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### The Diary: Jonathan Coe

By Jonathan Coe

The novelist says that rather than simply mocking the rich and powerful, we should be outraged by what they get away with



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**I**s there any task harder, or more thankless, than trying to have a serious discussion about comedy? I'm not sure there is, and yet it feels as though I spend half my time these days chipping away at this subject in print or in person. I'm in northern Tuscany, appearing at the Sarzana [Festival della Mente](#), where I'm expected to talk on the subject, "Sense of humour: *uno stile di vita*". What on earth am I going to say?

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I've been doing this kind of public appearance for almost 20 years now and always get a warm reception from my Italian readers, so it's absurd that I still get so nervous about it. I think the problem here is that there seem to be so many academics and philosophers at the festival. Coming from Pisa airport I shared a taxi with Alessandra Lemma, a professor in the psychoanalysis unit at University College London, who has not only prepared a 60-minute lecture on body modification for her own event this evening but, just to rub salt into the wound, has already dashed off a definitive book about humour, *Humour on the Couch* (2003).

My insecurities multiply. Nor does it help that the hotel manager downstairs keeps saying, every time I walk past the reception desk, "*Buongiorno, professore*" with what sounds to me like malicious irony. Nor that the organisers insist on referring to my impending presentation as my "speech" or, indeed, "lecture", whereas I prefer to think of it a ... well, a chat, really. A chat with a friendly journalist – even if it will take place in front of 1,000 people.

Anyway. The sun is shining. A salad, a glass of wine and a sea breeze have put me in a, perhaps dangerously, relaxed frame of mind. I'm sure everything will be fine.

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Being in Italy means missing out on one of the great events in the recent history of the city that I still regard as home: the opening of the new [Library of Birmingham](#). Perhaps some people, given a choice between Tuscany and Birmingham, would not find themselves hesitating for long but I'm still feeling a keen pang of regret. I was lucky enough to get a sneak preview of the library a few weeks ago, and a couple of hours spent exploring its interior were enough to make me fall in love with it.

I'd been determined to remain unimpressed, too. Growing up in Birmingham in the 1970s, the beating heart of my universe had been the Central Library in Chamberlain Square, a striking inverted ziggurat designed in the much-maligned brutalist style by John Madin. Although I can see that this building might have outlived its usefulness as a library, it still seems shocking to me that it hasn't been listed and will soon be demolished, reducing this lovable landmark to nothing but a set of photographs and a fading image in the collective memory bank of thousands of Birmingham autodidacts. But, still, the new library – whatever you think of its flashy exterior, which to my eyes seems not to take much account of its neighbouring buildings – is stunning on the inside. A captivating, Escher-like construct of escalators, platforms, annexes, spirals, walkways, galleries, and (praise be!) shelf upon shelf of books – real books, wherever you look. And the whole place is bathed in light, too: natural daylight, the one thing I definitely don't remember seeing much of in the old library. It saddens me not to be present at the launch event for this magnificent public building.

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In the exhausted aftermath of my lecture/chat, I realise that the two things – Birmingham’s new library and Sarzana’s vibrant Festival of the Mind, are obviously connected, however great a distance there might seem to be between sun-baked Emilia-Romagna and the Bull Ring shopping centre. Both the library and this well-organised, sold-out festival are powerful statements of the enduring importance of ideas in an increasingly commodified world.

Sometimes it seems that Britain is always in the vanguard of this commodification, and it’s possible to look yearningly towards the rest of Europe as a repository of older, less material values.

Throughout, the big marquee pitched in Sarzana’s main square has been filled to capacity whether the speaker was a popular novelist or a professor of literature discoursing on lacunae in Primo Levi and Virginia Woolf. There is the same kind of buzz you find at a British literary festival but the content of each event (*“Invecchiamento cerebrale: un’epidemia del terzo millennio”*) seems pitched at an altogether different level.

And yet we shouldn’t do ourselves down. Whatever the plans for Birmingham’s Paradise Circus once John Madin’s old library has been bulldozed out of the way (retail units? offices? luxury apartments? – somehow I think it will be some or all of the above), it would be churlish not to pay tribute to the city council for investing £188m in the new one. Investing that money in bricks and mortar – or rather concrete, timber and aluminium – but beyond that, in books. Books and ideas. For the really big news about the Library of Birmingham is that a British public body has honoured a huge financial commitment to a project that is, in essence, entirely spiritual.

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Spurred on by this thought, and perhaps by the Sarzana Festival’s crusading atmosphere, I rather surprised myself with an outburst of unironical polemic towards the end of my event. My interlocutor, Massimo Cirri – himself a brilliant polymath, being writer, broadcaster and practising psychologist – deftly kept our conversation spry and light-hearted, and I couldn’t help noticing the big laughs he was getting from the audience every time he mentioned Silvio Berlusconi.

But where does it get us, I suddenly found myself asking the crowd, if we just laugh at politicians all the time? Berlusconi has kept himself at the forefront of Italian political life for 20 years by playing the buffoon: the incredulous laughter of the public has done him no harm at all. We think we can damage the rich and powerful by lampooning them

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but they have put themselves way beyond the reach of that. It's time for us all to stop laughing and, instead, to start researching, understanding and, above all, thinking about what these people do and how they get away with it. Less laughter, more outrage! The sentiment drew a warm response but as I soaked up the applause I couldn't help thinking to myself, "Well, that's one way for a comic novelist to put himself out of business."

*Jonathan Coe's latest novel 'Expo 58' is out now (Viking)*