

# Chawton House Library Fellow's Lecture 25th November 2010

## Stevie Smith: the literary orphan

Dr William May, University of Southampton

Few twentieth-century British writers are both as inviting and hostile to their audience as Stevie Smith (1902-1971). If she has maintained a qualified popularity in poetry anthologies as the author of 'Not Waving But Drowning', for some, her idiosyncrasy makes her uniquely immune to serious consideration. Others point to her authorial shoulder-shrugs to ask if she need be taken seriously at all. Her caricatures of professional literary readers in her poems and novels find them, without exception, to be pompous, self-regarding and belittling to their subjects. If sustained study of her work is rewarding, its gifts are often given with sly looks and mistrust.

This lecture argues not only that a reassessment of her work is timely, but that Smith's defensive attitude towards it can offer a point of entry, rather than a barrier, to its rich and humane insights. Drawing on the image of the orphan in Smith's poetry, Dr May uncovers both the literary connections her work suggests and those it attempts to conceal. He uncovers new sources for her illustrated poems, suggests why she glossed over the figure of her sister in her three autobiographical novels, and outlines how her own relationship to reading formed her attitude towards audience and reception.



**Lecture Tickets:** £10 & £7.50 for friends/students

**6.30pm** Reception with wine

**7.00pm** Lecture



**To book, or for more info, call 01420 541010 or email [info@chawton.net](mailto:info@chawton.net).**