

We authors are rarely let out in public. One exception to this rule is the literary agency drinks party - a curious occasion. A few dozen laptop moles, who have spent years eschewing conversation in favour of the written word, are brought together to chat. Let the mind boggle. An instantly recognisable face at my agent's is Ian McEwan. Despite never having met him before, I owe him a huge personal debt. His novel *Saturday* has encouraged my husband to cook fish stew in the footsteps of McEwan's fictional neurosurgeon Henry Perowne. Now I must confess that there has been no little debate at home as to whether the fluid result is in fact soup or stew, and should therefore count as a starter or a main course - but it is undoubtedly delicious. Anyhow, I introduce myself to Mr McEwan, and thank him profusely. He looks a little bemused. "I hope he's not taking the recipe from the book," he replies, "it's not meant to be used." I pause, envisaging my other half wandering off to the fishmongers, novel in hand, and suddenly worried that we have been inadvertently breaking some patent or copyright law. But Mr McEwan smiles, explaining that "It has too much liquid in it. It would come out more of a soup than a stew." I almost kiss him.

The current It-food is not fish stew but chocolate. In the midst of a government campaign against obesity, a new specialist chocolate shop hits a London street each week. My latest local is Melt, on Ledbury Road, whose unique selling point is - wait for it - FRESH chocolate. I am forced to admit that it had never occurred to me that some chocolate wasn't. Anyhow, Connaught chef Angela Hartnett has already been in, so Melt must have a point. The greatest chocolate-cool indicator however is the fact that XL Recordings, the label behind The White Stripes, Dizzee Rascal and The Prodigy, to name but a few, has been sending out hampers filled with nothing but chocolate and champagne. My mother-in-law, whose Kensington Park Road shop Felicitous (another *chocolatier*) has been doing this for them is thrilled that these musicians will now be receiving what she believes to be an "essential" part of a healthy diet. As proof of this she cites the recent presence of Audrey Tatou "quaffing a cup of chocolate and as looking as exquisite and petite as you can possibly imagine." So there you go.

Off to Waterstone's Notting Hill with my heart in my mouth. Browsing in book shops used to be unadulterated pleasure. Becoming a writer however has transformed the experience into a nerve-wracking rollercoaster ride. Right now as the paperback of *Lilla's Feast*, my story of my great-grandmother's triumph through the adversity of a loveless marriage and a Japanese concentration camp, is being launched all I can think about is where it might be in the store. But I am off to see the manager Mark, whose tireless and selfless fund-raising - Tsunami relief, Dyslexia Institute - I admire On Saturday 25th March, however, he is organising a slightly different form of altruistic event - a "MummyFest." This will consist of five authors and mothers: Santa Montefiore, Janine di Giovanni, Rachel Johnson, Rosie Thomas and myself all signing books for Mothers' Day. The beneficiaries of this, however, are us signing mothers. We are being granted an extraordinary few hours to ourselves at a weekend, whilst our other halves freeze in the

Diana, Princess of Wales, Memorial Playground in neighbouring Kensington Gardens. Kick-off is at 1pm – I shall be there until the playground closes.

A mutual friend takes us out on the town with mesmeric actress Stockard Channing. We go to The Wolseley where, even in jeans and boots, she turns heads. My husband and I are star-struck. To him she is Mrs Bartlett, the President's wife in compelling West Wing. To me she is Betty Rizzo from Grease. After dinner, we walk up to Berkeley Square. Together, Stockard and our friend West Wing co-star Ron Silver – campaign manager Bruno to fans, silence the entire queue outside Funky Buddha. We end up in Annabel's. Is she, will she, is she going to dance? Instead she stretches her legs out onto the footstool and says, "You, know, I think I came here on one of my honeymoons."

I returned to London at the weekend a year older than when I left. As the West Coast Line rolled me back from North to South I swapped sheep for dogs and the squelches of oozy grass for that familiar pavement ring. Not much had changed. I had been away for a tumultuous visit to our cottage in Cheshire. The highlight for the children was the making of my birthday cake and an all-too-enthusiastic discussion of whether the number of candles required was "enormous," "gigantic" or, even worse, "infinity." For a dose of re-Londonisation I take them to the Natural History Museum to see the new "Super-sensing" TRex that tries to attack the audience. My four year-old son, who has already seen it, assures me that it is even scarier than the last TRex exhibit. I remember that as being terrifying. As we approach the dinosaur hall, a large sign warns that younger visitors might be upset. I ask my children if they really want to see this. They assure me that they do. Halfway along the raised walkway we begin to hear blood-curdling roars. My two year old daughter tenses in my arms. I turn to retreat but the way behind me is jam-packed with parents with markedly older children. We have passed the point of no return. I am deeply regretting my cavalier approach to the Museum's warning signs. As we round the corner I hold my breath, and then stop. Below us, jaws facing away, is a rather charming dinosaur, waving its head at the children standing at the far end. My daughter is transfixed. She reaches out an arm as if to stroke it. "Love it," she says.