

Bookworms young and old
are set to gather in
beautiful surroundings



Greenwich, the historic haunt of Chaucer himself, has long nurtured creative writing. Today, growing numbers of budding novelists, poets and playwrights are opting to study at the well-respected University of Greenwich, and this month the Greenwich Book Festival will return for the third year.

Schools Day on Friday 26 May will see the lawns of the riverside Royal Naval College campus completely covered with groups of school children clamouring to see characters such as Kipper the dog and Beetle Queen come to life, to meet their favourite authors, and to create their own illustrations with comic drawing wizard Neill Cameron. They will also be able to discover how books are made, have their faces painted and have a go at story-telling.

On Saturday 27 May, hundreds of adults and families will have the opportunity to hear an amazing range of established and new voices on the literary scene. The festival vibe will be in evidence throughout, with the Queen Anne courtyard filled with food and drink stalls from neighbouring Greenwich Market.

Headliners include big names such as Sarah Perry, who won the Waterstones Book of the Year accolade for her novel *The Essex Serpent*, Lisa McNerney, Bailey's prize winner and author of *The Glorious Heresies*, and renowned violinist Min Kym. Local stars include Eltham-based writer Wendy Moore, discussing her new book *The Mesmerist*, about science and

A WORLD OF WORDS

Literary SE10 welcomes Crystal Palace-based author Laura Barnett to the third annual Greenwich Book Festival

Words MADELEINE HOWELL

superstition in Victorian London and award-winning poet and fellow south Londoner Sabrina Mahfouz.

Leading this year's popular Friday night 'pool party' event will be acclaimed author Laura Barnett, who shot to fame with the success of her debut novel *The Versions of Us*, which is partially set in her home town of Crystal Palace. One strand of the novel, for example, features a particular pink house on Gypsy Hill that fed her imagination. South east London life permeates Barnett's writing, and she tells me that her favourite restaurant is Crystal Palace haunt Joanna's, where she got engaged to her husband, and that she likes to run up to the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill and is often dreaming of buying prints from the Greenwich Printmakers Gallery.

At the festival, she'll be introducing her second novel, *Greatest Hits*, which will be brought to life with its very own soundtrack that she collaborated with singer/songwriter Kathryn Williams to produce. 'Firstly, it's a novel about a folk rock singer song writer called Cass Wheeler, who is 65 and somewhere in between Joni Mitchell and Kate Bush in my head,' says Barnett. 'She retired from music ten years ago after a personal tragedy and hasn't returned to her music since – until now. It's set over one day in spring 2015 when she's going through her back catalogue. It's her attempt to come to terms with her past.'

The second prong to the book, of course, is the real-life accompanying album. 'It's just been finished and it's phenomenal,' Barnett enthuses. 'Kath is an absolute magician, and it's spine-tingling to hear the songs that I had only imagined before. It's about bringing a new dimension to the reading and listening experience. There are so many ways in which art forms are coming together, and so many possibilities offered by the internet in terms of breaking down genres – so it

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just seemed really clear to me from the beginning that if my book was about a musician, then I wanted those songs to exist. I'm really grateful to Kath that she got on board with my crazy idea and agreed to jump off the cliff with me – and I think we've landed with our parachute intact!

Given her collaborative approach, I ask, would she say that it's also important to bring literature to life through events such as the Greenwich Book Festival itself? 'Very much so,' she says. 'I spent inordinate amounts of time on my own in my study making stuff up in my head, so for me it's amazing to communicate directly with readers. Reading is also a solitary experience, and as much as you might adore a book and perhaps

Tweet about it, there's nothing quite like meeting the author and talking to other people about it. I think the literary world is a very lovely one to spend time in, so anything that brings people who loves books together has to be a good thing –

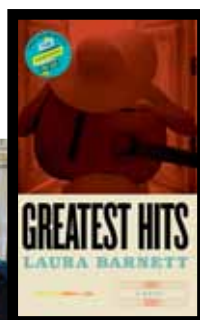
we can be a force for good in this crazy dark world!' she laughs.

For Barnett, who knew she wanted to write a novel since she was five years of age, it's also inspiring for budding young readers and writers. 'I've got nephews and a niece myself and they love meeting characters and writers in person – it makes such a difference in terms of instilling that love of reading. The Greenwich Book Festival gets people together in beautiful surroundings. It was really well-attended last year, and fostered some amazing conversations. It's a great way of keeping people connected,' she smiles.

Her third novel, *Salvage*, is in its early stages and has seen Barnett visit a number of south London salvage yards including some in Dulwich and Sydenham, as well as at the LASSCO (The London Architectural Salvage and Supply Company) site in Vauxhall to garner ideas.

It seems that south Londoners have much to be proud of when it comes to literary heritage both past and present – so don't miss the chance to find out more and perhaps even to source some ideas of your own at the festival...

Visit greenwichbookfest.com to book tickets



The Greenwich Book Festival brings to life books and characters