

# The Telegraph

## Hay Festival Xalapa: Martin Amis, Richard Ford and many more

Novelist Tiffany Murray raves about the Hay Festival in Xalapa, where Martin Amis and Richard Ford talk about the American masters, and the magical is truly made real.

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By Tiffany Murray

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Once upon a time there was a Xalapan bar filled with red dragons. They cried, they whooped, as scrum-half Mike Phillips went to work and Wales made it into the Rugby World Cup semi-finals. Those dragons were the National Poet of Wales Gillian Clarke, Hay Festival director Peter Florence and the author Jon Gower. It was a good night to be Welsh in Mexico.



Martin Amis at the Hay Festival in Xalapa

This was my second night in Xalapa and Hay's first year (the festival has previously been in Zacatecas). Within half an hour of landing here, I found myself teaching a creative-writing class, and then being interviewed about *Diamond Star Halo*, my second book. Soon I was hugging Michael Nyman in Xalapa's stunning Archaeological Museum and checking out Marcus du Sautoy's face for symmetry. Time works like this in Xalapa, or perhaps it's "Hay" time? Because, wherever this festival is, you don't sleep and it doesn't matter.

Xalapa is officially "the city of flowers", a university town famous for its festivals, but in the run-up to Hay, Xalapa's wonderful cultural heritage was eclipsed. What became important was security, scanning papers for news from Veracruz as the drug cartels and the government locked horns.

We've been spoilt. Michael Nyman's brilliant closing concert packed the Teatro Del Estado General Ignacio de La Llave, and the only screams I've heard over the week were those of giggling kids as they skimmed the lake on a zip-wire, while beneath them Martin Amis, and then Richard Ford, were interviewed alfresco. These were beautiful moments.

Any heavyweight, posturing action I've seen has been in the literary ring. In one of the first events, Amis, Eduardo Lago, Francisco Goldman and Florence talked about "the Masters of US Literature". I wanted to ask if John Irving could metaphorically join them for a wrestle, maybe Toni Morrison could capoeira them into exhaustion, but they had strict boxing corners occupied by Mailer, Bellow, Updike and Roth.

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[Martin Amis: the novelist life \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/8825242/Martin-Amis-intoxicating-free-the-novelist-life.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/8825242/Martin-Amis-intoxicating-free-the-novelist-life.html)

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Amis was Bellow's man with *Augie March*, Goldman came in with a surprise left hook with Joseph Heller and *Catch-22*. They were asked to sum up American literature in one word: "Democratic", said Lago, while Amis grumbled, "Mongrel".

Two events captured my heart: Ford in conversation with Lago, and the sessions with New York underground cartoonists Peter Kuper and Eric Drooker.

Ford gave a full picture of himself as a boy in Jackson, Mississippi, just down the road from Eudora Welty: "She was a great friend to me." For him, "to be a Southerner is an accident of birth", and to be a writer is "an amateur's art and it's not that hard".

With Diego Rivera's murals and Guadalupe Posada, it's apt I've fallen for the graphic novel while in Xalapa. "Graphic novel, sequential art, comics, whatever the hell you want to call it," Drooker says. We watch images of Kuper's interpretation of *Metamorphosis* ("Kafka, he looks like Frida Kahlo, right?")

We watch Drooker's work on the film *Howl*. Later, Kuper and I find a young Xalapan artist with a notebook beautiful enough to frame, or eat. He nods: "Now, I've got to go back to my room and draw."

It's been a quick four days. I've been taken off by a wonderful group called Totonal to a pre-Spanish cemetery to gaze at the beach where Cortés landed. I climbed a mountain with du Sautoy where we met a tall 78-year-old Mexican with a machete who told us he was very proud of his height and his name – "Isabel". The magical real, indeed.

\* *Diamond Star Halo* by Tiffany Murray is published by Portobello Books

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