



# in my many hats

**James Naughtie**, broadcaster,  
journalist, beekeeper and  
bibliophile, talks to Tony Kane

There is a good chance you will have heard James' voice early this morning - well before you read this article - if you are a Radio 4 listener.

I travelled over to Richmond where James lives with his wife, author Eleanor Updale, and their three children aged 19, 21 and 22. Despite the fact that James had been up since 2.59am for his slot on the *Today* programme, he arrived at midday fresh and enthusiastic. 'How do you manage it?' I asked. 'It's pretty well a nightshift. You get used to it,' he explained. His day starts with a meeting with the nightshift who have done the preparation work during the day and the night before he arrives. 'They are pretty well worn out after an 11-hour stint,' he said. It is their job to brief James and his fellow presenters on the framework of the programme for that morning. He then has a couple of hours to write the programme and go through the newspapers before it starts at 6 am. 'We always know the questions that we are going to ask and the answers that we want to hear - of course,' he laughed. 'Usually they are the exact questions that politicians don't want to answer.' When he eventually gets home, he takes the dog out for a walk in the local park. 'It's my way of unwinding and I sometimes meet people who talk about the programme - it gives me good feedback.'

'Don't you find the demands of the work very stressful?' I enquire. 'It can be,' he answers. 'This week in particular, I have done four mornings, but it is worth it. It is a great privilege to be able to have a position where one is allowed into people's lives in quite an intimate

way. It's a private time of the day: they might be in bed, getting dressed, changing the baby's nappy or getting the kids off to school. The team are aware of this and we respect it.'

James is a great admirer of the BBC and Radio 4 in particular. 'The BBC doesn't always get it right but as an institution it is invaluable. There is nobody more critical than those who work in the Beeb. You only have to travel to other countries to see what results there are without an independent broadcaster.' I mentioned Fox News and the effect that has had on politics in the USA. He nodded in agreement. 'It has turned politics into show business. The way politics is discussed is often puerile, with the exception of the recent Obama and Clinton election where the bar was raised.'

I say: 'I heard on your programme that there is a suggestion that the Licence Fee should be voluntary. What do you think of that?' He threw his hands in the air. 'Don't even go there. The *Today* programme would not happen. There would be no obligation on broadcasters to show a sense of fairness.'

We talk about his great interest in books: James has agreed to do the interview with Salman Rushdie at Wimbledon Bookfest on 10 October. 'Yes I'm delighted to do it. I think you have a great programme. I notice you have Peter Snow - an old friend of mine. He is a great presenter and always a big success.'



I can now be seen with a ridiculous hat and a net looking after our bees. They are the luckiest bees in the kingdom because our garden is a stone's throw from Kew Gardens



I say that I understand he has interviewed Salman Rushdie in the past. 'Yes, on a day I will never forget - nor will he. When I was on *World at One* I interviewed him before the programme started, as is often the case, and I read to him what I had seen on Reuters and broke the news that there was a Fatwa out against him. I think it was a considerable shock to both of us, and we have reflected on it many times.'

'Do you think there is a future for Book Festivals or do you think there are too many nowadays?' I wonder. 'Not at all,' he replied. 'In the past, political meetings were where people came together and discussed issues and ideas. This happens much less now due to TV, but there is a hunger for community events where arguments are rehearsed and questions asked in a live debate - not passive, as on TV. I believe that book festivals fill that gap.'

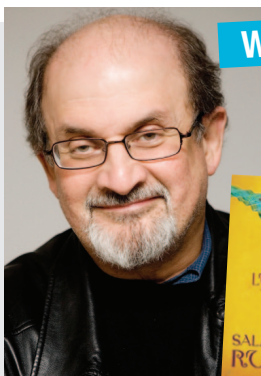
Publishers complain that the publishing business seems to be on its way out, I say and ask if James is of that opinion. He is not. 'There is always a place for the really good book,' he says citing the winner of the 2009 Mann Booker Prize: 'Hilary Mantel wrote a history book, *Wolf Hall*, that was 600 pages - it made demands on the reader, it was quite a heavy book. By Christmas it had sold 250,000 copies.' He is a trustee of the prestigious prize and was its Chair last year. James considers that 'celeb' books with ghost writers have lost their market in favour of quality literature.

I ask about his hobbies: 'I had a birthday present last year from my wife that was almost as good as a small boy getting a train set,' he tells me. 'I can now be seen with a ridiculous hat and a net looking after our bees. They are the luckiest bees in the kingdom because our garden is a stone's throw from Kew Gardens so the bees have full access to all the wonderful plants and shrubs that Kew has to offer. Most people think of bees and pots of honey but I love watching their habits and life style - it can be quite hypnotic.'

As we were about to finish he mentioned, in an almost embarrassed way, that he was writing a novel - his first, a political thriller - and he was very excited about it. 'What is the title?' I demanded, pen in hand. He refused to go any further, explaining it was still in the early stages.

In addition to his love of bees, it is obvious that James as a journalist has also a love of people and politics. 'Yes I love my job. Politics is in a very creative phase at the moment where everyone is thinking creatively. I am a natural reporter with a strong curiosity and I want to know the answer to things but apart from the minutiae of politics I love meeting and talking to people - that's what keeps me going.'

*Bookfest Headline Event: The Jim Naughtie Interview with Salman Rushdie The Big Tent, Wimbledon Common, Sunday 10 October, 5pm, tickets £15. [www.wimbledonbookfest.org](http://www.wimbledonbookfest.org) for further information on other events and to book tickets*



## Wimbledon Bookfest Headline Event

### Salman Rushdie in conversation with James Naughtie



Wimbledon Bookfest is delighted to welcome Salman Rushdie with his follow-up to the bestselling *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, one of his most popular books with readers of all ages. While *Haroun* was written as a gift for

his first son, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, the story of Haroun's younger brother, is a gift for his second son on his twelfth birthday. Salman Rushdie became a KBE in 2007. In 1993 *Midnight's Children* won the 'Best of the Booker' prize, the best novel to have won the Booker Prize for Fiction in the award's 40 year history. *The Enchantress of Florence* was published in 2008.

Sunday 10 October 5-6pm Big Tent £15

- Wimbledon Bookfest takes place at various venues from 2-10 October
- Speakers this year also include Antony Gormley, Michael Morpurgo, Tracy Chevalier, Lynda La Plante and Lynda Bellingham, Liz Jensen, Joseph O'Connor, Will Hutton, Peter Snow, Tony Parsons, Michelle Magorian, Penny Vincenzi, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Robert McCrum, Ollie Smith and Jay Rayner and Maggie O'Farrell.

• A full programme is available at [www.wimbledonbookfest.org](http://www.wimbledonbookfest.org)  
 • Box office: online at [www.wimbledonbookfest.org](http://www.wimbledonbookfest.org) or call Polka Box office on 020 8543 4888.