

Five Dials



NUMBER 6

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Plus four new Danish cartoons

...and indeed more



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On John Mortimer and Obscenity

INSTEAD OF A GLASS of late-morning champagne there was a single Polo mint broken into quarters within reach of his fingers. Instead of a stream of conversation there were pauses when John Mortimer sat in his wheelchair, smiling a little, while the fax machine on the other side of his office birthed another spam advertisement that curled up into the air before fluttering to the floor. Instead of the immense lenses of his old glasses he wore small, dapper frames. But on the day last autumn I visited Mortimer's house there were also reassuring signs of continuity. The latest, and what would turn out to be his final, attempt at a Rumpole novel was spread before him in a black binder, printed in a font so large only a single paragraph fitted on each page – a sign he would surely keep writing even if the pages could only hold single letters, for there was no reason a petty nuisance like near-blindness should stop a decent story. 'There is,' Mortimer reminded me, 'still a lot to fight against. I tend to use Rumpole for those fights,' he said, as if introducing his favourite knife.

Throughout the morning the fax machine intermittently bucked to life. When I asked him what he was thinking about these days, Mortimer didn't wait for me to repeat the question. In a more forceful tone than the one he'd used to describe his vegetable garden he said, 'English law', and listed a few initiatives he wanted to fight against, including the threat of forty-two-day detention, which was still very much alive at the time. A few days ago, when I listened to the recording of his voice again, the phrase sounded out of the headphones with a dose of octogenarian bounce. John died on 16 January 2009, but the recorded words capture his fight. I like the way John says 'English law'; it wasn't the first time he'd pondered its worth. 'I'm not as fit as I could be,' Mortimer pointed out with a smile on that day. His own systems were frail but there was still something solid woven into the fabric of his life, something that might carry on long past him, though the Labour Party, he said, was trying to gut his beloved English law.

Somehow it would wriggle free.

I travelled to John's home near Henley-on-Thames early in the morning. I was given a walk through the garden and even had time to rub the snouts of John's pigs – all descendents from his original trio, Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner – before I was ushered in to talk to him about the subject of this issue of *Five Dials*. He didn't hear me the first time I announced the word, so I repeated 'obscenity' in a louder voice and John then smiled and nodded and said: 'Ah yes, obscenity.' If anyone in this country could recognize the subject when it entered a room it was John Mortimer.

To the very end, as is evident in the interview that starts our review of various censorship struggles, Mortimer stressed that if life is a writer's subject then no area should be forbidden, nothing should be stifled under an obscenity act or censorship law. He was aware of the power of the material at the hands of writers. 'Words are seen as unexploded mines, lying on deserted beaches,' he wrote in a foreword to *Books in the Dock* by C.H. Rolph, 'which may be gingerly approached in the course of morning walks, cautiously examined, perhaps prodded with a stick; but ever likely to blow up in the faces of passers-by, destroying private property and changing the face of the landscape for generations to come.' These odd creatures called writers, who sit alone scratching black marks on white paper, had, according to him, no idea how much power the resulting words could hold. The struggle goes on. As Mortimer points out in the same introduction, 'liberals who defend pornography would still like to ban books with fascist or racist arguments.' Those Americans who smile at the archaic struggles of the British back in the 1960s might have been the ones who were made nervous by the new ways a quartet of young black hip hop musicians from California found to express their fears of police brutality in the late eighties. 'We all say that we are never frightened of words,' wrote Mortimer, 'provided we agree with them.' When I read that phrase back to him he

smiled, asked to hear it again, nodded, and said, 'That sounds about right' then put another quarter of Polo mint in his mouth.

Over the course of assembling this issue we've heard stories of scenes that have no place in today's world, including the sight of the film *Deep Throat* broadcast on every possible wall of the Old Bailey while young lawyers watched and jotted notes. At the *Five Dials* offices we've taken particular pleasure in the famous line uttered by Mervyn Griffith-Jones, a prosecutor at the Lady Chatterley trial, who asked the jury: 'Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?' I'm sure each *Five Dials* reader can recall an instance of clunky censorship. I remember the disingenuous voice that leapt into actors' mouths when the swear words of the day needed to be smothered on network television. (Crook 1: 'Get the *frick* out of here, *motherjumper*.' Crook 2: '*Fudge* you.' Crook 3: 'You'd better tell your *freaking* goons to *flip* off.') Even today, as John Sutherland points out in his essay, the words that are now permissible on BBC 1 can be very different from what may be uttered in a BBC green room.

What Mortimer understood immediately was the silliness of censorship. The jury was his if he could get them laughing at the prosecution, so the obscenity trials of the 1960s and 1970s became trials of demarcation, laying the line between epochs. As Mortimer argued, if you weren't moving forward you were on the side of repression. Each precedent looks very silly now and yet examples continue one after the next, including the reaction of Al Gore's wife, Tipper, to a lyric on her daughter's Prince CD which led her to assemble the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in 1985, an American organization that stirred up almost as much fuss over the lyrics to Sheena Easton's 'Sugarwalls' as Gore's husband was able to garner years later for global warming. It seems laughable now, but as punk rocker Jello Biafra recounts, the concerned groups may have stopped noticing the devil in every piece of cover art but they are still ready to legislate. Some who laugh at Gore's crusade against obscenity might find themselves rethinking censorship laws as they apply to the images that flash across darker reaches of the Web.

What were we so scared of then and what are we frightened of now? Was it necessary to stand up for the rights of

every petty pornographer, or have these fights led to a moral laxness that is putting our children in danger and leading millions of people towards addiction? And, perhaps most importantly, is obscenity the last and best way to sell hundreds of thousands of books?

Our survey is by no means definitive but now was the time to ask some of the key figures of the past half-century just what their fights achieved. We've worked up through the decades, from John Mortimer, John Calder and Ann Mallalieu's experiences in the sixties; cartoonist Art Spiegelman on the images of the seventies; Jello Biafra on his battles with the PMRC, and Jerry Heller, the manager of N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), on the phrases Americans feared in the late eighties and early nineties. A notable absence is the former owner of Grove Press, Barney Rosset, who published *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer* and *The Story of O* in the United States. Rosset is still active, keeping busy writing his memoirs and, with the help of his wife Astrid, updating his Facebook page. (He's probably the only person on a

social networking site sat next to Samuel Beckett in his profile picture). 'The one who fights the battle is not the one to ask about what the victory achieved,' he wrote in an email to me in late March. 'It is for those who enjoy the aftermath and occupy the newly won territory who should tell us how the victory has influenced their lives.' And so we've turned to the present, and asked if there are words or phrases that are obscene now and whether it's worth getting worked up over every 'motherjumper' when, as Arundhati Roy demonstrates in her contribution, there may be more pressing obscenities in the world. We've also gone ahead and printed more Danish cartoons – four more, to be exact, which can be found at the back of the magazine.

The issue, as you might imagine, contains plenty of strong language. But if any words catch your eye, please ask yourself what makes them strong and how long these particular black marks on a page will maintain their power. 'It sounds like a nickname,' George Carlin once said of the forbidden term 'tits', one of his 'Seven Words You Can't Say On Television'.

"Hey, Tits, come here. Tits, meet Toots, Toots, Tits, Tits, Toots." It sounds like a snack, doesn't it? Well, it does now, so which word or phrase or image has taken its place to be loaded with the fears and cultural baggage of the day? It's a question John Mortimer would have wanted us to keep asking.

I did end up drinking a glass of champagne before I left Mortimer's study. It was a hard offer to turn down. 'I have a long afternoon ahead of me,' he said, and although there were hints he was in pain he masked it with more amiable talk about his next book – always a next book – and a few more stories he could dredge up about old judges, old campaigners like Mary Whitehouse and others who had formed the choir of the shocked and outraged.

'Did they think the world would crumble?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Has it?'

'No, it hasn't,' John replied. 'So I think we do live in a more tolerant time.' He tapped his finger on the work that lay in front of him. 'Whether it produces better writing, I don't know.' ◇

CURRENTISH EVENTS

Obama and Child

Paul Maliszewski introduces his baby to the President

BY THE TIME freshly inaugurated US President Barack Obama was secured inside the presidential limousine and inching down Constitution Avenue, I was at home, sitting on the sofa, watching the proceedings on television. Outside, the streets were full of sirens, non-stop and overlapping sirens, and the air was thick with helicopters. I was, I think it's safe to say, in a less than generous frame of mind. And it was that disposition, I'm sure, which led me to look at the Secret Service agents who were walking alongside the limo, two at the front and two behind, and think, 'Those guys look like ushers carrying a casket.' I said to my wife, 'Is it just me, or does it feel like we're watching a funeral?' 'It's weird,' Hadley said. 'It's definitely weird.'

The limo was moving more slowly than

I thought a car could manage without being considered parked. This is a machine, a distinctly American machine, whose doors, I noticed, are so heavy with armour and bulletproof glass that even a fit man must use both hands and put his weight into closing them. Those doors impressed me. I rewound the coverage, heading back some seconds into recent history, so Hadley could catch just how thick they were.

Police officers, hailing from probably every state and dressed in the rich variety of uniform khaki, blue and black, lined the route, standing shoulder to shoulder and facing two lines of metal barricades, chest-high at least. Behind the barricades, on the other side, were the crowds, the milling people. Some friends of ours had said they were going to try to get to the parade route. One left his apartment at

three in the morning to claim a spot.

Because gloom begets gloom (at least for me, multiplying like evil-looking rabbits), I nearly convinced myself that the whole day – the praying and the pretend-playing of Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman, the oath-taking and the orating – was less a national celebration than a ceremony designed to seal the new president inside the White House, which, from my vantage, seemed like one of the world's most impressive mausoleums. I was, as I say, in a bit of a mood. The day had not turned out as we expected.

It was, in retrospect, not a good idea to try to bring Elliot, our baby, almost nine months old, to the inauguration.

We had planned elaborately though. We discussed what we would do and what might happen. We talked about what could go wrong and what we would do then. We looked up maps online and studied street closings and determined, as best we could, where we should walk. But the information was changing, always in flux, and one bit of information could conflict with another. Maps were altered overnight.

We bought the urchin, aka Urch or Munch (as in -kin), little fur-lined boots. They were his first pair of shoes. We purchased air-activated hand- and foot-warmers from the local hardware store, where employees were selling them as fast as they could tear open the boxes. We stocked up on granola bars.

Like soldiers sharing burdens, we figured out who would carry what. Would they let us bring bottled water? We checked with the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Activities. Could we take the baby's stroller? We could not. Since my wife works on the Hill, in one of the House office buildings located across the street from the Capitol, we decided to use her office as a kind of forward-operating base. We could store extra supplies there, baby gear we might need but didn't necessarily want to tote around. Her office would, if necessary, be our refuge from the cold and the crowds.

Not all of this feverish preparation, this elaborate exercise in catastrophic thinking, was particular to the inauguration. We do it all the time, albeit on a less intense scale. It's just that generally we don't have to worry about manoeuvring around barricades. Becoming a parent is like being promoted to command a platoon, a tiny, largely helpless and sometimes trying, but, yes, still lovable platoon. Everything – a simple dash to the mall or meeting someone for lunch – poses a logistical challenge: possible to overcome, sure, but needing to be addressed with uncommon efficiency. And every logistical challenge comes at a cost, too. Want to make that lunch date? Then give up on the idea of getting anything done in the morning, of reading or writing or dish-washing or whatever, because that time must be given over to preparing the platoon to leave, to being ready – for anything.

What's more, being organized only gets one so far. Harder still is working against one's own nature. I've come to realize that I've lived almost my entire life doing what I wanted to do pretty much when I wanted to do it. Yes, I went to school, I held jobs and I followed most of the rules, but when I was on my own, at leisure, I was, as former President Bush famously said, the decider. If I wanted to go out, to take a walk, well, that's what I decided to do: I grabbed my coat and I left, right then. If I felt hungry, I ate. If I needed to go to the

bathroom, I went. I mean, why ever delay? And yet I never, in all those years, thought of myself as intrinsically selfish. This is not like the selfishness of the uncharitable miser or the greed of the money-grubber. This is a kind of invisible, existential selfishness. I wrestle with this still, from time to time, and so I have no real wisdom to offer, except to say that there are many varieties of love, and one that I'm learning is this: love is when you feed yourself not when you feel hunger, but after everyone else has eaten.

ON THE MORNING of the inauguration, we walked toward the Capitol, about a dozen blocks from our house. I wore Elliot strapped to my chest and facing the world. We'd walked this way countless times, by the Library of Congress and the Folger Library, the Supreme Court and the Capitol. However intrinsic these buildings are to America's shared civic life, however large they loom in the national imagination and mythology, however many high-school classes visit them on forced-march field trips, they are also just part of our neighbourhood, fixtures on the landscape, a set of handy reference points. We see them all the time. We run our errands here, do our dry-cleaning, our shoe repair, our grocery shopping. We circle around the Capitol, pushing Elliot in his box, as we've taken to calling his stroller, and then we figure out what we're going to do about dinner.

In the weeks before, signs had gone up designating certain streets and blocks 'buses only'. Would chartered tour buses be parked here, end to end, where the cars usually were, or would only buses be allowed to use the roads? It was never clear. Other signs called for the District to be, at long last, made a state. 'Yes We Can!' they said. 'DC Statehood NOW!' It's a sore spot and a perennial issue that District residents, most of whom are African-Americans, don't have a vote in Congress. While most states feature chipper, tourism-friendly mottoes on their licence plates – Sunshine State, Grand Canyon State, Big Sky Country, Sportsman's Paradise and Maine's ridiculous Vacationland – ours raise the full-throated cry of revolution: 'Taxation without Representation'. We do have a so-called shadow senator and a representative, elected officials who may sit in on committee meetings and

may make speeches but who can't vote on a thing, not even to rename a post office or declare Johnny Cash a great American. When we moved to D.C. a friend told me he thought of voting here as a kind of performance art, a largely symbolic act that might make you feel good inside, at least for a little while.

Still more signs directed us to cross Pennsylvania, walk behind the Madison building, the stark, stone addition to the Library of Congress complex built, undoubtedly, in the 1970s, and then head around the back of the House office buildings. I don't know why we bothered with all the maps. There were no choices. There were no alternate routes, really. There was only one way.

We followed the general flow of the crowd and looked for the entrance – or the line to get to the entrance – of the orange section, the location of our seats, which Hadley had won in her office's pool. T-shirt vendors were hawking their commemorative wares and a woman was selling 'Handmade Obama earrings', price \$10. Our line, when we found it, coiled around the perimeter of a park. People were kind, friendly, patient and even, I thought, a little hushed. They were all one could want from people stuck together in the same line. The couple behind us had come from Raleigh, in North Carolina, a good five hours by car. My wife was born in North Carolina – most of her family still lives there – and she and I met there, in Durham. I could imagine people everywhere, in our line and all the other lines forming throughout the city, finding little things in common, thin threads with which to tie tiny knots. Unlike the folks who came for the second Bush inauguration (which we also attended, mostly out of base curiosity, two inveterate gawkers wanting to witness the spectacle of whatever happened while secretly hoping for full-scale riots), this crowd did not sport anywhere near the outstanding volume of jewellery and ankle-length fur. It was more of a jeans and hiking boots crowd. Outdoor wear, sports-team jackets, shiny tracksuits.

The weather was, of course, quite cold, and by the time we completed the entire circuit of the park it was starting to wear on Elliot, who was fussing and crying and kicking me in the crotch. We headed back down the steps, trailing after the end of our line, only to see that many people were simply streaming right past the park,

skipping the ordeal of the line and heading directly for the entrance and what was the first of I can only guess how many layers of security.

New lines were forming in front of a series of walk-through metal detectors installed under a white tent in the middle of the road. Police there warned everyone to empty their pockets. Everything out, electronics, keys, coins. Even a foil wrapper on a granola bar or a pack of gum would set off the alarm. I pulled a bottle of milk out of my pocket and Hadley stood in front of me, feeding it to Elliot. We shuffled forward as a unit. A cop working the other side, with a handheld metal detector wand, called out general instructions. 'What you do at the airport,' he said, 'you do here.' Someone asked if that meant he had to take off his shoes. 'Except for shoes,' the cop said. Then he added, 'But if you want to take off your shoes, you can go right ahead.'

We had been outside, in line, for about an hour and a half. As Hadley went through the metal detector, Elliot started to howl. I held the milk in front of him and looked down, trying to see. The hood of his coat poked up over his head, a light blue puffy cone that reached to just underneath my chin. I couldn't see his face. I could hear him feeding though, that rhythm of gulp and swallow. Then he let go of the nipple in order to cry again.

I stepped through the metal detector next and tripped the alarm. Shoe-cop came at me with his wand. 'One of you set it off,' he said.

'Well, he can't walk through on his own,' I said. 'He's a baby.' Elliot went on crying. I have no idea what my face looked like just then, or what my expression revealed, but I imagine I must have appeared desperate, pleading more than making some feeble challenge, too weary to be even a little annoyed.

Shoe-cop looked me over and said, 'You can go on, sir.'

Everyone who passed through security bunched together on the other side. There was no pushing or shoving, but there was no line either and no recognizable order. Everyone was just oriented toward the Capitol, looking up 1st Street NW, past the Rayburn building. By now Elliot was in full meltdown mode. Hadley and I stepped to the side, behind a couple of concrete barriers that were acting as a

funnel for the crowd. Maybe he had just had enough of being strapped to my chest. Hadley stood in front of me, talking to Elliot. 'Do you want out?' she said. 'Have you had enough?' There's always a new puzzle to solve and too little information to glean. On the other hand, maybe he couldn't eat well in that upright position. He still always takes milk on his back, resting atop a pillow that not so long ago was larger than he but now is so small his legs dangle off the end, sometimes crossed at the ankles, as if he were a kid lounging on an inflatable raft, afloat in a pool.

Elliot's cheeks appeared blue. Or at least one of them did. I pointed to a spot where I thought I saw a slight bluish tinge. 'They don't always look like that, do they?' I said. Maybe it was just the light or a shadow reflected from his coat. It didn't matter though. All that mattered was that he was upset and cold. We all were cold. It was too much, too much to try to do. We had tried to do things before and needed to turn back. Once, when Elliot was just a few weeks old, we walked to the National Gallery of Art to see *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures of the National Museum, Kabul*. The exhibition was crowded though, too crowded for me to maneuver the stroller and Elliot was loud, too loud to walk through a museum. He could take in only half of the hidden treasures before we retreated for home. Sometimes, still, it was too much to try to take him out to eat. Timing was everything. Timing and chance.

Hadley said she'd take Elliot inside and warm up. 'You should go on to the inauguration,' she said. 'Take the tickets.'

I looked at the crowd, still hardly moving, just everyone staring toward the Capitol, willing themselves forward. 'I don't want to go by myself,' I said.

'But you were looking forward to this,' she said. 'You wanted to go.'

'I can't just leave you here, with him like this.'

Elliot was in my arms, looking up at us, miserable, upset, his face crumbling. What had we done, and why had we done it, and what were we thinking? It was too cold. Elliot was too small. We tried to reassure him and then we just tried to make him laugh, giving everything we had. Sound effects, funny faces, anything. Sometimes if you get him laughing you can almost trick him out of crying. Make him forget.

'It's just not the most important thing

right now,' Hadley said. 'For us.'

'I know,' I said. A couple of million people had their own ideas about what was important, historic, whatever, but she was right.

Hadley walked back to one of the cops manning the metal detectors and asked how we could go about getting out.

'Out?' he said. It seemed like the one question he hadn't answered a thousand times before.

'We need to get out of the cold,' she said. 'My baby has had it.'

The cop motioned us back through. 'Come on,' he said.

'Do you know where the closest entrance is to the House buildings?' she asked. 'I'm staff.'

'Capitol staff?' the cop asked. She nodded and he pointed back to an entrance we had passed, where people were already lining up. Everywhere a crowd. 'Just go to the front of the line,' the cop said, 'and show them your ID.'

Hadley went ahead, faster than me and Elliot, and worked her way toward the door. 'Excuse me,' she said. 'I'm staff.' A guy beside her, standing right in front of the door, produced his own ID. 'So am I,' he said. We would have to wait.

I WASN'T ALWAYS keen to attend the inauguration. In the months after the election, in fact, my interest peaked and ebbed. One low point came when I was at a local photo place, dropping off some picture files of the baby for printing. A sign in the window advertised that they were now framing copies of the *Washington Post*, preserving instant Obama memorabilia like the front page the day after he won the election. I sat at the store's computer, uploading my files, and while the hard drive churned away, I rocked Elliot back and forth in his box. A woman came in and asked about the framing. She seemed excited, maybe even breathless. This was in November, not long after the election. The woman wanted to know, were they selling the newspapers too? No, the owner said, just the frames. The woman, less excited now, asked how much the frames were. Fifty dollars, he said. He stepped toward the back of the store and picked up one of the frames from a thick pile that leaned against the wall. It was just a plain, black frame, one you would use for a poster. If

it cost more than half that, regularly, I'd be shocked. What a cheerless enterprise, I thought, and yet I had no trouble imagining the owner, a tall man with a shaved head and squirrel cheeks, wondering how he could get a piece of the Obama action, and then it occurred to him: I will frame their newspapers.

As the inauguration neared, every business got into the spirit somewhat. At Art & Soul, a craft gallery, they were selling the limited edition Barack Obama Tote Bag, an all-plastic number with Obama's face superimposed over a collage of headlines. Only 2,008 bags, each handmade in Vermont, were for sale nationwide. A steal, I'm sure, for \$90. For the more practical shopper, there was Obama bottled water. Water N' Faith featured the president-elect as shill, a bottle of the good stuff crudely Photoshopped so that it appeared clutched in his upraised hand. The 7-11 convenience store had a competing brand of inauguration water. 'Collect all Four Bottles,' the sign on the front door said, with a measly 37-cent discount offered on quantity purchases. A nearby deli, meanwhile, was selling chocolate bars with Obama's face in bas-relief. T-shirt vendors on the street were a phenomenon unto themselves. Personal favourites included one with Obama styled as Clark Kent, ripping his shirt open to reveal, on his chest, the presidential seal. Another featured Obama as a slam-dunking basketball star. 'Now is our time,' it said. I couldn't pass up buying a shirt that cast Obama as Muhammad Ali, the undisputed champ, standing over Sonny Liston and yelling at him to get up after his first-round knockout in 1965. On the shirt, (which I wore, along with three additional layers, to the inauguration) Senator John McCain is laid out on the mat, bony-chested and flabby-armed.

The bookstore was selling 'Inaugural Edition President Obama' trading cards as well as a poster-sized enlargement of Obama on the cover of *Ebony* magazine, the issue that named him among 'the 25 coolest brothers of all time', citing his swagger, confidence, effortless style and black cool. Down the street, at a newish hamburger place, the chef, a guy who graduated from a reality show, had created the Obama burger, with Applewood bacon, red-onion marmalade, horseradish mayo and crumbled blue cheese. A liquor store, its window festooned with tinfoil

stars and miniature bunting, encouraged customers to 'Celebrate Change with Moët & Chandon Champagne.' Another liquor store recommended that Ketel One vodka was the smart purchase for those looking to 'celebrate change'. A dry-cleaner had formalwear – 'Rent Inaugural Tuxedos Now!' – with 'designer styles available for purchase', and a vintage shop advertised a sale on ballgowns. cvs, the national pharmacy chain, draped its building in bunting, while Pawticulars, a chichi pet store, had three cardboard cut-out dogs and two cats on display, all wearing Uncle Sam hats. So adorable.

National advertising campaigns didn't disappoint either. Pepsi morphed its red and blue logo so that it appeared to be kin to Obama's campaign symbol and then released a series of ads that baldly appropriated 'Hope' and 'Optimism' as the company's latest pitch words. 'Yes You Can' one Pepsi ad promised, which is but one word apart but substantially different from the original, more inspiring slogan, 'Yes We Can.' Yes, they did reduce collective action to individual encouragement and empty flattery. An online clothing retailer had the same idea, sending out an email on the day of the inauguration (subject line: 'Change Never Looked So Good!'). 'Yes you can!' it read, then gave shoppers the chance to 'celebrate change with an extra 15% off EVERYTHING.' The day before, an outfit selling reproduction antiques emailed customers about 'Great items for 1600 Pennsylvania Ave,' with '44 great items in honor of America's 44 Presidents.'

Was this simply advertising at its crass worst, spotting whatever seems the least bit genuine in the culture, colonizing it, and then, before we're all sick of it, turning it into a new way to sell us the same shit? Or was Obama perhaps all too easily appropriated because, well, he was himself a brilliantly advertised product, with a sharp logo, a catchy slogan and a few easy to remember messages? Maybe, in a way, it was all advertising: the president just a new beverage – or, worse, the same beverage we'd been drinking for years poured into a newly redesigned bottle – and sold, whatever the case, by expert pitchmen to a nation that needed its thirst quenched.

IN THE BASEMENT of the Longworth building, just outside the cafeteria, we found a table and chairs and dropped our

coats, our scarves, our hats and gloves. Hadley went to see about some food – a juice for me, a coffee for her, something baked to tide us over. I took Elliot's jacket off and tried to warm his hands by cupping my fingers around his. He had on a pair of striped pyjamas and, over it, some kind of fuzzy Christmas-themed get-up that's warm but looks like it was sewn together from faded chunks of moss. A flat-screen TV was bolted to a nearby wall and several people had already gathered around it, pulling up chairs, creating a front row and then occupying it. The walls were cinderblock, painted white. Photographs of the Capitol under construction and in various stages of completion hung on the walls at irregular intervals. Exposed pipes and vents and banks of fluorescent lights were suspended from the ceiling. The carpet must have been some textile designer's take on either cellular mitosis or the fertilization of the egg by eight artful spermatozoa, I couldn't decide which.

I'd been here before, to have lunch with Hadley. It was packed then, just teeming with staffers, young people mostly, in suits, sitting at tables, their heads bowed over their BlackBerrys and their thumbs manic, hardly anyone uttering a personal word. In Washington, it's not at all uncommon to overhear a young man announce, with supreme confidence, to a tableful of his young associates, 'Well, I have several qualms about the current tax code. Firstly...' Such is Washington – or at least, political Washington – a place that could be fairly encapsulated into a single image: a young woman in a skirt suit and pumps laughing too loudly at some old white guy's dumb joke. By the time we leave this city (and I sometimes hope it's soon), I aim to learn the quintessentially perfect dumb joke to complete that image.

On the TV, some of the dignitaries and boldfaced names started to arrive and take their places on the platform. We were supposed to be there, I thought. We were supposed to watch this in person. What's more, I wanted to be there. Sure, I had reservations about the parade of Clinton regulars, all ready to assume positions of power in the new administration. And yes, I felt, at most, a bottomless ambivalence for the frenzied market in tenuous inaugural tie-ins. And I was, frankly, exhausted by the news coverage, maybe the longest pre-game show in the history of broad-

casting. In spite of all that, however, I still thought we all should be there, Elliot perhaps most of all. Years from now, he would, I imagined, want to tell people, friends, his own family, *I was there. My mom and dad took me to Obama's inauguration.* Instead we were stuck in this cafeteria annex. It was like waiting out some disaster in a shelter set up by the Red Cross. Who were these people anyway? I thought. And how had everyone come to be here, underground? We were all so close to the Capitol and yet not there at all. Had they, like us, been overcome by the cold? There were children with parents, the older kids running around, playing, some resting their heads on the tables, using their balled-up coats for pillows. Or was everyone here turned back, unable to get in?

Hadley returned with food and I suggested we should give our tickets away. It could transform our bad time into someone else's lucky windfall. 'Someone could still use the seats,' I said.

'So we should just say, "Does anyone want these?"'

'I guess,' I said. 'Look for people who are just a couple.'

'So you want me to ask?'

I nodded. I often have bright ideas that involve Hadley following through on them, particularly when they involve going up and, you know, talking to people.

I bounced Elliot up and down on my leg and made motor sounds, pretty much my default setting. Hadley walked to the front of the room. 'Does anyone need tickets?' she said. 'We have two. We couldn't use them.'

'It's too late to get in,' a man said. And then he asked to look at the tickets anyway. Hadley handed them over. 'Can I keep them,' he said, 'as a souvenir?'

She said he could have one and then brought the other back. I shrugged elaborately. We tried.

People came until the room was full, and then still more people came. One hundred people, maybe more. We heard that The Mall, designated as the overflow area, the place to head if you couldn't get where you were supposed to go, was closed, already at its capacity. In the cafeteria, people started to pack themselves in pretty tight. They took every chair. They sat on top of tables. They leaned against the wall or stood in the middle of the room. As someone who is a bit too given to ranting and swearing,

without irony, about the deterioration of the social fabric, as I term it, I was touched to see people make conscientious attempts not to block other's view of the television. Such a small consideration, really, and yet it said everything: *I know you want to see this, and I don't want to keep you from seeing.* We all did what we could, as best as we could. We watched the prayer and saw Aretha Franklin sing. Some women really liked Franklin's hat, ooh-ing their approval. When Obama came on the TV, everyone cheered. But when he spoke, it was hard to hear. I could make out just phrases, a word or two. Nobody could turn up the television. People tried, but nobody could get the buttons to work, and nobody knew where the remote control was. People would go ssssh-hhh, but then their shushing was just as loud as anything else. This was our inauguration, such as it was. People took pictures of the TV, close-ups, so that you couldn't tell, at first, that it wasn't live. A woman rested her head on her partner's shoulder. Another woman browsed back through the images on her camera. She had some good shots, I thought. Other people stood at the front of the room and took pictures of us, just standing there, looking back at them and watching the TV.

We applauded and we cheered and then everyone went their separate ways. A man came up and asked us where we got our snacks, but the cafeteria had closed so Hadley told him another place that might still be open. As we left, I was carrying Elliot in my arms. It would be easier that way. If I strapped him back on my chest, he would fuss again. He wouldn't have it.

When we emerged from the basement and started to walk for home, it might as well have been a new day. It was sunny, clear and bright. And it was warmer. Hadley said, 'Why couldn't it have been like this in the morning?'

I tossed Elliot into the air, and he giggled and laughed and drooled. We all laughed, his joy infectious. Behind us, we heard a helicopter take to the air, trailing that deep woof-woof sound. It was Bush's ride, leaving the Capitol. It rose above the roofline of the houses and then banked to the north.

Some people ahead of us turned to watch the helicopter too and they cheered to see the former president go. 'Go home,' one guy said.

'See ya,' his friend said.

THREE DAYS LATER, I happened to be at cvs when the inaugural decorations came down. We were standing in line, waiting to buy something or other – I can't remember what now – when a guy came in and introduced himself to the manager. 'We're here to take your bunting,' he said. The manager didn't really respond. 'Those flags on the outside,' the guy added. 'I just thought you'd want to know.'

Outside, a guy on a ladder unhooked the bunting and, within minutes, cvs was just a pharmacy again, the same as before. I had started to wonder what would come next, for the country, the new president, for us. And it occurred to me that I endure Republican administrations, weather them, knowing full well what to expect. But with Democrats, I brace for eventual disappointment. On balance, I decided it was much worse to be disappointed, crushed, than to ride out even a long dismal period.

I had by then seen President Obama's inaugural speech replayed on television, and I'd read the text several times. Something he said stuck with me:

What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task.

It was a curious speech, I thought, unusual for how little it tried to make everyone feel good. Instead, it was like being handed a homework assignment, a schedule of heavy reading and, at the end of the class, a tough exam. 'This is,' the president said, 'the price and the promise of citizenship.' It was hard not to wonder if we – if I – were up to that task.

I thought of the speech again one night while Hadley and I were watching the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Stewart was playing a clip of the president talking to CBS news anchor Katie Couric about one of the more modest items in his economic stimulus package, a plan that Republicans and, in slavish turn, Couric were questioning as just so much useless pork-barrel spending. 'We're going to weatherize homes,' the president told Couric. 'That immedi-

ately puts people back to work. And we're going to train people who are out of work, including young people, to do the weatherization.' Further, the programme – and it really was, all told, a few raindrops in the stimulus ocean – would help lower energy costs for homeowners. The clip ended and returned to Stewart, who was sitting at his desk, cheering, his fist pumping in the air, as he yelled out, 'Yes! We!' And then he fell asleep and began snoring. 'Weatherizing?' he asked, his incredulity speaking for itself. 'Where did this guy go?' he added, playing a second clip, this time of then-Senator Obama, speaking after the New Hampshire primary, in January 2008, when he was still a long-shot candidate. 'Genera-

tions of Americans,' Obama said, 'have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can.' Stewart read off a few more jokes, about how the president was being so very boring, the worst offence, really, in the world of popular culture, and how he was sounding so much more like John Kerry than John Kennedy.

Is that a joke, really? And is it a joke we should find funny? Obama hadn't become dull, he'd become president. He was elected to govern, which, as boring as it may sound, means being concerned with the details of how the country works and how people can best be helped. High hopes and lofty expectations got us this far, but now

hope has to become something else: an expectation, say, not to be entertained or amused or feel swept away, as in a romance, but an expectation to think and work, and a desire to stay engaged by the minutiae of making the country run, even if just some government-sponsored weatherization programme. Obama called it responsibility. Perhaps though it is just another definition of love. It won't be easy, I'm sure, or simple, to love the government as much as I say, abstractly and without thinking, that I love this country. Nor will it be easy to work my mind, to think about things I'd just rather leave to someone else, to think for me, on my behalf. But what is love, finally, if not work? ◇

A SINGLE BOOK

A Far Cry from Kensington

Ali Smith on the double edge of Muriel Spark

'Can you decide to think? – Yes, you can. You can put your mind to anything most of the time. You can sit peacefully in front of a blank television set, just watching nothing; and sooner or later you can make your own programme much better than the mass product. It's fun, you should try it. You can put anyone you like on the screen, alone or in company, saying and doing what you want them to do, with yourself in the middle if you prefer it that way.'

WHAT DO WE DO with our lives? How do we employ ourselves? How do we view our pasts, and more, how do we survive them to really inhabit our futures? And what do we do if those pasts keep us awake at night? *A Far Cry from Kensington* is one of Muriel Spark's most liberating, liberated and meditative novels. Spark is a writer who can take the meditative and make it mercurially funny, playful and mischievous; alongside the grim 'cry' at the core of this novel there's a force of fun, and a force of calm light-heartedness in its analysis of the creative process in the light of free will, imagination, truth, history.

First published in 1988, it is a conscious exercise in looking back – a novel that

announces its own preoccupied insomnia. But its insomnia is unexpectedly pleasant, a 'beloved insomnia in the sweet waking hours of the night' – as if the usual dark night of the soul has been replaced by something much, much lighter. We begin in the future, intimate with its narrator awake in her bed listening, in the silence, to the noise of thirty years ago, the noise of the mid-1950s, a time when Mrs Hawkins, publishing assistant, literally larger than life, large enough in a post-war time of rationing and utilitarian discomfort to suggest a comforting abundance to everyone who simply looks at her, lives in a shabby, decent rooming-house in down-at-heel Kensington – how things change over time! – run by Milly, an Irish landlady of great kindness and frankness.

Mrs Hawkins has a lot on her plate, as it were, which is something she learns practically and literally to deal with in the course of the novel. She has simply spoken the truth, out loud; she has told a rather bad writer called Hector Bartlett, to his face, exactly what she thinks – that he's a bad writer, a '*pisseur de copie*'. ('It means that he pisses hack journalism, it means that he urinates frightful prose.') Bartlett happens to be having an affair with a famous novelist, Emma Loy, whose char-

acter is a shining piece of sardonic creation by Spark. Emma Loy has a lot of sway in the book world – and this particular London is full of people surreally chasing jobs in the publishing industry; part of the novel's high entertainment is its satire of the book business. 'Jobs in publishing, Mrs Hawkins, are very hard to come by. You might bear that in mind. I could put in a word for you in many quarters. Only you must, simply must, retract.' The power struggle is swift. Pretty soon Mrs Hawkins is out of a job.

Over at the rooming-house, 'from Wanda's room came a long, loud, high-pitched cry which diminished into a sustained, distant and still audible ululation.' Wanda, the Polish dressmaker, has started receiving anonymous threats. 'We, the Organisers, have our eyes on you.' Everyone at the rooming-house suspects everyone else; everything polarizes down to the single question – are you a friend or an enemy? But Mrs Hawkins, eyes like the hawk in her name, notices how cheap the threatening letters look, how fake, like 'a deliberate literary performance of poor quality; an attempt at parody, if a lame one.' Is Wanda 'guilty'? Of what? Why has she, like many others in this slim, far-reaching novel, fallen so completely for the hype about a mesmerizing, modern yet medieval-sounding contraption called the Box, which, its proponents claim, has the power to cure all ills? And what exactly is the Box, with its 'radionic' power in the new radioactive age, its special resonance for the radio and TV generations reading

this book in the 1980s?

When these three different farcical stories come together, Mrs Hawkins finds herself at the centre of a cheap detective mystery on the one hand, and on the other a set of metaphysical tests concerning power and truth. 'No life can be carried on satisfactorily unless people are honest.' Meanwhile, post-war London comes back to life – 'strange grasses and wild herbs had sprung up where the war-demolished houses had been' – and because in many ways this is a novel distinctly about revival, particularly about the aftermath of the war, how such trauma can be healed by its walking wounded, *A Far Cry from Kensington* is, in the end, a beautiful – and still suitably utilitarianly 'sober' – celebration of a whole new blossoming. This wonderful blossoming is the real mystery, in a novel which doesn't just sort the frauds from the true but also the good frauds from the bad frauds, and which becomes a conscious act of revitalization, not just of a city, but of its people and also their potential literature.

A Far Cry was Spark's eighteenth novel and, incidentally, takes place around the

time when, in her own life, she was living in London and first writing her own fiction; her first novel, *The Comforters*, was completed in the mid-fifties and published in 1957. This particular time in her life is very entertainingly dealt with in her only volume of autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), a book she published four years after this novel and whose voice, wry and calm, witty and sharp, is very close to that of *A Far Cry's* narrator.

Spark had spent the latter war years working in intelligence for the Foreign Office. When the war ended she made a career move which must have seemed very farcical indeed after such work; she took a post at the Poetry Society, editing its periodical, *Poetry Review*, and by all accounts enduring a series of mini-wars, battling with every mad faction imaginable in the London literary world; after this she took a position three days a week with Peter Owen, 'a young publisher who was interested in books by Cocteau, Hermann Hesse, Cesare Pavese. It was a joy to proof-read the translations of such writers. I was secretary, proof-reader, editor, publicity

girl ... in the office at 50 Old Brompton Road, with one light bulb, bare boards on the floor, a long table which was the packing department,' as she writes in *Curriculum Vitae*. Much of her Poetry Society experience slipped into her marvellous novel *Loitering With Intent*, written seven years earlier, which dealt with the years just prior to those depicted in *A Far Cry*. With its lambasting of literary vicious circles and all their bombast and fakery, and by dint of its sheer post-war joyousness, *Loitering With Intent* can be seen as a sister-volume, the bright noon to this 'wide-eyed midnight' of a novel.

But in Spark's work the lightness of things is always a serious business, and a literary vicious circle is likely to be one of the worst forms of viciousness, since she is an artist profoundly drawn to a morality in the art process, and especially to the function of fiction in the real world. For Spark, who converted to Roman Catholicism at about the same time as she wrote her first fiction (and consequently at about the same time as *A Far Cry* is set), the religious process, the writing process and



the processes of art are inextricably intertwined. Her belief system gifted her a 'balanced regard for matter and spirit,' as she called it, and a vision of all our realities, all our 'real' histories, as a kind of parallel fictional work; this gives the recurring notions in her work of the relationships between fiction, truth and lies, between real and fake, between author, authority and free will, a particular slant.

Here the trivial, intimate history of the novel apes the reality whose setting it is, in a plot which resembles a mini-Cold War, a mini-descent into 1950s post-war paranoia. Where the novel's surface is scattered with the authentic references that make the obvious links between fiction and real time ('Billy Graham, Senator McCarthy, Colonel Nasser . . . *Lucky Jim*'); where its general theme might be said to be a people getting back into shape in the post-war years; its subtext is Spark's endless preoccupation, the 'supernatural process going on under the surface and within the substance of all things'. The novel's own preoccupation is moral – the makings of good and bad – in this case, what makes a good or a bad writer, in a novel where gratuitous viciousness and powermongering, and 'bad' and 'untrue' writing, come together as the same thing. It's a book that knows it's a book – it is always announcing its status to its reader. 'I offer this advice,' our narrator says, 'without fee; it is included in the price of the book,' a book very much about the act of narrative skill, about the uses of foreground, background, foresight, hindsight, or the basics of narrative structure. Mrs Hawkins, the 'scrupulous' proof-reader and editor, almost suggests this novel is a casebook for those who would wish to write well.

Its subject is the thoughtful self, making sense, from an objective distance, of the meanings of both silence and voice. Its first refrain is the pained cry of the lost, wounded woman at the centre of its plot, and to some extent also Mrs Hawkins' own silent cry, which readers learn of when they come upon the story of her war marriage. Its other, more pervasive refrain is much sweeter, and arises from emotional distance, from the meditative future which will, it is promised, simply put the past into its proper context. 'I came to realise the answer later,' as Mrs Hawkins repeatedly says. 'I'm a great believer in providence,' Spark herself wrote. 'It's not

quite fatalism, but watching until you see the whole picture emerge.'

Above all, the novel is a fiction about what happens when you speak the plain truth out loud, how to survive the consequences, and the damage that happens to those taken in by, convinced by, the opposite of truth. It asks us not just to sense that we're being watched (in both the cheap 1950s paranoia plot as well as in a much larger metaphysical context), but more, to watch ourselves and, like Mrs Hawkins, to be ready to change, to change our own bad habits, to put ourselves blithely to rights. This blitheness is the key to survival in a novel in which the bruised, haunting dark of the past is ever-present, but dealt with, as it were, with a combination of unsentimental affection and satisfying, score-settling wit – a perfect model of what critic Ruth Whittaker calls Spark's 'aesthetic of detachment' and, in the form of this novel, a prelude to every kind of revitalization.

Spark often takes south London – and not the north of the city, which is the usual literary stamping-ground of novelists – as her subject in her books about the city. She likes to reveal alternatives; she comes, after all, to this most English of narratives, shot through with its references to the Brontës, Dickens and Forster, from a quite alternative position; for this most

European of English novelists is a Scottish novelist, gifted in a particular otherness of authority, brought up between the wars in Edinburgh, where she 'imbibed, through no particular mentor, but just by breathing the informed air of the place, its haughty and remote anarchism. I can never now suffer from a shattered faith in politics and politicians, because I never had any.'

'Can you decide to think?' This permissive education in the art of thinking, this laughing history of post-war literary London, this pensive and merry laying of old ghosts, is a book that knows its mere place as a book, and argues back about the importance of truth and art, and truth in art, with every fictive bone in its body. Masquerading as a chatty, realist piece of fiction, it is another revelation, as each of her novels is, of Spark's art of merciful liteness, and the far-reaching after-effects of language well used. 'That cry, that cry,' the far cry at its core is both idiomatic and actual, painful then distanced, examined and understood, by means of the Sparkian balance of artifice and truth. It all adds up to something huge – a sprightly philosophical rejection of twentieth-century angst, with all the carefree carefulness, all the far-reaching economy, all the merciless, sharp mercy, that characterize the art of Spark. ◇

Lightning in a Summer Storm

John Sutherland on the power of a bad word

IN 1982 I PUBLISHED a monograph entitled *Offensive Literature: Decensorship in Britain, 1960–1982*.

The book took the form of a calendar, the first date of which was November 1960 and the dam-breaking decision that ‘acquitted Lady Chat’. There followed a series of vigorous but eventually ineffective resistances in the twenty years following – spear-headed by Mrs Whitehouse and the Festival of Light – which, effectively, collapsed with the ineffective prosecution of *The Romans in Britain*, in 1982. Hot stuff, then. Tepid stuff, now and long under the bridge.

The pages of my author’s copy of *Offensive Literature* are sadly faded (as, alas, is their author) but the issues raised in the book remain fresh. They may be summarized thus: Has the ‘Great Liberation’ represented by these two transformative decades and what followed:

1. enriched British culture?
2. put British culture on a glide-path to terminal and irreversible decadence?
3. had little or no effect on British culture?

Unlike his father, Kingsley (who had to reserve it for his scabrous letters to Larkin), Martin Amis can eff-and-blind in print to his heart’s content, and does just that. Are the son’s novels better for the licence? Has the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain – preposterous office though his was – had that much impact on the quality of what is offered on the West End stage since 1960?

The arguments of the cultural conservatives are worn threadbare, but still have some superficial validity. Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Tolstoy wrote under conditions of strict censorship. Is their art the worse for it? Is the unbuttoned *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* that much better than the four-letter-wordless *Women in Love*?

Kingsley Amis – who placed himself, perversely, side by side with Longford (‘Lord Porn’), Whitehouse and the FoL – argued for the continuation of censorship because it preserved a kind of radioactive energy in the forbidden vocabulary. Prohibited words were strong words; and

language needs these weapons of lexical destruction, like the nuclear bombs which were never used in the 1960s, but which preserved the status quo.

When he wrote *Lady Chatterley*, Lawrence proclaimed his noble intention to ‘hygienize’ our Anglo-Saxon lexical heritage: to make ‘fuck’ as usable, in any and all social contexts, as ‘copulate’; ‘cunt’ as ‘vagina’; ‘shit’ as ‘excrement’; ‘cock’ as ‘penis’; ‘piss’ as ‘urine’. Did Lawrence succeed in his mission? No. Could he ever have done? No.

Debates about censorship tend to be as sterile and inconclusive as those of the fallen angels in Pandemonium, in *Paradise Lost*. The same terms recur so often as to become mere sound. Those terms include: ‘a tendency to deprave and corrupt’ (the Victorians’ favourite); ‘liberty of thought and expression’ (Orwell and other subscribers to Voltaire, *Areopagitica* and *Index on Censorship*); ‘public decency’ (the favourite French legal instrument of oppression); and ‘obscenity’, a term whose meaning is as slippery as its etymological origins are obscure.

Looking back, all that furore about sex and obscenity in the 1960s – what it was ‘permissible’ to depict, and what was not permissible – now seems to me to have been a huge distraction. The real issue was, and still is, power and control. Where the power chooses to discharge itself culturally seems as historically random as the lightning strikes in a summer storm. You can say ‘fuck’ now on prime-time television on the BBC (Kenneth Tynan broke that barrier in 1964). But you can’t say ‘golliwog’ in the Broadcasting House green room (in 1964, of course, the Black and White Minstrel Show was riding high).

One of the more enduring contributions to the Great Debate begun forty years ago is Robert Darnton’s book on the ‘forbidden’ bestsellers (i.e. pornography) of the pre-Revolutionary era in France. These ‘under the cloak’ works were not intended to excite, or stimulate. Erection was not what they had in mind,

but just the opposite. They aimed to undermine the foundations on which the *ancien régime* rested, hence the stress on libidinous priests, satyromaniac and nymphomaniac aristocrats and royalists.

It was the same with the licentious satirists in Britain in the Regency period – William Hone (tried three times for obscenity in 1817) and George Cruikshank, Sr. Their squibs weren’t corrupting: they were seditious. Their cartoons threatened not the morals of the individual, but the current holders of power in Britain, by rendering them ridiculous. At various periods in history pornography can be the cultural equivalent of dynamite: ‘libertine’ and ‘liberty’ coalesce.

We are now at a fascinating juncture. For five hundred years it has been relatively easy to control public expression. In the UK, the legal requirement (going back to the eighteenth century) is that every piece of print must carry an indentifiable printer’s mark – creating a trail of ownership and responsibility. Copyright registration, administered via the British Library, operates a similar kind of mass control. The Performing Rights Society keeps tabs on music. Film distributors voluntarily submit their wares to the BBFC. Newspapers, wary about libel, routinely have their chancier items ‘legalled’ by lawyers. The Official Secrets Act muzzles the Civil Service. The oaths of loyalty do the same with politicians. Expression in the UK is effectively as caged as it ever was.

Except, of course, for one place: the internet. Attempts to control cyber-expression are chronically, at times comically, flat-footed. One example will serve. In February 2009 the Dutch politician Geert Wilders is banned from entering the UK to attend a private showing of his seditious film, *Fitna*. Thanks to the publicity, hundreds of thousands of Britons Google and goggle at it on the web. No one is prosecuted. By comparison the old ‘published in Paris’ convention (under which *Lady Chatterley* lived for thirty years) was brutally effective.

Web-control is impossible. The only weapon left in the government’s arsenal is exemplary punishment. There will, depend on it, be more high-profile Gary Glitter prosecutions, more Gary McKinnon extraditions (he was the geek guilty of looking where he shouldn’t on the web, namely the Pentagon’s archive), more huge

finer for the odd student file-sharer guilty of receiving bootleg music or a ripped movie. When the odious Craig Meehan (partner of Karen Matthews, mother of 'missing' schoolgirl Shannon) was prosecuted for having downloaded child porn, one of his young, male neighbours was reported as saying: 'Everyone round here

has their stash of porn.' He did not, evidently, feel threatened.

To return to the big question. Culture has neither been coarsened nor stimulated into new heights of creativity by the long period of decensorship of certain areas of expression through which we have lived. It has merely adapted, as culture always

does. What is worrying is that, in the future, given the current uncontrollable nature of expression on the web, the state will necessarily be driven to ever more intrusive inspection and intrusion: more cameras, more email monitoring, more data-capturing and quarrying. Paradoxically, the more freedom, the more control. ◇

THE OBSCENITY ISSUE

'I think we are staying tolerant'

John Mortimer

Although he was known in the early 1960s for his work in divorce courts, John Mortimer was drawn into the ongoing battles against the Obscene Publications Act when asked to defend Hubert Selby's Last Exit to Brooklyn in 1968. Other high-profile cases followed, including trials where he defended the publications Oz (1971) and the Gay News (1976). A fervent believer in free speech, Mortimer said the Oz case, which became the longest obscenity trial in British history, 'stands at the crossroads of our liberty, at the boundaries of our freedom to think and write and draw what we please'. Mortimer went on to defend the makers of Deep Throat and the Sex Pistols for their use of the word 'bollocks' on an album cover. He believed no one – not even the near-illiterate pornographers of the world – should be stifled. 'I think it's highly inequitable that the talented should be permitted access to erotic fields denied to the clumsy, talentless majority,' he once wrote. 'We should not only be able to defend to the death other people's right to say things with which we disagree; we must also allow them to do it in abominable prose.'

I visited Mortimer at his house near Henley-on-Thames in the first week of October 2008. He died on 16 January 2009.

FIVE DIALS: Do you believe that literature was improved by the battles against the obscenity act?

JOHN MORTIMER: I think we learned to be more tolerant of each other and not to be surprised at other people's tastes. I hope we learned tolerance. The Obscene Publications Act was an act of censorship really. Getting round the OPA might have improved literature. Have you read it?

5D: I have.

JM: It's ridiculous. It says the definition of obscenity is something that would be likely to deprave or corrupt likely readers. It's been difficult to find anyone who's been depraved or corrupted by reading a book. It also has lots of exceptions. It's all right if the book's beautifully written or artistic, or it's of historical worth, or whatever. So you could be depraved and corrupted on one side and educated on the other. The act doesn't really make much sense.

5D: Why did you want to fight this act?

JM: Because I was a barrister and that was the work that came my way.

5D: Were there personal reasons?

JM: I don't believe in censorship of any sort. I don't think there should be anybody telling us what to read and what to write. I was a barrister who wrote, so these cases came my way. Most barristers refused to do them.

5D: Is there any way an idea can be banned?

JM: Some ideas are banned all the time. If you have the idea of robbing a shop, breaking and entering a house, murdering someone – of course those ideas are banned. But otherwise, no.

5D: Are we now in danger of losing what you fought for?

JM: I don't think so. Pretty much everything is out in the open now. I don't know

what more there is. I don't know if there's any censorship to fight, really. The way we did it was to laugh at it because things they censored were so funny. They were ludicrous.

5D: Why was laughter such an important tool in the battle?

JM: Censorship is ridiculous, really. Laughter is an important tool in anything, absolutely anything you're defending. It's very good for people to be caused offence, by the way. They should be caused offence three times a week and three times on Saturdays. It keeps them alive.

5D: What should they be caused offence by?

JM: Censorship. You must laugh at everything else. You must remember some of these cases were richly comic. I've been in front of some very stupid judges.

5D: How did you deal with stupid judges?

JM: Argue. That's what we did. You would have Mrs Whitehouse kneeling in the corridor praying for a guilty verdict. One judge wrote that God was dictating his summing up to him. But the moods change, don't they? At the end of the Victorian age they changed too. I think these waves come, perhaps unconsciously.

5D: How did you know how to handle these judges?

JM: My best moment was *Inside Linda Lovelace*. The doctor was giving evidence and said what a terrible effect it would have on a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl if she read this account of sex with Linda Lovelace – I looked at the judge and he was hiding his nose under his notebook and giggling. I said, 'Would you mind

telling the jury whether it would have a different effect on a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl than it is clearly having on a seventy-three-year-old judge?’ He wasn’t very pleased. I think the English are likely to be more moralistic about sex for some reason. I don’t know why that should be. And violence? Every kind of violence is already in Shakespeare. It’s full of violence and sex. I once went to see the official censor, the Lord Chamberlain, and I said, ‘Is there any subject you would censor irrespective of how it was done?’ He said, ‘Regicide.’ I looked at him and said, ‘What about *Hamlet*?’

5D: What would the world be like today if you hadn’t won?

JM: Someone would have won. Someone.

5D: How does a society stay tolerant?

JM: I think we are staying tolerant.

5D: But aren’t you worried we’re becoming a bit more conservative these days?

JM: Are we? When I think of a Conservative government I think that is a bit worrying. Except the Labour Party has become so conservative. You must be vigilant. You’ve got something very precious here, precious freedoms. Don’t let them get thrown away in little bits. I suppose some of the greatest literature in the world has been produced in censorious periods – you can’t stop literature, really – but we don’t need censorious periods for great books.

5D: What issues are you interested in now?

JM: The issues I think of these days are the Labour Party’s assault on the law. The fact you can be imprisoned for however many days without being put on trial. Witnesses can be stood behind screens so no one knows who they are. All these little things

that make the English law so unique are being dropped by the Labour Party. That’s obscene.

5D: Why do you think today’s writers aren’t writing about those issues?

JM: I am writing about them. I don’t think other writers are quite conscious of what’s going on.

5D: How are you tackling these issues?

JM: I’m writing a Rumpole book, naturally. You have to set out on the assumption that there’s nothing you can’t write about. If anyone tells you anything different you fight them. You fight them and keep fighting them.



5D: What effect do you hope this new book will have?

JM: I don’t know. I don’t set out to convert people. I don’t really hope for anything, except that they might enjoy the book. If the ideas get absorbed, then that’s fine.

5D: What effect did seeing all that obscene material have on you over the years?

JM: I was mildly amused. Mildly. (Pause.) Have you had a drink yet?

5D: I haven’t.

JM: You must. Is anyone in the kitchen? He’s had nothing to drink, this poor man. Glass of champagne?

5D: Yes.

JM: And did you see the garden?

5D: I was shown the garden when I came.

JM: The garden’s rather good. There are so many apples. The pigs eat some of them.

5D: I went to see the pigs. They seemed to be very happy.

JM: They get out, they get lost. It’s chaos. Wonderful chaos.

5D: You’ve changed your glasses. You don’t have the big glasses any longer.

JM: No, what do you think?

5D: They’re a good choice.

JM: I used to have big round ones. I have different ones now. My eye doctor was taking out my cataract or whatever it was. I said, ‘I can’t chat to you but I’ll say Othello’s final speech.’ So I said to him, ‘I pray you, in your letters / When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught

in malice: then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well.’ And he then gave me a speech out of *Richard II*. We went through this entire operation not quoting Shakespeare but giving chunks of Shakespeare to each other. My eyes have changed, you see. Mind you, everything has changed. ♦

‘I don’t know how to put the genie back in’

Baroness Ann Mallalieu

Ann Mallalieu was the first female president of the Cambridge Union Society and worked as a trainee presenter for Yorkshire Television before being called to the bar in 1970. She worked with John Mortimer on numerous occasions. In 1991 she became a life peer as Baroness Mallalieu and went on to defend in cases dealing with consent and personal choice, including R v Brown, the House of Lords case on the extent to which a person can consent to injury. She spoke to Five Dials on her mobile phone from the Chilterns, within a couple of miles from John Mortimer’s home.

ANN MALLALIEU: In the 1970s we had a great spate of cases. I did some on my own, but John Mortimer was my leader on others. I suspect I was instructed to defend because he thought the mixed jury were more likely to accept the arguments if there was a woman barrister telling them it was perfectly all right. Such was the amount of money available that the top silks in the profession were involved in this sort of work. Publishers could go for who they took to be the best, so they went for John Mortimer.

If John was leading me in a case involving film, and he had to actually be there, he’d take his glasses off or he’d send me in to sit through the whole thing. He took the view that they’d say, ‘If that nice young girl can sit there and watch these films they must be all right.’ I’d come out blinking into the daylight, thinking, ‘What are all these people doing with clothes on?’

FIVE DIALS: How did you feel being put in that role?

AM: To some extent I shared John’s views that none of this stuff should have been prosecuted. A certain camaraderie developed around these cases, and we all got pretty insensitive to the whole matter. It was sometimes quite difficult to anticipate how a jury, coming fresh to the material, would take it.

There were some extremely unpleasant films. At one stage we had to watch some that were very scatological and John made

an excuse that he had to be somewhere else. The jury was told if you’re going to be sick just run out of that door and you’ll find the loo. The men on the juries were normally the most squeamish. It was the men who sat with their eyes covered, looking down, unable to watch, whereas the women who were used to changing nappies didn’t seem the slightest bit perturbed. I think they had a much higher threshold for that sort of stuff.

Deep Throat was one of many films we had to defend in the Old Bailey. All the barristers defending had to see the material. There were so many barristers we had projectors all around the courtroom and the film being shown simultaneously on every wall in the court. Wherever you looked, still more strange activity.

5D: Did John give you any advice when you were working with him?

AM: John was a very undemanding leader. I don’t remember him ever asking me to do anything. I learned by watching him. He had superb timing – he was an actor *manqué* – so he’d have the jury eating out of his hand. Quite often at the end of the case, when it was all over, jurors would come up and ask for his autograph. I was so keen and enthusiastic, I’d prepare pages of notes about the law and pages of suggestions for the final speech for which he’d thank me very courteously. Then he’d proceed to make exactly the speech he intended to make.

John’s great forte was making people laugh. If the jury were laughing you knew you were home and dry. It was important to get the jury looking down on the prosecution as being rather out of date and out of touch with life. Once there was a magazine John and I were defending, a sort of flagellation magazine called *Spank*. The prosecution said, ‘This is not upright sex’ and from that moment on John latched on to the phrase and the poor prosecutor was branded as the champion of ‘upright sex’. The words meant something entirely different when John said them. Every time

the phrase came out the jury laughed again. The poor prosecutor’s case was completely finished after that.

John made pretty much the same speech about liberty on every occasion. It implied the prosecution weren’t civilized and couldn’t see this was really not of any great significance. We used to call a team of experts, a strange crew, who would turn up at every case and give expert opinion on why the work wasn’t contrary to Christianity and why it didn’t do anybody any harm. Looking back now, it seems utterly crazy because none of those sorts of films would be prosecuted at all today.

5D: Was it necessary to defend everything you defended?

AM: I have a mixed view looking back over the years because I don’t think you can frame the law – as somebody said in a case, and I’m paraphrasing – according to the sensitivities of a delicately brought up fourteen-year-old schoolgirl. On the whole I think people should be allowed to choose what they see. I don’t think any adult of sound mind should be prevented from seeing and reading whatever they want. But they shouldn’t have it put in places where it’s going to hit them in the eye if they don’t want it to.

I am troubled by the enormous growth of internet pornography. We could never have anticipated how it would lead to such levels of addiction. I’ve come across cases in recent years where this is plainly so – people are spending hours and hours viewing and paying for pornographic material which is now available in our homes. The people who were the recipients of the stuff we were looking at had to go out of their way to visit clubs or find places where they could buy magazines.

Also, I’m not sure we’ve advanced very far from those days in our general sexualization of women. That’s what all those magazines are about. Although people say, ‘Oh, that’s pretty harmless, the stuff you see in the newsagents,’ I think we should have moved on from that stage to actually looking at what people are, rather than what they appear to be. It’s led to a very considerable degree of unhappiness.

5D: Would your attitude have changed if the prosecution had argued that what you were defending would lead to an addiction to internet porn?

AM: I would have wanted to be convinced of it, and at that time I wouldn't have been. Now I am. You get people saying you must close down these sites involving children. That is only the tip of the iceberg. There's a real problem for adults, and I think that will come to be recognized.

What I don't want is complete censorship of everything. I don't want to censor, providing the choice is voluntary and not put into the faces of people who don't want to see it or vulnerable people, by which I really mean children. But I do think there is a real problem with the internet and the lack of control. People concentrate on paedophilia, but I think there are a great many vulnerable people who are a lot older who are having their lives badly affected.

SD: It touches on that idea of control and how much control should be allowed.

AM: It does. It certainly does. I suspect you oughtn't be able to access stuff unless you make considerable effort and probably pay money to do so. I don't know how you put the genie back in the bottle. People are not aware how addictive some of this stuff is. Back then you'd have to go and find the shops and seek out the magazines and the contacts.

SD: Is passivity the dangerous ingredient?

AM: No matter how something affronts you the first time you see it, when you see it day in, day out you do tend to find yourself somewhat changing your attitude.

SD: Did you feel any backlash from feminists? Did anyone at the time say you were helping to put forward material that was denigrating to women?

AM: Certainly not at the bar. I wasn't aware of that at all. I don't think I felt that myself, in fact I'm sure I didn't. I'm not sure why, perhaps I was looking at it in too simplistic a way.

Some of it was extremely exploitative, but equally some of it was almost *Sex and the City* with bells on. The Linda Lovelace films, for example – Linda Lovelace, or the characters she played, appeared to be in total control in the films. It was not somebody being forced to do things they didn't want to do. It was somebody taking

control and, in a sense, exploiting men.

A lot of the works were frankly just good fun and you wouldn't be offended, or at least I don't think you would. There was a wonderful *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* cartoon film we had to defend where all the dwarves had enormous erections. It was just funny. I remember one we had a great trial with. It was a medieval costume drama set on a castle's walls, and everyone was wearing suits of armour or the ladies were wearing those long hats with plumes and things, then they took them all off and the usual activities took place. The credits went up and it was called *Cumalot*. When the jury saw that they all laughed and we knew we were on our way to an acquittal.

Later on – and it wasn't with John, but later on when I was in silk – I defended in a sadomasochist case. Some of that was pretty horrible stuff, but it was all consensual. I've never come across a snuff movie or anything along those lines, but I have defended cases where people were actually harming one another but it was consensual. My view was that it wasn't exploitation; it was just that these were rather sad people who were unfortunate enough to only find gratification by watching and doing these bizarre things.

SD: John was of the firm belief censorship is gone. Is it gone or has it just changed to suit our time?

AM: We haven't worked out how we deal with offences concerning children at all. We go in with a sledgehammer and what we do then is break up families. We don't know how to deal with it properly.

I think John was wrong. I think censorship does still take place. Censorship is certainly there almost to the point of paranoia. You've only got to suggest there's a child involved in anything and the full force of the law comes down on you. I'm not sure to what extent violence is being prosecuted now. There was a time when things had moved from sex on to violence. It hasn't gone. It's just changed its emphasis and moved away from sex to offences involving children and, to a lesser extent, now violence.

SD: What about words?

AM: Our relationship to words has changed very much since those trials. The concentra-

tion is on the visual image, and I would very much doubt that any book published by a reputable publisher would be prosecuted now. I can't quite imagine what it would be, unless it was some glorification of one of those things that are regarded as complete taboos like sex with children. I think the authorities have steered right away from anything that could be said to have any literary merit. I suppose it would be possible to be shocked by a book if you've got some imagination, but, a book is more difficult, on the whole, to be shocked by. A book involves an interaction with your mind. Visual images just have to hit you in the face.

SD: What were we scared of back then?

AM: As the prosecution put it there were two things. Firstly, there seemed to be a belief that you only had to watch a couple of these films and you would start trying to imitate the behaviour there would be a breakdown of traditional morality. Secondly, they also thought they were trying to protect young people, particularly. We do make mistakes in those sorts of areas, I think noticeably on drugs. It's no good trying to warn young people about the evils of drugs because they know more about drugs than the adults. The more you tell people not to do things, the more they actually do them.

Those were the fears we had and I think all that's changed to some extent. We have abandoned the idea that you only have to get sight of an image or read a passage from *Lady Chatterley*, or the equivalent, to have a breakdown of the social order.

SD: Have you thought about how the law succeeds in protecting the vulnerable but still respects free speech?

AM: I'm not there yet but I certainly think that I will, at some stage, when somebody gets round to trying to face up to it, be in favour of a greater restriction in so far as it's possible to impose the law upon what goes out on the internet.

SD: Do you think there would be people who would fight against you at that time in favour of freedom of imagery, in much the same way you fought for freedom of speech?

AM: At the moment there would, but I'm not sure that when, as I believe increasing-

ly, people see that there is enormous damage done [by internet addictions] that that will necessarily be so. I think it is a real, serious, growing problem. At the moment we talk about addictions as drink and drugs, but I think there are addictions to the internet which are every bit as damaging and which are, on the whole, concealed because you don't see the immediate physical effects. But the effect of breakdown on lives and families, I think, is a growing one, and when that is recognized people will feel we've got to take some steps here – in a way they have with child pornography

and trying to shut down those sites. It's probably impossible to do at the moment, but I'm sure there will be a technology in due course which will enable it to be done. We do face such restrictions in our lives, many of which I disagree with, but that I'm sure is at some stage something the state will feel it ought to do.

China blocks all sorts of things. And so we'll find the free world blocks all sorts of stuff. There'll always be people trying to find ways around it and no doubt succeeding. At the moment we don't even begin to try.

5D: Wouldn't that sort of block set the stage for another John Mortimer to come through and make his case again?

AM: I wonder. I think John, in a way, was a one-off. John didn't believe in any rules of any sort but that's anarchy, and attractive though it is in a straightforward and clear argument, I wonder... John was of his time, I think, which was a time when things were opening up. I think they're beginning to close down now. They go in cycles. Maybe there will be another John. I expect not. ◇

THE OBSCENITY ISSUE

'We're moving into restrictive times'

John Calder

John Calder was the British publisher of Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs and others. He was at the vanguard of changing attitudes to what was acceptable in print in the 1960s, championing freedom of expression, and a free press, during several high-profile court cases. In 1966 Calder convinced John Mortimer, then a divorce lawyer, to take his first obscenity trial in defense of the graphic depictions of sex and drugs in Hubert Selby's *Last Exit To Brooklyn*.

Now 82, Calder has relinquished his publishing house. By day he occupies a cluttered desk in the basement of his South London bookshop not far from his flat. When we met he had just returned from Ireland, touring Beckett's *Endgame*, and was preparing a short lecture on Dylan Thomas for an upcoming event at the shop. — Jakob von Baeyer

FIVE DIALS: What causes you offence?

JOHN CALDER: Things to do with cruelty. I've always been more interested in the political side of things than the moral ones. I've never really looked to be attacked, you know.

5D: Was *Tropic of Cancer* the first time one of your books was on trial?

JC: No, that was the one I got away with. The trials I prepared for were the trials that didn't happen. *Tropic of Cancer* didn't happen and William S. Burroughs, which I

thought very likely, didn't happen either.

Tropic of Cancer came along two years after the Chatterley trial in 1960. I had invited Henry Miller to Edinburgh and he got such a standing ovation I was persuaded the time had come to publish him in Britain. He was loved all over the world, and in America. I wrote to a considerable number of people – Graham Greene, Bertrand Russell, Evelyn Waugh – to ask would they be willing to appear as witnesses, then I sent a list of sixty or seventy names to the Director of Public Prosecutions saying I was going to publish this book, saying it was out in America, it was out in Germany, France and so on, saying it was nonsense that such a major novel could not be published in Britain because of our outdated censorship laws. I said if they wanted to take action I would withhold publication until after a trial because I didn't want to get booksellers into trouble. But that there was this long list of witnesses willing to appear in court for them to see.

A month went by and not one word, so I went ahead. I could only find one printer willing to print the book and all he could print was 10,000 copies. Ten days before publication, I finally got a letter from the Director of Public Prosecutions saying they were not going to prosecute. I kept this letter to myself.

On publication day, on the evening news on the BBC, I heard that a long

line of people were collecting outside of Foyles [the independent bookshop on Charing Cross Road] to get hold of the book before it was banned. And the queue got to be over a mile long. I didn't tell anyone about the letter from the DPP, of course, because I wanted to keep the excitement going. We sold 160,000 copies in hardcover.

5D: The issue here was the depiction of sex?

JC: He was just very frank about his sexual life. You've got to remember that until the Obscene Publications Act, which was in 1959, the word 'fuck' in a book would be enough for it to be prosecuted. You'd expect the jury to automatically condemn it for one word like that.

5D: What other words or phrases were forbidden?

JC: Simple Anglo-Saxon words which you heard around you all the time. But in print – oh, horrors. And you could not bring a witness in to court to go into the literary merits of the work. The Obscene Publications Act of 1959 allowed, for the first time, the defence to bring witnesses into court.

5D: But there was a real trial in 1964 for Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book*?

JC: *Cain's Book* had extremely good reviews but it was not a national case. It was a bookseller in Sheffield, a sort of backstreet bookseller, who had a large stock of borderline books seized. But they did seize *Cain's Book* as well. The book had

had good reviews and had been selling for a while, but the sales had declined at this point and were due a new boost, so I decided to defend it. A few of us went up to Sheffield. Unfortunately Trocchi insisted on coming. Trocchi just made every kind of trouble. I said, 'Books don't corrupt people, they just inform them.' And Trocchi went into the witness box after me and said, 'I totally disagree with my publisher. If I didn't think that books affected people I wouldn't bother to write them.' He went out of his way to be as provocative as possible. The magistrate found against it. They probably would have anyway. That was the kind of people they were.

JD: The obscenity here was the depiction of drug use?

JC: Yes. There wasn't much sex but there were detailed descriptions of shooting up heroin into your arm and all that, and what a man feels when he is doing it. It was autobiographical. Trocchi was Britain's best-known drug addict at the time, but in those days, you see, it was legal. You got a prescription daily if you were a registered addict. There were only two or three hundred people in the country who were registered.

The court found against the book. We appealed in the High Court in London and the appeal went against us, whereupon it became illegal to describe a description of drug taking, meaning that it could be prosecuted from there on. We went on selling the book. Not in Sheffield, of course, but quietly, and it just went on selling because of its general reputation. It went on selling quite well for years.

But then came the *Last Exit To Brooklyn* case. That was purely the result of a Billy Graham campaign. He came over and did [the television show] *Big Breakfast*; he used to take the Albert Hall and have these big Christian rallies there. Everybody would come forward to be saved. It was all very fundamentalist. He said a book was coming out that he would like to see prosecuted. He picked on Selby just because he had recently been published, but *Last Exit* wasn't any stronger than most other books. There were, however, descriptions of incidents of homosexuality.

They won. I said we must appeal and was told there's no sense appealing against a jury trial. So I went to see John Mor-

timer, who was a friend, and had tea at his house. I said, 'Look, the lawyers I've got just don't understand the issues here, but you do. You're a writer. Would you lead an appeal for us?' And with some reluctance he agreed. He said, 'Well, I've mainly been a divorce lawyer up until now.' I said, 'Yes, but you are an intellectual and a writer, and you understand the issues.' He was brilliant. The appeal judges found for us, so we won in the end. But that took over two years.

JD: What was the substance of the argument of the appeal?

JC: The main thing was that the judge had not explained literary merit sufficiently well to the jury. There were three appeal points, but that was the main one. There were no witnesses in appeal court. It was purely legal argument between the two barristers. After that, of course, Mortimer was the first name everyone thought of.

JD: What have we gained from the trials of this time?

JC: The sixties was an age of reform. You had one bill after another. Law reform came in, capital punishment was brought to an end, censorship in the theatre was brought to an end. There were all these Liberal reforms, one after another, with the Wilson government. It was also the first time young people had money in their pockets – you didn't have to work so hard and life was easier. In the years before, there obviously was sex around but it was kept very, very quiet. People didn't talk about their private lives much. Then everything just exploded. And, of course, the older generation reacted against it eventually, and that was Thatcher. Now things are changing again. I think we're ultimately going to go back to the fifties again, to the sort of era like in 1947 when things were rationed and short.

JD: Thinking as a publisher, are there words or phrases that may offend?

JC: No, not me personally. What people are more worried about today is what goes on on the internet. I certainly kept things away from children. I published *Tropic of Cancer* for twenty-five shillings, which was quite a lot of money in those days.

Most hardcover novels were about twelve to fifteen shillings. Twenty-five shillings was a pretty hefty price, but we did it deliberately, because it wasn't money that anybody young would have to spend on a book. But then Henry Miller's agent came over and wanted me to sell the paperback rights straight away. I said it's not advisable; only adults are buying and if it's in paperback everyone will be able to get hold of it. But he put great pressure on me, so in the end I had to sell the paperback rights, reluctantly, because the hardcover was selling so well.

JD: How did this affect you as a publisher of 'obscene' books?

JC: In the sixties I had a series of bestsellers. They were not particularly typical of what we were publishing. We were publishing a rather intellectual, literary list with a lot of translations – people like Samuel Beckett, the French *nouveau roman*, and so on, which sold, but not particularly well.

JD: Did the marketing appeal of 'obscene' books drive sales?

JC: No doubt about it – anything that had been forbidden. People liked reading about sex, I suppose. It got them excited or interested. But then that gradually died down and now it's rather taken for granted. Interestingly, at a certain period there was a lot of behaviour that was perfectly legal and nobody could touch you whatever you were doing. But writing about it was illegal.

JD: What would it take today to have a book taken to trial for obscenity?

JC: The times we're moving into are going to be restrictive in a lot of ways. Civil liberties are being eroded here right now. We all know that. That means some books – political books – are going to come under attack. Whether or not they go back to worrying about obscenity again, I would guess more restrictive attitudes may follow.

I read *The Satanic Verses* long before the fuss started. I didn't see anything in it. I found it a rather amusing book in a lot of ways. And then he [Salman Rushdie] was threatened with death and some of his publishers and translators were murdered.

I can remember going into a bookshop in Manchester one day and finding the whole place totally smashed up because they'd been selling the book. I think we're going to see a lot more of that now.

JD: The new line is not sex or drugs, but religion?

JC: Fundamentalism is coming back everywhere and it's going to be trouble. Violence has started again in Northern Ireland. I was up there a little while ago in Enniskillen, a nice town, and the people I spoke to said things were over with. They've ended. They haven't. They're coming back. There are always a few fanatics, people who like trouble. I think from now on it's going to be political and ideological conflicts between different racial or faith groups.

JD: Are you tempted to get involved and to publish things which challenge where that line is?

JC: Well I'm well over eighty now. I've stopped publishing myself. I can only recommend. I never really looked for trouble, it sort of came. But when it comes you have to defend yourself.

Actually, I was very often asked to debate with Mary Whitehouse about censorship. I got to know her very well. In the end she was pretty unshockable, anyhow. Once we debated in a town hall in Birmingham against each other. She packed the place with her supporters who were all waving Bibles at me. It was a dreadful night. It was pouring with rain, and winter, and I was wondering how I was going to get to the station and back to London. Suddenly Mr Whitehouse, her husband, asked, 'Are you looking for a taxi? Would you like a lift to the station?' I said, Mr Whitehouse I really would. On the way he said, 'You know, tonight you were quite reasonable. Perhaps you'll begin to see things our way.' Well I wasn't going to argue with

him. I said, you never know. I'm always willing to listen to every point of view. [Laughter.]

I remember one debate, somewhere like Leeds, out in the open air. John Trevelyan, the film censor, who was also a friend of mine, was with Mary Whitehouse arguing against me. And I remember her saying 'And doesn't Mr Calder realize that sex and violence are exactly the same thing?' There was a man in the front row who had fallen asleep who suddenly woke up and yelled: 'Nonsense, woman!' and everybody laughed.

All the university debating societies invited me, and it was very often Mary Whitehouse debating against me, or a right-wing journalist. I always argued the case as I saw it, and I always used to win. But then I began losing because she would pack the place with her supporters. Opinion was changing anyhow. Thatcherite days were beginning. I was asked to talk a lot in those days. ◇

THE OBSCENITY ISSUE

'There aren't any rules any more'

Art Spiegelman

Art Spiegelman is often credited as the father of the graphic novel. Famously, his two-volume Holocaust comic Maus, in which Jews are drawn as mice and Nazis as cats, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Spiegelman's early interest in the potential of comics, like the lurid and exciting panels he discovered in Tales from the Crypt, was scuppered by a restrictive Comic's Code in fifties America. He later became part of the taboo-breaking underground comics community which thrived in San Francisco in the sixties and seventies.

Spiegelman was in London to promote a re-issue of Breakdowns, one of his experimental strips from the seventies. I met him in his Soho hotel room on a rainy night. His only demand was that he could chain smoke throughout our interview.

— JvB

FIVE DIALS: How have the boundaries of obscenity been defined in comics?

ART SPIEGELMAN: In America there are specific rules about what's obscene. For

example, the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] has determined that certain words cannot be said on the radio. Certain things couldn't be in bookshops for a long time. The reason I thought my book *Breakdowns* could not even be republished is because I was working with obscene drawings.

JD: Have you ever set out to create a deliberately obscene image?

AS: Yes, I did. In 1965 I was a high school kid, inspired by *MAD* magazine, who wanted to be a cartoonist of some kind. I just didn't know what kind of comics I wanted to make. By the end of high school I was offered a newspaper strip, but that was the kind of cartoonist I didn't want to be. I thought it would be like being invited into a tomb every day for the rest of my life. I saw the first issue of the *East Village Other* — an underground newspaper with rotten drawings in it — so I went over

with my portfolio, feeling that it was better than anything they published, and told them I wanted to do comics.

I was already beginning to do surreal comics with no punch lines, but without the context of underground comics around me. I was groping for something. I went up to see the editor and he said, 'You got anything with some sex and drugs in it?' I was a seventeen-year-old kid. I just didn't know that much about sex and drugs.

So I went to college to avoid the draft and look into sex and drugs some more so I could come back with appropriate material. By the time I came back the underground comics thing had really started with Robert Crumb as its avatar, and with [comic artist] S. Clay Wilson egging Crumb on to greater depredations like Captain Pissgums and his Pervert Pirates, Ruby and the Dykes, and these intense George Grosz-inspired, totally congested pictures of every obscenity that could be drawn in defiance of the Comics Code that censored comics in the fifties in America. It was in that context I began doing underground comics. These guys were slightly older, and more sophisticated and advanced than me, so I tried to draw the most obscene comics I could make. I

succeeded in totally terrifying R. Crumb's wife. She wouldn't let me in the house.

Let's say it was before I found my voice. I didn't yet know where atrocity lay in my own life, so it got projected elsewhere.

There was an issue of *Zap* comic that was pretty much purged from all the bookshops and led to some crippling lawsuits for the booksellers. One sweet Robert Crumb drawing called 'The Family That Lays Together Stays Together' showed parents, grandchildren and animals all fucking in a tableau in typical Crumb style. That was definitely the one that blew the whistle. There was a very specific line that one couldn't cross at the time, which was photographically representational images of organs that depicted penetration. That was the marginal line that has long since been crossed. But at that moment it was a clear definition. You didn't get to explain context. It's the same thing that maybe James Joyce had to deal with when his book [*Ulysses*] was coming out and had the word 'fuck' in it. The visualization of highly representational

images was the buzzer that would set cops on your trail.

My book *Breakdowns* didn't have a very wide public when it came out. There was a lot more interest in it after *Maus*. My publisher heard about *Breakdowns* and my editor at Pantheon said, 'What's this *Breakdowns* thing?' I showed it to him and he said, 'Oh, we could publish that.' I said, 'You can? But what about this?' and I showed him the panels that to me still represented the forbidden. He looked at me and said, 'What, the naughty bits?' I felt really old. I felt like a hick. And as I said at the time, and wrote in my afterword, I know we live somewhere between Janet Jackson's tit and Paris Hilton's clit, but I don't know exactly where.

These colliding agendas exist now. On one hand there are absurd fences being built but on the other hand one can see anything, anything – a suicide, as I just saw listed on one of the news sites, that someone put on Facebook. You can see people fucking any creature that has an aperture large enough. The divisions

between what can be seen and what cannot be seen are changing.

Clearly, what's obscene are dead bodies in Iraq. That's harder to see. At least in America, and without really great Googling skills, those images aren't entered into the bloodstream. For me that is actual obscenity – atrocity photos, or something that can either exist as evidence or can exist as horrifying titillation for people. That would be genuinely obscene.

SD: How do you think we arrived at this point?

AS: I don't think there are any rules any more, or any rules that are understandable. Usually the rules would have to do with means of distribution. Other than that whatever you could manage to get a hold of and keep private was yours to deal with as you may. But in mainstream media, in television and radio, there are limits, usually arbitrary, and there's usually someone trying to push at them, to figure out what can and can't be said or shown. One of the places where this limit sits is at exactly those images by Robert Crumb that we were talking about, when a representation of an adult is fucking with a representation of a kid. That, in and of itself, is enough to land somebody in jail. Which is strange because it's a representation. My moral indignation at certain things is trumped by my moral indignation at when things are stopped being said.

I can't think of too much that's as obscene as the government that I lived under for the last eight years in terms of its disregard for life, its greed, its stupidity. It's been an obscene eight years. On the other hand, that's because it exists in the world of actions. If there's some kind of fevered, dreaming, mad, sadistic inner life of Karl Rove, if he had turned into some sort of Genet-like novelist, I could have lived with it. It's just when it began to create real blood and gore and bodies and dispossession, disenfranchisement. That's what gets me mad.

I come from this Lenny Bruce-like, First Amendment, absolutist place where it can all be said. When it becomes more than said it has to be looked at again. But if it can't be said, maybe it has too much power? Because that which can't be said still gets whispered, and at that point it roils and infects. ◇



‘The culture wars are coming back’

Jello Biafra

Jello Biafra knows more about the long arm of censorship than most: In 1986 the former Dead Kennedys singer was charged by the LA deputy city attorney with ‘Distribution of Harmful Matter to Minors’, placing him squarely in the first group of people in America ever to face criminal charges over a record. In the heyday of Tipper Gore’s organization, the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC), and their burgeoning ‘Tipper sticker’ album-rating system, Biafra set himself apart as a louder voice in the fray, fighting censorship (and the religious right) via his increasingly public trial, his music and a discography of spoken word albums that now span two decades.

Biafra’s underlying philosophy might be summarized as this: Question Authority. His spoken word rants are instantly recognizable for their volatile content, complete with call-outs of elected officials. His delivery style is a mix of vocal twang and vaudevillian energy and though his dark, curly hair is a little thinner up top now and he’s thicker in the middle, his face and voice carry the same animation and vitriol as of old: during his days in the Dead Kennedys he wore spray-painted t-shirts; during his 50th birthday party show he dived shirtless into the crowd.

From the hugely influential Dead Kennedys to his new venture, JB and His Axis of Merry Evildoers; from a run for mayor in San Francisco in ’79 to being tapped as a presidential candidate by the New York state Greens in 2000, Biafra has kept the politics in punk and the punk in politics.
— Colin Whyte

JELLO BIAFRA: If you’re recording we have to make sure it’s working.

FIVE DIALS: I checked already by phoning some people before you, so I think we’re all right.

JB: *Check it again . . .* I don’t want it to be like *SPIN Magazine* who interviewed me and Ice-T together about the Rodney King riots and then brought the tape to New York and it was blank . . . that’s what I want to avoid.

JD: I hear you. Was your move from music into spoken word and more straight-up politics catalysed by your own experience

with censorship?

JB: It added fuel to the fire. When the LAPD charges came down I realized I was Tipper Gore’s pigeon. I became an interview machine. I was practically losing my mind because of the pressure of going through a trial in court and thinking the whole future of the music industry might be on my back – whether they were helping me or not – so I could not fuck up. In the end two good things happened: I got to meet and spend time with Frank Zappa and suddenly, instead of spoken word readings in little coffee houses, I was brought into universities as a supposed ‘censorship expert’ to, quote–unquote, ‘lecture’ to the students. But I’ve always hated the concept of lectures, so they got the spoken word show instead.

JD: It’s a great platform.

JB: It also meant that there are sections on one of my spoken word albums that explain the sordid, ugly details of who was funding the Parents’ Music Resource Center. The co-founder of the PMRC was also on the board of Focus on the Family at the time and Focus remains the leading Christian Right hate group in this country. One of the things the PMRC wanted red-flagged when it came to music ratings was homosexual content.

JD: That and the occult and the classic seven words you can’t say on television.

JB: Then when Public Enemy and Ice-T and N.W.A. got popular, Tipper and crew had a field day because then they could play the race card, just like the people who got rock ’n’ roll thrown off the radio in the late 1950s. *Oh my God, your children! Your nice, precious, suburban children! The devil!* The guy with the horns only scares so many suburban white parents, but you start bringing in the horror that their children might be listening to political music made by – gasp! – *black people* who are talking in very graphic ways about what it’s

like to grow up poor in the richest country on earth . . . we can’t have that!

JD: You did a lot of the work of exposing what was going on in courtrooms and senate chambers and presented it in a way that was entertaining, meaning young people would tune in and learn what was going on. Did you see your role that way at the time, as a kind of translator or jester?

JB: Um, I don’t think jester is quite the right word.

JD: In the sense of poking fun at the king?

JB: I used to be a little self-conscious when so many people got down on my lyrics in Dead Kennedys, saying, *You shouldn’t be such a preacher, you’re going over the line*, but it didn’t really make me back down. But then, when the so-called ‘culture wars’ began in earnest, it coincided with all kinds of buyouts and hostile takeovers of mass media outlets when the merger and takeover laws were deregulated by the Reagan regime.

JD: What was the result of mergers?

JB: Corporate-owned mass media became deliberately dumbed down in order to use the news to sell more products and keep people in the dark. And as Chuck D put it when people were grilling him on the lyrics of Public Enemy: *We are the new CNN*. I took that very seriously and thought it’s not just hip hop where you need to tell people what’s going on. All artists need to tell people what’s going on because if we don’t, who will? So then, by the time the Gulf War broke out, mainstream corporate media in this country was way more openly biased than I had ever seen them before. I, of course, went ballistic at a time when a lot of people were afraid to say anything and I realized that the ‘Talk on Censorship’ at the spoken word shows didn’t need to be confined to Tipper Gore and religious Right hate groups anymore. I could talk about anything I wanted and, in all likelihood, it was things that were not getting reported in mainstream news.

JD: What aspects of the censorship debate in the USA do you think we should consider ‘settled’ at this point?

JB: Is it ever settled?

JD: Well it seems, at least, like the religious Right is a less obvious boogeyman now.

JB: Whoa, well they've been more successful at penetrating the mainstream. And as much as people recoiled in horror and laughed at Sarah Palin, when I saw her speech at the Republican Convention I gasped in horror: *A star is born!*

So are any parts of this argument dead? No. I think the dramatic dumbing down of the news media in the United States is the worst form of censorship going on today. Corporations deliberately omitting key parts of the story or forgetting to report the story altogether – that got us into Iraq and now we can't get out. And that's far more dangerous than Tipper Gore or Focus on the Family. I mean, real people are getting killed because of this every day.

The so-called Culture Wars were quieter when Bush was in office, in part because there were way nastier things that were scaring the shit out of people. But they're going to come back. And one of the people that I fear is going to bring them back is Barack Obama. He said during his campaign that if people who make video games don't crack down on the content of those games then 'my administration will.' I mean, all three of the major candidates had an agenda against freedom of speech if you go back far enough.

Several times there's been a bill intro-

duced in Congress called the Media, Marketing & Accountability Act which would introduce a federally mandated sticker to rate sexual content, level of violence, how patriotically incorrect art is or whatever and it would be a one-size-fits-all system for music, movies, DVDs and games. And anybody who did not 'voluntarily' adopt the rating system and slap it on their products – their products would automatically become illegal. If you tried to sell something without the mark the Federal Trade Commission could then fine you \$11,000 per unit sold *per day*. Luckily that bill has never even made it out of committee every time it's popped up, but the last time it was introduced another sponsor was added: Hillary Clinton.

Part of the reason the PMRC faded away was that who needed the PMRC when you had the Bush Administration and a corporate media willing to do anything the Bush Administration wanted, including bullying anybody who opposed the war on terror or any part of the invasion of Iraq. You'll notice how they vilified the Dixie Chicks and even attacked Sheryl Crow for having a peace sign on her guitar strap at the Grammy Awards – my God, you'd think she wanted to blow up a building or something! I could almost forgive her for all her horrible music. And the message was: 'Pop culture figures should not express political opinions because they're abusing their visibility and popularity in the marketplace.' You know – 'Artists must not be political.' Unless, of course, they're [country singer]

Toby Keith or Arnold Schwarzenegger or Mel Gibson – then it's OK . . .

JD: What do you think, right now, is the main mechanism by which moral standards are enforced in the USA?

JB: I'm not sure there is a main mechanism. It comes in layers. I mean, nowadays what's creeping me out is how people – not just young people but mainly young people – feel like their lives are not valid except based on how they advertise themselves on Facebook or MySpace. You have to advertise yourself or you don't exist.

JD: Who do you view as the custodians of taste these days?

JB: Same as it's been for generations: Hollywood. And that goes for corporate McNews, as well. It's getting harder and harder to tell the difference between the news and *Entertainment Tonight*.

[Since *Five Dials* is a publication produced in the UK], readers in Britain need to realize that part of the reason Americans are so ignorant and so dumb and so insensitive about some things, such as the way Israel treats Palestine, is because our corporate media is so dumbed down . . . Let me put it this way: About five days after 11 September 2001, I flew over to Europe for a spoken word tour and I was just *stunned* at the difference in quality between the European media's coverage [of 9/11] and the American media's coverage. There was so much more depth in Europe . . . so many more sides to the argument were allowed to be heard; and then I came back home and started talking to people about some of these things I'd found out and people hadn't heard about them at all.

I'll say it again. The worst kind of censorship going on today is McPapers regurgitating what advertisers and the government tell them to print. How do you fight back? 'Don't hate the media, become the media.' And that includes going one-on-one with people you know at home, work, school, family . . . They start spouting Rush Limbaugh/Sarah Palin bullshit or they're too blindly obedient to Obama without really checking to see what he's actually doing – don't just dismiss them as stupid or rednecks or unreachable – sit down and talk to them. If you don't, who will?



JD: Fox News?

JB: It may turn your stomach. You may get put down and ridiculed. But at least you planted some seeds. That's how we turned a majority of Americans against the war. It wasn't CBS, it wasn't MTV, it wasn't Lollapalooza – it was us. On top of that I tell people that there's large sections of the country now that have been so monopolized by the Clear Channels and the Disneys of the world that all people are exposed to are, you know, twenty crappy pop music tunes and, for political content, it's 'all assholes all the time'. Right-wing debating ultra Right-wing, and that's all they get. So in places like that . . . people who are in bigger cities or hipper college towns or whatever should encourage their

relatives and friends who live out in these other areas.

JD: You've got the war itself and this 'greater depression' looming, so how important is the fight against censorship in the grand scheme of things? Are there other things we should be fighting against first, say torture?

JB: I think you have to fight them all at once under the umbrella of human rights. I mean, you can't stop torture unless you have the *right* to agitate against torture and express yourself. But you have to use one to fight the other; you have to fight both at the same time. You use your freedom of speech to fight other assaults on human rights, because without human rights and

the right to free expression you can't fight global warming, you can't fight for animal rights or *anything* unless you have the right to express yourself.

JD: To question authority . . .

JB: Without fear of being taken away to some torture chamber or prison.

JD: Is it hard for you to tell who the bad guys are?

JB: Oh, for me it's actually quite easy . . . [Laughs.] Anybody with a wind-up key sticking out of their back saying, 'Corporations: please screw me so I can screw somebody else.' I think it's pretty obvious who they are. ◇

THE OBSCENITY ISSUE

'Censorship has now moved into the hands of the people'

Jerry Heller

Jerry Heller broke into the music industry in 1966, representing artists for a mobbed-up booking agency in Los Angeles. Heller went on to act for stars like Marvin Gaye and Van Morrison; he booked Elton John and Pink Floyd's first American tours. In 1987, he met Eric 'Eazy-E' Wright, a twenty-one-year-old drug dealer who wanted to rule the hip hop game. The unlikely duo became friends and business partners. They co-founded a gangsta rap label, Ruthless Records, and Heller agreed to manage Wright's band, Niggaz With Attitude.

In Heller's estimation, Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren and DJ Yella were no less than 'the black Beatles'. The band became US law enforcement's public enemy no. 1 upon the release of their 1988 album Straight Outta Compton. The song 'Fuck tha Police' had violent, anti-authoritarian lyrics; Heller says it provoked frequent run-ins with the LAPD and, in a letter of complaint from the FBI, N.W.A. was cited for obscenity after performing the song in Cincinnati, and nearly arrested for doing the same thing in Detroit. Their manager championed their right to freedom of speech at every turn.

N.W.A.'s last album was released in 1991. Eazy-E died in 1995 from complications related

to AIDS. Dr. Dre has become one of the most successful producers in hip hop history. Ice Cube (who painted Heller as the white devil of hip hop for skimming N.W.A.'s profits, although he has never pursued the allegation in a court of law) is now a Hollywood leading man. He continues to record gangsta rap, as does MC Ren. DJ Yella is the CEO of an adult film company based in Compton. Heller spoke to me about his experiences with the band on the phone from his home, northwest of Los Angeles. – Matthew McKinnon

JERRY HELLER: Alonzo Williams, who was the patron of the World Class Wreckin' Cru, and one of the most influential of the early West Coast rap impresarios and artists, was a close friend of mine. He kept saying to me, 'There's this guy who comes in my club, and I'd like you to meet him.' At the time, I was managing Egyptian Lover, the Wreckin' Cru, LA Dream Team, J.J. Fad and Bobby Jimmy and the Critters, so I was reasonably busy. Alonzo kept on me for a couple months, until I said, 'What's the story? Is this guy your brother-in-law or your cousin?' He said, 'No, he's a guy who comes in the club and spends money. He offered me \$750 to set up a meeting, and to be honest with you, I could use

it.' I said, 'OK, I'm going to be at Macola [Records, a Hollywood vinyl pressing plant] on Tuesday. Have the guy show up and I'll talk to him. Whatever.'

On 3 March 1987, a beautiful spring afternoon in Los Angeles, this tricked-out Suzuki Samurai pulled up. This little guy, Eric Wright, got out the driver's side. MC Ren was in the passenger seat. Eric was clean – pressed Levis, a cap with Jheri curls sticking out. Alonzo introduced us. Eric reached down in his sock, pulled out a roll of money and paid Alonzo \$750. I said to him, 'You got anything for me to hear?' He said, 'Yeah.' He didn't say, '*Oh man, I got this girl, and I got this guy, and I got this song, and this is my boy, and this is my this, and this is my that*' – the typical bullshit LA record business patter. He was willing to let his music do the talking.

We went inside and he put on 'Boyz-N-the-Hood'. I was flabbergasted. It blew my mind. When I asked Eric what the name of the band was, he said, 'N.W.A.' I said, 'What's it stand for, No Whites Allowed?' He laughed and said, 'Actually, that's pretty close.' I didn't know what it meant until I heard 'Straight Outta Compton' – '*Crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube, from the gang called Niggaz Wit' Attitude.*' I'm not sure the profanity was anything more than a vehicle to draw attention to the message, which was the anguished cry of what's happening in America's inner cities. I remember Gil Scott-Heron, I remember the Rolling Stones, I remember the Black

Panther Party. I thought to myself, this is a combination of those forces that's going to shock the world. I was willing to give up everything I was doing to go into business with Eric Wright.

FIVE DIALS: Right now I'm looking at a Polaroid of you standing in front of a house with your arm around Eazy. There's a sold sign on the lawn, and someone has printed 'The Wrong Hous [sic]' beneath the photo. Do you know why?

JH: That's the first house that Eazy bought, in Norwalk [south-east Los Angeles County]. I had never been there before. There were two or three new houses in a row, and we wound up taking the picture in front of the wrong one. It was a modest house, but it was especially meaningful to him, I think because it was the first time anyone in his family had really owned a home. It exemplified our relationship, that we were able to do that together early in his career.

JD: You look paternal.

JH: That was our relationship. It was very much father-son.

JD: In your book *Ruthless: A Memoir*, you wrote about representing Marvin Gaye in the 1960s. Were you still his agent when he released *Let's Get It On*, which became notorious for its sexual content, in 1973?

JH: No. But we had a close relationship; we were very good friends. There was some discussion about *Let's Get It On* when it came out, but nothing serious, because it wasn't so overt that it came to the attention of radio programmers. They seemed to be more lax toward black artists than they were to artists like the Rolling Stones. Marvin didn't throw sex in your face like Mick and Keith did with 'Let's Spend the Night Together', which is the first record I can remember that radio stations wouldn't play.

JD: There was nothing radio-friendly about N.W.A.

JH: I went to see Joe Smith when he was chairman of the board at Capitol and played him *Straight Outta Compton*. He looked at me and said, 'You know, Jerry,

you've got to stop getting high. This is too crazy. Nobody will ever listen to this, no radio station will ever play it, and certainly no one will ever buy it.' I said, 'Joe, I remember when radio stations wouldn't play "Let's Spend the Night Together" by the Stones – now Mick Jagger is Frank Sinatra. Things change, Joe. This is one of those times, one of those seminal albums that is going to forge a change in American culture.'

JD: Did you expect 'Fuck tha Police' would be labelled obscene?

JH: I'm a child of the sixties. I grew up with a president who was a crook, who put us into the most unpopular war in history, who had no communication with people under thirty. I had seen the Symbionese Liberation Army and the Panthers and the Diggers, I understood what they were about. I didn't think the authorities would perceive 'Fuck tha Police' as the kind of threat that they did with the Panthers, because the Panthers really scared them. But I thought they would find it distasteful, and I certainly never thought that radio would play it.

JD: Milt Ahlerich was an assistant director of the FBI when he wrote, 'Law enforcement officers dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens, and records such as the one from N.W.A. are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers' and, 'I wanted you to be aware of the FBI's position relative to ["Fuck tha Police"] and its message. I believe my views reflect the opinion of the entire law enforcement community.' Was his letter alarming to read?

JH: First of all, Priority Records, which was our distributor, was terrified. Number two, the band loved it. They thought it was one of the greatest compliments of their lives. I took it very seriously until Donald Edwards, who was a Democratic congressman from San Jose, came out and defended our right to free speech. Once he did that, I said, 'Fuck these FBI guys. Whatever happens, it's not going to go unnoticed.'

JD: Still, getting scolded by the Bureau must have been a surprise.

JH: It was the furthest thing from my mind, that the world's number one law enforcement agency would take 'Fuck tha Police' seriously. Even though I had been around Huey P. and Rap Brown and Bobby Seale and the Panthers – I actually represented Emmett Grogan and the Diggers – it was never something that crossed my mind.

What crossed my mind was, how am I going to get white people to buy this record? How am I going to get the people in Kansas and Nebraska and Minneapolis and places like that, which is probably ninety per cent of the record-buying public in America, and was probably eighty per cent of the record-buying public in the world in those days? What I came upon was this: the Huntington Beach surfers and skateboarders, who are always on the cutting edge of the arts in this country, liked Suicidal Tendencies, Metallica and Guns N' Roses. I approached those groups, who then became giant fans of N.W.A. If you look at the interviews and videos Guns did during that period, '88, '89, '90, you'll see them wearing *Compton* t-shirts and hats. Their fans said, 'If Guns thinks they're cool, if Metallica thinks they're cool, if Suicidal Tendencies thinks they're cool – they're cool.' We're talking about 26 million people who had bought *Appetite for Destruction* at that point.

JD: What happened when N.W.A. performed 'Fuck tha Police' in Detroit?

JH: We had been warned by the mayor that if the band played 'Fuck tha Police' there would be serious repercussions and the city would close the show. I said to the guys, 'The date is sold out, and if they shut you down, it will cost us a couple hundred thousand dollars. Can we do one show without that song?' They said no problem. They got on stage and started with a couple other songs. Then they looked at each other, started laughing, and went into 'Fuck tha Police'. Mysteriously, some cherry bombs went off in the audience. The cops interpreted that as gunfire and rushed the stage. We had two tour buses at that time, but the police had confiscated our bus drivers' licences so they couldn't drive. My cousin Gary Ballen was N.W.A.'s production manager; my old friend Atron Gregory was the tour manager. To get the band

offstage, they took the guys through LL Cool J's dressing room, out the back door and on to the hotel. When the cops got to LL's room, I guess all blacks look the same to them, so his guys took the beating that was meant for N.W.A. Elvis had already left the building.

5D: But the police found them anyway, right?

JH: When our guys got to the hotel, I told them not to leave their rooms because the police couldn't come inside without a search warrant. Of course, they weren't in the rooms fifteen minutes before they were down in the lobby looking for women. The cops showed up; it turned out to be a fiasco. I negotiated a settlement with the chief of police, which was that N.W.A. would leave the state immediately. Their next date was in Nashville or somewhere. The cops gave the bus drivers their licenses back and the band left Detroit.

5D: I want to read you something from *Ruthless*: 'In Cincinnati, N.W.A. was busted for violating the city's obscenity statutes, taking [their] place in a long line of artists, from actress Mae West to photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, victimized by the censorship capital of America.' Was that episode a repeat of Detroit?

JH: Those two cities, along with St Louis and Milwaukee, amazed me, because I always thought they were in the north. But those places were unbelievably bigoted against the band. It was obvious what their motives were. In Cincinnati, the guys did 'Fuck tha Police' and the police came on stage and cited them for obscenity. The people from the Riverfront Auditorium, where the show happened, told us they would finance a lawsuit against the statute up to the Supreme Court if we were willing to take it that far. Towards the end of that lawsuit, the officials from Cincinnati called us and said they would let us off if we paid tickets of \$117, and they would only cite two guys in the band. We refused. The Riverfront people won that suit. Around the same time, the city lost another obscenity suit [over an exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photographs at the Contemporary Arts Center]. It was a great victory for civil liberties.

5D: Is censorship gone since the time of 'Fuck tha Police,' or has it just changed?

JH: Censorship has moved into the hands of the people rather than into the hands of the legislators. One thing that N.W.A. did, as Larry Flynt did before them, was to expand the boundaries of our reliance upon the good sense of the people to determine what's right and what isn't, what's obscene and what isn't, and what's immoral and what isn't. It's an individual choice now, which is what it should be.

5D: What do you think that society was afraid of back then?

JH: N.W.A. were the audio-documentarians of their time. They were trying to shock people with the violence of their language and the subjects they were talking about. The fact that they dressed in guerilla outfits like the Black Panthers made them shocking by their appearance as well. People my age were terrified of the Panthers in the sixties and seventies. They were terrified that the Panthers were going to poison water supplies and commit overt acts of terrorism. Remember that one Sunday afternoon in 1971, the Panthers walked into a San Francisco police station and killed a police officer. We're talking about people the system couldn't control. 'Fuck tha Police' reawakened that fear in the hearts and psyches of middle America.

5D: Does that fear persist? What if 'Fuck tha Police' came out tomorrow instead of twenty-one years ago?

JH: For one thing, the record stands up. Certainly, it enlarged our level of tolerance and understanding of the problems that young people face in our inner cities, to the point that everybody can understand their situation. 'Fuck tha Police' isn't about killing police, like Milt Altherich said. It's about the interactions of inner city youths when confronted by different configurations of police: a black officer with a black officer, a white officer with a white officer, a black officer with a white officer. That's what it was trying to enlighten young America about – what it was like to live in that environment. It certainly wasn't a call to arms against the police.

5D: Body Count, a metal band fronted by Ice-T, released 'Cop Killer' in 1993. The song was thematically similar to 'Fuck tha Police', and was equally loathed by US authorities. What did you and Eazy think when you heard it?

JH: 'Cop Killer' was more of a rock 'n' roll record than it was a rap record. Ice-T was the original gangsta rapper in Los Angeles. He was a lot older than the guys in N.W.A. He was a friend, but Eazy didn't feel he was making the same magnitude of political statement that *Straight Outta Compton* made. We thought about it more from an economic point of view than we did from a ground-breaking, sociological-political point of view.

5D: What about Public Enemy? 'Fight the Power' came out a year after 'Fuck tha Police', and became as much an anthem for hip hop on the east coast as 'Fuck tha Police' was for the west.

JH: To me, there are no two more important acts in the history of American hip hop than Public Enemy and N.W.A. They went hand in hand, with Public Enemy on the east coast emulating the Panthers and N.W.A. on the west coast emulating the life of inner city youths in places like Compton. When those bands broke up, that was the end of gangsta rap as far as I'm concerned. Everyone else were just imitators. The difference between 'Fight the Power' and 'Fuck tha Police' was that Public Enemy was making a political statement and N.W.A. was making a sociological statement. The songs were interlocking in a certain respect. Together, they covered the whole spectrum of problems that Bobby Kennedy had been trying to remedy before he and Dr. King were assassinated.

5D: I don't remember Public Enemy getting knocked for obscenity. N.W.A.'s offence seems to have been violating community standards – although there's no such thing as a homogeneous American community.

JH: N.W.A. had something in common with the Rolling Stones and MC5 and groups like that: the voice of rebellion. It's rebellion against your parents, it's rebellion against the system, it's rebellion against

society. The band just had to strike that note of discord, to make the public feel that what they were saying was not that different than what the Rolling Stones were saying in 1965.

SD: Was it necessary to defend against everything? Or, turning that question on its head, what if N.W.A. had not defended 'Fuck tha Police' – if they had chosen to apologize for the song and pull the album from stores?

JH: That wasn't open for consideration. I thought *Straight Outta Compton* was the most important piece of work I had heard since the mid-sixties, probably since *Sgt. Pepper*. I was totally uncompromising, the band was totally uncompromising, the backbone of the band, Eazy-E, was totally uncompromising. MTV banned the video for 'Straight Outta Compton' and we refused to change anything about it. We were going to rise or fall with what you see is what you get. Of all the things I've done in my career, which have been many,

I've never been prouder than the period from 3 March 1987 to 26 March 1995, when I was associated with Eazy-E.

SD: Finally, should we be legislating against some forms of obscenity these days?

JH: We have to worry about nuclear capabilities in Iran and global warming and the economy now. There's far more serious problems for us to face than whether someone says 'motherfucker' or 'cocksucker'. ◇

THE OBSCENITY ISSUE

The Parental Advisory Sticker

Patrick Neate

I WAS A GUEST last year at a conference at the University of Tübingen in southern Germany. Titled 'Multi-Ethnic Britain', it was organized by the English department and attended by academics from across the nation and beyond. Privately educated, white, middle-class and suburban, I was clearly the ideal candidate to address the nuances of British multiculturalism; so that's what I did.

I didn't complain. In fact, I rather enjoyed it. Increasingly, I suspect this is the lot of the contemporary British novelist – the illumination of otherness for the reading classes. It's the price we pay for telling stories more interesting than our own.

At lunch one day, I was approached by an earnest, murine woman. She challenged me to explain why white, middle-class, suburban boys – not just in Britain, she shockingly revealed, but all over the continent – should find relevance in the music of black America; specifically hip hop.

I pondered a moment. The woman wore spectacles perched on a nose that might have been ergonomically designed for the purpose.

I considered telling her about the primacy of 'authenticity' (however nebulous its meaning) as a contemporary cultural signifier; perhaps even postulating that W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of 'double-consciousness' might now be universally

applicable in western society – after all, alienated as we are, isn't 'in' but not 'of' a state familiar to us all?

In the end, though, I just suggested she get hold of a copy of Ice-T's seminal 1988 album, *Power*, and take a gander at the cover.

I'm looking at it now: there's the man himself, front and centre, concealing a gun behind his back. On his right stands Darlene Ortiz, his then girlfriend, wearing the skimpiest swimsuit the other side of 1990, and wielding an Uzi. And, on the other side, affixed to the bottom right hand corner, is that notorious sticker with the bold black and white lettering: 'Parental Advisory: Explicit Content'.

I explained to my solemn interrogator that this image represents an adequate summary of hip hop's appeal to adolescent boys: sex, violence and vexing the 'rentals. Simple.

I confess I said this with some conviction since that very album cover once had pride of place on my teenage bedroom wall. In fact, back in 1988, I actually bought *Power* unheard, solely on the basis of that swimsuit, gun and sticker. And I was in no way disappointed by its contents.

I used to cruise Putney High Street in my dad's Mazda estate, windows down and stereo cranked, playing 'Drama', 'I'm Your Pusher' and, most frequently, 'Girls LGBNAF' ('Do that stuff that your mama

call smut! / Girl, let's get butt naked and fuck!') Really, I did.

Looking back, is it just me that finds the acronym quaintly coy and even the vulgarity of the lyric somehow innocent?

I think it was the sticker that mattered to me most; more than the sex and violence, let alone the music. Just like my kicks had to be Nike, so my listening had to be Parental Advisory. At my school, where kids customized their jackets with spray paint, the most popular stencil read 'Parental Advisory: Explicit Content'. In fact, I spent much of this period choking on terrible, throat-scorching hash on the grounds that it was dope and it was illegal. And I likewise listened to inane, expletive-driven hip hop on the grounds that it was rap music and it was Parental Advisory. To me, it made sense. I may not have known much about sex, still less about violence. But pissing off the parents? I knew how to do that, didn't I?

Apparently not.

When my mum saw the *Power* album cover pinned to my bedroom wall, she didn't bat an eyelid. She knew I was trying to tell a story more interesting than my own. It seems nothing changes. And as meaningful as the Parental Advisory label was to me, so it was meaningless to her. My mum certainly needed no advice from a sticker. ◇

An Incomplete Guide To Obscenity

Arundhati Roy's Field Notes from India

This is in the nature of an Open F.I.R. (First Information Report), a technique borrowed from the Indian Police. (It's true what the agony uncles say, there's some good in everyone.) An Open F.I.R. is a Work in Progress, which allows the police to keep adding new suspects (under the sub-heading ' & Others') to old case-files. In that spirit, this document is offered as a preliminary dispatch.

THE GENOCIDE IN GUJARAT

OBSCENITY ONE: In which the Government sponsors genocide.

In the state of Gujarat, there was genocide against the Muslim community in 2002. I use the word genocide advisedly, and in keeping with its definition contained in Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The genocide began as collective punishment for an unsolved crime – the burning of a railway coach in which fifty-three Hindu pilgrims were burned to death. In a carefully planned orgy of supposed retaliation, more than one thousand Muslims were slaughtered in broad daylight by squads of armed killers, organized by fascist militias, and backed by the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Gujarat government led by the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. Muslim women were gang-raped and burned alive. Muslim shops, Muslim businesses, and Muslim shrines and mosques were systematically destroyed. One hundred and fifty thousand people were driven from their homes. All this was widely reported in the national media.

OBSCENITY TWO: In which democracy triumphs.

Soon after the genocide, there was a State election. Narendra Modi who presided over the genocide was voted back to power for a second term.

OBSCENITY THREE: In which the killers have their say.

Towards the end of Modi's second

term as Chief Minister, the Indian news-magazine *Tehelka* did a sting operation in which several of the killers were captured on camera boasting about their crimes and detailing the ways in which they were supported by Modi and his administration. The sting was broadcast on a national news channel.

This is Babu Bajrangi, one of the major lynchpins of the Gujarat genocide, recorded on camera:

'We didn't spare a single Muslim shop, we set everything on fire...hacked, burned, set on fire... we believe in setting them on fire because these bastards don't want to be cremated, they're afraid of it... I have just one last wish... let me be sentenced to death... I don't care if I'm hanged... just give me two days before my hanging and I will go and have a field day in Juhapura where seven or eight lakhs [seven or eight hundred thousand] of these people stay... I will finish them off... let a few more of them die... at least twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand should die.'

Babu Bajrangi continues to have the blessings of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, the protection of the police, and the love of his people. He continues to work and prosper as a free man in Gujarat.

In another gruesome incident, Ehsan Jaffri, the Congress politician and poet who had made the mistake of campaigning against Modi in the Rajkot elections, was publicly butchered in Gulbarg Society, a housing society in Ahmedabad. More than forty others were killed with him. Several women were gang-raped before they were killed. In the words of Mangilal Jain:

'Five people held him, then someone struck him with a sword... chopped off his hand, then his legs... then everything else... [and]

after cutting him to pieces, they put him on the wood they'd piled and set him on fire. Burned him alive.'

OBSCENITY FOUR: In which democracy triumphs again.

The overwhelming public reaction to the *Tehelka* sting was not outrage, but suspicion about its timing. Many believed that the exposé (like the genocide itself) would help Modi to rally the Hindu vote. Some even believed, quite outlandishly, that Modi had engineered the sting.

Whatever the reasons, he did win the elections again and is now Chief Minister for a third term.

OBSCENITY FIVE: In which the police lend a hand.

While the carnage raged, the Gujarat police stood by and watched. Several victims testified that the police actually helped the killers. The Ahmedabad Commissioner of Police, P.C. Pandey for example, was kind enough to visit Gulbarg Society while the lynch mob massed before the attack. He did nothing. After Modi was re-elected, Pandey was promoted and made Gujarat's Director General of Police.

The police also found other ways to help. When survivors went to the police to file reports, the police would record



their statements inaccurately or refuse to record the names of the perpetrators. In several cases, when survivors had seen members of their families being killed (and burned alive so their bodies could not be found), the police would refuse to register cases of murder.

OBSCENITY SIX: In which procedure is everything.

In a democracy, for impunity after genocide, Procedure is everything. In the case of several massacres, the public prosecutors the Gujarat government appointed had actually already appeared as counsel for the accused. Several of them belonged to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which is the ideological heart, the holding company of the BJP and its militias. Or to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and were openly hostile to those they were meant to represent.

OBSCENITY SEVEN: In which we see that Hindu fascism's roots are wide and deep.

The RSS was founded in 1925. By the 1930s, its founder, Dr K.B. Hedgewar, a fan of Benito Mussolini, had begun to model it overtly along the lines of Italian fascism. Hitler, too, was and is an inspirational figure. Here are some excerpts from the RSS bible, *We, or, Our Nationhood Defined* by M.S. Golwalker, who succeeded Dr Hedgewar as head of the RSS in 1940:

Ever since that evil day, when Moslems first landed in Hindustan, right up to the present moment, the Hindu Nation has been gallantly fighting on to take on these despoilers. The Race Spirit has been awakening.

Then:

In Hindustan, land of the Hindus, lives and should live the Hindu Nation. . . .

All others are traitors and enemies to the National Cause, or, to take a charitable view, idiots. . . . The foreign races in Hindustan . . . may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights.

And again:

To keep up the purity of its race and culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here . . . a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.

By the year 2000, the RSS had more than forty-five thousand shakhas (branches) and an army of seven million swayamsevaks (volunteers) preaching its doctrine across India. They include India's former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the former home minister and current leader of the opposition L.K. Advani, and, of course, the three times Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi. It also includes senior people in the media, the police, the army, the intelligence agencies, the judiciary and the administrative services who are informal devotees of Hindutva – the RSS ideology.

OBSCENITY EIGHT: Some industrialists, a newspaper editor, a little Bollywood and some Schollywood.

It's not surprising that very little of all this makes it into the version of the New India currently on the market. That's because what is on sale is what Robert Jay Lifton calls a 'counterfeit universe'. In this

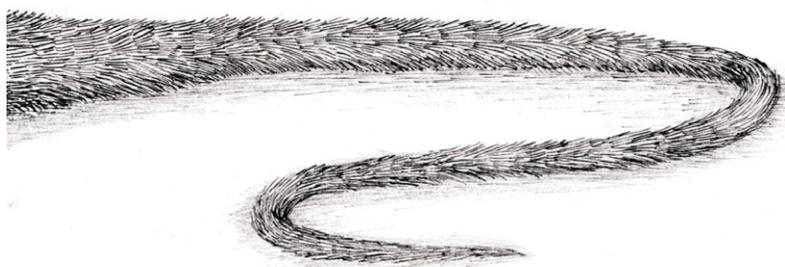
universe, systemic horrors are converted into temporary lapses, attributable to flawed individuals, and a more 'balanced', happier world is presented in place of the more disturbed one. Those at the top of the food chain, those who have no reason to want to alter the status quo, are most likely to be the manufacturers of the 'counterfeit universe'. Their job is to patrol the border, diffuse rage, delegitimize anger, and negotiate a ceasefire.

This is Shahrukh Khan's (Bollywood superstar, heartthrob of millions) response to a question about Narendra Modi. 'I don't know him personally . . . I have no opinion,' he says. 'Personally they have never been unkind to me.'

Ramachandra Guha, liberal historian and founding member of the New India Foundation, advises us in his new book, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, that to describe the BJP regime – in power both in Gujarat and at the centre during the 2002 genocide – as fascist would be to 'overestimate its powers and to underestimate the democratic traditions of the Indian people'. To substantiate his point, Guha reminds us that in the 2004 general elections, the BJP alliance at the centre was voted out of office. 'When was the last time a "fascist" regime permitted such an orderly transfer of power?' he asks. He omits to mention that in the Gujarat state elections held soon after the genocide (which Guha calls 'the Gujarat riots') Narendra Modi was voted to power for a second term and then, five years later, for a third term. So far, in Gujarat, there has been no transfer of power, 'orderly' or otherwise.

EDITORS AND COMMENTATORS in the 'secular' national press, having got over their outrage at the Gujarat genocide, now assess Modi's administrative skills, which most of them are uniformly impressed by. Vir Sanghvi then editor of the *Hindustan Times* said, 'Modi may be a mass murderer, but he's our mass murderer,' and went on to air his dilemmas about how to deal with a mass murderer who is also a 'good chief minister'.

At the Vibrant Gujarat meeting in January 2009, the CEOs of India's leading corporations including Ratan Tata, and Mukesh Ambani (Reliance Industries), publicly backed Modi as India's future prime minister. ♦



Horns: A Coda

Marilyn Chin

DURING THE TENTH month of the first year of the reign of Emperor Jing, a little girl from the southernmost province of Guangdong grew horns. The horns were hideously sharp with little tufts of greenish hair sprouting in the ridges. When the new emperor heard about this monster, he ordered his five most valiant soldiers to execute her. But, when the soldiers arrived, the girl's grandmother had already sent her into the hills. The old woman, then, with proper demeanour, served the men last year's inferior crop of high mountain tea and quoted *The Book of Changes: When an evil minister of state usurps power, the indigenes will grow horns.* The head soldier replied with a quick couplet from 'The Treatise of the Five Monarchs': *Little girls, no matter how mistreated or angry, must not grow horns. Feudal citizens, no matter how unhappy, must not revolt against the Lord.* Whereupon, he took out his sword and slayed the grandmother and mounted her head on a pole, as a warning to other renegade villagers.

Centuries of chaos and pogroms followed. Finally, rebellions were quashed, marauders were executed and there were no more incidents of little girls growing horns. By now, most of the world's citizens have smooth, unfurrowed hairlines. Albeit, there was a sighting of a pair of razor-sharp growths erupting on the forehead of a little brown girl. She was last seen in the autumn of 2008, smooching with her surfer-dude boyfriend and strolling on a sun-flooded promenade in San Diego.

The Agony Uncle

Alain de Botton will make life easier

I am one of those people who has never quite fulfilled his potential. I did well at school and in my university studies, but I have not made any great success of my career. Sometimes, I feel envious of friends of mine who have made a lot of money. One friend of mine started a chain of pizza restaurants and is now extremely wealthy (with all the usual toys: a Mercedes, a twenty-four-year-old girlfriend – we are both fifty-six, etc.). I hate feeling envious, but I can't deny that I feel bad. What can I do to worry less about the achievements of others? – Mark, London

THERE MAY BE no better cure for envy than the thought of death. The thought might seem a melancholy one, but arguably far more so for those currently anchoring their lives around the pleasures of a high-status position than for those ignored by the world and therefore already well-acquainted with the oblivion that their counterparts will eventually be accorded. It is the rich, the beautiful, the famous and the powerful to whom death has the cruellest lessons to teach. However troubling the notion of our own mortality might be, there is comfort to be found in the idea that among those who will suffer our fate are the very people whose achievements are now apt to leave us feeling inadequate and envious. Their celebrated names, their wealth, their parties, their arrogance, their cruelty – all these will be washed away by time. We may be forgotten and ignored in our own day, but we can rest assured that everyone else will ultimately join us in oblivion. Time equalizes painful earthly differences; the ashes of the Chief Executive and the peasant will end up mixed together in the earth. No wonder that certain people have, throughout history, found a bitter-sweet pleasure in going to look at graveyards and the ruins of past civilizations.

For those roughly treated by society, there is a pre-emptive revenge to be had in anticipating individuals' and society's eventual demise – a pleasure that painters have often expressed. The history of art contains a number of canvases showing the key

symbols of civilizations in ruined form, as a warning to, and revenge on, the pompous guardians of the age in which they were painted. So fond was he of painting the great buildings of modern France in ruins that the French eighteenth-century painter Hubert Robert earned himself the nickname 'Robert des Ruines'. His 'Imaginary view of the Grande Galleries of the Louvre in Ruins' (1796) is a fine example of his work.

In England, his contemporary Joseph Gandy made his name by painting the Bank of England with the ceiling caved in and some seventy years later, Gustave Doré illustrated London as he imagined it would look in the twenty-first century; resembling a latter-day version of Ancient Rome, complete with a New Zealander, an inhabitant of the country that in Doré's day was thought to represent the future, sketching the ruins of the then brand-new Cannon Street station – much as Englishmen had once gone to Rome to sketch the Parthenon or Coliseum.

While artists have anticipated the ruins of the future, many travellers have set out on journeys to contemplate the ruins of the past. Already by the eighteenth century, ruin-tourism was an established feature of the experience of travel; parties routinely stopped to behold the ruins of Troy, Corinth, Paestum, Rome, Thebes, Mycenae, Knossos, Palmyra, Baalbec, Petra and Pompeii. No longer were ancient statues to be used as latrines and temple columns as lintels for stable doors. The Germans, masters at according compound words to fugitive and rare states of the soul which other languages require paragraphs to evoke (*Weltschmerz*, *Schadenfreude*, *Wanderlust*) quickly coined terms to describe the new feeling for old stones: *Ruinenempfindsamkeit*, *Ruinensehnsucht*, *Ruinenlust*. In March 1787, Goethe made two visits to the ruins of Pompeii: 'Many a calamity has happened in the world,' he reported from Naples, 'but never one that has caused so much entertainment to posterity as this one.' 'What wonderful mornings I have spent in the Coliseum, lost in some corner of those vast ruins!' remembered Stendhal in his *Promenades dans Rome*,

and he recommended ruin-gazing as 'the most intense pleasure that memory can procure'. He even proposed that the Coliseum was far more attractive in ruins than it could ever have been in its heyday.

For a ruin-complex to work its power, it should feature a once impressive set of buildings, preferably banks or temples or palaces, now lying in an artful arrangement of stones overrun with weeds and flowers – and even better if in the rooms where kings once made their subjects tremble, a goat is nibbling at some grass or a donkey is defecating.

'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings / Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!' reads an inscription on the pedestal of a statue of Ramses II of Egypt in Percy Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*. But there is no need for the mighty, or even the humble, to despair. Ramses II lies in pieces on the ground, and Shelley ends the poem with the lines: 'Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

In ruined cities, we can enter without knocking into the bedrooms of people who would once have been guarded by legions. We can yawn in the reception rooms of kings; we can step into the tomb of a man who would never have let us approach him and indifferently chew our way through a sandwich, bits of ham falling onto the dusty floor in which there may still be infinitesimal fragments of emperors' bones. What was once a throne may be a good place to apply suncream.

Ruins speak of the folly of giving up our peace of mind for the sake of the unstable rewards of earthly power. In contemplating them we may feel our anxieties about our achievements slacken. What will it matter if we have not been a success in the eyes of others, if there are no monuments or processions in our honour; such things will in any case disappear into dust and New Zealanders will in time be sketching on the ruins of our boulevards and department stores. Judged against eternity, how little of what agitates us can matter. Ruins bid us to surrender our strivings and our images of perfection and fulfilment, to stop defying time and accept that we are the playthings of forces of destruction which we can at best keep at bay, but never vanquish. A playfulness and lightness may descend upon us as we contemplate ourselves from a perspective of a thousand years hence. ♦

How To Be A Witness

Richard Hoggart is examined during the Chatterley Trial

Richard Hoggart was the ideal candidate to defend Lady Chatterley's Lover because he embodied, as much in his writing as in his outlook on life, Ruskin's belief that 'the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way'. At the time he had not long published The Uses of Literacy, a book dedicated to such an ideal and to upholding the values instilled in him by his grandmother, who herself read Lawrence's descriptions of sex and remarked that 'E makes a lot of fuss and lah-de-dah about it.' Language mattered to Hoggart because he knew that most boys of his background – urban, orphaned, working class – were almost wholly dispossessed of its true range. He'd heard the word 'fuck' three times on his way to court only because it had come to mean something filthy and vitiated. What is filthy about fucking?, he reasoned. It was the false division between those deemed morally superior due to their high status, and those not trusted to have morals of any kind, which had given rise to the word's misuse in the first place. His commitment to looking at things honestly and speaking to others truthfully was invaluable in the book's defence: he was damned if he was going to allow ignorance and secrecy to prevail, as it always had done. In standing up for it, he stood up for himself and all those who had helped him to climb 'hand over hand', in his words, out of a situation in which one was expected to remain for life. And if his grandmother could handle it, so could the rest of us.

– LyNSEY Hanley

Then came Mr Richard Hoggart, author of *The Uses of Literacy*, Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Leicester University. He was introduced to the Jury as a man who went from elementary school and grammar school to university and took an English degree. He said that he lectured on D.H. Lawrence to 'the young people under his care'. He was a member of the Albemarle committee on the Youth Services and of the Pilkington Committee on broadcasting. Mr Hutchinson asked him what he thought about the literary merit of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. 'I think it is a book of quite exceptional literary merit, probably one of the best twenty novels we

have written in Britain in the last thirty years', said Mr Hoggart.

'It has been said that the two main characters in the book are little more than bodies which continuously have sexual intercourse together. What would you say to that as a fair summary of this novel in relation to its main characters?' – 'I should think it was a grossly unfair summary. I should think it was based on a misreading of the book.'

'The book has also been described as little more than vicious indulgence in sex and sensuality. In your view is that a valid description of this novel?' – 'I think it is invalid on all three counts. It is not in any sense vicious; it is highly virtuous and if anything, puritanical.'

'Did you say "virtuous and puritanical"?' interrupted Mr Justice Byrne. And Mr Hoggart, who was a self-composed, determined and unshakeable witness, said that he did. He added that 'indulgence' was not the word for the love passages in the story. 'The sexual encounters, the parts in which we have descriptions of sexual life, are all carefully woven into the psychological relationship, the context of the two people, and the natural flow from this as part of an attempt at explaining their outlet, either physical or spiritual. The third word in the statement is?' and Mr Hutchinson repeated:

'Vicious indulgence in sex and sensuality.' – 'The book obviously includes sensual passages because they are part of the relationship, but certainly not indulgent and certainly not vicious. I thought, taken as a whole, it was a moral book.'

'We know one of the complaints is that it uses four-letter words. What exactly do you mean by saying that, taken as a whole, you think the book is a moral book?' – 'I mean that the overwhelming impression which comes out to me as a careful reader of it is of the enormous reverence which must be paid by one human being to another with whom he is in love and, in particular, the reverence towards one's physical relationships. Physical relationships are not matters in which we use one another like animals. A physical relation-

ship which is not founded in a much closer personal respect is a vicious thing. This spirit seems to me to pervade *Lady Chatterley* throughout, and in this it seems that it is highly moral and not degrading of sex.'

'As far as the young people under your care are concerned, would you think that this was a proper book for them to read?' – 'Viewed purely in the abstract, I would think it proper, if they came to me to ask me if they could read it, to tell them to ask their parents, and probably I should give them a note to their parents asking them if they could read it, but I would not take that responsibility upon myself.'

'You would think that a wise course?' – 'Yes.'

'Have you children of your own?' – 'Yes.'

'By the time you have reached the end of the book, have those two persons, in your view of the reading of it, found some true and real contact, as opposed to all the contacts at the beginning of the book?' – 'Yes, I think the ending of the book has a result which one can hardly find in literature now. He is able to say things in the letter he writes at the end, the very last page, "Now is the time to be chaste, it is so good to be chaste, like a river of cool water in my soul." This is the writing of a pure man. "I love the chastity now that it flows between us. It is like fresh water and rain. How can men want wearisomely to philander," that is, to be promiscuous. This seems to me a resolution which establishes that the book has moved through the whole cycle.'

'It is quite obvious, of course, that this relationship is between two people who in fact are married. Would you say this book advocates – it obviously describes – but would you say it advocates adultery?' – 'I think the book advocates marriage, not adultery. It takes a difficult and distressing human situation which we know exists. A marriage which has gone wrong, which had never started right. It doesn't burke the issue by saying they went on somehow, and this is very much to the point. He could have made this analysis of the realization of the solution through sex by a wife who did not love her husband. He stacked the cards against himself. He was talking about the nature of a true marriage relationship between people. We know there are bound to be occasions in human beings, sometimes for very bad reasons and sometimes for reasons that are unavoidable,

when there is friction between our formal state of marriage and the relationship we meet with, the genuine relationship he is talking about. He did not say, if you want to enjoy yourself in sex you should leave your wife or husband, but the thing to do in a marriage was to work hard at every level. When you get up in the morning and cook breakfast, don't lose your temper with the children. Having gone through all this they will get married. He tells us so; they are waiting for it.'

'In your view is there anything more in this book than, at the end, two people finding a state of satisfactory sexual relationship?' – 'There is not only more in it than that, but one could say – although it sounds paradoxical – one could say the physical sexual side is subordinate. I am sure it was for Lawrence. He said more than once that really he is not interested, not unduly interested in sexual acts. He is interested in a relationship between people which is in the deepest sense spiritual. This includes a due and proper regard for our sexual and physical side. I believe in this book what he said is, "I must face this problem head on, even at the risk of having people think I am obsessed by

sex." But one realizes from this last letter that, between Mellors and Lady Chatterley, there will be periods of extraordinary chasteness; there will be moments of coming together in love which will be all the better because they are not using one another like creatures for enjoyment. It is a kind of sacrament for him.'

'I want to pass now to the four-letter words. You told the Jury yesterday you were educated at an elementary school. Where was it?' – 'Leeds.'

'How did you start your life?' – 'I was born into the working class and I was orphaned at the age of eight and brought up by my grandmother.'

'What is your view as to the genuineness and necessity in this book of the use of these four-letter words in the mouth of Mellors?' – 'They seem to me totally characteristic of many people, and I would like to say not only working-class people, because that would be wrong. They are used, or seem to me to be used, very freely indeed, far more feely than many of us know. Fifty yards from this Court this morning I heard a man say "fuck" three times as he passed me. He was speaking to himself and he said "fuck it, fuck

it, fuck it" as he went past. If you have worked on a building site, as I have, you will find they recur over and over again. The man I heard this morning and the men on building sites use the words as words of contempt, and one of the things Lawrence found most worrying was that the word for this important relationship had become a word of vile abuse. So one would say "fuck you" to a man, although the thing has totally lost its meaning; it has become simply derision, and in this sense he wanted to re-establish the meaning of it, the proper use of it.'

'What do you say about the use of these words as they have been used in this book?' – 'The first effect, when I first read it, was some shock, because they don't go into polite literature normally. Then as one read further on one found the words lost that shock. They were being progressively purified as they were used. We have no words in English for this act which is not either a long abstraction or an evasive euphemism, and we are constantly running away from it, or dissolving into dots, at a passage like that. He wanted us to say "This is what one does. In a simple, ordinary way, one fucks", with no sniggering or dirt.' ◇

FICTION

Scene Two

An Excerpt From A Play By Steve Toltz

SCENE TWO: Hugo's office

(HUGO is at his desk, on the phone.)

HUGO

This is Professor Hugo Fox. I sent down a couple of DNA samples. I was wondering if the results were back. When will that be?

(HUGO looks out the window.)

HUGO

Hey. (He leans out the window.) LUCINDA! LUCINDA! LUCINDA!

(To himself) She's not turning around.

(To Lucinda) I know you can hear me!

(Back to the phone) Sorry. Sorry. Of course, please...

(There is a knock on the door. Before HUGO has a chance to respond, CLAUDE enters. She is his student – a goth with black clothes and black eye makeup and black fingernails.)

HUGO

OK... whenever you can, that would be great. Thanks.

(HUGO hangs up the phone.)

CLAUDE

You wanted to see me?

(CLAUDE walks towards HUGO and stops only a couple of inches from his face. HUGO takes a

half-step back. A long silence. HUGO motions to the phone.)

HUGO

I'm getting my DNA tested.

(Pause.)

The genetic codes are the tarot cards of the twenty-first century, they reveal everything about you – from how many hours of sleep you need a night to how high you wear your pants.

(CLAUDE takes a step towards HUGO. HUGO takes another step back.)

HUGO

The future is etched into your body. Genes are the new fate. These atomic-sized interwoven strands of destiny will tell me all my prospects and limitations, and will illuminate the exact size and shape of the boundaries within which I am allowed to improvise my life.

(Pause.)

DNA will even tell me if I have blue eyes or not.

CLAUDE
You do have blue eyes.

HUGO
But that is not yet confirmed.

CLAUDE
I'm looking right into them. They're blue.

HUGO
Well. That's what DNA will tell us.

(*The two stand in silence.*)

HUGO
Claude, do you know why I wanted to see you?

CLAUDE
Yes.

HUGO
You plagiarized your essay.

CLAUDE
I know.

HUGO
But you plagiarized me.

CLAUDE
Word for word.

HUGO
This essay is just an exact repeat of what I said in class.

CLAUDE
I couldn't have said it better.

HUGO
But didn't you think I'd notice?

CLAUDE
I hoped you would.

HUGO
Do you think that is proper?

CLAUDE
Last week we made love on your desk. Was that proper too?

HUGO
I'm not interested in getting into a debate about sexual politics, Claude.(Pause.) Besides, I told you – anything is excusable if you do it just one time and never repeat it. Infidelity. Murder. Even genocide's OK if you have only one sloppy crack at it. What are you staring at?

CLAUDE
Your hair. It's really receding, isn't it?

HUGO
Like the shoreline before a tsunami.

CLAUDE
I think it's sexy.

HUGO
I think what we have here is a failure to communicate.

CLAUDE
Did I tell you about my mother's death?

HUGO
Yes. During sex.

CLAUDE
She was lying on her death-bed. It was one of those electronically-controlled death-beds, you know, in the hospital. The whole family came, brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts and second cousins, a big family, these were not a physically beautiful group of people, by the way, in truth not ten teeth between them. They came in one by one to be with her, to give her comfort, that was the ostensible reason for their compassion, but they couldn't miss the opportunity, someone dying like that, lying alone in a bed, unable to move, a perfect receptacle in which to pour out the sewerage of their hearts and minds, so they slid up beside her, and confessed the deepest, darkest secrets that they were harbouring in their foul souls. Dark, dirty secrets about themselves. My brother told my mother he'd slept with his brother's wife. My brother's wife confessed she'd slept with my father. My father confessed he'd slept with the priest. The priest confessed he'd slept with my cousin's son. It went on and on. Everyone filed in one by one and emptied out their worst secrets into my dying mother's ears, the worst excesses of their small, filthy lives. Then

the unexpected happened.

(Pause.) My mother suddenly got better.

(Pause.) She was released from hospital one Saturday afternoon and by Sunday morning she was found murdered in her bed. Shot, stabbed, suffocated and set on fire.

(Pause.) That's when I knew I couldn't trust people. And if I couldn't trust people, then I didn't want to be trusted myself. Why should I be the only trustworthy person on the planet!

(Pause.) That's why I moved to this city, because I wanted a change, only as soon as I got here, I realized how pointless it is to go from one place to another, how everyone travels to escape themselves and no one ever succeeds, not even in death, not even in heaven, or hell, because the soul you believe is eternal is the exact same soul that disgusts you now, the same one that makes you sick. I've never understood how people can believe that the most sublime idea imaginable is to be stuck with your own tedious essence throughout eternity.

HUGO
My God, you're depressing.

CLAUDE
Thank you. As are you. What did you say in class today? 'Your enemies may hurt you, but you can always count on your friends to ignore your cries of pain.' It's so true. That's exactly how people are, and that's why the best thing we can ever say about someone is that he didn't kick me when I was down.

HUGO
You know, it really is rare to hear someone your age articulate the essence of life with such sophistication.

CLAUDE
Boys my age – they don't understand the darkness. I mean, they feel the darkness, but they don't understand it. You feel and understand the darkness.

HUGO
My wife tells me not to be so negative all the time.

CLAUDE
But you have to be! Life is horrible!

HUGO
She doesn't see the darkness.

CLAUDE
How can she not?

HUGO
She's always looking on the bright side.

CLAUDE
What bright side?

HUGO
She thinks there's a bright side.

CLAUDE
That's just moronic!

HUGO
It's not her fault. It's her upbringing.

(Beat.) They were happy.

CLAUDE
How naïve.

HUGO
One big happy family.

CLAUDE
Ripe for slaughter!

HUGO
Of course, in a family like that, misfortune and tragedy shocks them something silly. If one of them gets cancer, they act all surprised about it, as if fifty million people don't get cancer every year.

CLAUDE
Fools!

HUGO
As if they've never even heard of cancer!

CLAUDE
Where do they get off?

HUGO
But you – you understand. How is it you understand? How is it someone so young and fresh and – if you don't mind me saying – nubile, how is it you have such a deep and abiding grasp of the horrors of existence? Was it just your unhappy childhood? Or was there more? Were you beaten? Were you sex-traded for a handful of magic beans? Wait – don't answer that. I've had an idea. Well, actually a feeling. Take your clothes off.

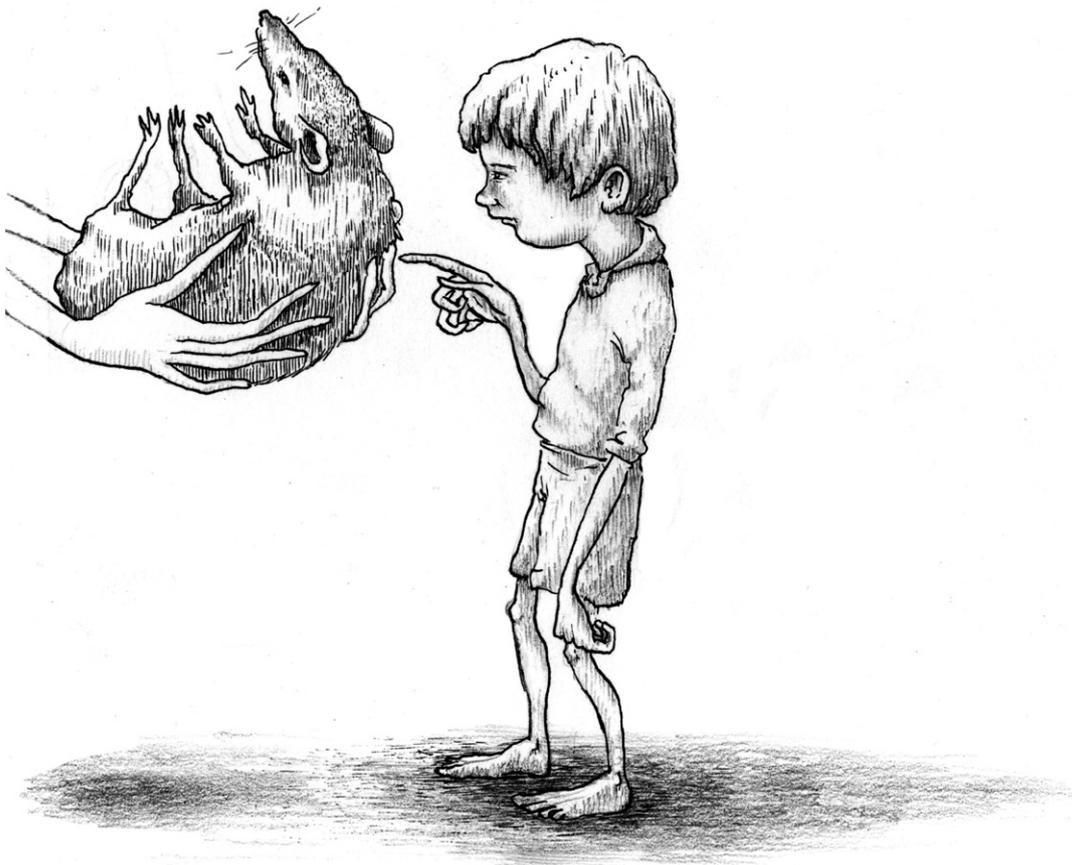
CLAUDE
Are you sure?

HUGO
Undress.

(She starts to undress.)

CLAUDE
Are you going to undress too?

HUGO
Eventually.



Long live the Garbage Man

Bobby Gillespie on *Lux Interior*

Erick Lee Purkhiser, known as Lux Interior, died on 4 February, 2009, aged 62. Interior was the lead singer of The Cramps, the world's foremost garage punk, trash rock, psychobilly band.

I'M SITTING in a hotel room in Sydney, Australia writing this. I've heard the news that Lux Interior has died and I feel weird & sad & numb & I don't know what to say 'cept that when I told my band members, one by one, the reaction was the same . . . no one can believe it & all are sad. Lux was loved by rock & rollers all the world over, 'cos him & his band The Cramps meant so much to us all. Lux was living testament to the power of rock & roll music – it flamed through him, his whole life was taken up by playing it, living it, turning other people on to it. He was a preacher in the best sense of the word.

Lux was one of the great rock & roll showmen/shamen, right up there with Iggy Pop, Jerry Lee Lewis & Jim Morrison.

Like them, he seemed to want to burst free from his body & explode outta this world, transport himself to other planes, taking his audience with him.

The Cramps, alongside The Birthday Party, Gun Club & The Jesus & Mary Chain, kept the beautiful, feral, ecstatic, raging, diseased spirit of rock & roll alive at the end of the seventies and thru into the early eighties – a time of nothingness, when punk had prostituted itself & turned into New Wave, which then begat Duran Duran, Dire Straits & the legions of Reagan/Thatcher-pleasing cocksuckers who shared the stage at Live Aid.

I first saw The Cramps live as support for The Police at the Glasgow Apollo in the summer of 1979 & it was truly insane. There was Bryan Gregory, with a white Flying V guitar covered in black polka dots, wearing a frogman's rubber diving suit, lying on his back for the whole show and shuddering spasmodically like some weird insect. The high-quiffed drummer, Nick Knox, dressed head-to-toe in jet black, was pounding out the holy backbeat, just endlessly staring into the

void, unrelenting, eternal. There was the impossibly beautiful Poison Ivy Rorschach firing out wave after wave of demented wipe-out rockabilly/surf fuzz-tone guitar death. Ivy was scary & sexy, not moving, just cool as ice, always. She's still one of my favourite guitar players, alongside Johnny Thunders & Link Wray. Ivy is a goddess. Then there was Lux, a truly wild & free rock & roll madman jumping off the fifteen-foot high stage into the front stalls to terrorize the New Wave Glasgow teens who had come to hear 'Roxanne'.

I went straight out & bought the *Gravest Hits* EP with 'Human Fly', 'Way I Walk', 'Domino', 'Surfin' Bird' & 'Lonesome Town' . . . that was it, I was infected by The Cramps & their rockabilly voodoo music. I caught the virus & I'm still sick.

They released their debut album *Songs The Lord Taught Us*, produced by Big Star/Box Tops genius Alex Chilton at Sam Phillip's legendary Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee, where Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash & Roy Orbison had created the rock & roll monster that was to change the world forever. *Songs The Lord* . . . sure lived up to that incredible legacy & more – it's outer-limits rock & roll that shakes, aches, astounds & mystifies to this day, with songs like 'I Was a Teenage Werewolf', 'Garbage Man', 'What's Behind the Mask', 'Strychnine', 'Sunglasses After Dark' & the truly demented 'Drug Train', where Lux promises us 'you'll see Elvis with your mother' if we all just step aboard. *Songs The Lord* . . . was an instant classic. The Cramps had made an album as deranged & wild & sexy & beautiful as any of their heroes.

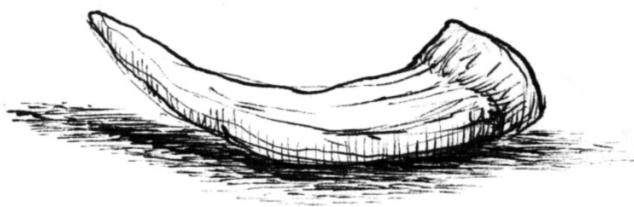
The genius of The Cramps is that they knew that the true essence of rock & roll is to be found in records like 'Hanky Panky' by Tommy James & The Shondells or 'Love Me' by The Phantom. Records discarded, derided, as sweet-sick bubblegum for hormone-ravaged teens or retardo trash for backwoods hillbilly psychotics. The Cramps saw the beauty in the unwanted, the losers, the outcasts, the misfits, the freaks – the true visionaries deemed ridiculous & beneath contempt by the mainstream, uptight, straight, bourgeois 'culture' creeps who run the media show in the USA & the rest of the world.

Being a Cramps fan meant you could learn about Charlie Feathers, The Legendary Stardust Cowboy, Count Five, The 13th Floor Elevators, Hasil Adkins, The Seeds, The Sonics . . . the list goes on & on. They gave you an education in arcane Americana. For this alone I am forever grateful. My friends & I have been turned on to so much fantastic music just by being fans of Lux & Ivy & The Cramps.

The sad thing is, when guys like Lux & Ron Ashton of The Stooges go, there's a little less rock & roll in the world. It really is a dying art.

When you went to a Cramps concert you knew you were seeing the real thing. They meant every single note they played. People used terms like 'trash aesthetic' & 'horror B-movie cartoon' to describe The Cramps – well there's nothing trashy about them. Lux Interior & The Cramps were possessed by the wild, free, spirit of rock & roll music & that is a truly beautiful & wonderful thing. It's not something that can be bought or acquired or learned in college. It's something that some people are born with & feel & need to do for all of their life. Lux Interior was one of those people & the world is a sadder place without him.

Thanks for the music Lux. We're gonna miss you. ◇



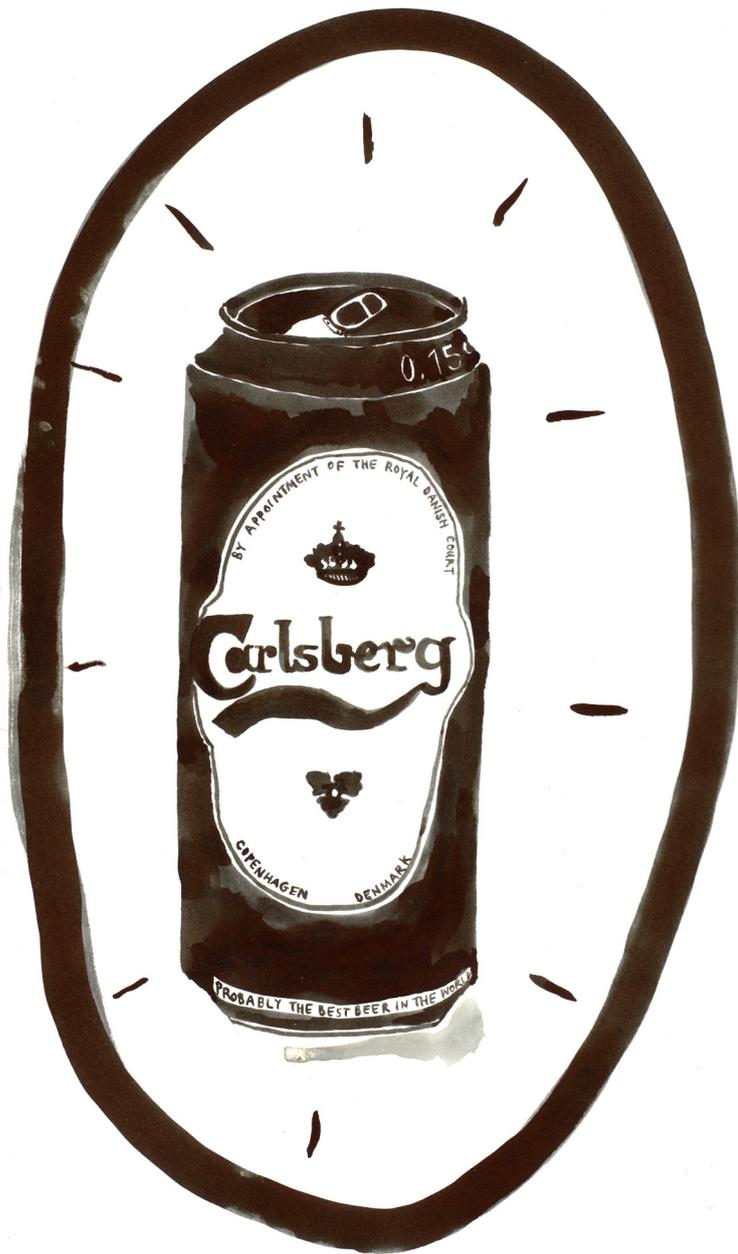
Four Danish Cartoons



A Danish Man Opening a Birthday Card



A Danish Mother and Child





A Danish Man Writing