got over it and wanted to bore on about it for 20 minutes in verse. So that pretentious stereotype is still out there alive and kicking."

Rachel McCrum: [*lights roll up, pushes aside paint splattered mug of red wine, adjusts trilby*] "I don't know what you could possibly mean. All the poets I know are very young and very sexy."

Well, for any pretensions which still remain, how are you conspiring to burst these bubbles?

MP: "With strong fingers and unclipped safety pins – pointy end first. Encouraging and catalysing cross-cultural collaborations, deliberating diversity, working with and alongside poets and performers of every ilk; being all ears when it comes to left-field or quite frankly bizarre suggestions. Plus being mobile and having an open door policy here at Neu! Reekie! HQ in Summerhall. The kettle's on."

EA: "I always think bubbles get burst when you see someone doing something and you think, 'If that bloke can do it, so can I.' The story I tell in my spoken word is very much about that. Maybe that will help."

Performance poetry seems to be on the ascendancy. Why do you think it's resonating with younger audiences?

Jenny Lindsay: "I started performing in 2002 and was at the time one of the youngest performers on the scene, and one of very few women writing specifically for performance. I'm glad that has changed, and as soon as I fix the time machine, I'm going to go back to 2002 and tell my former self not to worry. But it would be several layers of awful to have performed poetry seen as purely a young 'uns' game. The reason I adore it is that there's no age limit, and while slams are most popular with younger audiences, there is more to the scene than slam."

TC: "People have been saying this for the last decade. Performance poetry is on the rise, performance poetry is the new rock and roll. The scene hasn't significantly expanded in that time. I mean, I think it resonates with younger audiences because they're people...? And they can appreciate it just like anyone else. Maybe that accessibility thing again. But I don't know. It feels weird and a bit futile to start talking about overall trends. I don't care about those and I don't know any poets who do either. You just turn up and do the best gig you can on the night. It doesn't matter if the scene is hitting some kind of cultural zenith or deep in a nadir of irrelevancy – it's about what happens in that room, in that moment."

EA: "Maybe with the internet it's easier to find. When I was younger I liked things like John Hegley and John Cooper Clarke but had no one to talk to about it, and lots of it was impossible to track down. I spent years looking for John Cooper Clarke albums in second hand shops. Now you can download them in seconds."

MP: "Social media making it more accessible; performance poetry crossing over into hip hop; young pups feeling empowered and being willing to voice their points and open themselves up to ridicule and humiliation – or, less commonly, great praise. 16-year-olds voting in the referendum, finding their political acumen and injecting some creative juice into that."



Humour and rhythm seem so prevalent in performances – do you feel there is a cross-over between comedy/performance poetry and music?

RM: "Yeah, definitely. There are also some brilliantly, beautifully irreverent events being run at the moment dedicated wholly to taking the piss out of poetry: Paula Varjack and Dan Simpson's Never Mind The Fullstops and Anti-Slam: Edinburgh's Poets Against Humanity to name a few. Music-wise – I've done a couple of collaborations with bands in the last year (The Last September, Biff Smith & Caroline Evens from A New International) and I love where it's pushed my work, in terms of thinking about refrains, rhythm and also how the voice doesn't need to compete with the music. Plus you get to stand on a stage with people with guitars and pretend you're a rock star. Well, indie twat, anyway."

MP: "Yup. But then not always. People like candour and candour is funny. That goes for all the above fields of play."

Performers often love to shock as much as they delight. Do you enjoy provoking these reactions?

MP: "Yeah, of course, first and foremost myself and Kevin [*Williamson, also of Neu! Reekie!*] curate shows we'd like to attend and when you've a penchant for tempo changes – mixed in with a taste for the absurdist and the avant-garde – the floodgates are open for all sorts – that which coruscates and carousels come hither. With every serving of beauty comes a serving of sadness."

TC: "I don't set out to horrify anyone – it's a pretty easy reaction to get. I think, if we're asking to be paid for what we do as artists, we have to try to offer something of value to the audience – even if we're challenging them, it has to come from a place of mutual humanity and love."

There seems a real camaraderie between performers across the nation, even in slams and battles. Who do you respect and admire?

MP: "Aye, poets are always shouting out to other poets, lauding and licking each other's lollies; more so in the performative world than the written arenas I think; but then maybe that's just my shrouded experience. Hmmm – Hollie McNish; Kate Tempest; Kei Miller; Dave Hook; Kevin Cadwallender; Colin McGuire; Irvine Welsh; Alan Bissett; Jenni Fagan; heck, there's too many. I'm ardently admiring them all."

“When you've a penchant for tempo changes – mixed in with a taste for the absurdist and the avant-garde – the floodgates are open for all sorts”
Michael Pedersen

TC: "I feel really lucky to be part of the spoken word scene. There are a lot of performers who I really like, and I've found almost everyone to be supportive, friendly, and interesting. I respect and admire most of my fellow poets, but I guess

– fellow Homework residents aside – poets I often find myself talking about are people like Anna Freeman, Francesca Beard, David Jay, Rob Auton and Harry Baker. I prefer personality and insight over American slickness. But then, I would, because I couldn't do slick if my life depended on it."

EA: "I'm not really part of the poetry scene so I don't know. However I would like to go to slam poetry nights and pretend I've misunderstood the concept and challenge all the poets to a wrestling match."

JL: "I agree that the scene overall is really supportive. There are a lot of egos, and nowhere near enough money which does lend a certain competitive edge, but people are generally having to make opportunities for themselves as they go. It's been a full five years since it was last viewed as 'the new rock and roll', so it's not like there is a path of any kind in terms of what you are 'supposed to do' when you are a performance poet. We have to make it up as we go, create the path by walking it. So we have to be nice to each other."

Bingo, Beats and Bigmouths (as part of Babble On): 9pm, Fri 21 Aug
Fight for your Right (as part of Babble On): 9pm, Sat 22 Aug
Neu! Reekie!: 9pm, Thu 27 Aug
Rally & Broad: The Interpretation Edition: 9pm, Sun 30 Aug
All events take place in the Spiegeltent as part of Jura Unbound

THE SKINNY
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JURA™

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What's On at Jura Unbound 2015

All events start at 9pm in the Spiegeltent, Charlotte Square Gardens. And they're free!



Sun 16 August Trading Stories

Jura Unbound 2015 takes flight with a night of seductive international short stories. Join us on our journey with Denmark's Dorthe Nors, author of *Karate Chop*; Ireland's Mary Costello reading from her debut collection, *The China Factory*, USA's Molly Antopol whose collection is *The UnAmericans*; and David Cates, whose *A Hand Reached Down to Guide Me*, is his first book for a decade.

Mon 17 August There Was a Crazy Guy

Colin MacIntyre has long been beguiling us with his music as Mull Historical Society and this year he celebrates with a Best Of... album and the release of his debut novel, *The Letters of Ivor Punch*. In a lively evening of songs and stories, Colin teams up with author and musician John Darnielle, whose *Wolf in White Van* is hailed as a 'meditation on monstrosity, escape and transformation' and Etgar Keret, author of *The Seven Good Years*.

Tue 18 August Born to be Wide

Famed for the chart-topping hit *These Boots Are Made for Walkin'*, musician Lee Hazlewood's comeback in 1999 is the focus of Wyndham Wallace's *Lee, Myself and I*. He makes his Jura Unbound debut alongside TV and radio journalist Stuart Cosgrove, author of *Detroit 67*, which describes an incredible period of social change and musical revolution.

Wed 19 August Head North, My Friend!

After fantastic celebrations of writing from Iraq and Syria in past Jura Unbound editions, we leave the heat and sand of the Middle East behind and head north with Highlight Arts to the icy Arctic wilderness for literary explorations and translations. Join your intrepid expedition leader, Ryan Van Winkle, as he brings you work from Shetland, Finland and Iceland with Ragnar Jónasson, Jessie Kleemann, Niillas Holmberg and more.

Thu 20 August Squash and a Squeeze with The Donaldsons

Julia and Malcolm Donaldson are legends of children's literature, well known for characters such as *The Gruffalo*. For one night only, they are escaping the Fringe to stay up late and play Jura Unbound. Discover their folk hits from when they busked on the streets of Bristol and get intimate in an audience game of Squash and a Squeeze. Destined to be a classic!

Fri 21 August Bingo, Beats & Bigmouths

Babble On co-producers, BIGMOUTH set the stage alight with some pulsating performances. There will be music from lo-fi punk superstars Art Brut plus an Edinburgh exclusive of Eddie Argos' spoken word show, *Formed A Band*. Get your dabbers ready as Ringo: Music Bingo offers unbridled joy with the world's greatest comedy music game; plus show-stopping poetry from spoken word legends Jemima Fox Trot & host Luke Wright.

Sat 22 August Fight for your Right

HOMEWORK is a literary cabaret in Bethnal Green run by a formidable brat-pack of writer-performers. Each month they produce new work on a different

theme and tonight celebrates 800 years of the Magna Carta with Ross Sutherland, Molly Naylor and Joe Dunthorne. The results are often engagingly shambolic, but never short of fascinating.

Sun 23 August The Skinny Night

The Skinny magazine is Jura Unbound's longstanding media partner and has been documenting the Scottish cultural scene for nearly a decade. In celebration of their impending 10th birthday, they pitch up in the Spiegeltent with award-winning novelist (and former Skinny contributor) Sean Michaels, for a night of multidisciplinary madness, live readings and theremins.

Mon 24 August A Little Slice of Italy

Dan Gunn's *The Emperor of Ice Cream* explores the lives, loves and betrayal of

Italian immigrants in Edinburgh before World War II; Massimo Bocchiola is an acclaimed Italian writer and translator, who translates Irvine Welsh's works. They are joined by Edinburgh-based Italian folk troop The Badwillis to bring a little slice of Italy to Charlotte Square Gardens.

Tue 25 August Happily Never After

Once upon a time there was a family of story-tellers and spoken word performers who lived in a magical mirrored tent. One day, an audience descended on this peaceful, boozy home and demanded to be entertained. They tried poetry, but it was a little too sweet. They tried short stories but found them a little salty. Then, they tried Jura Unbound, featuring Illicit Ink, it was just right. Mischievous, and comedic, twisted fairytales you've been waiting for.

Wed 26 August Vic Galloway and Friends

In the past Vic Galloway has given us *Songs in the Key of Fife* and shared rude jokes with King Creosote and James Yorkston but tonight the hardest working man in music brings together a heady mix of singer-songwriters and debut novelists to raise the roof on the Spiegeltent and celebrate the best of the Scottish indie scene.

Thu 27 August Neu! Reekie!

Welcome back to the devilishly dirty decadence of Neu! Reekie!. 2015 has been a killer year for hosts Michael Pedersen and Kevin Williamson: their first book was published, their show #UntitledLive was headlined by Young Fathers and gigs in Japan were followed by a whistle-stop tour around Scotland. They've created something extra naughty for Jura Unbound 2015; come and revel in it.

Fri 28 August Sounds of the City

Three writers with stunning novels read gritty stories of urban cities, street-fighting men and women, packing heat and punches. Marlon James' atmospheric *A Brief History of Seven Killings* tells of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley; Ryan Cattis's visceral *All Involved* follows LA gangs after the '92 riots; and Lisa McInerney's mischievous *The Glorious Heresies* sees a group of misfits mishandling a murder.

Sat 29 August Stripped but not Bound

Stripped is the Book Festival's strand celebrating graphic novels and comics. Publisher No Brow have created a fresh little format for graphic novels in their 17x23 project – join graphic novelists William Exley, Andy Poyiadgi and Joe Sparrow as they lead an interactive Jura Unbound night. It's like colouring-in books for adults, with added edge.

Sun 30 August Rally & Broad: The Interpretation Edition

Rally & Broad creators Jenny Lindsay and Rachel McCrum present The Interpretation Edition. Artists explore translation, interpretation and communication and what happens when we don't understand each other. A mischievous creative investigation bringing together art forms and celebrating the wonder of words, all delivered in the inimitable Rally & Broad style.

Mon 31 August Bang Bang!

When the smoke has cleared and the last rocket popped above the castle, head to our Spiegeltent for the finale of Jura Unbound 2015. A little shorter but full of firecrackers, we'll be going down in a blaze of glory! Kicks off at 10.15pm.

