

FT MASTERCLASS SEGWAY RIDING ...with FELIX DENNIS

The publisher and poet gets around his Warwickshire estate at 12.5mph. If *William Leith* wants a tour, he'll have to learn how to keep up.
Photography by *Gareth Phillips*

I'm standing in the middle of Dorsington, in Warwickshire, an estate owned by the publisher and poet Felix Dennis. It's cartoonishly pretty and opulent – thatched cottages, groomed avenues of trees, statues all over and outbuildings done up like five-star hotel suites. It's one of Dennis's five homes, three of which are estates like this. The other two are in Connecticut and Mustique. Dennis doesn't drive. So how does the owner of Dennis Publishing get around the substantial grounds of his estates? By Segway, and he's going to show me how it's done so I can keep him company.

But first I ask him why he settled on the Segway, which from a distance looks like a broomstick with wheels. The rider's feet are mostly hidden behind the wheels, and the stick goes up to chest level. He tells me that he was in the US when he saw a Segway advertised in one of his own magazines, and ordered a couple. They have a maximum speed of 12.5mph, which is like a fast cross-country runner.

"I rode up and down the halls, in this skyscraper, on the Segway. And I was smitten straightaway," says Dennis. "If you go to places where they have esplanades – the south of France, Barcelona – there are crocodiles of these, with tourists on them. If you go to Amazon warehouses, if you go to airports, there are hundreds and hundreds of these machines."

Dennis has wild grey hair. He wears a baggy leather jacket and loose cords. He stops outside a building to talk to one of his employees. There is a plaque bearing the words: "Felix Dennis. Honorary Consul to Warwickshire, St Vincent ▶



Felix Dennis on his Segway: "If you try to balance, you fall off!"



Dennis instructs William Leith. Below: a statue in the Garden of Heroes and Villains

◀ and the Grenadines". He chats for a moment but then he is off on his machine, leaving me standing on the lawn, Segway-less.

Dennis has gone to The Welshman's, the building in which he writes his poetry. Being a poet is phase three of his life. In the 1960s, Dennis was a hippie. In 1971, as co-editor of the countercultural magazine *Oz*, he was tried, and acquitted, on the charge of "conspiracy to deprave and corrupt the morals of the young of the realm". Then he became a publisher. Now 66 and the owner of magazines such as *The Week*, *Bizarre*, *Cyclist* and *PC Pro*, as well as the comic *Viz* – and many other enterprises – he is worth £500m, according to the 2013 Sunday Times Rich List.

I am driven up to The Welshman's, where Dennis is waiting for me with my Segway. "Don't try to balance on it," he says. He has a perfect old-style London accent, like Ian Dury. "If you try to balance, you fall off. A child knows how to do it instinctively. An adult always tries to balance. You see, you're trying to balance. But don't. Just stand on it. That's it. You're getting the hang of it."

Until you find your feet, it feels precarious. If you lean forward, it moves forward. If you lean back, it stops. If you keep leaning back, it moves backwards. "It's all done with gyroscopes," he says, as we glide along. "You're moving a bit fast, William! I'll go on the inside. You stay where you are... You're getting a bit silly now."

The Welshman's stands next to the Garden of Heroes and Villains, which is packed with life-size bronze statues of historical figures – Darwin, Churchill, Einstein, Captain Cook and his colleague Joseph Banks, as well as Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and more. Stephen Hawking, Dorothy Parker. The garden goes on and on – most of the figures strike me as heroes but Dennis believes there is "a little of both in all of us". There's a large statue of a mammoth being hunted by spear-toting prehistoric ape-men.

'Do you think I'm the greatest poet for 100 years? No. Why then do people buy my books in tens of thousands? Because they're going to enjoy themselves'



We move into the road. In the middle is a roundabout with three statues of running airmen, frozen in the act of scrambling towards a Spitfire in the summer of 1940. The plaque at their feet says, "The Few". I zoom, on my Segway, towards "The Few". Dennis keeps worrying I'm going too fast, or that I'll crash into something. He's got a point. The Segway looks eccentric and harmless; it feels a bit like a Zimmer with an engine. You have a sense of gliding. But it's faster than you think and you could easily come a cropper. I get the hang of turning: you control the direction by twiddling the handle, like the throttle on a motorbike. It's a very fine control. The turning circle is tiny – you could spin round and round if you wanted.

I buzz past "The Few" and towards a statue of Captain Cook and Banks. Behind a bush I can see a huge bull – a bronze imagining of the Minotaur of Crete. Dennis says he is one of the few people who still commission statues, and has spent about £5m on them: "It's basically just me and a few dictators these days," he says. "And the dictators just want statues of themselves."

We take a break for tea. Inside, The Welshman's is a cornucopia of mainly shiny stuff: perfect tables, Apple computers, a stained-glass window, a library of the classics, a painting by Caroline Coon of the *Oz* trial defendants, in the nude, with idealised physiques. If I'm not mistaken, the Dennis figure is the most well-endowed.

When we met, he was about to go on tour, reading his poems in 30 cities across the UK and Europe. He writes poetry in old-fashioned forms – iambic pentameter, sonnets and sestinas – but concentrates on modern subject matter. It's stirring and Kiplingesque. It's resonant. It's emotive. His many critics don't get it. But he's hugely popular. Purists appreciate free verse; the public, it turns out, likes poems that rhyme, and that it can understand.

"The vast majority of free verse is ghastly," he says. "Utterly ghastly. No one reads it. No one listens to it. The book-buying public has been voting with their wallets for 60 years. I hear poets complaining: we face what our forebears did not face. We face TV. We face radio. We face this and that. And I just say: 'Balls! You don't face bear-baiting. You don't face out-and-out gambling. You don't face underage whores. The reason they don't come to listen to you speak, and the reason they don't buy your books, is that no one understands them.'"

He quotes the poem he opens his readings with: "This is The Server". It's inspired by Auden's "Night Mail". "This is the server waiting on stations/Silicon god of an email nation/blinking and winking in towering stacks" – and so on.

"Do you think I'm the greatest poet for 100 years? No. Why then do people buy my books – not just in hundreds, not just in thousands but in tens of thousands? Because they want to. Because they're going to enjoy themselves."

We get back on the Segways. I gain in confidence. I whizz past Captain Cook. I might be going too fast. "Don't try to balance," warns Dennis. "You're doing well. Don't twist it too fast." I love this. It's great. "You're moving a bit fast," says Dennis. "You're in a bit of trouble here. Stop. Stop. Stop...!" **FT**

"Did I Mention The Free Wine? The Cut Throat Tour" runs until October. Details at www.felixdennis.com