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Plus reviews of works by
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Reason and Terror

George Hoare

Martin Amis
The Second Plane
Jonathan Cape, 2008
224 pages
£12.99
ISBN 978-0224076194



'This is a narrative of misery and pain, and also of desperate fascination.' —Martin Amis, *The Second Plane*

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger once pointed out that no one dies for mere values. The fact, however, that suicide bombers not only *die* but also *kill* for their values would suggest they are not 'mere values'. For Martin Amis, novelist-turned-political essayist, it is hard for us to know how to respond to terrorism, and the events begun on 11 September 2001. It is difficult for us, Amis argues, to rationally confront suicide bombing—which, we should note, involves both killing others (unlike violent political communication such as self-immolation) and killing oneself (unlike car-bombs or other methods of mass murder). It evokes a pre-modern view of the meaning of life, in which values can provide a cause that adherents are willing to die and kill for. The lack of an accessible perspective for intellectually addressing suicide terrorism has, in Amis's view, definitively conditioned our reaction to terrorism, and goes a long way to explaining the pervasive bafflement at 9/11 and its enduring aftermath. This is a complicated point. Perhaps the 'death of God', as announced by Nietzsche in 1882, has deprived our 'Western' tradition of its anchoring centre weight, handing us down only these 'mere values', and leaving us unable to know quite how to respond to events such as 9/11. We could hold, though, that despite the great difficulty of fully empathising, of imagining a cause for which we would ourselves consent to die, in understanding suicide terrorism with 9/11 as its centrepiece, we still have reason. How, Amis asks over the course of the twelve essays and two short fictional pieces, can we (as, importantly, the 'rational West') engage with the phenomenon of suicide terrorism, its 'horrorism', and the rise of radical, political Islam?

The guiding light of reason is so appealing to Amis on 12 September 2001 because he finds himself lost for words—unusual for him—and without recourse to his writing instincts. He likens himself to Josephine, the opera-singing mouse in the Kafka story: 'Sing? She can't even squeak.' Of course, Amis has always keenly felt his moral responsibilities as a critic, as his previous collection, *The War Against Cliché* (2002), evidences. But, he argues, his journalism about September 11th came less from a sense of obligation (to comment, to provide opinion) than from

the artistic inability to do otherwise: 9/11 dispossessed Amis (and many other novelists, he contends) of the freedom of imagination required to write fiction. For Amis this seems plausible, as in his work since the early 1980s he has assumed an increasingly autobiographical voice: he seems sometimes to have to write about what he experiences, or at least in his own persona (ascribing to all characters his distinctive voice). Imagination, he states, was 'of course fully commandeered, and to no purpose' by the advent of 9/11; there was no time for Amis to indulge in the novelists' necessary 'solipsistic daydreams' or allow 'reason at play'. The real world had obtrusively intervened into his consciousness. In other words, for Amis 'politics—once defined as "what's going on"—suddenly filled the sky'.

Amis the political essayist, from 12 September 2001, has not been universally well-received, particularly by the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton. Eagleton and Amis's public spat (they are both at Manchester University) centres around an interview given by Amis, that is not included here, in which he thinks aloud:

There's a definite urge—don't you have it?—to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan . . . Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs—well, they've got to stop their children killing people.

Eagleton understandably sees this as a 'squalid mixture of bile and hysteria', citing a 'genetic excuse': 'Amis's father [the novelist] Kingsley, after all, was a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays,

9/11 dispossessed Amis (and many other novelists, he contends) of the freedom of imagination required to write fiction.

and liberals' and concluding that 'Amis fils has clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase'. And there certainly has been a development in Amis' writings, as argued cogently by Daniel Soar in the *London Review of Books*, towards

the 'anatomising of hatred', as gruesomely present in the effluvia swishing around throughout his most recent novella, *House of Meetings* (2006). (This is to be contrasted with the more dispersed, vaguer, and, at any rate, less bodily class-based hatred of some of his works, such as *Success* (1978), *Money* (1984), and *London Fields* (1989).) Unfortunately, there is hatred in *The Second Plane*, even if it avoids many of the criticisms previously levelled at Amis since it is written in the impersonal, third person. Now, it is others doing the hating; it is for us to respond.

One question that remains even at the end of the book is whether it could be subtitled more accurately as 'reason in the age of terror' or 'terror in the age in reason'. Amis equivocates between seeing the world as primarily rational, with terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism out of place, and

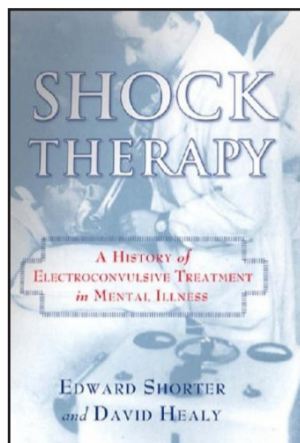
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Shock and Cure

Jamie Horder

Edward Shorter and David Healy

Shock Therapy: A History of Electroconvulsive Treatment in Mental Illness
Rutgers University Press, 2007
382 Pages
£18.50
ISBN 978-0813541693



It was the spring of 1938 in Mussolini's Italy, and a group of men had obtained custody of a former railway worker whom the police had recently picked up off the streets of Rome. Drawing inspiration from the apparatus used by a nearby abattoir to stun pigs before slaughter, the men shaved their subject's head and proceeded to attach a pair of crude electrodes to either side, which were then connected to a custom-built machine designed to deliver brief but intense bursts of electricity. Experiments involving a number of unfortunate dogs had indicated that the same current applied across the heart was generally lethal, but no animals had been killed by a shock to the head. The switch was flicked; the man, hitherto fully conscious, immediately entered a tonic-clonic or *grand mal* seizure, akin to the most severe kind of epileptic fit. His limbs contorted wildly, his face blueing through lack of oxygen as his breathing temporarily ceased. The seizure was brief, and the man returned to consciousness a short time later. It was not long, however, before he would be shocked into convulsions again.

One could be forgiven for seeing in this sequence of events a session of torture, akin perhaps to the force-feedings with castor oil that the Fascist authorities at the time so enjoyed. Indeed, many commentators have interpreted the events of that April day and the subsequent history of what became known as electroconvulsive therapy or ECT, in just that way. For the men in Rome were a team of psychiatrists, led by a Dr. Ugo Cerletti, and the goal of their experiments with electricity was not punitive but medical. As far as Cerletti was concerned, the first trial had been a resounding success. After several sessions of the treatment, the patient, who had been living as a vagrant, speaking incoherently, and suffering from paranoid delusions, showed a dramatic improvement in his mental state and was able to return home to his wife. Psychiatrists around the world rapidly adopted ECT as a more patient-friendly alternative to the existing methods for producing therapeutic seizures, namely injections with toxic drugs or high doses of insulin. (That such seizures could produce improvements in some cases of mental illness had been known for a number of years.)

Today, to the extent that they are aware of the procedure at all, most people regard ECT as a frightening and shameful black mark on the history of medicine. Jack Nicholson's powerful portrayal of a lovable rogue subdued and broken by the 'shock box' in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is familiar to millions. How did such a once-lauded treatment fall from grace, and is its sinister reputation deserved? Edward Shorter and David Healy attempt to answer these questions in *Shock Therapy*, a book that combines a history

of ECT's origins and development with an enthusiastic defence of the procedure's continued use. It is a timely book. With the safety and effectiveness of antidepressants and other psychiatric medications increasingly coming under fire (not always fairly), and with increased debate about the desirability of more psychotherapists in the NHS, it is bracing to be told that nothing works nearly so well as a few electrical shocks. According to the authors, received wisdom has been utterly wrong for the past few decades, and ECT is and has long been an underused and grossly underappreciated treatment.

As they explain, ECT was not always perceived as inhumane. During the 1930s and 1940s, shock therapy enjoyed widespread popular acclaim, with the press promoting it as a wondrous treatment for all kinds of mental ills. The media and most of the public accepted the claims of doctors quite uncritically. By the 1960s, however, lurid stories of minds shattered by shock therapy became commonplace, and a series of damaging newspaper articles, books, and movies served to erode the procedure's reputation in the minds of the public. With surprising rapidity, the perception of shock therapy transformed from a miracle cure into a case study in medical brutality, a damaging, cruel, and useless procedure. The use of ECT declined markedly during this period, and numerous hospitals abandoned it, though its use continued in many others. In some US states and a few European countries, shock therapy even became subject to specific legislation limiting its use—something almost unprecedented for a medical procedure.

For Shorter and Healy, the campaign against ECT was a misguided and harmful deviation, a rejection of the one psychiatric treatment that really worked in severe mental illness in favour of talking cures and psychiatric medications that were less consistently beneficial. (Healy's critical views on such drugs, especially antidepressants, are well known and forcefully expressed at several points in this book.) Many readers will react with surprise to this, for it is the critical accounts of ECT that have become fixed in the public consciousness. Some people are even surprised to learn that shock therapy is still practiced in civilised nations, yet it is used routinely in Britain and elsewhere: walking down the main corridor of Oxford's Warneford Hospital, near Headington, visitors can see the waiting room of the ECT suite alongside the Coke machine and the toilets.

Strange as it might seem, ECT is an extremely useful means of treatment. Psychiatrists today are almost unanimous in the opinion that it is highly effective for many patients, and most would agree with Shorter and Healy that it is in fact the strongest treatment available for severe clinical depression. Study after study has shown that a course of ECT (which today most commonly involves one session every other day for an average of ten sessions) produces major improvements in at least 70 percent of such patients, with the benefits becoming apparent within days. Numerous clinical trials have shown that the effects of ECT are both more powerful and more rapid than even the most potent antidepressant drugs, and it is often effective in patients in whom several different medications have been tried and failed. In addition, many psychiatrists believe that ECT is useful in treating psychiatric conditions other than depression, such as manic excitement, though there have been few systematic studies

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Telling Tales on Musical Genius

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Alex Ross

The Rest Is Noise

Fourth Estate, 2008

624 pages

£20.00

ISBN 978-1841154756



Oliver Sacks

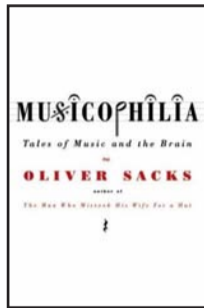
Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain

Picador, 2007

400 pages

£17.99

ISBN 978-0330418379



I

The identification of the musical moment when a fissure appeared between the Romantic and the Modern is a constant source of historical debate. For many, the harmonically ambiguous chord at the beginning of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* reflects the breakdown of bourgeois social codes, while for others modernism's first steps are better represented by the unbounded flute solo which begins Debussy's *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un Faune*. Alex Ross chooses to initiate his sweeping history of twentieth century music with the Austrian premiere of Strauss's *Salome* at Graz in 1906. Certainly he has good reason to: within its luxuriant folds of orchestration the opera seems to contain both the final remnants of the glorious 'Teutonic' tradition—of Beethoven, Liszt, and Wagner—and the seeds of a revolutionary order where strangeness began to overtake beauty as the guiding spirit of composition. Indeed, *Salome* can be described as both anarchic and cacophonous, in contrast to the carefully ordered rituals of opera-going which does not escape Ross's attention. After experiencing the opera, Kaiser Wilhelm II is reported to have commented of Strauss that 'normally I'm very keen on him, but this is going to do him a lot of damage'. The monarch, in politics as in matters of art, was proven somewhat naïve, for the opera's reception was such that the work arguably coloured a whole generation of musical innovators whose significance was to stretch to the end of the twentieth century.

So begins a history whose purpose is to encounter every significant, and many insignificant, moments of twentieth century music. No character is deemed too small in the telling, no musical style considered inconsequential. As a result there is something almost histrionic, rather than historic, in Ross's claim to capture the repertoire of the last century in its entirety. This is not to denigrate his accomplishment, as few writers outside the academic arena have tackled what is, musically, a multifarious century of extremes. Ross should be applauded for attempting a history that is arguably beyond the limits of a single volume. But it is somewhat inevitable that charting every cultural movement within a period that experienced rapid social and economic changes will result in a somewhat blurred account. The danger is that, without the space to differentiate carefully between the truly important trends and the mere flashes, we are subject to a sensory overload in which the vibrancy of events thwarts a discernable teleology.

Nevertheless, Ross does achieve a convincing, if somewhat unbalanced, three-part division of the twentieth century: the first section covers European modernism from 1900 to 1933; the second runs from 1933 to 1945 across Russia, America, and Germany; and the third embraces all national styles from 1945 to 2000. The least satisfying of the three is the final section, which, as so often is the case with contemporary music criticism, becomes an encyclopaedic list of composers, mentioning many styles but dissecting few.

The middle section of the book, where Ross discusses the relationship between political and cultural despotism, is the most persuasive, partly due to the fact that he gives more space and time to developing his theses. Modernism, like the political regimes that characterise the first half of the twentieth century, is conceived as the final, terrible flowering of the Enlightenment project, but one incompatible with the stifling cultural policies of Nazism and Stalinism. Clearly Ross's decision to begin his tale of modernist music in the decaying glamour of fin-de-siècle Vienna accords convincingly with his thesis that national socialism signalled the 'death fugue' of European music. Here was a system that could not permit music to continue on its path to chaos, for in doing so, it would have undermined the belief in the power of order. The strength of the collective too would have been breached if Schoenberg and the other lone celebrities of modernism had been heralded as individual geniuses.

There was space for only a single dignitary in Nazi Europe, and he had ears exclusively for Wagner. Indeed, one of the more surprising elements that materialises in Ross's reading is the constant presence of Adolf Hitler, not only as a historical figure—possibly present at the Graz performance of *Salome* and definitely there at the Bayreuth festival—but also as a shadow cast across the entire canon of Western art music. Looking back over the twentieth century, Ross almost suggests that the negative reception that classical music currently experiences is partly the due retribution for an art form that courted the attention of history's most evil bogeyman.

To the cynical onlooker, orchestras and operas houses are stuck in a museum culture, playing to a dwindling cohort of aging subscribers and would-be elitists who take satisfaction from technically expert if soulless renditions of Hitler's favourite works.

The implication here is of classical music's perfect suitability as an agent of social stagnation, preventing radical innovation and maintaining class hierarchy. In keeping with Ross's agenda, which is left unsaid but clearly sensed throughout, it is seen as imperative that music save itself from reactionary forces epitomised most obviously by Nazi policy but also to an extent by our current form of bourgeois 'museum culture'.

Assuredly, Ross's history is dazzling, not only in the vastness of the subject matter, but also in the energy of the prose, which skips around from one performance to the next, across continents and time periods almost with impunity. However like any bright light stared at for long enough, *The Rest is Noise* begins to cause something of an almost migrainous pain. Music critic for *The New Yorker*, Ross clearly belongs in a journalistic milieu whereby palatability trumps depth and intricacy. The rush to include as many composers as possible leads him to reduce these highly complex characters to a glib list of adjectives

so that Mahler ('childlike, heaven-storming despotic, despairing'), Schoenberg ('sharp-witted, widely cultured, easily unimpressed'), and Berg ('a debonair, handsome man, self-effacing and ironic') lose their individuality under a barrage of cliché. Similarly, the rapaciousness of Ross's interest in non-musical art forms leads occasionally to wild simplifications of both music and visual art, as in his under-developed notion that Rauschenberg and Reich can be termed unequivocal adherents of 'Pop Art'. Most saddening from a scholarly perspective is the absence of any notated musical example. It should not be expected that everyone who reads *The Rest is Noise* can interpret notation, but for the majority who can, musical examples could have served as evidence for Ross's deductions, strengthening his prose rather than creating a distraction as the publishers must have foreseen. One might interpret this as indicative of a writer whose own voice, cutting stridently across the twentieth century, cannot resist talking over the music.

II

The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat, a book about Oliver Sacks's experiences as a consultant neurologist, provided the inspiration for Michael Nyman's 1986 opera of the same name. It seems particularly apt that Nyman's music should be repetitive, obsessive, and seemingly devoid of rational development, given that Sacks's book shows how the human mind regularly operates in similarly illogical ways. Sacks's latest book continues his exploration of the connection between anomalies in the neurological condition and the manifold experiences that listening to music generates. *Musicophilia* is essentially a collection of medical notes, a re-telling of various real-life experiences in which a malfunction in the subject's brain is accompanied by an alteration in their attitude to music. Results range from an increase in the ability to aurally memorise complex and lengthy passages of music, to the discovery of a synesthetic ability to visualise colour or smell with certain intervals to, in some unfortunate examples, the onset of convulsions at the sound of a particular tune. Incredibly, these neurological symptoms are not limited to those who consider themselves particularly 'musical', but often affect people who have had no, or very little, training and exposure to a formal musical education.

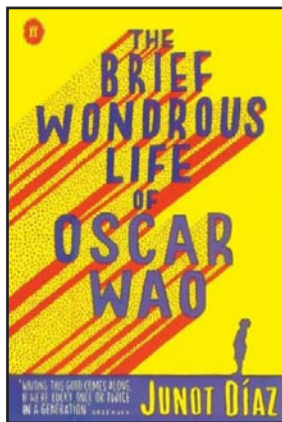
The most extraordinary history is of a male subject—Dr. Cicoria—who, previous to being stuck by lightning, had no musical gifts at all. He enjoyed some rock music, but remained unmoved by the classical repertoire. Something in the near-death experience of being electrocuted sparked an obsession for piano music, particularly for Vladimir Ashkenazy's recordings of Chopin's works, which resulted in many hours of repeated playings and practice. Dr. Cicoria's personality underwent severe alteration too, from being an 'easygoing, genial family man', he became a figure 'inspired, even possessed, by music', believing he had been 'saved' for the higher purpose of developing his 'gift'.

As fascinating as these stories are, the number of anecdotes that Sacks includes becomes tiresome. The lack of any kind of narrative across what is essentially an almanac of neurological curiosities means that the book is perfect for dabbling in, but frustrating when read from cover to cover. From a clinical perspective, *Musicophilia* is deliberately not a technical book and, thankfully for those uninitiated in the language of statistics and cerebral scans, the author has the happy ability to translate highly specialised

The Importance of Being Oscar Wao

Matt Hill

Junot Díaz
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
 Faber and Faber, 2008
 352 pages
 £12.99
 ISBN 978-0571179558



While the publishing industry in Britain manages to conjure a bestselling literary sensation every few years or so, in America it is naturally an annual event, and this year undoubtedly belongs to Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Aloft on the wings of unanimous critical acclaim, Díaz recently became the first Dominican—and only the second Latino-American—to scoop the Pulitzer, a species of literary prize quite unknown on these shores, in that it has a reliable history of recognising enduring fiction. It would be quite unfair, of course, to review the hype rather than the book, but it is instructive to note the way in which so much of the praise heaped on Díaz has sounded the same note: he is ‘a powerful new voice’ (*Powell’s Books*); ‘an ironic, confiding, exuberant voice’ (*Kirkus Reviews*); ‘one of contemporary fiction’s most distinctive and irresistible new voices’ (*New York Times*). There has been a great deal of harping on ‘voice’ amongst reviewers, and in order to explain *Oscar Wao*’s significance—because it is, I believe, a significant novel—I would like to consider a few senses of the word in relation to contemporary American fiction.

One sense of ‘voice’ that we should forbear to inflict on Díaz, and which I suspect some of his reviewers had in mind, is that of a representative of his particular sociopolitical subculture. He is not quite the first Dominican author to gain an American readership—Julia Alvarez went before him—but his Pulitzer award signals his entry to the mainstream proper, with all attendant privileges like huge sales and having to answer inane questions on *The Charlie Rose Show*. Allowing that one happy incidental effect of Díaz’s success may be increased exposure for a vastly underrepresented immigrant group, to honour him as a ‘voice’ in this sense is to imply a view of American literature as a great pluralistic confab, a house of representatives where each community’s experience is articulated by its own anointed delegate. Whatever the imperfections of American democracy, it is a category error to expect American literature to redress them. And quite apart from the *a priori* objection that good fiction first of all searches out the specific as against the general example, the starting point for *Oscar Wao*’s drama is its eponymous hero’s crippling, mortifying atypicality.

Oscar isn’t ‘one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about—he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock’. In fact, he’s a fat, sci-fi-loving nerd who seems destined to disprove the seeming law of nature that no Dominican male can die a virgin. Increasingly alienated from his contemporaries at Rutgers University, Oscar develops an obsession with the ancient Dominican legend of *fukú*, a curse which is said to wreak havoc on all who fall under its influence. Meanwhile, the narrative arcs backwards, tracing the upheavals faced by his mother, Beli, and his grandfather, Abelard, whose encounters with a murderous Dominican dictatorship are chilling enough to support

Oscar’s suspicions of a family curse.

Given all this, it would be understandable had Díaz written a long howl of intergenerational anguish, but the impression that arises on putting down *Oscar Wao* is of a warmth and humour which belie its dark materials. The reason for this is found in another, more literary sense of ‘voice’: the prose in *Oscar Wao* is a marvellous olio of Spanglish that ranks alongside any of the recent experiments in American prose. Listen:

There are those alive who claim that La Fea had actually been a pro herself in the time before the rise of her brother [Joaquín Balaguer, President of the Dominican Republic], but that seems to be more calumny than anything, like saying that Balaguer fathered a dozen illegitimate children and then used the pueblo’s money to hush it up—wait, that’s true, but probably not the other—shit, who can keep track of what’s true and what’s false in a country as baká as ours—what is known is that the time before her brother’s rise had made her una mujer bien fuerte y bien cruel; she was no pendeja and ate girls like Beli like they were pan de agua—if this was Dickens she’d have to run a brothel—but wait, she did run brothels!

For all its colloquial swagger, this is a highly stylised piece of writing, with its comic missteps and reversals, sprinklings of Spanish jostling smartass canonical quips and shrugging expletives, all in a sentence the momentum of which is carried by a slipstream of hyphens. It is the voice of Yuniór, a homeboy machista and Oscar’s sometime college roommate, whom Díaz reprises from his 1996 short-story collection *Drown*, and who often addresses the reader as though he were shooting the breeze on a street corner in New Jersey. But, by an act of narrative sleight-of-hand, we do not realise there’s a first-person behind this voice until some way into the novel. The surprise is calculated and central to Díaz’s purpose, because by revealing the presence of another personality written into the margins of the text, he radically undermines the authority of the narrative—a move with obvious significance in a book partly about a dictatorship, but which has implications for its American context too.

Like many of his contemporaries, Díaz is suspicious of the near-hegemony of the monoglot voice that, with the admitted exceptions of Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield, used to form the bedrock of English-language prose. His solution is to unveil a narrator who is not merely unreliable but who, for many readers, will be occasionally incomprehensible. Yuniór is apt to address his readers as ‘nigger’, to season the prose with sci-fi arcana and untranslated Spanish (sometimes extending to full sentences) — to make, in other words, few concessions to the kind of artificial, standardised rhetoric that we normally think of as ‘literary’. It thus marks the distance travelled in the politics of American narrative voice since, say, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which signalled the throat clearing of a different, newly confident subculture. When Bellow’s protagonist opened his account by announcing, ‘I am an American, Chicago born’, he was brassily declaring his right of access to the cultural centre ground, his right to interpret America to itself. *Oscar Wao*, meanwhile, bespeaks a society fragmented into a thousand overlapping cultures, comfortable with difference and distrustful of centrality. Its linguistic world is one in which we are all migrants, with all the excitement and occasional confusion that condition entails.

This distance can be measured in the way Díaz handles cultural references. While *Augie March* displays an almost maniacal desire to prove a mastery of cultural authorities on the part of both author and protagonist, *Oscar Wao*’s allusions are scattershot and irreverent: ‘The sexy isthmus of her waist alone could have launched a thousand yolas,’ says Yuniór of one character, and there are some jocose nods to Flaubert, Conrad, Proust and, yes, Bellow. The book’s title refers to the Hemingway story ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’, and contains a joke about miscommunication: ‘Oscar Wao’, the protagonist’s nickname, is ‘Oscar Wilde’ rendered in a Dominican accent. None of these references suggests a thorough engagement with the traditions they invoke—nor are they bothered to. Díaz’s deepest mines of cultural reference, in fact, are those of sci-fi and fantasy. Where *Augie March* would reach for Herodotus or Hegel to illuminate character, Yuniór heads for the world of comic books: ‘Like Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*, who drained from an entire jungle the photonic energy he needed to survive Coldbringer, so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival.’ These are more than just knowing lowbrow hijinx: *Oscar Wao* eloquently suggests that the immigrant experience is often so vertiginously strange that it can only be understood in terms of eccentric genre forms.

At the outset of the book, Yuniór notes that if the influence of *fukú* can be discerned throughout Oscar’s family history, then perhaps his narrative can be seen as a *zafa*, that is, a counterspell with power to unloose *fukú*’s hold. Yuniór seems to have in mind something akin to a ‘talking cure’, the idea in psychoanalysis that catharsis can be induced in the trauma victim by enabling the victim to express his or her experience vocally. Yuniór turns out to be a historian of Oscar’s family, his self-appointed task to redeem its generational trauma by giving it a voice, and, in doing so, to deal with a related trauma of his own.

Place *Oscar Wao* beside a couple of other American literary bestsellers of recent years—Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), and Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000)—and something of a mini-genre begins to emerge. In all three, an intimate, confiding first-person voice makes significant claims for the power of storytelling to redeem an originating trauma (whether bereavement, genocide, or tyranny). There is an affinity here with the culture of the talk show—which is, of course, another form of the talking cure where a few million viewers, channelled by the host, fulfil the role of the analyst (except, with characteristic American inclusiveness, in this version the catharsis is not restricted to the analysand but is intended for everyone). *Oscar Wao* shares with Oprah an expressivist faith in sounding out pain, where the final release is affecting in proportion to its dreadfulness. ‘Negro, please’, says Yuniór at one point, ‘this ain’t a fucking comic book’. But when the rhetoric of self-expression lapses into pure hyperbole, *Oscar Wao* is just that: wonderfully, hilariously, but unremittingly overstated. Its voice is so compelling that when, teen-flick-style, the loser implausibly gets the girl in the end, you can barely bring yourself to demur. And yet, for my part, I hope we’re not in danger of forgetting that literature can be more than just a talking cure.

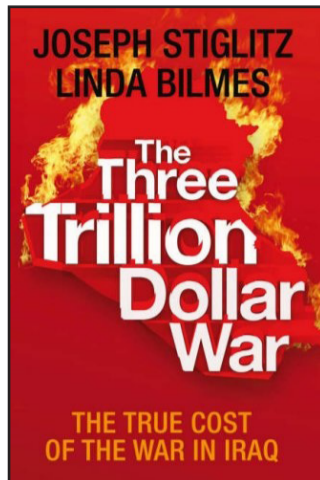
Matt Hill recently completed a BA in English at Jesus College, Oxford, and is now a night porter at a hotel in Bristol.

The Value of Economic Shock and Awe

Samsher Gill

Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes

The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict
Allen Lane, 2008
336 pages
£20.00
ISBN 978-1846141287



America has already paid a steep price for invading Iraq,' Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes write in the preface to *The Three Trillion Dollar War*, referring to the 4,000 American casualties and nearly 30,000 wounded in battle. But 'the economic burden is less readily apparent'. Stiglitz and Bilmes set out to assess this economic toll, tabulating just what the war literally cost in dollars and cents. Both writers approach the problem with the mindset of a social scientist: Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in 2001, is an economics professor at Columbia; Bilmes is a lecturer in public policy at Harvard. They start from the premise that governments, like markets, sometimes fail. 'Social scientists,' they write, 'try to understand the systematic sources of these "failures" and look for reforms to reduce their likelihood and mitigate their consequences.' The Iraq War, they say, is a case study in 'government failure'.

The book primarily serves to debunk the lowball estimates the Bush administration foisted on the American public before the war, numbers that ranged from \$200 billion for fighting the war to the laughably low figure of \$1.7 billion for financing the reconstruction of Iraq. How do Stiglitz and Bilmes tabulate the bill? Their calculation includes money spent directly on the conflict, disability benefits and health care for veterans, the loss of productive labour due to war casualties, and the macroeconomic toll wrought by increased oil prices.

The main virtue of social science is that its methods ensure a clear and elegant approach to problems of massive scale by requiring an effective framework for collecting and analyzing data. This can also be its vice and, at times, Stiglitz and Bilmes appear trapped by their own vocation. The result is an epic of economic and statistical 'shock and awe'. Each chapter is a barrage of frameworks, steps, procedures, estimates, qualifiers, and projections. There isn't even one final tab. Instead, each chapter counts two sets of costs: the 'best case' scenario, or what they reasonably predict will be the 'minimum possible cost that the conflict will incur', and the 'realistic-moderate' scenario, which assumes a longer period of combat activities and, as a result, higher associated costs across the board.

The final totals—\$2.2 trillion without interest in the best case and \$4 trillion without interest in the realistic-moderate scenario—are so large as to seem incomprehensible. That the war has been so expensive comes as little surprise after Bilmes and Stiglitz tear through a dizzying array of numbers. In 2008, operating expenses may total \$16 billion a month, or 'to think of it another way, roughly every American household is spending \$138 per month' on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The costs of caring for injured soldiers, many of whom require ongoing mental and physical therapy, will likely total \$422 billion in the best case scenario and \$717 billion in the realistic-moderate

scenario. And so on.

While it is impossible to keep track through the pages and pages of mounting costs, the message is clear: the Iraq War has been a spectacularly expensive conflict. The Bush administration, through gross incompetence or willful dissimulation, continues to underestimate the costs in public pronouncements. Many of the expenses, including the interest accrued to money borrowed, will continue to burden the American economy for generations to come. Yet *The Three Trillion Dollar War* seems intended to be far more than a mind-numbing ledger. Stiglitz and Bilmes write in the opening that 'by examining the costs, we can come to understand better the implications of the war, and perhaps learn how we can extricate ourselves from Iraq with the least amount of damage.' They then close the book with a series of proposals designed to show that cost analysis can improve future decision-making under the assumption that 'the United States will, someday, go to war again.' Many of the suggested reforms address issues such as cost transparency and accountability, and would help eliminate a problem seemingly endemic to the Iraq War: that of lost, wasted or misdirected funds. While these are no doubt good ideas, they are budgetary solutions to budgetary problems, and the implications of the war extend far beyond the balance sheet.

Perhaps the most telling number appears early in the book, when Stiglitz and Bilmes compare the cost of Iraq to other United States wars: more expensive than Vietnam, twice the cost of Korea, ten times the first Gulf War, twice World War I. There is one exception. Although the per troop cost of Iraq is four times higher, World War II, after inflation, remains the most expensive American war at \$5 trillion. Despite this enormous cost, World War II is regarded as a great success. Is this because the United States, along with the other Allies, ultimately triumphed, or because fighting it was the right thing to do?

A war can be judged by whether it accomplishes its strategic objectives and by how it goes about pursuing them. On both counts, Iraq would appear to be a titanic debacle. What Stiglitz and Bilmes show is one way the United States failed to properly wage the war. They mention frequently, though do not attempt to prove with any rigour, that the strategic goals—the dream of a stable, free, democratic Iraq—have not been achieved. But there remains one final way to judge a war. That is to ask whether its goals could in any way justify the use of violence and the resulting cost, human and financial. This is the Iraq War's fatal flaw, that many of its purported strategic benefits have been unmasked as illusory. There were no links between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks—despite some intimations to the contrary from administration officials—and there were no weapons of mass destruction. The problem with the Iraq War is its legitimacy. The war can no longer be justified, not merely from the juridical perspective of a disapproving international community, but also from that of the aggressor, whose goals were either bankrupt or misguided from the first. The war has been a disaster not just because it has cost too many lives and too much money. That is true of all wars. It is that lives and money have been spent for the wrong reasons or, perhaps worse, for no reason at all. This is a problem social science cannot address.

Max Weber, the father of modern sociology, was aware of his discipline's limits. In a 1918 lecture to students at Munich University, Weber attempted to respond to a challenge laid down by Lev Tolstoy. 'Science is meaningless,' said the Russian, because it cannot answer 'the only question

important for us: "what shall we do and how shall we live?"' In response, Weber asks, 'what then does science actually and positively contribute to practical and personal "life"?' He provides three answers. First, science furnishes us with the means to achieve our ends. Second, science illuminates 'methods of thinking, the tools and the training for thought'. Third, science helps us to 'gain clarity'.

It is when we come to choosing our ends (what Weber calls the 'ultimate problems') that science runs into trouble. The study of philosophy, says Weber, along with 'philosophical discussions of principles in other sciences', can ensure that 'such and such a practical stand can be derived with inner consistency, and hence integrity, from this or that ultimate value position'. Science figures in our moral thinking by requiring that our ends and means are logically consistent with their supporting assumptions. This, as Weber asserts, 'is no trifling thing'. We cannot hold accountable solutions to complicated problems unless we can accurately map out the relationship between a proposed course of action and the values from which it derives. It's not difficult to see why this is the case; in fact, *The Three Trillion Dollar War* is just such an example of this kind of reasoning. The Iraq War was intended to enhance American national security, but it has wound up damaging military readiness and imposing major macroeconomic costs. Through a detailed economic investigation into the war, Stiglitz and Bilmes lend substantial clarity to the debate over how to make America safer by showing some of the inconsistencies and errors in the execution of the war, along with the egregious cost miscalculations and underestimations that helped justify it. What science—social science included—cannot tell us is how or why to choose one 'ultimate value position' over another.

Weber forces us to draw a frustratingly paradoxical conclusion: science cannot adjudicate fundamental questions of value, but, at the same time, it can and must play a role in deciding between subsidiary goals and beliefs, as well as in suggesting the mechanisms by which we hope to put our values into practice. Yet while Weber seems to describe as futile any hope that science might shed light on human values—what they are or should be—the reality is that science, and the social sciences in particular, spent most of the twentieth century fleeing any association with the concept of value.

Humans are value-producing beings. We have desires and inclinations; we prefer some outcomes over others. Our world does not merely exist under a system of natural laws, but carries meaning for us. Science is inextricably bound up with this existence. Without it, we would be helpless to accomplish our goals, both because we would be bereft of the means to do so and because we would be unable to navigate the hopelessly jumbled network of principles and values we aspire to follow. At the same time, social science cannot furnish us with these basic values. Quite simply, it has little to say about the meaning of life. But science cannot escape its uneasy, though hardly tenuous, relationship with our moral deliberations. At its finest, social science carries us to its own limit. As Weber pointed out to future scientists at Munich University during the twilight of the World War I, science can compel one 'to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct'. By structuring our inquiry into lived experience, social science can disclose, rather than disguise, its relationship to human ends; in so doing, it brings our basic value assumptions into sharper relief. Social science illuminates our moral principles as much as it perfects our methods of adhering to them.

Bob the Bewildering

Tumi Makgetla

Heidi Holland

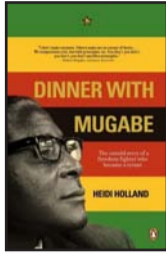
Dinner with Mugabe

Allen Lane, 2008

280 pages

£11.87

ISBN 978-0143025573



Martin Meredith

Mugabe: Power, Plunder, and the

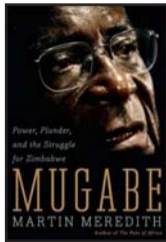
Struggle for Zimbabwe

Public Affairs, 2007

272 pages

£8.99

ISBN 978-1586485580



Take the suited dictator with the owlish glasses above his Hitleresque mustache, the man who punches the air to emphasize points in his vitriol, and imagine him as a child. He sits alongside a riverbank, attempting to catch doves in a simple trap of sticks and leaves. Described as a loner, he would read his book in solitude—sitting, waiting, with characteristic determination.

To imagine this man as a young boy is to conduct an almost impossible feat of reduction of both size and power; it is to underscore how much larger than life an all-powerful leader can become. The idea of the banality of evil, first applied to Nazi war criminals by Hannah Arendt, captures the dissonance between the terrifying tendencies of an individual and the fact of his simple, almost boring humanity. A very real person exists behind the sensationalized façade of Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwean president who has held on to power for nearly three decades. In getting to know the seeming banalities of that person, we seek to understand his evils.

Heidi Holland's exploration of Mugabe's personal history in her biography of the Zimbabwean leader, *Dinner with Mugabe*, traces how a boy known for his scholarship, articulateness, and determination came to dominate the country he fought to liberate. Poring over his personal history with a psychologist's eye, Holland reveals him to be an emotionally detached person with a deep inferiority complex, a man who responded to criticism with a desire for revenge. This basic analysis, understood against a backdrop of historical events, forms the story of 'a freedom fighter who became a tyrant'.

While Holland's book portrays Mugabe's path to tyranny as a spiral of vengeful decisions, Martin Meredith's *Mugabe: Power, Plunder, and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* suggests that Mugabe's rise to the top represents a megalomaniac's successful concentration and later defense of state power in the hands of one party. Zooming out from Mugabe's personal history, Meredith's survey of the Zimbabwean historical landscape exposes a veneer of violence shrouding the country's pre- and post-independence days. He charts how Mugabe successfully maintained his grip on power, repressing opposition while his coterie enjoyed the spoils of office. The book is one of several books by Meredith, a professional journalist, who writes on Southern African political history. Holland, too, is a journalist who has worked in Africa for 30 years and has written books on South African politics and on racism and crime in South Africa.

Looking back on history, it is difficult to deduce whether Mugabe underwent a transformation from well-intentioned to tyrannical as Holland suggests, or whether Meredith's telling of the story is more accurate, with a Mugabe who

always cloaked a ruthless edge beneath a freedom fighter's mask. Both accounts indicate that when Mugabe came to power, he genuinely reached out to his former opponents and spoke sincerely of reconciliation. The puzzle that both authors struggle to unravel is why he responded to rebuffs and setbacks in such a fiercely anti-democratic manner. Both books exhibit a fascination with the spectre of dictatorship and the far-ranging powers it entails, as well as an urge to understand the tragedy that has befallen a once hopeful and relatively prosperous nation. In so doing, the authors reveal the limitations of using one man's character to explain a nation's trajectory. Mugabe sits at the center of a story that is not just his, but that he shares with a circle of people who have profited from his grip on power.

Robert Gabriel Mugabe grew up in the Jesuit mission village of Kutama, about 100 kilometers east of the capital city Harare. He was born in 1924, a year after Britain granted Rhodesia, as the country was then named, the status of responsible government. Mugabe qualified as a teacher in 1945, joining one of the few professions open to educated Africans under colonial rule. He taught in Rhodesia, studied for a year in South Africa, and later accepted a teaching position in Ghana in 1957, where he met his first wife, Sally Hayfron. That was the same year that Kwame Nkrumah declared Ghana's independence, beginning a wave of independence struggles across then-colonial Africa. Mugabe's biographers emphasize his time in Ghana as a key moment when the political thoughts he encountered previously—about Marxism and national liberation—became meaningful and practicable. Returning home to Rhodesia on holiday, Mugabe participated in a rally and warmed to the idea of getting involved in politics. He and Sally later moved back home for good.

A Rhodesia ruled by Ian Smith, a hard-line politician who fought bitterly to prevent Africans from coming to power, greeted Mugabe and his wife upon their return. Along with his white-minority government, Smith declared independence from the United Kingdom in 1965. After the declaration, he and his supporters fought against the rising Zimbabwean nationalist movement, which sought a Zimbabwe under African control. Mugabe, a force in that movement, had been arrested in 1964 with other members of the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU), which had splintered off from the Zimbabwean African Peoples' Union (ZAPU). In 1972, while Mugabe was in jail, civil war broke out between the government and the national liberation movements. After serving eleven years in prison, Mugabe was released in 1974, along with other detained leaders, to participate in settlement talks with the government. The talks marked the beginning of a series of failed attempts to find a political solution to end the war. Five years later the famous Lancaster House conference took place, resulting in a settlement that led to elections in 1980. Zimbabwe had won its independence. ZANU won a majority in the elections and Mugabe became president.

During the first years of his rule, Mugabe made overtures to his former opponents in what his biographers consider genuinely conciliatory acts. He appointed two white ministers to his cabinet and wowed Ian Smith with his courteous conduct towards him. Nevertheless, tension grew between the ruling party and the white community in Zimbabwe after a series of debacles, tied partly to the new government's fear that white Zimbabweans were cooperating with the South African government to undermine the newly independent state. Simmering tensions between the two former liberation parties ZANU and ZAPU came to a head in 1983, when government forces unleashed a campaign of terror in Matebeleland, an area home to the majority of ZAPU's supporters.

By the end of the 1990s, according to Meredith, the unemployment rate had reached 50 percent and inflation ran at 60 percent. Meredith attributes the poor economic outcomes to the corruption of the political elite, which had a destabilizing impact on many government institutions. Effectively condoned by the Mugabe government, people claiming to be war veterans began invading white-owned farms in 2000, one of the most internationally publicized events during Mugabe's rule. In the early 1990s, commercial agriculture sustained a quarter of all jobs and 40 percent of Zimbabwe's export earnings. The invasions dealt a harsh blow to an already suffering agricultural economy.

Mugabe's rule over the past decade has become increasingly authoritarian. Meredith details how the government regularly uses force against the population to prevent opposition to ZANU's rule. By 2004, three million Zimbabweans had fled the country, Meredith reports, roughly a quarter of the population. Many headed for South Africa. The government retaliated against the 2005 electoral victories of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, by harassing their supporters, who hailed largely from urban areas. In a move purportedly aimed at cleaning up urban centers, the government tore down thousands of houses in slum areas and shantytowns and arrested street traders. A United Nations report on the campaign found that almost 100,000 homes and roughly 30,000 businesses had been destroyed.

Holland met Mugabe in the 1970s, while working in Zimbabwe as a journalist sympathetic to the liberation movement's struggle. While the title of Holland's book is in keeping with a fine tradition of dining with dictators à la *Tea with Mussolini*, it is in fact based on a real experience. The book's preface relates how she threw together a quick meal of roast chicken and green beans for Mugabe before driving him to the train station on behalf of a friend. It was 1975 and he had just been released from prison. This brief encounter motivates Holland's central question: 'What happened to the man who was kind enough to phone a young mother and enquire about her child after a brief dinner in 1975? How on earth did he become the cruel dictator who rules Zimbabwe by decree and corrupt patronage more than 30 years later?'

She seeks an answer to this puzzle in his childhood experiences, which she draws upon to construct a basic understanding of his personality type. From about the age of ten, according to Holland, Mugabe was burdened with his mother's expectations of success when his older brother, the family favorite, died and his father abandoned them. Holland describes Mugabe's mother as a deeply pious and extremely depressed woman who 'left him in no doubt that he was to be the achiever who rose above everyone else; the leader chosen by God himself.' Mugabe also impressed a local priest in the Jesuit missionary village where they lived, who encouraged him academically and promoted him above his age group in school. Holland depicts Mugabe as a loner, whose bookishness and inheritance of his mother's devoutness earned him the scorn of his peers.

Holland works her way through Mugabe's life story in a series of in-depth interviews with key political figures from Zimbabwe's history and a few family members and priests who knew him well. Through these interviews she destabilizes the simplified portrait of the leader on the book jacket, where Mugabe appears as a clean-cut freedom fighter, tilting his head up to meet the soft light of the future with a clear gaze. The book's strength rests in part on her application of a highly descriptive technique to an impressive list of interviewees, bringing life to well-known names in

continued on page 17

Forgotten Conscripts No Longer

James Appell

Tom Hickman

Called Up, Sent Down: The Bevin Boys' War

The History Press, 2008

256 pages

£20.00

ISBN 978-0750945479



Last March, over 60 years after World War II, Prime Minister Gordon Brown recognised 27 men for their service during and after the war in a ceremony at Downing Street. Given the intensity with which Britain has remembered and commemorated World War II veterans, it hardly makes sense that men who served their country had to wait more than half a century before the government acknowledged their contribution. Yet this has been the fate of the Bevin Boys. Tom Hickman's new book *Called Up, Sent Down* describes their peculiar wartime fate. Unlike Britain's other veterans, the Bevin Boys served their country without ever leaving the United Kingdom or seeing military action.

World War II presented the opportunity for young men of fighting age to do for their country what their fathers and grandfathers had done in the Great War: to serve in the Armed Forces, to wear the uniform of the British Army, and to fight for King and Country. Month by month, those who reached the age of 18 registered, underwent medical examinations, and within weeks received their instructions to report for conscription. In December 1943 hundreds of young men, like those who had gone before them, anxiously awaited their assignments. They received an unwelcome early Christmas present: they were to be the first of 48,000 or so 'Bevin Boys', sent to mine coal in Britain rather than to fight the enemy in greater Europe. They would wear blackened overalls and steel toe-capped boots rather than military uniforms, and they would wield picks rather than pistols. They became Britain's forgotten conscripts.

The minister of labour and national service, Ernest Bevin, devised this scheme in response to a severe shortage of both coal and coal workers. The declaration of war in 1939 saw a surge in the demand for coal, as industries at home and abroad mobilised. But export demand tailed off considerably by May 1940 with the fall of France and Italy's decision to side with the Axis Powers. With around 5 percent of the mining workforce losing their jobs virtually overnight, Bevin dropped the protected status of miners, allowing them to seek employment in the construction and munitions industries. Former miners could now help the war effort rather than remain idle.

This was to be the fatal mistake with which Bevin's name is now popularly associated. Miners streamed out of the pits in far greater numbers than he had anticipated, and coal production screeched to a halt. The government tried to convince miners to continue working at the pit-face, but to no avail. In the end Bevin settled upon compulsory conscription into the mining workforce to sustain production. Young men who had prepared themselves for war were picked by ballot, allegedly out of Bevin's own hat, to prepare to go underground.

The shocked recipients of conscription papers in late

1943 and early 1944 reacted with disbelief. Some refused to report and went absent without leave, even on pain of imprisonment. Others sought to appeal on medical grounds or simply argued for their greater suitability for the Armed Forces. They wrote to national newspapers, campaigned publicly, and generally made a nuisance of themselves in their efforts either to shame the government into improving their lot, or simply to express their disappointment at not being able, like so many of their peers and family members, to 'do their Duty'.

Many continued to serve down the mines until 1948, long after those serving in the Army had been decommissioned. Bevin's reputation suffered and MPs began calling the experiment a failure. Unlike soldiers, the Bevin Boys received no medals, no benefits and no pensions; while soldiers could return to their old jobs, the Bevin Boys, who had been forced out of previous employment by law, had no such provision. This was all the more damaging given the post-war demobilisation of industry, which brought the 5 million men and women who had served in the forces back into the civilian labour force. Many conscripts returned from the mines bearing physical and mental scars from work that was as demanding on the body and senses as war. Though many were injured or killed in combat overseas, miners suffered a considerable number of casualties underground. At the time, however, the government did not see merit in such a comparison.

Tom Hickman's book charts the lives of the Bevin Boys in their own words, an oral history of the forgotten conscripts. Hickman marshals the individual testimonies of some 70 former Bevin Boys, who came from all parts of Britain to serve in coalfields in Wales, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Durham, the North East, Scotland, and Kent. These testimonies form the basis of *Called Up, Sent Down*, the author's voice taking a backseat to the words of the men themselves. Hickman's real skill has been to present the words of his interviewees both thematically and chronologically, giving the book a genuine narrative structure while allowing the conscripts plentiful focus.

Hickman's subjects underwent such varied experiences in their host communities that *Called Up, Sent Down* maintains a pluralism in the story it tells. Some of those interviewed continue to look back in anger at their period in the mines. Ken Tyres's story is perhaps the hardest to read in this respect. Tyres was injured after getting trapped between two tubs full of coal at a mine in County Durham:

The pelvis healed but never the internal injuries. I've never been able to travel far because of urinary problems, never more than a few miles. And since that day I've never had a full night's sleep. Being a Bevin Boy wrecked my life.

Tyres received no war pension, despite having made a claim for one. The War Pensions Agency turned it down, explaining that he was ineligible either as a conscript or a civilian. As a Bevin Boy he had been 'called up and allotted a National Service Registration number [but] was not enlisted and therefore remained a civilian'. As a civilian his 'physical injury [was] not caused either by the enemy or in combating the enemy'.

But the book contains contrasting recollections. Other conscripts, initially critical, turned out to be grateful for

the experience. One Bevin Boy may have spoken for many when he noted that 'mining was a risky business, but I wasn't shot at or shot down. Would I have survived as a ship's stoker or if I'd taken part in the D-Day landing?' A notable number continued in the mining trade after being decommissioned. Ian McInnes's experience in the mines helped him obtain a first-class degree in mining at university in Nottingham, leading to a lifelong career as a consultant.

Hickman clearly is enthused by his subject. His previous works on National Service and the BBC during wartime demonstrate his preoccupation with the interaction of individuals and state institutions in the context of war. In this book he has collaborated with the Bevin Boys' association, and he has integrated material from the published memoirs of Bevin Boys. This seductive technique allows the reader to become acquainted with the Bevin Boys themselves, through hearing their stories first-hand. But it also becomes very easy to be uncritical. The reader needs little invitation to recognise the dichotomy between the state's crass treatment of the conscripts and the Bevin Boys' stoicism. Such highly personal histories inevitably run the risk of becoming celebratory, lionising the efforts of 'heroes' in the face of huge obstacles. Yet the more one immerses oneself in the testimonies of the Bevin Boys, the more one cannot fail to be impressed by their story—irrespective of one's academic reservations.

Called Up, Sent Down in fact offers much more than a portrait of the Bevin Boys' courage in adversity. For one, it puts into perspective the popular aversion to war today. The choice between serving on the battlefield or in the mines would doubtless be unenviable in any age, but would the draftees of today be as disappointed as their predecessors in the 1940s if told they would not serve on the front? No doubt the combined weight of twentieth century conflicts and the unrelenting and often graphic news coverage of them has taken its toll on the romanticism of war. Moreover, the imperatives are different. Times have changed since adolescents 60 years ago 'entertained the... hope that the war would last until they were old enough to get into the fight'. That, perhaps, is a good thing.

Hickman's study also hints at some fascinating patterns in the sociological map of Britain. The North-South divide at times reads as a gaping chasm, with Bevin Boys from London and the South East posted up to the coalfields of the North seeming to enter a different country, where regional dialect 'might just as well have been a foreign language'. The mining communities come to life through the eyes of the interviewees as distinctive social entities, with idiosyncratic cultures, languages, manners, and rhythms. To one London Bevin Boy posted to Staffordshire 'it was...like living in a time warp'. One gets the feeling that Britain's mining communities were a world apart from the Britain that was busy at war.

Indeed, Hickman makes few references to the ongoing war which the Bevin Boys were helping to power. Notwithstanding the odd meeting with soldiers on leave, or the encounters with civvies that left many Bevin Boys ashamed of their status (they were often mistaken for conscientious objectors or shirkers), Hickman barely mentions the action on the battlefields over the Channel or the nightly bombing raids suffered by many across the country.

Is this an oversight by the author or his demonstration of the all-consuming nature of mining work? The latter suggests an important undercurrent of the book, perhaps one not anticipated by Hickman. That miners and their communities were so integral to the war effort and yet so removed from the war, almost forgotten by it, may be the most valuable conclusion one derives from *Called Up, Sent Down*. Although the book tells the story of the forgotten conscripts, it is the unheralded local career miners—those who worked alongside the Bevin Boys—who take centre stage.

Coal-mining in Britain during the 1940s was quite literally a matter of life and death. The coal that miners hewed fired the factories and fuelled the troops to keep the war effort going. It was the fuel that kept the home fires burning (especially during the famously bitter winter of 1947–1948). Conscripted or not, the miners faced daily threats to life and limb. Rock-falls, dust, low ceilings, flammable gas, and the grind of manual labour all threatened lethal consequences, making mining ‘the industry with the worst safety record in Britain’. One miner told Bevin Boy Tom McGuinness: ‘Son, you have a worse job than a rear gunner.’ Presumably he was fully aware of the irony of his comment. For Bevin Boys mining was a hazardous, but ultimately temporary, form of employment; for the men of the mining communities, it was their life.

Miners have had a tough time in recent years in the British popular consciousness. The mining industry in Great Britain has dwindled considerably since the war. UK Coal, Britain’s largest mining company, has only 12 mines in operation today, employing only 3,500 workers. The dark days of the 1980s, when Arthur Scargill led unionized mineworkers out on strike, formed the iconic image of British mining. The wounds from the year-long Miners’ Strike, as well as the subsequent closure of the pits and destruction of the very communities about which Hickman writes, have reconfigured Britain, making British miners an endangered species. In the popular mindset, the Bevin Boys are to be pitied for having had to live and work in such places, when 40 years later the miners drew ire for striking or leaving the mining profession.

As if to underline this disparity, the Bevin Boys are no longer ‘forgotten’. Former Bevin Boys such as Warwick Taylor (*The Forgotten Conscript*) and Reg Taylor (*The Reluctant Miner*) have published their experiences. School curricula on the Second World War make mention of the Bevin Boys. Since 1998 they have been allowed to march to the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. And in March 2008 Gordon Brown presented a number of former Bevin Boys with commemorative badges in honour of their service.

The Bevin Boys have been acknowledged, and rightly so, for their employment in the mines was without choice. They most certainly ‘did their Duty’. But *Called Up, Sent Down* also highlights the contribution of the men who worked alongside the Bevin Boys and, though sometimes as hostile as they were helpful to the young conscripts, shared in the hard, dangerous but vital work. Now their industry and way of life have largely disappeared. Perhaps Hickman has missed the ‘scoop’ here: are they not also forgotten?

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Amis

conceding that substantial changes must be made in our way of life to adapt to the new epoch begun with the second plane of September 11th. The equivocation is nearly fatal for Amis both politically and, perhaps more importantly, as an author. His best work, as Soar argues, succeeds in not giving hatred the fuel it needs by refusing to take it seriously. Terrorism, on the other hand, Amis takes very seriously. However, to contend that we should adapt to terrorism either politically or artistically is to surrender the power of reason to dissect and overcome terror. It is also a short step to claims that al-Qaeda somehow threatens our way of life, and we must do ‘whatever necessary’ to maintain it. In his recent book *Invitation to Terror*, Frank Furedi argues that this tendency pervades our response to terror: irrational dread of terrorism is fuelled by a host of concerns, such as our preoccupation with risk, and our fear of the ‘worst-case scenario’, rather than what is actually happening. Furedi contends that societies attacked (even by far more destruction than that of al-Qaeda) do not fall apart; our response to terrorism should be to be ‘constantly questioning the belief that we live in an “age of terror.”’

Amis, however, does not question whether we live in an age of terror. Rather, terrorized himself, he draws the consequences that society has moved from reason to terror. And when he sees himself as a lone voice of reason, he feels, inevitably, more permitted to take liberties—with arguments, with positions, with the distinction between fiction as ‘reason at play’ and political essaying as reason applied to ‘what’s going on’. At worst this creates such fear-mongering phrases as the following: ‘to transcend reason is of course to transcend the confines of moral law; it is to enter the illimitable world of insanity and death.’ Fundamentally, Amis seems unsure of whether man is a creature of reason or whether we are, at base, *homo religicus* and ‘man is only fitfully committed to the rational—to thinking, seeing, learning, knowing. Believing is what he’s really proud of.’ And since he takes little care to analyse the socio-political conditions that generate terrorism, Amis is left with an oversimplified dichotomy between the rationality and irrationality of actions that is not context-specific. There have been attempts to make sense of suicide missions by comparing suicide bombing to other forms of political action such as the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monks. It would have been interesting to see how Amis would compare 9/11 to, for example, the Japanese kamikaze missions of the Second World War in which the pilot both died and killed, for no more compelling an ideology.

For Amis, the central point, which he puts succinctly, is that ‘terrorism undermines morality. Then, too, it undermines reason’. This is more than the failure of reason to confront and scrutinise terrorism; it amounts to the basis of Amis’s aforementioned rejection of reason as the appropriate tool for responding to terror. Reason has been undermined. In terms of explanation, ‘It is time,’ according to Amis, ‘to move on. We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason.’ It is important for us as readers, who presumably see ourselves as rational humans, to object to this frightening anti-humanist perspective. For one, it obviously portrays the terrorist as non-human, with no capacity to

communicate or to understand the political, psychological, and sociological mechanisms behind terrorist ideology. Second, as Amis does not seem to realise, it also lessens us. It invites an irrational response to terrorism. It sees our understanding and actions as constrained by terrorism and our current state of knowledge. We certainly should not be frightened by postmodernist critiques of the ‘ethnocentrism’ of reason into cultural relativism, and the abandonment of the Enlightenment project centred on the emancipatory power of reason. We should, however, understand the limits to our understanding and also appreciate they may be temporary and surmountable.

Revealingly, Amis approvingly cites one of his favourite authors, V. S. Naipaul’s description of the religious impulse as the inability ‘to contemplate man as man’. The greatest danger of Amis’s thought on the troubled relation between reason and terror is that he ends up being unable to comprehend terrorism, becoming stuck by the inescapable fact that it is man who does this (rather than God). Even with his ‘mere values’ of rational secular humanism, Amis ought to aspire more to understanding terrorism than to reverting into bafflement and desperate fascination.

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Stiglitz & Bilmes

Stiglitz and Bilmes hope their proposals ‘will help us avoid becoming embroiled in another Iraq or Vietnam in the future’. In a limited sense, this is true—if being ‘embroiled in another Iraq or Vietnam’ means waging a war inefficiently, without proper regard to budgetary inadequacies and long-term costs. But, as the authors remind us in closing, ‘Stripped of the relentless media and government fanfare, the nationalist flag-waving, the reckless bravado, war is about men and women brutally killing and maiming other men and women.’

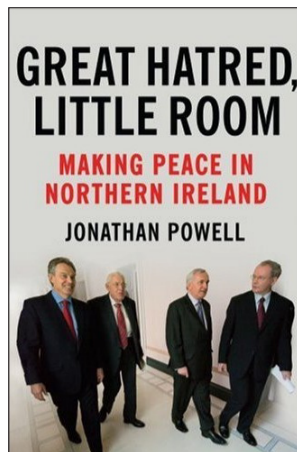
This, it seems, is the brute reality that Stiglitz and Bilmes are unwilling to confront. The reforms they endorse may prevent another poorly waged war. Their detailed, coldly complete tally of the economic costs may also help us understand just what is at stake when we do decide to next enter into violent conflict. But while a clear picture of the costs and benefits is essential to judging a given course of action, such knowledge is independent of the moral criteria by which we weigh the costs against the benefits. The costs and benefits do not alone disclose their value. That is something we assign independently of the bare facts. We can conduct technocratic cost calculations, efficiency assessments, and audits of all kinds, but such calculations cannot hope to answer the larger questions about the legitimacy of violent conflict. When, in the final analysis, all other considerations are removed, war really is merely about people intentionally killing each other. Deciding when such an act is just, and not wanton, will vex even the most brilliant social scientist.

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One at a Time

John-Paul McCarthy

Jonathan Powell
*Great Hatred, Little Room:
 Making Peace in Northern
 Ireland*
 Bodley Head, 2008
 352 pages
 £20.00
 ISBN: 978-1847920324



Like their masters, British mandarins come in all shapes and sizes. Dexterity and adaptability are, after all, tools of their ancient trade. A quick gallop through Peter Hennessy's unctuous tome *Whitehall* brings us in proximity to the four main variants of the breed. Firstly, there are the load-bearers, like Sir William Armstrong, then head of the home civil service who fainted at a meeting of permanent secretaries in 1974 convened amidst the collapsing scenery of the Heath regime.

Secondly, there are the indulgent. Bernard Donoghue's riveting memoir of his spell as Harold Wilson's policy chief in Downing Street from 1974-1976 suggests that he leads the way here. One of his diary entries for 1976 records that Wilson put no less than four large brandies down the prime ministerial hatch prior to a rough session in the Commons. A silent Donoghue passed him the bottle and Wilson duly knocked Mrs. Thatcher into a cocked hat. (Asquith, eat your heart out.)

Thirdly, there are the empathetic amongst the hordes of the permanent government. One thinks here of Cabinet Secretary Burke Trend in 1969 who, after observing that President Nixon had managed to cover his hands and pants with the contents of an ink well in the cabinet room, reached manfully for a jug of cream and doused himself as well. In honour of the special relationship, one assumes.

And finally, the heroic must get their due. Hugh Dalton's reign of terror at the pauperised Treasury from 1945 to 1947 proved quite a nursery for this breed of civil servant. His many enemies dined out for years on the story of the private-secretary-who-was-pushed-too-far. Legend had it that Dalton, whose manners verged on the porcine for the most part, once propelled a messenger into the toilets to fetch one of his assistants for an emergency consultation about the UK's chronic dollar shortage.

The chap in question was in a closed cubicle. Fearing the wrath of the Chancellor, Dalton's messenger slipped a mortified note under the door. Seconds later, the note was pushed back out, bearing the exquisite retort: 'Kindly tell the C.Ex that I shall be with him shortly. I can only deal with one shit at a time.' The excremental, it seems, holds no fear for the best of HM's panjandrums. On the strength of his recent memoir from his time as Tony Blair's chief-of-staff, it seems that Jonathan Powell shovelled quite a lot of said material while holding the Northern Ireland brief from 1997 to 2007. His rapid, predictable memoir ensures that any sympathy we may harbour for the dirtier aspects of this job perishes in short order.

I

The 'peace process' in Northern Ireland during the nineties left rather a lot of sententiousness and self-pity in its shuddering wake. All of the major memoirs in this genre might have been written by the same hand. Everybody wants to 'give peace a chance', for the children you understand. Huddling under the gloom of the midnight oil, principles are invariably defended, friendships forged 'across the divide', and the hand of history gently caresses all and sundry. The village toughs and meanies nearly always morph into the firm friends of their interlocutors. While it would be quite impossible to have them down to one's club, quite impossible you understand, the British mandarinates have always harboured a rather creepy soft spot for the rugged integrity of 'the men of violence'. Powell ticks all these boxes in his book, but one reads on if only because of the prime ministerial *frisson* that remains the chief attraction of all books like this.

He dealt with quite a parade of horrors in his time, people whose lives seemed a trifle too rackety for many of his

Blair showed none of the steeliness in Northern Ireland that would become his trademark when faced with Milosevic in Kosovo, Mullah Omar in Afghanistan or the Hussein crime family in Iraq.

predecessors. In his portraiture he can be mildly entertaining. We meet the Rev. Paisley in these pages, a second-rate shake-down artist and theological grotesque still vituperating against the Council of Trent. Like the selectively deaf curate, Powell assures us that he can assume human form when he wants to. Powell had reason to pay close attention to the leaders of the Provisional IRA, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. He saw McGuinness as the more emollient of the two, whereas Adams was either at his feet or his throat, as plaintive or enraged as a toddler, albeit one with an awesome proficiency in the deployment of high grade explosives.

Their combined CVs, to which Powell gives but a nodding glance, suggest that he was rather casually feasting with panthers for most of the last decade. Between them, Adams and McGuinness can claim the following achievements: the torture and abduction of women and teenage civilians, the bombing of pensioners on parade, the murder of unionist academics with contrary opinions, the formalisation of tactical alliances with the drug lords who run Colombia's FARC outfit and with ETA whom they mentored in the art of targeted assassination of elected officials. Between them, they organised the deaths of more civilians in Northern Ireland than all the UK security forces combined. Powell seemed to enjoy their gallows humour, but was wise in his wish to cultivate a wider and more congenial circle. Bertie Ahern, the long-serving Irish Taoiseach until his recent defenestration in Dublin, emerges here as a political fixer of Tammany Hall vintage, one with an extraordinary capacity to absorb impertinence and humiliation from all parties in this Byzantine process. As one who elevated muddling

through into a high art, he was a particular favourite of Powell's. Former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Mandelson is sometimes 'shitty', but always absurd.

And the chairman of the constitutional negotiations, former US Senator George Mitchell, added a touch of Yankee class to the whole endeavour. With his old fashioned manners and his Liberace smile, Mitchell was a solid packhorse during many tense months of political standoff between the parties. Reading through his own memoirs from 2001, one is sometimes astonished to recall that Mitchell was twice offered a seat on the US Supreme Court by President Clinton, once in 1993 when Byron White called it a day, and again in 1994 when Harry Blackmun retired, only to decline both offers so as to keep the Northern Ireland brief. Having listened to nearly three years of Paisley's evangelical scurrilities, at times he must surely have longed for the happy slog that is a life devoted to parsing the American federal tax code in the marble palace.

II

This material is just the antipasti compared to Powell's main course, which is his depiction of Prime Minister Blair in real time, or 'Tony' as he refers to him throughout. Blair is the central presence in the book, and Powell gives scholars an important, if largely unreflective insight into the peculiarities of his premiership. As the youngest man to become Prime Minister since Lord Liverpool in 1812 and the first since Ramsay MacDonald to hold the office without any previous ministerial position whatsoever, Blair was neither house-trained nor especially deferential in his attitude towards policy formulation. Up to 1997, Northern Ireland policy was handled by a butcher's dozen of officials in Whitehall and Belfast. If you were lucky, co-ordination came from the cabinet secretary and more immediately from the foreign and defence private secretaries in Downing Street. Blair took an axe to these structures in 1997, centralising policy around Powell and ruthlessly cutting the Ministry of Defence out of the picture. Their new impotence became clear on the day he formally apologised to those who were wrongfully convicted of terrorist charges in the 1970s and when he established a new tribunal to inquire into the killing of 13 civilians in Derry in 1972, decisions which had long been opposed by the Ministry of Defence.

Blair's handling of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) still remains a great puzzle however, and Powell's book does little to explain the problem. Blair showed none of the steeliness in Northern Ireland that would become his trademark when faced with Milosevic in Kosovo, Mullah Omar in Afghanistan, or the Hussein crime family in Iraq. All of the major studies of the peace process have shown Blair to be something of a soft-touch in his dealings with Adams and McGuinness, someone who allowed them to define the scope of the process and the tone of the negotiations far more so than even the Irish Government thought wise. (Blair was intensely irritated for example by the Irish Government's insistent characterisation of PIRA as 'a colossal crime machine' after 2001. In one Irish account, he is said to have told the Taoiseach in his best Fettes accent, 'This was, um, you know, um, unhelpful, really.') He craved a deal from the first minutes of his premiership and declined numerous chances to extort one

from Adams for fear that he might split the PIRA, regardless of the reality that they were already split since 1995.

Powell's book amplifies this general sense of Blair's fluffiness. This is best reflected in the extraordinary informality that characterised some of his major judgment calls. Prime Minister and Taoiseach apparently agreed an amnesty for some of the grossest murderers in Northern Ireland's low-key civil war on a stairwell around 5 am in Castle Buildings in Belfast in 1998. Powell himself tried to cobble together a timetable for the disarmament (but not disbandment) of PIRA while being ferried around various 'safe-houses' in west Belfast by one of Adams' flunkies in a battered Toyota. His drivers forbade him to tell the local police of his movements.

The grave issue of possible collusion between UK security forces and loyalist terror gangs was first formally discussed in Downing Street while Blair and Ahern took part in an episode of *Masterchef*. Sadly again, the issue of recovering the remains of those abducted, tortured, and secretly buried by PIRA in the seventies was hardly discussed at all. As such, the acoustics if you like of the negotiations between the UK and PIRA remained hopelessly skewed in the latter's

The grave issue of possible collusion between UK security forces and loyalist terror gangs was first formally discussed in Downing Street while Blair and Ahern took part in an episode of *Masterchef*.

favour. Dean Godson's exhaustive account of this process, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism*, showed that as befitted a lifelong bully, Adams himself only ever succumbed under pressure and threat. Thinking of the millions he had extracted from vengeful Irish-American millionaires since 1994, he was terrified of various American envoys like Mitchell Reiss who could suspend his fundraising visa with a simple phone call to the State Department. Mohammed Atta's obliteration of downtown Manhattan on September 11th had the kind of pedagogic effect on him that had eluded Powell for the previous four years. PIRA cashed their chips and decommissioned shortly afterwards.

One is left with the feeling that the more sensible parties in the mainstream of Northern Ireland would have survived if Blair and Ahern had pushed Adams harder and faster to disband his paramilitary wing, an argument Powell dismisses at the end with a fatuous claim that the 'Nixon goes to China' principle shows that the more extreme parties are better at making deals stick. This is true, one is tempted to reply, if their competition is hung out to dry.

Powell's account suggests that we have to add unpredictability to the previous charge of fluffiness levied above. He tells us at one point that Blair became bored with Adams and McGuinness's unending pleas for more time to square their militant flanks. He apparently felt that he was wasting his time with the monkeys when he should have been addressing the organ grinder. Blair asked Powell whether he should talk to the top-brass of PIRA himself, the so-called

'Army Council', in the hope that the roar and dazzle of his Clause 4 charisma might seal a deal. In the end he chose not to, but Powell must surely have warned him that he would be going up against at least two certifiable sadists here, Brian Keenan, the gun-nut whose contribution to inter-community amity lay in extorting rockets from Gaddafi in the early eighties, and Thomas 'Slab' Murphy, the pig farmer-cum-millionaire in whose large house Irish police recently found a functional torture chamber. One is left wondering just what Blair would have said to them.

In these reckless instincts, unlike so much else about him, Blair followed a squalid path laid down by his predecessors. Like him, they too were tempted by bold wheezes that would lead to some unspecified 'breakthrough'. Harold Wilson foolishly met with PIRA in 1972, lying to the Irish Government about his intentions to boot, thereby simply prolonging their campaign for no recognisable return. Against the advice of the local police, Edward Heath thought that the Paratroopers, the most notorious regiment in the British Army, would make good peace agents in Derry in 1972. He seems to have been the only one who was surprised when they massacred 13 unarmed civilians that same year. (The transcript of the telephone call placed by the distraught Irish Taoiseach Jack Lynch to Heath's private office the evening of the killings still shocks the conscience three decades later. The transcript can be found online.)

Yet it was Mrs. Thatcher who established the gold standard for prime ministerial hubris. In 1983, during a discussion at Chequers about the auxiliary security functions of the Army in Northern Ireland, her mad left eye seemed to swivel and she suddenly asked her Irish counterpart if he would consider a joint population transfer as a definitive solution to the violence. As recounted in the then-Taoiseach's memoir, she mused aloud to him, 'What was that man's name again, Garret? That 17th century fellow...yes, Cromwell, that was it.' The Taoiseach suggested an emergency tea break.

Powell's overt sensitivity to the so-called 'burdens of history' serves merely to warp and cripple. In some cases, this spurious regard for historical grievances is just a cover for indulging tribal myths and self-pity. Powell fell head first through this trap door in 1997. His vapid historical introduction in this book shows signs of this neurosis as do his myriad lectures about the literal quality of the Protestant mind, or the more convoluted register allegedly favoured by the extreme nationalist constituency. Such clichés flattered their fathers, but did little to sharpen the diplomatic perspective and simply reduced him to the status of a headwaiter for whichever group could push itself to the front of the queue. At least readers were spared another invocation of Heaney's much overworked line about hope and history rhyming, a favourite of Bono, Clinton, and Mandela. Then again, like God, New Labour didn't do poetry.

III

Powell's book betrays a kind of cherubic optimism that is all the more alarming considering the realities of life in Northern Ireland today. Throughout his account, he blithely assumes that peace is in fact a reality, and that the worst problems have now been

bypassed thanks to Tony's tireless tact and his own hard graft in the monasteries, B&Bs, and slum pubs of west Belfast. Almost none of Blair's initial calculations proved sustainable however between 1997 and 2007.

The two moderate political parties there, the Ulster Unionist Party on the unionist side and the Social, Democratic, and Labour Party on the nationalist, were gradually bled dry by the enormous attention Powell gave Adams and Paisley. The constitutional arrangements agreed in 1998 under Senator Mitchell's chairmanship were cutting edge consociational democratic structures designed to facilitate partnership amidst the centre parties. This finally collapsed last year as both extremes accepted the keys to the kingdom. Powell accepts no meaningful responsibility for Blair's failure to protect the vulnerable centre by squeezing the village toughs whose noisy demands filled the PM's nightly red boxes.

Powell's cheap moralising should be read alongside Paul Bew's moving last book, *The Politics of Enmity*, which is in many ways a threnody for the political world Powell so casually cast aside. With a more focused British Prime Minister, Bew suggests that the centre might have held

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and the world might have been spared the sight of Paisley's triumph. Powell is also silent on what is perhaps the biggest problem facing the next generation in Northern Ireland, namely the constitutional formula agreed by all parties which permits a change in the state's constitutional status if 50 percent of the population plus one solitary extra voter plump for same in a local referendum.

As Richard Bourke points out in the chilling envoi of his book, *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas*, such a simple-minded majoritarian calculation would cause mayhem all over Ireland should it ever be activated. Powell is too busy drawing threadbare parallels with the Tamil Tigers and the PLO to give much thought to this problem. British statecraft has not been without its detractors in our own time of course. That veteran Labour curmudgeon Denis Healey once said that the chief legacies of British diplomacy in the modern era were minimal: the popularisation of Association Football and the term 'fuck off'. Watching Powell brandish the medals of his defeats, it's hard not to feel that Healey had a point, or that someone is going to be back in that battered Toyota before too long.

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Spectacles, Autumn, and the Sad Young Literary Heart

Paul Sonne

Keith Gessen

All the Sad Young Literary Men:

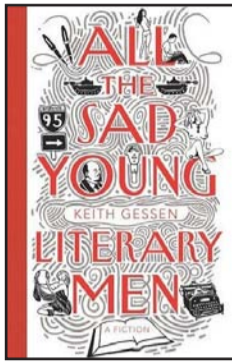
A Fiction

William Heinemann, 2008

256 pages

£12.99

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I

In Isaac Babel's story, 'How It Was Done in Odessa', a bookish young Jewish boy asks an old man how the local mob boss achieved his greatness. For a boy like you to understand a boss like him, the old man replies, you must imagine you are a different sort of person:

Forget for a while that you have spectacles on your nose and autumn in your heart. Quit raising hell on your writing desk and stuttering in public. Imagine for a moment that you raise hell out on the street, and you stutter on paper. You're a tiger, a lion, a cat. If you spend the night with a Russian woman, you'll leave her satisfied.

Keith Gessen's debut book is about all the sad young literary men with spectacles on their noses and autumn in their hearts. It is about young men who want to be told how things are done, who cannot tear themselves away from raising hell on their writing desks any more than they can tear themselves away from who they are. They long to leave women satisfied—and they fail, more often than not.

Gessen, the founding editor of *n+1* magazine, melds memoir and fiction by folding elements of his own life into three fictional twenty-something selves: Keith, a Harvard-educated political journalist and the son of Russian immigrants; Sam, an Israel-infatuated temp worker bent on writing the great Zionist novel; and Mark, a divorced doctoral student of history composing and decomposing in Syracuse. Marooned in early adulthood, the three anxious bachelors of arts subsist somewhere between becoming 'great' men and becoming nothing at all. Theirs are not portraits of artists as young men, for these young men do not produce art. Rather, the book is comprised of the portraits of non-artists, of wannabe artists and enthusiasts, of a species of voracious, intellectual parasite on the rump of society's laureates: a breed known as literary men.

Though *All the Sad Young Literary Men* may be a novel in a formal sense, it is not traditionally novelistic. Keith, Sam, and Mark never meet. Their three stories appear autonomously and coalesce into what Gessen calls 'a fiction'—codeword for a triptych of portraits that stands in for a novel. The three protagonists emerge in remarkable full-colour, while the supporting actors around them, shed light as appropriate, but ultimately remain out-of-reach. Because Gessen's three 'hi-def' characters never meet, the key interactions of the book pit convincing characters against ephemeral side-puppets, a chiaroscuro treatment that makes Gessen's portraits glow but does little for the book's overall effect.

The result is something like eating three appetizers for dinner in place of a single main course, a risky trade-off accepted knowingly by its instigator. In the case of *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, it is a trade-off well executed, but nonetheless a trade-off: Gessen deliberately forsakes the kind of character interaction and cohesiveness of plot that we expect in exchange for eulogising a particular *type* of

person in the throes of a particular moment. He is not after the plight of one man, but rather that of an entire time-lapsed species of young men, a stuttering, un-amassed collective of spectacled young noses and autumn-filled hearts. And like any brilliant eulogist, he interlaces sadness and hilarity to deliver a sparkling homage.

Gessen flags this intent from page one. The title proclaims to be about *all* the sad young literary men, when in fact the book is about three, young literary men who all happen to resemble Gessen. In light of Gessen's purpose, however, the disparity makes sense. Though they never meet, Keith, Sam, and Mark bleed into one another as time progresses because there is an element of universality to their predicaments. For the young literary readers among us, their stories become a playful riff on an all too familiar life—Gessen strikes close to home by reinventing his story in the image and likeness of the sad young literary everyman. Twisting intellectual snobbery and pop-culture savvy (the very breed of prose that appeals to sad, young, literary comrades in arms), he writes something uncommon into a book of common despairs.

II

The most striking feature of *All the Sad Young Literary Men* is a vicious anxiety that consumes Keith, Sam, and Mark. These young men may not stutter in reality like Babel's young boy, but they certainly stutter metaphorically, anxiously stammering through their twenty-something lives.

This pervasive anxiety seeps into Gessen's prose style. Fretful dialogue propels the narrative at a panicky clip. Gessen's remarkable feel for cadence allows the narrative, pockmarked by side-comments of all persuasions, to meander and then sprint, often descending from Babel to babble to psychobabble in one anxious exhale. Paragraph-long sentences funnel themselves into single-word exclamations:

He did not love rum, but he didn't mind it, and then, standing in the kitchen, under the bare fluorescent light, after a very bad week, a week during which his hopes of Celeste evaporated, during which his dissertation, while not stalling exactly, certainly did not progress, and in fact began to seem slightly ridiculous—during which the entire project, the sometimes utopian project, of Mark's life began to look like it was going simply to fail—well, Mark made a kind of decision. He said to Leslie: 'Shot?'

Gessen peppers the prose heavily with jeering, American pop-culture references—'with the collapse of the discipline of history into *Antiques Roadshow*, history of social trends, history of the spoon, these department potlucks were pretty much all they had'—and his capacity to extrapolate the commonplace into academic metaphor makes for witty quips: 'she had such control of *tone*, in her text messages, she was the Edith Wharton of text-messaging.' He even uses J.Crew as a verb. But for all his beautiful sarcasm and side commenting, Gessen seldom lets go of his tight grip on the story to step back as a narrator, rarely going beyond casual lexicon or delving into meditation. His voice keeps with the voices of his characters, which limits the sophistication of the prose, but also charms us with its honesty.

Gessen's young men experience anxieties of varying sorts—first and foremost an anxiety of a certain age, but also a corresponding anxiety of action. Keith, Sam, and Mark share an intense uneasiness borne out by the ominous creep of their twenties. Their lives circulate around disappointment and self-doubt, and yet they operate under a fleeting inkling of a future that could be different.

The young men enjoy life like it is a gap year, all the while worrying that their gap year could evolve unknowingly and without warning into the dreaded gap life. 'He was getting to be a certain age, he thought,' the narrator says of Sam. 'It was the age when his never to be written masterpieces had begun to outweigh the masterpieces he was still going to write.'

The 'literary' element of Gessen's 'literary men' indicates a certain bystander status: these young men know how to think, but when is the thinking to stop and the action to begin? A graduate student in Russian history at Syracuse, Mark studies the Russian Revolution, focusing on the Mensheviks, whom Lenin called 'professors of revolution' instead of revolutionaries. 'The Mensheviks were wonderful intellectual people, but they didn't make it,' Mark says. Instead, Lenin and the Bolsheviks made it, and Mark comes to respect Lenin for his ability to act. After all, Lenin did not share the destiny of Karl Liebknecht, the German who tried to launch a revolution in 1919, but wound up tortured and shot. Leon Trotsky's line sums it up: 'Sometimes you end up like Lenin, and other times you end up like Liebknecht.'

The space between the doers and the done for, between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, Lenin and Liebknecht, speaks to the conundrum of action that afflicts each character in this book. They may become epic like Lenin, die trying like Liebknecht, or even fail to get started like the Mensheviks. That is to say, Keith, Sam, and Mark repeatedly face the question: are you a tiger, a lion, a cat, a creature with nine lives that pounces on opportunity with carnal ambition? Or are you busy raising hell on your writing desk—thinking, reading, pontificating, and paralysed by the autumn in your heart?

Like Liebknecht, Isaac Babel was killed before he could finish his 'life's work'. In 1940 the NKVD arrested Babel, one of the most brilliant writers of the early twentieth century, took him to the basement of Lubyanka in Moscow, and shot him. 'They didn't let me finish' were his last words to his wife. In 'Isaac Babel', Gessen's best chapter, a college-age Keith memorialises Babel's unjust execution in a drunken speech, which he delivers to other inebriated college students: 'They didn't let him finish! Don't let them not let you finish! Finish! Finish while you can!' Keith yells. 'My speech made no sense. Everyone cheered.' In the context of the book's pervasive 'anxiety of expiration', however, the speech makes perfect sense. Each of the young men in the book feels that his freshness could spoil any moment, without warning, long before his idealised future has come to pass. Unlike most young men their age, Keith, Sam, and Mark spend their twenties grasping for an epic—for epic lives, novels, careers, loves—but as they grow older, the potential for realising those romantic epics begins to expire, or so it seems. Unlike Babel, 'No one would ever arrest me at my house, take me to the basement of Lubyanka, and shoot me in the back of the head,' Keith knows, and yet he also realises that he may very well expire of his own accord. That, it seems, is an equally terrifying thought. For Babel expiration means real death, but for Keith, it means living death—a life spoiled, curdled, and soured like expired milk.

For Gessen, e-death also symbolises this anxiety about living expiration, albeit in a more light-hearted timbre. Sam realises his Google is shrinking while working a temp job at Fidelity. He understands that the dwindling number of Google hits to his name speaks to 'a larger failing', but 'to see it quantified... to see it numerically confirmed... it was cruel'. Sam had once been able to reconfirm his virile existence through his Google, back in the heady days when he had a book deal to write the great Zionist novel (despite speaking no Hebrew, which to him looks

like 'Tetris pieces'). Having plunged from 300 to 22 hits, Sam's disappearing Google sends him into a panic. He calls headquarters and lowers his voice: 'Look,' he says, 'My Google is shrinking.'

'I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about that, sir. Maybe, if you don't mind my saying, you need to do something notable. Write something. Start a blog.'

'Look, I tried that. Don't you think I tried that? I'm calling because I thought maybe you could shift the algorithm a little.'

'Oh, no, we couldn't do that.'

'You couldn't just up my count a little until I get back on my feet?'

The man laughed an uneasy laugh. You couldn't do anything in this country anymore, thought Sam, without someone thinking you were a creep. When the man spoke again it was with a forbidding formality.

'Sir, there's nothing we can do. I can only suggest writing more. Distinguishing yourself somehow. Google is a fair search engine.'

'It's a search engine run by Jews!' Sam suddenly cried, a little louder than he'd meant to.

Sam's phallic Google, Keith's drunken speech about Babel, and Mark's ruminations on the difference between Lenin and Liebknecht all speak to an anxiety about the moment when the young literary man faces the prospect of either distinguishing himself or extinguishing himself. In order to achieve the former and avoid the latter, the young literary man must act: the world, after all, will not 'shift the algorithm' exclusively for him.

Midway through the book, Keith deems himself as neither 'a mediocrity' nor 'a genius', explaining that if he tries hard enough, he will be fine, but if not, he will fall through the cracks. It is this 'above-averageness' that attracts all three young men to the literary world, a place where even the most qualified aspirants risk drowning—somewhere in the deep end between mediocrity and genius.

III

The title of the book, a play on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *All the Sad Young Men*, suggests that Gessen's book addresses dilemmas similar to those Fitzgerald found compelling, albeit focusing on a different type of young man. We find clear connections between Gessen and Fitzgerald: they both strike something of an ironic tone, they both model stories on themselves, they both concentrate on smart, young men growing up and struggling to get women, and they both effuse a certain undeniable Americana. But for sure, Keith, Sam, and Mark are no Gatsby. Their pretentiousness and pretensions to greatness come not from where or how they summer, not from their rich or powerful parents, not from their success with women, but rather from their intellectual prowess and engagement—from the spectacles on their noses and the autumn in their hearts. They are literary men: they are overeducated and overambitious; they drop Heidegger and Foucault; they are Jewish, secular; and they masturbate, watch pornography, and poke fun at Zionism. That is to say, if Gessen's characters come from a lineage in literary history, they hardly descend from the Jay Gatsbys of American fiction, despite the referential title. They come, more probably, from the Nathan Zuckermans.

Philip Roth once said that Zuckerman, like Babel's young protagonist, had 'spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart' but also 'blood in his penis'. The same goes for Gessen's young men. While Keith, Mark, and Sam pump autumn through their hearts, they also pump a trademark Rothian 'blood in the penis': much like Zuckerman, they exhibit a sexualised young man's hysteria, a preoccupation

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Ross & Sacks

neurological discussions into transparent prose. Indeed, at times Sacks's endeavour to simplify medical information results in his own language bordering on the gratingly colloquial. In the same way that Ross resists the inclusion of musical examples, so Sacks shares a reticence to provide any scientific data. The anecdotal nature of his collection requires the incessant use of the first person throughout, which by itself creates an ambiguity of tone. *Musicophilia* is neither comfortable as an academic work nor characterful enough to be convincing as a personal memoir. Just as Sacks's individual voice remains submerged beneath anodyne prose, so the patients linger as anonymous figures, displaying little interest to the reader beyond the peculiar gift they demonstrate. As a result, it is a struggle to be involved in the human side of the personalities beyond raising an eyebrow at some especially bizarre condition.

Perhaps it is most exasperating that Sacks does not show an inclination to be more scientific when it comes to the music itself. The question of why it is that Chopin should be the composer with whom Dr. Cicoria becomes obsessed is never broached. Is it, one wonders, because Chopin's music sounds improvisatory, flouting formal constraints, and thus continually suggestive of new, imaginary horizons? Or is it something about Chopin's peculiar handling of the piano's rich sonorities that inspired Cicoria to practice so obsessively? Could it even have been a narcissistic desire to be like Vladimir Ashkenazy, to inhabit the role of the virtuoso? Sacks could have been more exploratory through his writing, reducing the number of patients discussed and spending more time on the music that inspired them.

III

What is clear from a joint consideration of these extensive books is the presence of a form of antinomy in the way music is understood. Through his excessive contextualisation of musical works alongside contemporary developments in philosophy, visual art, literature, and politics, Ross underlines the manufactured nature of music. The canon is a collection of artefacts constructed in the image of their particular *zeitgeist*, be that artistic, urban, or ethnological. Made by human hand, works are dependent on the mediation of composers who, grounded without choice in their social environment, cannot but compose in the way they do. Musical compositions, in Ross's world, do not simply float down from the sky. As Ross claims in his introduction, his subject is not just music but the 'politicians, dictators, millionaire patrons, and CEOs who tried to control what music was written.' It is a noble thing, according to our scientific principles, to explain music in this way—that is, to prove that good music is dependent on its historicity, its ability to speak for a community in time and the repressions they battled.

Conversely, Sacks's stories of people with inexplicable musical abilities only highlight the innateness of music. This is admittedly not an attitude currently in favour within a society that prefers to overlook difference in pursuit of egalitarianism, but if Sacks tells us anything, it is that creativity operates for reasons as yet unknown, strongly felt by some and not at all by others. Those in power tell us that music should be available for all and, as proof, every society in the world has its own music through which its members' identity is partly constructed. It seems a falsehood, however, to claim that within those societies

every member has an equal ability to compose, perform, and appreciate music, even as this recognition may seem to go against our anti-elitist values. Is it too cynical a view to suggest that the characters that make up Sacks's study would inspire enraged jealousy if their genius were not portrayed as the counterbalance to some neurological fault? This trend has presented itself most notably in the recent past with the emergence of the not unreasonable idea that Mozart suffered from Asperger syndrome. In this way, his prodigious talent is not only explained but justified by his foul mouth and scatological sense of humour (according to the sources). In Beethoven's reception there is an even greater sense of justice in the fact that, being profoundly deaf towards the end of his life, his music was in some way a reward for battling against adversity. In our era of supposed meritocracy, it is easier to swallow the pill of unearned musical genius when it is accompanied by a good dose of perceived heroism or disability.

The questions of defining what we recognise as musicality and where we locate genius stem from the paradoxical situation where music operates both as an object (a score, a recording) that exists with a high degree of autonomy, and as a temporal experience that only comes into being through the perception of the listener. Conceptions of musicality and genius are therefore based on an uncomfortable mixture of two sets of criteria: an objective criteria based on knowable facts such as the work's formal structure and its historical context; and, secondly, an interpretative criteria based on the feelings the music evokes in the listener. In the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the two criteria seemingly coalesced: Bach's music, for example, is both fascinating to analyse structurally and highly affecting in performance. At some point, however, the two criteria diverged so that a composer like Schoenberg, whose music is distinctly discordant and unsettling, is heralded a genius for his quasi-scientific grasp of structure, while Rachmaninov, whose music exhibits a looser form, remains beloved for his emotional warmth. The twentieth century is endlessly exciting for this particular reason—it was perhaps the first time that the conviction of a composer was all that was required to stand as the purpose for a work of art, in place of the previous intention of communicating an objective idea to a wide audience. As a consequence, the century has become infamous for the gradual loss of a consensus as to what constitutes musical beauty, even of rationality's disappearance altogether from in aesthetic judgements.

The Rest is Noise and *Musicophilia* have something to say to all who love music, but individually they present somewhat unfinished impressions of what a musicological discipline could be. They are, if anything, rather apologetic, with Ross's dissolution of music into a web of culture, and Sacks's portrayal of music as a divine illness. But 'discipline' implies a sense of struggling to control excessive desires, in this instance the desire to discuss music purely in terms of emotional content and the temptation to reduce its almost mystical elements to graphs and facts. Musical composition equally needs to be assessed as evidence for a disciplined mind, with the term 'genius' used sparingly for the rare figure who creates works of art that touch both our objective faculties and our heartstrings. To ignore one or the other is not only to misrepresent music, but implies a denial of an integral aspect of being human.

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All that Glitters is (Occasionally) Gold

Kerry Saretsky

Sophie Dahl

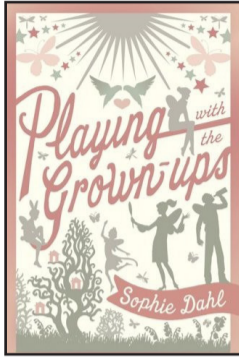
Playing with the Grown-Ups

Bloomsbury, 2007

285 pages

£7.99

ISBN 978-0747577775



Despite its gleaming dust jacket, *Playing with the Grown-Ups* is a nuanced and engaging coming-of-age novel by Sophie Dahl, whose own coming-of-age has proven similarly transfixing. The plot follows Kitty Fitzgerald as she transforms from the young girl who plays innocently with the grown-ups at her grandparents' idyllic Hay House to a young adult who plays at grown-up games—from sex to lies—while the adults are too consumed by their own growing pains to supervise Kitty's childhood.

The young and bookish Kitty hides behind her big glasses as much as behind her young and glamorous mother Marina: 'a beauty, a painter, and a weeper'. Dahl jauntily describes Marina's relationship with Mr. Fitzgerald, Kitty's father: 'She heard the grown-ups say her mother was his kept woman, which didn't make sense to Kitty, because he hadn't kept her'. Yoked by her youth to a mother who, having not yet finished her own youth, was too young and wild to discipline her daughter, Kitty from the start is emotionally precocious. Through Kitty, Dahl captures a child's inability to see the difference between her own emotional aptitude and that of her superiors, part of a classic unknowing disconnect between adult and child, taken from the child's point of view. Kitty weaves the consciousness of adulthood into her young diction, unaware that she is incapable of fully comprehending such dinner-table-gleaned statements as 'because of having "pots of money" (said in a whisper) he was perfectly happy to give her mother some of it'.

From this cusp between Kitty's childish solipsism and adult awareness, the book follows the oppositional developments of Marina, the young glamorous mother, and Kitty, as the latter makes her way into independence and the former backslides into dependency. Kitty, predominantly unsupervised as she is carted from a bleak rural English boarding school to a resplendent Park Avenue mansion, metamorphoses from a slightly dumpy social outcast whose main preoccupations are books and family, to a vampish teenager whose main concerns are the cliché: sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. The childish desire to grow up faster evolves from a pre-adolescent dab of Marina's Chanel No. 5 behind her ear to a virginity lost hours before making a hungover entrance to school.

Kitty learns from her mistakes, partly because of the solid family structure provided by Marina's parents (her grandparents) and partly because of a few close friends who refuse to let her antics go unpunished; she eventually finds the maturity to remove herself from such a toxic environment. Marina, however, places faith in everything but herself—from gurus to guys—and finally nearly burns out in a morass of pills and alcohol mixed dangerously with disillusionment and disappointment. Thus, it is when Marina's immaturity hits its nadir that Kitty must ascend to adulthood and become the caretaker not only of herself, but of her shattered mother.

What separates this novel from the scores of cotton-candy chick lit is Dahl's awareness of and commitment to a literary

tradition, what Kitty refers to as 'the classics'—Dahl is, after all, the granddaughter of 'classic' children's author and memoirist Roald Dahl. Kitty's grandfather asks if she is reading any 'lovely Fitzgerald', echoed in Kitty's own surname: Fitzgerald. Her nanny is called Nora, her grandfather's dog Ibsen, and the family cottage is described as 'a doll's house'. Furthermore, Marina calls Hay House 'Never-Never-Land'. The crowning allusion is 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', introduced as drunken phrases bellowed into the night by Marina's equally dissipated older suitor who screams to the Clapham streetlamps that 'the ladies come and go, they speak of Michelangelo'. Marina, in her breakdown, scrawls on a pad the other half of the poetic duet, 'Do I dare disturb the universe, in a minute there is time, for decision and revision which a minute will reverse', watched over by her pug named for Dickens's Little Dorrit.

Thus, descriptive phrases, family dogs, and drunken dribble all point to Dahl's literary influences, ones that she readily admits to. *Tender is the Night* is 'a book I've read and re-read, and when I was writing my book, I was reading it,' she confessed to the *Sky Book Show*. Despite the disparate sources and appearances of these allusions, their commonality is the notion of a perfect appearance masking a disfigured reality. Kitty tells her grandfather when she finally has read some 'lovely Fitzgerald' in *The Great Gatsby* that she imagines 'that Daisy looks like Mummy'. Yes, Marina resembles Daisy both from the interior and exterior. Beautiful, golden, celebrated, and immaculate from the outside, yet ineffectual, frightened, grasping, and impetuous within. The allusions are more appropriate than they may seem, for Hay House in nostalgic memory does become the Never-Never-Land that Kitty and Marina yearn for. When Hay House is similarly described as a doll's house in which Nora and Ibsen live, Dahl is conjuring a literary backing to Marina's feelings of entrapment in her father's home and longing, as she says, 'God, I want to move to New York... What can I do here? There's nothing to do, I'll be stuck here for ever with you and the bloody chickens.'

While the allusions demonstrate a literary awareness and appropriateness on the part of the author, however, they simultaneously highlight a gap in achievement: Dahl has confessed that reading Fitzgerald 'made [her] despair because nothing [she] wrote would ever be this good'. Kitty is described as a magpie for her attraction to all that glitters, and Dahl similarly turns her book into a magpie's nest of literary allusions. The book does seem in the end like a collection of influences and memories: emotions of frustration and entitlement recollected from childhood; items from the past, like Betsy Johnson dresses and copies of *Go Ask Alice*; and writers who assert their influence on this budding author like the adults do on the budding Kitty.

In the end, Dahl's book may contain references to such 'classics', but it does not belong on their shelf at the bookstore. She lacks a control of plot that is further destabilised by her strategy of alternating chapters of childhood and adulthood in order to imply tragic prolepsis. The device is extraneous, as the tale needs no instigator, and the intervening adult-perspective chapters are marred by trite language and an unfortunate propensity for melodrama and emotional inauthenticity, as when 'Violet's laughter turns to sobs'.

These adult chapters, full of high sentiment and low writing, seem an afterthought that tarnish a book that is otherwise salvageable for its ability to ensure a reader's empathy with the youthful protagonist. Dahl accomplishes this

effectively—at least for those readers under thirty whose adolescence was similarly full of *Full House* reruns and Jaffa Cakes and 'Killing in the Name' on the radio. Such references may be too specific for a wider audience but they will speak engagingly to a younger generation. Dahl also masterfully traces the inner monologue of Kitty's growing mind, from the girl whose 'second favorite word' is 'sexist', and for whom when 'she turned eleven it had been replaced by "alacrity"'—to the later Kitty, who 'hobbled up the hill, looking as dignified as she could, with her skirt flying in the wind, as flimsy as a handkerchief, one crippled patent stiletto tapping an angry war march on the cold pavement'.

This latter quotation speaks to the promise of Dahl's lyricism, recaptured in such excerpts as 'her grandfather, Bestepapa, had hands that were true as butcher's blocks, and his voice was like the beginnings of a bonfire' and 'Kitty always measured the passing of time by the calendar of her birthday, which fell, inevitably, like a spent plum, during the first week of autumn term'. For her unique, hodgepodge lyricism and her ability to convey with remarkable lucidity the true sentiment of a young mind, it is worth overlooking the self-indulgence and lack of control that characterise both this first-time author and her young protagonist.

In setting out the examples of Fitzgerald, Ibsen, Eliot, and Barrie, Dahl at least asserts her aspirations, if not her current abilities. In the future, readers would hope to find evidence of these influences in her literary style rather than in mere mention. Dahl would do well to pare down the magpie nest of her writing, tossing out the extraneous and distracting rhinestones ('she looks at her husband's broad back, every inch of which she cherishes') and hoarding only the real gems that demonstrate character instead of stating it, that push the plot along without an idle spinning of flashy wheels. The reader sees Dahl, again like Kitty, 'teetering long-legged toward her future,' and hopes that as an author, she will learn not to be dazzled by what sparkles only cheaply in her own writing. For it is not by mentioning her influences, but by learning from them, that she will ever achieve a place with 'the classics'—it remains to be seen if she aspires to ornate estate jewelry or mass-produced copies.

After all, 'all that glitters is not gold' is the book's great espousal. *Playing with the Grown-Ups*, like its gleaming silver cover, is covered in glitter, coated in references to Vogue and Chanel, Park Avenue, and the King's Road. But unlike the pearly portraits of Marina that adorn the family's Manhattan home, Dahl's writing over-exposes the film, laying bare the inside at the expense of the perfect, and beautiful, exterior. Though the Park Avenue house is described as 'LUXURY' replete with a 'chauffeur who carried her duffel bag like it was a Vuitton trunk,' it is a home that offers no comfort or protection for a young girl. It may have 'LUXURY,' but it has no rules and certainly no permanence. And while Marina is 'so pretty' in her 'black-and-white photograph... by Irving Penn,' her inner state is less like the perfect model exterior, and more like the exposed, raw woman portrayed in the novel's final scene, when she is described 'in her hospital nightgown with mascara staining her cheeks': a mess. What preoccupies Dahl, like Fitzgerald, is the portrayal of the poignant magnetism of something not golden, but gilded, and the dangerous disappointment that follows once the gold leaf has inevitably worn away.

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Stories to Herself

David Sergeant

Doris Lessing

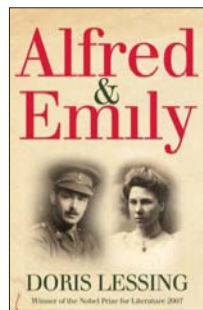
Alfred and Emily

Fourth Estate, 2008

274 pages

£16.99

ISBN 978-0007233459



Reaching the end of Doris Lessing's latest—and, apparently, last—book, in which she looks back at her parents' lives and at her life with them, readers, too, might find themselves looking back and wondering: 'just where have I been? What exactly was that?' It is a work that combines a novella-length fictionalised account of the lives of Lessing's parents, the Alfred and Emily of the title, as they might have been had the war not occurred, with an account of their lives as they actually turned out, raising two children on a scrappy farm in the Rhodesian bush. This amalgam also manages to assimilate, along the way, a foreword and coda to the fiction, an authorial explanation of its basis in fact, a long extract from an encyclopaedia about London, an assortment of grainy photographs, and zigzaggings through time and space touching on everything from prehistoric paintings to African insects, to Mugabe, to the colonial diet and a list of Lessing's childhood reading. And it works. The novel—or is it biography?—or is it history?—is held together by the unabashed singularity of Lessing's voice: a voice that, in its flight, sheds the taxonomic shells that normally encase literary works.

The tapping of the non-literary tradition, of oral storytelling, has been a felt force in Lessing's work since *Ben in the World* (2000), though its underlying currents extend back further through her career. Lessing herself has stated that it was only with the devolving of the narrative onto a storyteller's voice that *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* came together, and storytelling weaves an important thread through the whole *Canopus In Argos* sequence in which that novel appears. *Alfred and Emily* is most striking for its intensely realised biographic vignettes, and it seems likely that they, in our age of celebrity-oriented curiosity and principled individuality, will determine its immediate reception. However, the work's impact comes just as much from its willingness to disregard stylistic and generic proprieties as it does from autobiographical revelation. It comes from the twinning of what never actually occurred with what did occur. *Alfred and Emily* sees an author trying out different ways of writing, as though plucking down different books from a library's shelves, with the urgency of the problem at hand—to find out what has happened, what is happening—making all the usual rules redundant.

Recognising these varying influences can help in an appreciation of the first (fictional) half of the book. So tangibly vivid is the autobiographical section that there is a danger the first half will fade away from the whole when it comes to be considered, that *Alfred and Emily* will end up being mined solely for its anecdotal riches. This risk is increased by the fact that in recent years Lessing's fictional voice has developed a laconic briskness that can sound odd, even thin, to a reader accustomed to the stylistic and psychological curlicues of the average literary novel, with its aspiration towards 'three-dimensional' characters. *Alfred and Emily*, in contrast, relates the fictional characters' crises, their loving, marrying, ageing, working, and dying, with a minimum of fuss, the narrative voice stringing them efficiently along the same tonal thread.

or insubstantial. Rather, it requires a slight retuning of the fictional ear, until it can register the cumulative effect of such incidents and their sequencing, as much as the style in which they are couched. In its lack of metaphor and simile, and favouring of direct statement, Lessing's prose has chiselled its way back to something resembling the early prose chroniclers: written narrative that seems to be standing just in front of what happened. As with much oral storytelling, incident in *Alfred and Emily* often seems to constitute its own analysis, through being preceded and succeeded by other incidents; character is determined as much by action, or plain transcription of speech and thought, as it is by the elaboration of appearances and inner life. This has the same impact as Lessing's explicit authorial questioning, and the questioning undertaken by her characters: the unadorned directness challenges us to credit what substance we receive, and not to go looking for the non-existent trimmings.

This directness is just one facet of Lessing's oddness, that accumulation of personal kinks which both marks her out as unique, and which seems to have led to much of the criticism of her work. The willingness to incorporate the writerly presence, to contravene the still-potent modernist strictures about authorial invisibility, is characteristic of a writer who also flouted the manners of the literary drawing room by writing a sci-fi sequence, much to the disgust of many (Harold Bloom: 'I find her work for the past 15 years quite unreadable ... fourth-rate science fiction.') It is characteristic of the individual strength and distance needed to challenge convention and received truths, on everything from feminism to terrorism (Jeanette Winterson: 'Is Doris Lessing living on Planet Zog or is it just that she is 81?') It relates to her sense of urgency, her crediting of function over refinement (John Leonard: 'She has written tens of thousands of pages, many of them slapdash ...') And in more subtle ways, it marks out the individuality and power of her writing, its view of the world from a perspective that has seemingly required a scaffold to be cobbled precariously out into uncharted air, so remote is it from our conditioned focus on certain kinds of surface.

Perhaps the keynote of Lessing's artistic character is this propensity to question, to come at whatever boundaries are encountered from unusual angles, and in this respect, *Alfred and Emily* is a fitting culmination to her literary career. The constant note of interrogation, explicit or implicit, threads the book together. These questions appear most strikingly, at first, in the voice of the fictional Emily as she grows older; and then, through the second half of the book, in the voice of Lessing herself. 'And now what?'; 'And her heart ached. Why did it?'; 'How was that possible?'; 'Why, suddenly, did she insist on it now?'; 'What was to blame?'; 'What were they about?' For all the differences between the fictional Emily and Lessing, there is an equally obvious consonance between them. Both are old women, both are storytellers—this is made out to be one of Emily's distinguishing talents—and both are looking back from old age, evaluating what happened, trying to find out why. Increasingly, as the book goes on, blunt authorial comments bookend these questions, placing a topic in perspective by standing back from it or to one side, or changing direction altogether, or simply closing an avenue of inquiry down. 'Fast forward, then!'; 'Interesting, watching history being unmade'; 'This is what a small girl sees, feels'; 'And so, that was that.' The urgency behind this, and the unblinking will, are both unnerving and life-affirming. As readers—and the age of individual readers will alter how this load is balanced—we have the strong sense both of time running out, and of what can be achieved in the time that is left. Lessing does not find the solution to all her questions, but that is not the point. Their unanswered return acts as a kind of human echo-location: we can move on from here, having a better idea of where we have been, where we are.

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Gessen

with sex and self-satisfaction of many kinds, and, it almost goes without saying, pervasive angst that knows itself to be overblown—anxiety of influence, of action, of age. We find Roth's trademark low-comedy hysterics and anxious use of autobiography deeply ingrained in Gessen's prose.

Like many young authors who have come out from under Roth's defiled hanky, Gessen charms his reader with a capacity to navigate handily between Google and Hegel, Lewinsky and Kerensky, fellatio and Holocaust revisionism, all without missing a beat. This 'low-comedy, highbrow' humour may be part of 'a real bourgeois genre', as one of Gessen's characters says of her sex column writing, but it is also an inappropriateness appropriate to convey much of modern Americana. The humorous mix of the 'literary' and the 'low-brow', perfected by Gessen and his contemporaries, seems the logical extension of Roth, the man who brought masturbation to the American canon with *Portnoy's Complaint*.

But this raises a pressing question that hovers over Gessen's debut. Will this sort of book—couched in cultural specificities and highbrow gutter humour, and bedecked with photos of Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton—last? Gessen's profile suggests that, much like his characters, he hopes to produce something lasting and meaningful (after all, he invokes Babel and Fitzgerald, contributes to *The New Yorker*, and edits a promising new intellectual journal). But one would be right to suggest that despite Gessen's pedigree, his undeniable talent as a author, and his book's serious value, his references to *The Antiques Roadshow* and Britney (no surname required) might expire just like his characters' ambitions, requiring lengthy footnotes for our children to understand. Where Gessen ultimately will fall on the scatter gram between mediocrity and genius will depend very much on his next book—a bona fide novel, we can hope—which given the talent established in *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, seems poised to strike a higher pitch. If, in fact, that is what Gessen wants.

This is not to say that Gessen's method of humour and culture-specific context strip *All the Sad Young Literary Men* entirely of durable literary merit. His blending of desperation and comedy, his reworking of the traditional *Bildungsroman's* themes, his flouting of the archetypes of novelistic form, and his sometimes-shrieking, sometimes-saddening candour make this a book to read and remember. Most striking, perhaps, is Gessen's autobiographical refashioning. He narrates Keith in the first person (they hardly share a forename by coincidence), and Sam and Mark appear in third person, though often through a similar memoirist's voice. This makes for the book's *coup de grace*: Gessen applies the accoutrements of a time-specific, self-reflexive memoir to the timeless phenomenon of spectacled, autumn-hearted young men.

A critic once called Fitzgerald's writing 'a continuous exercise of the autobiographical impulse', designed to depict 'a social character, a national type that fascinated and repelled him'. So too did Roth use his autobiography as an aestheticised, all-access pass to a national 'type'. And readers consistently equate the bespectacled young boy with Babel himself, because like his epigones, Babel manipulated his autobiography in the name of a marginalised everyman (or 'everyboy' as it were). Gessen, who like Roth combines autobiographical refashioning with humour and hysteria, keenly picks up on this tradition, and though he is hardly a Roth, Babel, or Fitzgerald *yet*, he commands us to wait and see. Such expectations will reify for Gessen the pressure experienced by his characters, imploring him to find a way to re-don his spectacles, and raise even more impressive hell on his auspicious writing desk for next time.

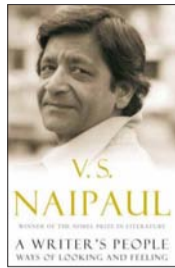
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Naipaul's Darkness

Jonathan Gharraie

V.S. Naipaul

A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling
Picador, 2007
194 pages
£16.99
ISBN 978-0330485241



Patrick French

The World Is What It Is: the Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul
Picador, 2008
555 pages
£20.00
ISBN 978-0330433501



Although he will never be short of admirers, V.S. Naipaul can probably claim the distinction of being the least liked man in English literature. Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001; his fiction and travel writing has helped broaden the cultural scope of the novel in English. Yet surely no figure in contemporary literature has been so reviled. Over the years, he has provoked the ire of Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, George Lamming, and Edward Said, mostly over political disagreements. But if the exact dimensions and contours of the personal ground covered by Sir Vidia's shadow are unclear, we already have some idea of the harsh and bitterly inhospitable climate. Former friends and acquaintances such as Paul Theroux and Diana Athill have written at length to prove that V.S. Naipaul is not a very nice man. To stay the distance with Naipaul you clearly need to keep your distance. When the truth itself is a hatchet-job, it takes the cooler, more proportionate scrutiny of a skilled biographer to properly order our understanding of the man and his art.

To illuminate this area of darkness, Naipaul has called upon the services of the distinguished young travel writer Patrick French. Given special authorization to sift through and quote from his subject's personal archive at the University of Oklahoma, which includes the previously unread diaries of his first wife, Pat, and the correspondence of his long-term mistress, Margaret Gooding, French has produced a stylish and comprehensive volume that has nonetheless let off the biggest stink in English letters since Andrew Motion's biography of Philip Larkin. This is hardly French's fault. The details must have caught even him by surprise. *The World Is What It Is*, bearing a title that suggests a somewhat resigned and down-at-the-heel James Bond flick, demystifies the sad story of a man who could hardly be described as a successful womaniser. With typically sober clarity, French confirms that we are dealing with a brutishly determined man. 'Vidia had a view of the world that he would do anything to maintain, just as he would sacrifice anything or anybody that stood in the way of his central purpose, to be "the writer".' From his wife Pat, he derived vital encouragement and sound literary advice; from his mistress Margaret, sexual fulfilment. In return for their gifts, they were neglected and abused, and the unhappy situation only expired when Pat did, after a long and harrowing struggle with breast cancer in 1996. Just weeks after this sad demise, he married the present Lady Naipaul, Nadira Alvi, a woman with whom he finally appears to have found something approaching contentment. The book ends at this juncture, with a huge sigh of relief from French (the final, exasperated one-word sentence is 'Enough'), which is understandable. Against the odds, French has succeeded in producing a remarkably dignified portrait of a very troubled man who somehow managed to channel his numerous resentments into genuinely great literature.

But the potentially lurid material can't have been the only

challenge facing French. Nakedly incorporating events and people from his life into his writing and perpetually toying with the confessional properties of various narrative forms, Naipaul has quietly expanded the personal frontiers of literature and made the biographer's task all the more demanding. Strangely, Naipaul's will-to-candour has never actually resulted in a full-length memoir; the closest he has come to that is the 'Prologue to an Autobiography' which takes up the first half of *Finding the Centre* (1983). *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling*, the latest of these attempts at memoir, brings together the best and the worst of Naipaul's accomplishments. In this quaint oddity, ostensibly a reflection on those writers and public figures that have influenced him most, he muses that 'a rise to achievement makes a better narrative than random decay'. This might seem a strange comment from the author of *A Bend in the River* and *Guerrillas*, novels that chart the fungal rot of newly independent post-colonial states, but it serves as an accurate description of his own trajectory. Born in Trinidad in 1932, the descendent of indentured Indian labourers, he won the island's scholarship to study at Oxford. He then became something of a giant.

Yet *A Writer's People* follows no such triumphal course. Writing sympathetically of Gandhi, Naipaul observes, 'there was no completeness to him. He was full of bits and pieces he had picked up here and there.' The same is true of Naipaul who, in this book, mentally traverses those times and places that have moulded his own view: the Caribbean, India, and literary London of the 1950s. The fragmentary tone is set in the opening chapter on Derek Walcott, where isolated images taken from Walcott's first volume of poetry chink about like so much loose change without purchasing anything in the way of critical insight. But critical insight isn't Naipaul's goal. 'My purpose in this book is not literary criticism or biography [...] I wish only, and in a personal way, to set out the writing to which I was exposed during my career. I say writing, but I mean more specifically vision, a way of seeing and feeling.' At the beginning of his essay on Flaubert, he gives us more of a clue as to his method by explaining how he approached book reviewing for *The New Statesman*. 'I found it helped if in a review I didn't mention the names of the characters; in that way I got nearer to a book's essence; certain books condemned themselves. I had no further reviewing scheme.' Reader, you will forgive me if I avail myself of a slightly more rigorous model. This dogged pursuit of 'essence' does not tell us much about Naipaul's ways of seeing and feeling (about what they involve and to whom they belong) or define that frustratingly bland word 'vision'. The result is that too often throughout the book the prose slumps into the very quality that Naipaul has spent his entire career guarding against. Although we are told what he felt at the time, how he read and what he remembers now, it is all too vaguely presented: choice morsels glimpsed through a fogged shop window.

Ungenerous readers (and there are those who might suggest that Naipaul hardly deserves any other kind) will describe *A Writer's People* as the withered fruit of a creative senescence. Indeed there are times when the narrative reads as a sort of rambling, off-the-record fireside chat at the gentleman's club: *A Writer's People* is garrulous in spirit, if not always in style. The problem becomes most obvious in the now notorious chapter devoted to his former mentor Antony Powell. In the late 1950s, Powell let 'Viddy' loose on Grub Street, securing for him a regular job as reviewer with *The New Statesman* and offering him friendship and support. In the chapter, Viddy repays him by savaging the achievement of the extraordinary 12-volume novel *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which took Powell several decades to compose, even going so far as to suggest that their relationship wouldn't have lasted had he read the book while his old friend was still alive. In fairness to Naipaul, it should be recognised

that he pays uncharacteristically warm tribute to Powell's generosity and writes appreciatively of his criticism. But ineptitude rather than ingratitude is the problem here, and in dispatching the life's work of the friend who helped him to find his place among London's literary milieu, Naipaul dilutes the signature precision of his sentences. 'There was less and less care in the writing; everything was over-explained,' he opines before going on to claim, 'there was no narrative skill, perhaps no thought for narrative.' We might not have expected a close reading, but these stern remarks require some supplementary quotations if they are to appear as anything other than invective. Powell is probably performing indignant cartwheels in the grave: it is likely that he would be more disappointed by Viddy's sloppy want of discretion than by the opinions themselves.

But Naipaul does not entirely forsake the many virtues of his prose. He really can write about literature, even if he reads another author's work largely to confront his own anxieties and ambitions. The essay 'Conrad's Darkness' from the non-fiction miscellany, *The Return of Eva Peron*, is a compelling example. Here, he describes his earliest encounters with Conrad's short stories and provides his readers with valuable insights into the development of a creative writer's standards. In *A Writer's People*, he most fully reveals himself in considering the achievements of Flaubert and the historians and poets of antiquity. Naipaul's vivid renditions of various people and landscapes have been distinguished by the deliberate economy of his style, and at their best, his observations on literature impart a similar substance and vigour to a writer's specific imaginative vision. Contemplating *Madame Bovary* and the comparative failure of *Salammbô*, he evokes his own proclivity for *la mot juste* by writing with firm lucidity and enthusiasm. Attention to detail is fine, we gather, so long as it is itself strictly controlled; this seems a balanced assessment of what has been the presiding principle of Naipaul's own style. It has been insufficiently acknowledged that, more than almost any other writer of the last half-century, he has recorded the painful severity of literary application as well as the great rewards of such discipline. This process was movingly characterised in *Finding the Centre*. 'To write was to learn. Beginning a book, I always felt I was in possession of all the facts about myself; at the end I was always surprised.' The most convincing passages from *A Writer's People* are those where one suspects Naipaul is unwittingly describing his own travails, learning more about the peculiar obligations of his craft as he analyses others' struggles to make themselves understood or heard.

French cannot hope to compete with the guileless authenticity of these revelations, but this is not to detract from his achievement. There are elements of the creative process that Naipaul himself cannot hope to explain. After all, *A Writer's People* is the story of the previously unmet presences that indelibly shaped Naipaul's work. Given the enormous influence that she had on his writing, Naipaul's wife Pat might seem an obvious choice to include in *A Writer's People*; and yet inclusion has never been an emotional technique available to Naipaul. His callous neglect of her was interrupted only by the occasional recognition that she was among the most astute readers of his work. French unflinchingly presents Pat's emotional suffering, which was now and again coloured by the awareness that maybe Vidia had not earned her abject devotion, and in so doing French allows us to see that Pat was a woman of independent taste and judgement. Her 'soft left' opinions might not have prevented her husband from holding increasingly reactionary positions, but they were sufficiently strong to mould those positions by contrast. Margaret, on the other hand, 'was addicted to Vidia' and 'liked to be dominated by him'. But she misunderstood the rival claims of his literary vocation and, in her turn, was cruelly shunted aside.

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Holland & Meredith

Zimbabwe's history, such as Ian Smith, Lord Carrington, the British diplomat who ran the negotiations leading up to the 1980 elections, and Jonathan Moyo, a key spokesperson for the government from 2000 to 2005. Her final chapter 'the good, the bad and the reality' concludes the book with a one-on-one interview with Mugabe himself, conducted at the end of 2007.

These interviews highlight the subjective nature of remembering and interpreting historical events. Her decision to make frequent use of block quotations from her interviews reminds one that every attempt to construct a historical account is always shaped by an individual's particular worldview. When Patricia Bekele, the niece of Mugabe's first wife, talks to Holland about her memories of living with Mugabe and Sally (whom she regarded as a mother figure) in the State House, her narration conveys the intimacy of their relationship:

She'd eat custard while he drank his tea. Mummy would always be perched on the arm of his chair, and he'd usually have his arm around her. He'd sometimes be reading a Graham Greene novel. That's how I remember them every evening as the sun went down over the gardens at State House.

Even if one lacks Holland's steadfast belief in a model of human psychology that assigns primacy to childhood experience, one can still learn much about the perspectives and attitudes of people involved in Zimbabwean history and their unadulterated opinions about why Mugabe behaves as he does.

Alternative interpretations of history emerge in interviews that Holland uses to support particular pieces of her psychological analysis. For example, Holland interprets a story told by Lady Mary Soames, the wife of the former British governor, as further proof of Mugabe's emotional immaturity. In the early 1980s, Soames's husband had worked hard to pull a group of potential investors together in London for a dinner with Mugabe, who then proceeded to embarrass Soames's husband by spouting Marxist rhetoric. Soames recalls her husband asking Mugabe, 'What do you mean by spouting all that frightful Marxist tripe?' and him replying, 'But it's what I believe.' Holland views Mugabe's 'inappropriate speech' on Marxism as a sign of 'poor judgment,' embarrassing 'a friend who had gone the extra mile for him'. Reflecting on the power asymmetries and the former British governor's desire for Mugabe to cozy up to investors, one can just as easily read his utterance as an act of self-assertion borne of frustration.

Given that Holland relies so heavily on interview material, it remains problematic that she does not sufficiently explore possible biases among her interviewees, particularly where she holds the interviewee in high esteem. She writes that Mugabe and the former agricultural minister Denis Norman had 'a good relationship in every respect', a strong statement that has no apparent source other than Norman's own interpretation of events. In her description of her interview with Norman, Holland heaps praise upon him, observing that 'though he was extremely wealthy, he had no airs and graces'. In cases where Holland does catalogue her interviewees' shortcomings or biases, she still goes on to regard their narration of events as a truthful foundation upon which to craft a meaningful analysis of Mugabe's character.

While Holland organizes her work around interviews, Meredith's book draws primarily on secondary sources to construct a chronicle of events in Zimbabwean history. There is nary a footnote to be found in either book and references in general are few and far between; this proves particularly stunning when both authors appear to be

drawing on the same secondary source. Both books include a 'select bibliography' in place of fully catalogued notes. Holland's work suffers less from the omission of citations because she has conducted much of the primary source material that constitutes meat of the book's contribution. Meredith's book is more susceptible to criticism on these grounds.

Unlike Holland, Meredith wastes little time seeking explanations for Mugabe's character in early childhood experiences. Rather, he focuses on the contrast that Mugabe perceived between racially oppressive Rhodesia, where he came to fear and distrust whites, and independent Ghana, where he was excited by the possibilities of African self-rule. Meredith also argues that Mugabe's time in prison hardened his resolve to defeat the Rhodesian government militarily and introduce a Marxist one-party state. Finally, Meredith maintains that Mugabe saw a negotiated settlement as second-best to a military victory over Smith's Rhodesian government, which would have bestowed even greater powers upon him.

The conflicted Mugabe who comes to life on Holland's pages differs radically from Meredith's depiction of a blustering megalomaniac ruthlessly carving his place in Zimbabwe's history. Meredith contends that Mugabe's legitimization of violence as an instrument of democratic contestation is deeply-rooted, discernable in his statements even before he came to power, an era when Holland and many others regarded him as a 'guerilla idol'. 'Our votes must go together with our guns,' Mugabe is quoted as saying in a radio broadcast from Mozambique in 1976 during the civil war. 'The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer—its guarantor,' Mugabe asserted, adding, 'The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins.'

Meredith reveals that a complex of interests lies at the heart of the ruling party's refusal to give up power. Drawing on highly publicized cases of corruption, he shows how politically connected individuals lined their pockets, often with damaging consequences for the well-being of state agencies. For example, a parliamentary inquiry found that senior personnel had stolen nearly ten million Zimbabwean dollars from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority, pushing it to declare insolvency in 1999. By widening the scope of his analysis, Meredith sheds light on how Mugabe was able to consolidate his power for nearly three decades.

Mugabe's success in part stemmed from his decision to give followers at various levels of the state apparatus free reign to enrich themselves and use their powers to crush dissent. According to Meredith, provincial governor Josaya Hungwe told a crowd ahead of a mayoral election, 'If you do not vote for Zanu-PF in the coming mayoral election, people are going to be killed.' Notably, Meredith reports that the MDC candidate won the election in that area, but the description of local repression ahead of the elections underscores the idea that Mugabe rules through a vast network of party loyalists encouraged to use their discretion to protect the ruling party's hold on power.

Yet the fact that these cases are scandals at all suggests some sordid measure of accountability left in Zimbabwe. Newspapers have helped to bring corruption scandals to light and the courts have censured the government in several instances. In 2000, for example, the Supreme Court ruled on behalf of the Commercial Farmers' Union declaring the government's actions illegal because it had not complied with its own process for compulsory seizure of land. It gave the government six months to develop a lawful resettlement program. Still, Meredith's discussion of the role of the judiciary shows that the executive has fiercely opposed the courts on many occasions and has not always respected their decisions.

At stake in these dissonant portrayals are questions about historical determinism. Mugabe lashed out in the face of

rejection and opposition, Holland argues, but he responded well to genuine but firm engagement, revealing a 'creative, passionate and flexible' side to him. For Holland, this analysis provokes questions about collective culpability for Zimbabwe's downward trajectory:

If we had reacted differently to the early signs of [Mugabe's] paranoia, could Zimbabwe have been saved from its current abyss? If whites in the country had been more realistic and acknowledged the impossibility of shifting smoothly from a police state of their creation to the democracy of their self-serving dreams, would they have been more respectful, less provocative? Or is Robert Mugabe simply an example of how power corrupts?

Holland's analysis suggests that if Mugabe had been surrounded by more caring and sincere individuals, he might have chosen more constructive responses to people who opposed his rule. While perhaps, for example, white politicians in the early 1980s could have shown greater interest in reciprocating what both authors perceive as Mugabe's genuine overtures for reconciliation, events like Gukurahundi support Meredith's analysis that he nevertheless would have been quick to sanction the use of violence to quash dissent.

Both authors succeed in adding complexity to an analysis of Zimbabwe by shedding light on Mugabe's motivations. Holland especially illuminates his inner world by revealing a richly described personal history behind his façade. Her book makes him knowable and mundane. The conclusion of Holland's more nuanced portrait, however, ultimately mirrors Meredith's interpretation: Mugabe is now a hardened and bitter individual, lightyears away from the moral man she once believed him to be. In this context, understanding his internal complexity tells us more about the past than it can about his future behavior if, as both authors suggest, Mugabe the man has retired into Mugabe the tyrant.

Zimbabwe's election fiasco this year underscores the importance of understanding what motivates Mugabe. The 84-year old leader bit his thumb at the world in March, demanding a recount when his party faced stiff electoral competition. The delay in releasing the presidential election results extended into weeks of chaos, as the country's security forces cracked down on the opposition, raiding offices and making arrests. The international community floundered in the face of Mugabe's recalcitrance, unable to cajole the government into abiding by the electoral rules it had set out prior to the elections.

As a young boy, Mugabe demonstrated his ability to wait patiently, on his own, until the time was right to achieve his objectives. The boy who patiently watched traps by the side of a river has grown into a man who will not bow easily to the pressure of his opponents. Despite indications that after almost 30 years many Zimbabweans want him to exit office once and for all, he is still biding his time.

But while he may seem like a loner, he is not alone. A sophisticated analysis of Mugabe may be critical to understand Zimbabwe's trajectory, but the analysis of a single person can only shed so much light on a complex set of institutional arrangements and personal interests holding together a corrupt authoritarian regime. At this advanced stage in the game, when the livelihoods of a significant number of cronies depend on Mugabe's continued reign, an understanding of how Zimbabwe will get out of its current impasse must build on an analysis that moves beyond knowledge of the man at the top. An understanding of the man, however, is still a good place to begin.

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Nothing To Be Frightened Of: An Interview with Julian Barnes

By Scarlett Baron

Born in 1946, Julian Barnes is the author of two books of stories, three collections of essays, a translation of Alphonse Daudet's In the Land of Pain (2002), and ten novels. These include Metroland (1980), Flaubert's Parrot (1984), A History of the World in 10½ Chapters (1989), and most recently, Arthur and George (2005). In his latest work, an essayistic memoir entitled Nothing To Be Frightened Of (2008), Barnes considers the prospect of his own death with a terror unmitigated by religion, philosophy, or the musings of his literary ancestors.

How do you feel about your readers these days? There was a time when you seemed rather combative about the interest readers take in your life as well as in your work.

In the face of the reader's interest in your life as well as in your books, you find yourself reacting in two ways. On the one hand, you adopt a high-minded Flaubertian position and maintain that only the art matters; on the other you react like an ordinary human being. I think the books ought to be enough—just as a piece of music ought to be enough, just as a painting ought to be enough. A work of art ought to explain itself: if it doesn't, it fails. At the same time, I'm as interested as anyone else in artists' and writers' lives. I'm as gossipy as anyone else. So I understand that if people like your stuff they will quite often also want to know something about you.

In *The Pedant in the Kitchen* (2003) you wrote that 'the best books persuade readers that do not even know the author that they are friends of his'.

Yes. One of the most important decisions you have to make when you're starting a book concerns the relationship with the reader. You have to determine every time where you and your reader are to stand in relation to each other. In general I like the reader to be as close as possible.

What does that mean—to have the reader as close as possible?

This is how I visualize the relationship. There are some writers who go up to a lectern when they write—they stand at a podium and the reader is down there in the audience, and the writer tells the reader about life and what it consists of and what its truths are. By contrast, I like to think of the writer and the reader sitting together, not face to face, but side by side, looking out in the same direction, through something like a café window. And then in my scenario, the writer asks the reader 'What do you think she's like? He looks a bit odd, doesn't he? Now why are they having a quarrel?' The reader's gaze runs parallel to the writer's gaze—the writer is just a little bit ahead because he's spotted these things first.

You once said that 'a first-rate critic is always less important and less interesting than a second-rate writer. The critic's job is, firstly, to explain, but secondly to celebrate rather than diminish.' Has your attitude towards literary critics mellowed?

I wouldn't say I've mellowed. But I don't think that that view is necessarily antagonistic. It's quite hard to review novels and yet lots of people do it without much skill. I've reviewed hundreds of novels in my time and I think I've only ever written one review that I would reprint. It was a review of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*—which I think is his best

book—and it took me three or four weeks to write. I think the only development in my thinking about critics—and I don't think about them very much—is probably that I feel more kindly towards academic critics than I do towards newspaper critics. I regard newspaper critics as a hurdle of misunderstanding that the book has to overcome before it reaches its readers.

Do you loathe critics in advance of a book coming out?

I'm not as bad as Philip Roth, who used to live in both England and America, and used to leave whichever country had a book of his coming out. But I haven't read a British review for around seven or eight years now.



Ellen Warner

Why is that?

It's two things really. I've never read a review which made me a better writer—I've never read a review which pointed out something to me which made me write the next book in a different or better way. And I'm no better at taking criticism that I think is unfair, or at being rubbished—I don't think you get any better at that. So you find yourself skimming reviews for words of praise and I think that's a bit ignoble really.

One of your short stories, 'Gnossienne,' begins with the sentence: 'Let me make it clear that I never attend literary conferences.' There's a conference being held on the topic of 'Julian Barnes and the European tradition' in June at Liverpool Hope University, isn't there? Are you going along?

Yes, there is. And yes, I am. I'm not going to attend the conference in the sense of sitting through the papers. I'm going along partly because a number of good friends will be there, and also because I think that if people are coming from all over the world to a conference in my country about me, the least I can do is to actually turn up, to be available for an interview and to answer any questions that might arise. That seems a sort of courtesy call.

You said once that knowing that your books are studied in schools and universities registers with you like an intimation of death...

Yes, it does. When people started studying me I did feel—and I still do feel to some extent—like saying, 'Hang on... I haven't finished yet—don't make generalizations about my work while I'm still writing.' And there's another reason why I worry about becoming a 'set text'. I remember what it's like to be at school and to be made to read the wrong writer at the wrong time—how you can be put off a writer for life. In an ideal world, readers would come to your books through some mysterious system of traction, some sixth sense. It makes me very anxious to think that a potential reader might be put off by being forced to study me.

You recently translated and edited a notebook in which Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) chronicled his slow, painful, syphilitic decline (In the Land of Pain, 2002). How did that come about?

I came across Daudet's notebook in the Taylorian Library in Oxford while researching Flaubert's Parrot. I remember thinking, 'This is wonderful.' Then one day I found myself about to write one of those columns for the *TLS* which say, 'There's something brilliant that's never been translated—someone should do it.' Then I thought, 'Why don't you do it?' It was very difficult, but I enjoyed it. It took a very long time. I think good translation probably takes longer than the original writing.

Let's talk about your latest book, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*. In the book you describe yourself as agnostic, yet at several points you come across sounding more atheistic than agnostic. You concede, for instance, that in some cases religion may do no harm, 'except for not being true'; elsewhere you describe religion as a 'beautiful lie'.

I think I'm probably an atheist but I'm always alarmed by dogma and I think atheism can be a dogma as much as anything else. I don't think I'm smart enough to know that there isn't a god.

You don't think that belief in god is just a silly idea?

I think it's a rather nice idea. But I haven't come across any evidence that there is any organising body out there. Indeed there are many things about the nature of human life which seem to me to argue strongly against the existence of a god. Think of Burma [being struck by Cyclone Nargis]. How many of these poor Burmese people are going to be wondering, 'Maybe there isn't a god after all, maybe Buddha isn't all that loving if disasters such as these can happen?'

The debate about religion and the value of atheism has recently flared up among British intellectuals. Did you make a deliberate choice to position yourself as more liberal in your statements than, say, Dawkins, Hitchens, Amis, Grayling?

It's more that while I think institutional religions have done quite a lot of damage as well as some good, I don't despise the religious instinct, which most human beings, in most societies, have. If you're a novelist, your job is to understand other human beings and to represent them faithfully and truly; and for many people the religious instinct is a very central part of being a human being. However, in the face of militant Islam or fundamentalist Christianity, it's very good that there is a powerful, intellectually coherent, atheist lobby. But I don't go along with despising people because they are so weak as to need to believe in an afterlife. 'Atheism is aristocratic,' Robespierre put it.

Dawkins features a lot in *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* as your archetypal 'Category One Atheist'—but it's not entirely clear whether you endorse him or not.

I admire what he's written and I read him with great pleasure. I think he's a very necessary person on the scene. At some point I've found myself wondering how he will die—whether he can be as seemingly blithe as he is about saying 'when I'm dying I just want life to be taken out of me as if it were an appendix.' I wonder whether one really can feel like that about one's own death. I find it very perplexing that people aren't more upset at the thought of their own extinction.

Much of your book concerns your fear of death. Do you harbour any other emotions about death?

Yes. I hate it too. But the trouble with combining emotions is that one risks personifying death too much. You mustn't turn death into a metaphor, a guy with a scythe. Death isn't the single stalking figure that cuts you down. Death is just a process. It's just like some terrible, heartless, bland bureaucracy at work, busily fulfilling its quota, as it always does. Personifying death with too many grades of emotion is to do it too much honour.

You say in the book that you sometimes find life 'an overrated way of spending time'. Would you describe yourself as desperate?

No. I would say that I'm a cheerful pessimist.

You say that you're not a confessional writer, but write that 'my fear of death has become an essential part of me'—surely the admission of such a preoccupation is confessional?

I suppose it is. I don't think of the book as confessional because I think of confessional literature as literature that is written to get something off your chest. I don't believe in therapeuto-autobiographical theory at all. I think of this book as an exercise in examining myself as a case and as an answer to a question: at this point in time, what does it mean not to believe in anything and yet not be reconciled to the notion that you're going to die?

Is the book in part an injunction to people to talk about death more?

Yes. I think we don't talk about death enough these days. It's partly because we live longer—and expect to live longer—and partly because death has gone out of the house. We don't sit at people's bedsides any more, or if we do, we do so in hospitals. We hand over dying and death to professionals who tell us what to do and how to behave and where to turn up. They don't tell us how grief is going to work though—they're not very good at that.

You say of the artists you admire most, a group that includes Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Jules Renard (1864-1910), that 'they are my daily companions but also my ancestors. They are my true bloodline.' In *Something to Declare* (2002), you insisted that 'Not Shutting Up About Flaubert is a necessary pleasure.' In *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* Jules Renard takes centre-stage, grabbing the limelight from Flaubert. Did part of you think that some readers might have had enough of Flaubert and that you should introduce a new literary figure?

No. It was more that Flaubert didn't have much more to say about death than what I used in the book. I mean... there might have been something of what you say in it too. I think you're right actually. I think that when Flaubert came into one draft, I did picture my reader thinking, 'oh no, here he is going on about Flaubert all over again.' But I don't think I bumped up Renard's contribution to an unfair degree. He writes about death in a way that is closer to the way in which I feel about it, as Daudet also does: they look at death in the same register as everything else in life, whereas Flaubert sometimes seems to me to be to be striving for something slightly heroic when it comes to death.

Larkin comes up a lot. He's different from your other literary protagonists—died relatively recently, English, a poet...

He's my favourite poet of the last half of the twentieth century. When I first read him I remember thinking instantly 'Ha! I've found a new person who speaks to me directly and intimately and tells the truth.' I re-read him a lot.

Would you call Flaubert a literary father?

I think he's a profound and iconic figure in my writing life. Do I think he's actually influenced the way I write fiction? No. Because he's French. And because he's dead. And because he's more than a hundred years away now. But in terms of how you should conduct yourself as a writer and the high ambition and ideals you should have if you set up as a writer? Yes, definitely.

Is there anything in your writing that you would say has been shaped by Flaubert?

I don't know because so many things go into the mix, and it's impossible to tell to what extent a Flaubertian attribute is also intrinsically one of your own. Take irony. I've always been an ironic person. You don't need Flaubert to inspire or authorise irony.

You see yourself as an ironist and you see Flaubert as an ironist. In *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* death and god enter as ironists as well. What is it that you value so highly about irony?

It's a way of saying things aren't as they seem. It gives you X-ray vision. It allows you to see round the back of things. It responds to the fact that reality isn't single-natured. It allows you two responses to the complexity of reality. It makes it possible to be serious and jokey at the same time. It's the 'snorkel of sanity' as I think Flaubert described it. Is it 'the devil's mark,' he asks, or 'the snorkel of sanity,' that is: does it curse you or does it save you? Renard puts it brilliantly: 'Irony doesn't dry up the grass, it only burns off the weeds.'

Julian Barnes's *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* was published by Jonathan Cape in March 2008. For more information see www.julianbarnes.com.

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Naipaul & French

Those who feared a warts-and-all account may be surprised to discover that French's biography is far from being all warts. Although Naipaul emerges as a capricious and often extremely unfeeling man, French's penetrating and sympathetic assessment of his literary achievement makes us understand how Naipaul's attraction to disappointment, taken by many as the token of a pitiless conservatism, belies a vast fund of frustrated compassion. In case we had forgotten, he points out that Naipaul's 'chosen subject was the powerless: those who, although in the majority in the world, had appeared in European literature only as peripheral characters, or at best as Man Friday'. French perhaps underestimates the extent to which Naipaul's early criticisms of post-colonial societies proceeded in part from his powerful inclination towards self-betterment, which as we learn in *Finding the Centre*, led Naipaul to think of writing as 'a fantasy of nobility'. This urge impels several of his protagonists, but Naipaul was also aware that this fantasy could slide into a sterile mimicry of the colonial master—a sad process that had been effectively satirised in his very first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, and later in the figure of Indar from *A Bend in the River*. Whether or not this made Naipaul's judgements on the post-colonial world accurate is another matter altogether. French acknowledges that there were those who were too willing to incorporate Naipaul into their own ultra-reactionary perspectives. Evelyn Waugh was one and although he privately moaned to Nancy Mitford about 'that clever little nigger Naipaul' winning yet another literary prize, he saw in *The Middle Passage* incontrovertible proof that the struggle for independence in the Caribbean and elsewhere was doomed. Discussing Naipaul's contentious book on Islamic societies, *Among the Believers*, French persuasively maintains that Naipaul never really occupied the role of mandarin intellectual in which Said and others cast him. He was much too willful, too reliant on 'close observation' of his immediate surroundings to slot into any grand neo-colonial schemes. If anything, Naipaul's work advances a misconceived notion of cultural authenticity, and French justly sees his recent advocacy of extremist Hindu nationalism in India as a worrying example of that.

There are those who would find in French's book enough material for a damning indictment of Naipaul's place as an elder statesman of contemporary prose. His misogyny, his ill-tempered dismissals of what he once called the 'half-made societies' of the developing world, as well as the appalling treatment meted out to people intimately connected to his work are all too plain to see. Without the undeniable fact of his achievements in fiction and travel writing, however, we would scarcely be interested in the baroque contortions of his private life. Naipaul's more critical readers become stunned when they recognise that his elegantly organised and often very sensitive writing can harbour a vicious disregard for other people's and other culture's ways of looking and feeling. But a writer's personality is never given to us unfiltered through his or her writing; indeed, artists themselves will always be taken aback by what they find in their own work. Naipaul's most recent novels, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, represent no attenuation of his strengths, and mark the latest stage of this process of self-discovery. Over half a century since his debut, V.S. Naipaul is still standing. Most disturbing of all, he deserves to be.

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Shorter & Healy

to support such alternative applications.

When it works well, ECT can produce truly dramatic effects. For example, people who have been lying motionless in a state of catatonic depression ‘wake up’ over a matter of hours. Those who describe watching the procedure sometimes sound like believers witnessing the power of the Lord at a revival meeting: the treatment is miraculous; it restores life to the desolate; it is like raising patients from the dead. Despite a proliferation of theories, scientists are still at a loss to explain how ECT works, but that it works remains beyond serious doubt. The treatment’s major limitation is that the benefits produced are often short-lived, unless the therapy is followed by drug treatment or a continuing course of shocks.

Despite the best efforts of its detractors, shock therapy never went away because, quite simply, it is indispensable. This brings us to the central question of *Shock Therapy*: given that it was and remains so helpful, why did ECT become so unpopular? Opponents of the procedure would say that during the 1960s, shock therapy ‘survivors’ found their voices for the first time and made the public aware of the procedure’s dark side, that is, of the side effects. This is an issue that is, to put it lightly, controversial. On the one hand, the long-standing belief that shock produces gross ‘brain damage’ or massive mental impairments—that it destroys intellects and personalities—is certainly false. Indeed, it can and regularly does restore such faculties to people who have lost them to illness. Rather more plausible are the claims relating to memory loss: ECT has been accused of ‘wiping’ memories laid down years before the treatment and also of causing impairments in the patient’s ability to remember new material. Although there is no firm scientific evidence that such lasting damage occurs, it is well known that patients never remember the therapy procedure itself and frequently lose memories of events occurring within hours or days of the shocks. The crucial and as yet unanswered question is whether the memory losses extend beyond these periods, and it is not impossible that the absence of affirmative evidence represents researchers’ failure to measure such long-term problems.

Shock Therapy dismisses complaints of lasting damage and essentially brands them as symptoms of mental illness in patients for whom ECT did not work. This explanation is possible, and most psychiatrists agree that any lasting harms that do exist are outweighed by the proven benefits, but critics are unlikely to be satisfied with this rather glib explanation. Even most ECT practitioners say that more work is needed to investigate the consequences of the treatment. It is fair to say, however, that such side effects can hardly suffice to explain either the militancy or the success of the public anti-shock campaign. Cancer chemotherapy and other such treatments with deeply unpleasant consequences are accepted as uncontroversial by all but a fringe minority of contrarians. Hollywood does not make movies about them. Shock therapy seems to strike a nerve, but why?

Shorter and Healy’s answer is that the fall of ECT was the product of the inherently unpleasant image of the procedure combined with the intellectual climate of the 1960s. Early shock sessions were indeed traumatic to witness: the patient’s wildly contorting limbs were a sight not easily

forgotten, even if one was aware that patients were quite unconscious and not in any appreciable danger. (Since the 1950s, anaesthetics and muscle relaxants have been used to ensure that patients lie motionless throughout—something ignored in most media accounts). Yet while the procedure may never have been pretty, it was not until the 1960s that it became controversial. This was the decade of dissent in the West, as generals, priests, and politicians all found their authority challenged. Psychiatrists fared no better: during the early sixties, a number of doctors, psychologists, sociologists, and writers began to rail against what they perceived as the authoritarian nature of the somatic therapies and their practitioners, and also against the whole system of diagnosing and locking up the mentally disordered.

Evaluating these ‘antipsychiatrists’ (as they became known, and sometimes called themselves) would take a book in itself, but it is certainly true that psychiatry at the time was not short of abuses, though few of these were related specifically to shock therapy. Nevertheless, ECT was sometimes used in ways that would now be recognised as quite unjustified. Shorter and Healy do not shy away from describing such practices as ‘regressive ECT’, whereby practitioners applied the treatment at far higher than the normal doses in order to provoke a state of infantile disorientation, from which, a few doctors hoped, it would be possible to ‘re-train’ the patients to become functioning members of society. In other cases, practitioners used the threat of ECT to keep unruly patients in line. The point, however, is that by focusing

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exclusively upon its abuses, the antipsychiatrists ignored the benefits of the procedure, and the authors are right that it is the perpetrators of such actions rather than ECT itself that should bear responsibility.

The antipsychiatrists were nevertheless remarkably successful in changing public perceptions. The whole spirit of the age was changing and suddenly, for large segments of the population, psychiatry became the enemy and ECT one of its most destructive weapons. Psychiatrists Andrew McDonald and Garry Walter’s survey of the portrayal of electroconvulsive treatments in American cinema nicely illustrates the change in attitudes. They note that early depictions were generally positive: ECT featured in only a handful of movies from the 1940s to the 1960s, but when it did, it was as a helpful therapy for distraught or traumatized protagonists, something which ‘put them back on their feet’. Yet during the sixties and early seventies, shock therapy underwent a sudden and dramatic transformation, culminating in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) and a number of similar if less well known works. Since the 1980s, the cruel nature of shock has been taken as so obvious that it has mainly played the role of a humorous or ironic source of pain or punishment in scenes set in psychiatric hospitals—its use as a weapon by a vigilante bent on revenge in the lurid *Death Wish 2* (1981) being typical. As McDonald and Walter

put it, ‘Having commenced its movie career as a severe but helpful remedy for personal distress, ECT on film has become a progressively more negative and cruel treatment, leaving the impression of a brutal, harmful, and abusive manoeuvre with no therapeutic benefit.’

Yet this raises a crucial point, and it is one that *Shock Therapy* does not fully explore. In movies since the 1970s, the question of the therapeutic benefits of ECT does not even arise: the procedure is presented not as a bad medical treatment, but rather as an effective tool of oppression, just as the antipsychiatrists had suggested. In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, the victims of ECT appear as sane as anyone else (‘What do you think you are, for Chrissake, crazy or somethin’? Well you’re not! You’re not! You’re no crazier than the average asshole out walkin’ around on the streets and that’s it’). Therefore to ‘treat’ them is, in itself, an absurdity. Shorter and Healy convincingly argue that the impact of popular culture on the reputation of ECT has been profound; they warn, indeed, that even today Bollywood movies are undermining the procedure’s reputation in India, a country in which shock has long been used more widely than in the West. Yet, in their focus on the portrayals of ECT, Shorter and Healy do not explore the perhaps more important issue of the portrayal of mental illness. This is central, because in claiming that shock therapy is useful, psychiatrists necessarily assume that people suffering from mental illnesses are in need of a cure. By undermining this fundamental axiom of psychiatry and presenting the people who receive shock as being anything but ‘ill’, Hollywood made ECT illegitimate regardless of what it specifically entailed: it cannot be a good treatment because there is no disease to treat.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that public opinion of ECT is so out of tune with that of psychiatrists, when the public understanding of mental illness is so often different from that of professionals. This situation cannot be blamed on Hollywood entirely. Severe psychiatric illnesses are unnerving and deeply mysterious diseases, and most people are lucky enough never to come in contact with someone in the midst of severe melancholic depression, or a full-blown manic or psychotic episode. Few people understand these conditions, yet it is just these states that ECT is used to treat. To say that electroconvulsive shock is effective is not to say that it is a useful way of keeping people compliant, but rather that it can make life bearable for people who have lost all hope. It can help restore mental equilibrium to people who have lost all contact with reality. Unless one realises the initial state of those who undergo the procedure, it is inevitable that one’s opinion of the treatment will be low. That mere electrical shocks could bring such profound benefits goes against all the dictates of common sense, but in the face of mental illness, common sense is commonly an unreliable guide.

Shock Therapy does not look beyond the ECT suite to ask what it is about psychiatry that allowed huge segments of the public to become utterly oblivious to the benefits of one of its most effective treatments. To do so would be to write an account of psychiatry itself. Yet the story of shock therapy cannot be complete outside of such a history. Perhaps the most important lesson of this book is that we are rarely more irrational than when faced with madness.

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