



HAL
open science

Laughing Out Loud with Jonathan Coe: A Conversation

Vanessa Guignery

► **To cite this version:**

Vanessa Guignery. Laughing Out Loud with Jonathan Coe: A Conversation. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, 2016, 51, <10.4000/ebc.3371>. <hal-04861525>

HAL Id: hal-04861525

<https://hal.science/hal-04861525v1>

Submitted on 2 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License

Études britanniques contemporaines

Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines

51 | 2016

LOL

Part 1: Jonathan Coe, 'a bringer of laughter'

Laughing Out Loud with Jonathan Coe: A Conversation

VANESSA GUIGNERY

<https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3371>

Editor's notes

The interview was conducted by Vanessa Guignery, Laurent Mellet and Catherine Pesso-Miquel. It was transcribed with the very kind help of Diane Gagneret, Mathilde Le Clainche and Julia Siccardi.

Full text

- 1 This conversation with Jonathan Coe took place at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon on 15 October 2015. Part of the discussion focuses on Coe's fictional production and part of it draws from essays included in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements. Non-Fiction, 1990-2013*, a collection which contains pieces about such comic or satirical writers as Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, B.S. Johnson, Alasdair Gray and David Nobbs, as well as musicians and film directors. The book comprises reflections on Coe's art of writing but also on comedy, humour, satire and laughter, more specifically in the essays entitled 'What is so Funny about Comic Novels?' and 'The Paradox of Satire'. In one of them, Coe remembers his childhood when laughter was 'something that drew people together ... something shared', when it 'forged bonds of sympathy between people, among friends and among families'. This sense of a community of laughter corresponds to what Benjamin notices in *The Rotters' Club* when he watches *The Morecambe and Wise Show* on television with his family and



realises that millions of families must be laughing at the same joke at the same time, and that, as a consequence, ‘the entire nation was being briefly, fugitively drawn together in the divine act of laughter’ (274). The aim of the interview is to explore this ‘act of laughter’ as well as the particulars of satire and comedy in Coe’s fictional work.

Vanessa Guignery: In one of the essays from your collection *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements*, you remark that your first ambition was to become ‘a writer whose words would make people laugh’. Is it still one of your ambitions?

Jonathan Coe: Yes, I suppose so. Comedy is pleasurable. The act of laughter is in itself physically, psychologically and emotionally pleasant. I suppose I have always liked the idea that something that I write might bring pleasure to people. Novels can bring pleasure in all sorts of different ways, but the act of laughing is visibly and palpably pleasurable. I have told this story before, but I will tell it again: one of my favourite writers, who stands right at the beginning of the English comic tradition and whom I’ve mentioned many times before is Henry Fielding, the author of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, and parts of those novels are still, I find, laugh-out-loud funny. Shortly after I moved to London, I was on a tube train and I was sitting opposite a woman who was reading *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding. Suddenly she started to laugh, her body started to move, her shoulders started to shake, she started to make these noises, and it was a kind of epiphanic moment for me. I suddenly thought: ‘Well, this is amazing. Two hundred and fifty years ago, a man sat in a room by candlelight making marks upon a piece of paper, and now, after all those centuries, someone is undergoing a physical convulsion and transformation as a result of what he wrote’. It seemed a very beautiful moment to me and a very concrete expression of the permanence of art and, potentially, the permanence of comedy as well. So, primarily, I put funny things in my books—I hope they are funny—to give people pleasure. That is the first reason. There are other reasons, but they are secondary.

VG: You wrote in an essay included in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* that P.G. Wodehouse was ‘the elephant in [your] comic room’ because you had been reluctant to read him for a long time. On the other hand, Kingsley Amis and Evelyn Waugh have been sources of inspiration for the very first novel that you wrote at the age of fifteen and which was never published (*All the Way*). Do you still feel connected to that literary tradition of comic writers?

JC: Yes, I do feel connected to it, particularly to Evelyn Waugh, whom I first read as a schoolboy when I was fifteen or sixteen. I loved the combination which I detected in Evelyn Waugh of comedy and social commentary. Politically, Waugh and I come from opposite ends of the spectrum, but that didn’t stop the way he imported satirical ideas into his novels from being a huge influence on me. I think that was always the problem I had with Wodehouse: I felt that Wodehouse’s comedy, from what I knew of it—which is only very superficial knowledge—had no edge. It was too light and airy to me, too much of a soufflé rather than a main course. Gradually I grew up and matured and realised that that is exactly what is so wonderful about Wodehouse, that he is to comedy almost what Bach is to music: what he does is so pure and so formally perfect and linguistically perfect that the content of it is really beside the point. You don’t read Wodehouse because you’re interested in the social mores of the English upper classes in the twenties and thirties; you can find that out from anywhere. You read his books because they are intensely pleasurable, pleasurable in an almost abstract way, and it took me a long time not just to understand that, but to appreciate it.

Laurent Mellet: If comedy gives pleasure, would you say that satire also builds up a welcoming, warm and comfortable space, or should we clearly distinguish comedy and satire?

JC: I find that this word ‘satire’ gets used a lot, with a lot of imprecision sometimes,



particularly nowadays in Britain. What people mean when they say ‘satire’ is really political comedy, comedy that happens to be about politics and doesn’t necessarily have a satirical thrust. The phrase that always sticks in my mind when I think of satire is something that Milan Kundera said. He doesn’t like satire because he says it is a thesis art, by which he means that the author starts from a presupposed position and the job of the piece of writing, or of the play, or whatever it is, is to move the reader or the viewer in that direction, to a preconceived political or moral point. For him, that is antithetical to what art really is, which should be full of ambivalence and ambiguity, engaged in the asking of questions rather than providing answers.

People have described *The Rotters’ Club* as a satirical novel but I don’t see it as a satirical novel at all. I see it as a comic novel mainly—perhaps a tragicomic novel—which happens to include a lot about the politics of the time, and in which the characters often get caught up in the politics of the time. But it’s not satirical in the sense that it doesn’t really have a viewpoint about the 1970s, which it tries to persuade the reader to share. The only novel of mine that I would say is genuinely satirical is *What a Carve Up!*, which is an unashamedly and unambiguously anti-Thatcher novel, and which is not generally enjoyed by people who don’t share that political viewpoint. I have had Conservative MPs say to me through gritted teeth: ‘Oh yes I love that novel, marvellous, so inventive and all that kind of thing’, and you can tell that what they really mean is: ‘I hated that novel with a passion’.

So, yes, let’s distinguish between satire and political comedy. Comedy can be a very welcoming space, a communal space, a place where different classes, different strands of moral and political thought come together and are reconciled. That’s what the passage in *The Rotters’ Club* about millions of families laughing at the same joke in *The Morecambe and Wise Show* celebrates. That in itself is the opposite of what satire should do because satire is not really doing its work unless it makes the reader feel uncomfortable in some way. This is why, for me, *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift is the greatest of all satires, because it leaves the reader with a very uneasy, uncertain feeling about what it means to be human at the end of the fantastic fourth book. What I say about Britain at the moment in my essay ‘The Paradox of Satire’ in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* is that, in a way, there is too much political comedy which gets mistaken for satire: it’s very comfortable, it nearly always comes from the same political position, which is a soft, left liberal position, and it plays up to and satisfies the audience’s expectations and makes the audience feel good about themselves. It’s lovely to feel good about yourself but it’s not what satire should be doing. Satire should be making you feel bad about yourself, which is not something readers want, necessarily: this is why the American writer George S. Kaufman famously said: ‘Satire is what closes on Saturday night’. On the night when everybody wants to go out and be entertained, if you try to put a satirical film in the cinemas, it flops. Not many people ever got rich by making satire, and nor should they, really.

Catherine Pessa-Miquel: Could you talk about those elements in your comedy which are grotesquely exaggerated, outrageously farcical, as for example the letters written by Harding, alias Sir Arthur Pusey-Hamilton, in *The Rotters’ Club*?

JC: I think every school has a class clown. As well as being highly popular and legendary figures within the school itself, they are quite mysterious and enigmatic figures because nobody knows what really makes them tick. I became interested in that and I also became interested in the idea that the satirist might be complicit in what he is satirizing, and really, can you ever write authentic satire, can you authentically ventriloquise the kind of person you are satirizing without in some way empathizing with them, without in some way being them? So, in some ways, satire also becomes an



exercise in sympathy with the thing that you hate, and the letters that Harding writes in *The Rotters' Club* are an example of that.

In the book itself, they are straightforward exercises in comedy, and they are, as you say, outrageous, transgressive, they get him and the magazine and publishers into a lot of trouble with the school. But the idea of the diptych—*The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*—was that the second novel, *The Closed Circle*, would rewrite the first one and would flip everything that you thought about it on its head. So you discover, in *The Closed Circle*, that a lot of what Harding wrote and was mistaken for satire by the other kids at the school, turns out to be exactly what he really did feel. He turns out to be a tragic figure, a far-right melancholy English nationalist and nostalgist looking back to some non-existent paradise or vision of a mono-cultural England, and getting into bed with all sorts of dubious political characters as a result. So, it turns out that what he wrote as Sir Arthur Pusey-Hamilton was, on some level, what he actually thought.

The idea for writing these letters came to me from when I went on holiday to some properties rented out by a company—a fantastic British company called The Landmark Trust—who rent out castles and follies, old prisons and water towers, amazing buildings which you might glimpse in the landscape and never imagine that you can actually inhabit. They all have these magnificent vellum-bound logbooks in which you're meant to write your experiences of living there, and some of the entries I read in these logbooks seemed so ludicrous and outrageous to me that I began to wonder whether the people who were writing them weren't taking the piss in some way. There was one father who wrote: 'We had a wonderful evening here: we turned off the electricity, did everything by candlelight and my daughters went up into the minstrels' gallery and sang medieval madrigals for the whole evening', and I was thinking: 'Did this really happen? Did they really do this kind of thing on holiday?' So I decided to write a parody version myself. I invented this character called Sir Arthur Pusey-Hamilton and I wrote two or three pages of outrageous nonsense about what it was that I had done there. Then I rented one of these places, a little tower on a beach in Devon, to write some passages from *The Rotters' Club* for a week or two, and while I was there I thought: 'Well, this character I've created for this purpose, I could bring him into the book actually. That would be fun'. So the two things—reality and imagination—overlapped at that point.

CPM: There are some very threadbare devices in comedy, especially in bedroom farce, and I love the way in which, in *The Rotters' Club*, you create a scene between a husband and wife (Sam and Barbara Chase) which takes up these ingredients—the *billet doux*, adultery, bedroom farce—and you turn it into a scene which is innovative and original, mixes high-brow and low-brow comedy, and links in with the political theme of the control of language (139-142). Did you just imagine that scene and have fun, or did you deliberately challenge yourself and say: 'I'm going to take these old devices and make them into something new'?

JC: I wrote that scene in the very week we were talking about actually, in a tower on a beach down in Devon, and I can remember doing it because it took me the whole week to make it work. It's been more than fifteen years since I wrote *The Rotters' Club*, so I can't remember everything about the process, but essentially what's going on is that the mother in this family, Barbara Chase, is not having an affair yet with her son's art teacher, but she is receiving love letters from him, and in her lower middle-class way, she is scandalised by this and horrified by the thought that she might be drawn into an adulterous affair. At the same time, she is totally bowled over by these letters, and totally bowled over by the fact that someone as posh as this guy, someone who uses language so well, someone so refined, should be interested in her, when she is stuck in this rather dull marriage to a bus driver who doesn't, to her, seem to have the same imagination at all. I wanted to find a way to make these two worlds run in parallel and then collide, these two different approaches to language: her husband's very warm-



hearted and very well-meaning but rather limited use of language, and the art teacher's very elaborate, very baroque, but at the same time rather sinister and manipulative use of language. I had the idea that he would be doing a very simple crossword, and getting into terrible difficulty even with the most simple clues, and constantly having to consult a dictionary. Meanwhile, she would be reading this letter, full of amazing words which she had never encountered before, and she would have to be consulting the dictionary, passing the dictionary back and forth between them for completely different reasons. And eventually, they would be looking up the same word.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a British television show called *The Two Ronnies*. It was a really mixed bag: a variety show full of all kinds of sketches. Some of them are great and have stood the test of time. Some of them seem a bit sexist and a bit old-fashioned now. But the "Crossword Sketch" is one of the best,¹ and I saw it again one afternoon a couple of years ago. I was bored and I was looking at old sketches on YouTube, and I suddenly realised: 'My God, this was shown in the 1970s, and this was where I got the idea for that crossword scene'. In this sketch, there is a little man in a Trilby hat, called Ronnie Corbett, and he is playing the working-class guy. The guy in the bowler hat is Ronnie Barker, and they are doing two different kinds of crosswords: Ronnie Barker is doing the *Times* crossword, which, as anybody who knows England will know, is a signifier of poshness, and Ronnie Corbett is doing a crossword in a tabloid paper.

LM: Another connection that regularly crops up about your work and in your own work is that between humour and melancholy. Is there any chronology between the two terms in your own novels? Is it a question of having humour in melancholy, melancholy in humour, of going from one to the other, or is it both at the same time?

JC: This question about the combination of humour and melancholy in my books comes up a lot and because it's always such a difficult question to ask, I'm wondering whether we are not using the wrong word. To be more precise, what you often find in my books is humour and nostalgia. Nearly all the melancholy in my books comes from nostalgia for something or other, looking back on the past as an era of opportunities which were either not taken or choices which were made badly. That is certainly the case with *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*: *The Rotters' Club* ends with this long, rolling sentence in which life for Benjamin feels totally open, full of an infinity of possibilities, and the rather dampening task of *The Closed Circle* as a novel is to show how those opportunities have closed down and how the choices he made were not necessarily the right ones.

All I can say is that I have always been, as a person, very subject to nostalgia, since I was a very young boy, as far as I can make out. My parents used to tell me that when I was thirteen, I was intensely nostalgic for being eight, and when I was sixteen, I was incredibly nostalgic for being thirteen and so it has gone on, really. There is a great tendency for the characters in my novels to look back on the opportunities missed in the past, not taken. Maybe that is a quintessentially British—or at least English—quality as well, that we are a nostalgic nation which is sometimes forward-looking but also obsessed with tradition. That is the tension that *Expo 58* makes play with because Thomas Foley in that book is sent to oversee the contents of the British pavilion which, on the one hand, is meant to look back on Britain's imperial glories and, on the other hand, is meant to look forward to its technological future, and wrestling with that contradiction is the thing that he finds most difficult. It is a source of great humour as well.



VG: Would you say that this mixture of humour and nostalgia, and of characters looking back, is also there in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, in which the protagonist is one of your recurrent

characters who is rather passive, not sure of himself, nostalgic for the past?

JC: In *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* you have a character who is not just melancholic but, in the beginning of the novel at least, profoundly depressed: locked in a paralysis which he doesn't begin to emerge from until he glimpses this moment of human interaction which he finds so inspiring, between the Chinese woman and her daughter at a restaurant in Australia. So yes, in a way, he is the last of those characters that I feel I can write about because I pushed it as far as I could with him: he gets involved in all sorts of scenarios which involve very broad, very farcical comedy. The whole notion of this absurd voyage he has to take up to Scotland with a boot full of toothbrushes and the indignities that are visited upon him on the way, are typical of low comedy but at the same time there is a vein not just of melancholy, but a kind of desperation and despair in Maxwell's situation.

VG: Maxwell's despondency at the beginning of the novel can be felt in the way he desperately needs to talk to someone on the plane on his way back from Australia. Could you say a few words about this passage (24-27)?

JC: The passage is from the very beginning of the book and it really shows Maxwell's first attempt to come out of this terrible phase of depression, where he has not really been communicating with the outside world. Suddenly he is put in proximity to someone on an aeroplane as they are coming back from Australia, so he has literally a captive audience for the next twelve hours, someone who cannot escape him, because that's what has been holding Maxwell back, that every time he tries to talk to somebody they run away. This guy cannot run away, so Maxwell lets rip. Maxwell lives in a town called Watford, which is almost a suburb of London. Anyone who knows England well will know that Watford is not the most beautiful place, in all honesty. It has many virtues, I'm sure, but it's not somewhere that many tourists would go, but Maxwell lives there and he's pretty happy about that. So he's talking to an Australian businessman who is sitting next to him about Watford, and he doesn't notice that the man has had a heart attack until the stewardess interrupts his monologue and tells him the man has been dead for at least five or ten minutes.

Graham Wolfe: I'm interested in your writerly craft in this passage. How did you decide to end it there and to get the stewardess to come in then? Was the earlier draft longer and you decided that it was too long? Was it shorter and you felt you needed another two pages until it became funny?

JC: I wrote it in real time. It was one of those lovely passages where you know it's going to be easy to write because you're just letting the words pour out of him in a torrent without thinking about his audience and whether his audience is going to be bored or not. So I said to myself that I shouldn't think about my audience and I shouldn't think about whether they're going to be bored or not, and just write it for just as long as Maxwell could find it in him to say it. It's rather like the long sentence at the end of *The Rotters' Club*, the thirty-page sentence. When you're tossing all the grammatical rules out of the window like that, it can be quite easy to write.

A lot of my comic set pieces are inspired by television sketches: the misplaced footnotes in the *House of Sleep*,² the crossword scene in the *Rotters' Club*... This long rambling monologue about Watford, which never seems to end, is inspired by a Monty Python show in which Eric Idle does an amazing monologue where he rants endlessly about the horror of going to Spain and encountering all those British tourists who only want to drink Watney's Red Barrel, a dreadful British beer which was apparently very popular on sale in Spanish holiday resorts in the early 1970s.³ I can't remember how that sketch ends, but it doesn't end with anyone having a heart attack or dying, so I did make that



up, at least. I should also credit my wife who gave me the idea for that scene, because this happened to her on a flight from Australia. She didn't bore the guy to death, but the guy sitting next to her died at the beginning of the flight and they just covered him in a blanket and made her sit next to him for the next twelve hours. She has never found it a funny story. She makes it funny when she tells it now but it wasn't funny to her at the time. Even that wasn't my own idea...

Lynn Blin: I'm interested in your being so open about your influences, things that you've seen on sitcoms during your youth, and the collaborative part of writing humour. Do you try things out yourself before you write them or does it just come in the writing process?

JC: It just comes in the writing process. I'm a very solitary writer and quite a solitary person, and the solitariness of novel writing is what appeals to me about it. I think it's very hard to work on television in the writing business unless you're very good at, and are comfortable with, collaboration. The problem I have with collaboration is not that I don't like other people's ideas. It's that I feel my own ideas, including my ideas for jokes and comic scenes, are very fragile until I actually realise them, until I actually put them down on paper. I have collaborated on a screenplay, an adaptation of one of my own books, and on another screenplay for a film which hasn't been produced yet, with the French writer and director Julie Gavras. Those have both been great processes, particularly the collaboration with Julie. It's been a very good learning curve. But I'm not good at pitching ideas which I think are going to be funny. If I said to collaborators: 'What is going to happen in this scene is: he's going to talk about Watford for five minutes and not notice the person sitting next to him has had a heart attack, and has died', they would look blankly at me. The confidence I have in my own ideas is strong but also very internal: I feel that I can write something like that and make it funny, but I need to go and do it by myself, and then present it to someone and say: 'Look, it's funny, I told you it would be'. So it's that grey area between the idea and the concretisation of the idea which is what collaboration really is: throwing ideas around when they are still in an embryonic state before you realise them. I find that difficult. I like to do it all my own way.

VG: A possible source of inspiration for the character of Maxwell Sim is *The Death of Reginald Perrin* by David Nobbs. It was turned into a television series—*The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*—which you enjoyed watching as a teenager. One of the epigraphs to *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* comes from Nobbs's novel and you devoted an essay to him in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements*. Could you say a few words about David Nobbs and about what appeals to you in his type of humour?

JC: David Nobbs is a very important figure in British comedy, and actually a very important figure in the recent British novel, although that seems to be my own, minority view. Not many people within the literary establishment see it that way and he became a victim of his own success, of success in one particular field. The separation between high culture and low culture is still a very significant divide in some areas of British life, and David Nobbs became very successful as a television writer—he wrote sketches for *The Two Ronnies* for instance—but at the same time he had a parallel career as a novelist. His first three novels were quite experimental and absurdist: he was very influenced by early Beckett, by N.F. Simpson. Then he wrote a novel in the early 1970s called *The Death of Reginald Perrin*, which is about a forty-six-year-old middleclass man, commuting like Maxwell Sim from a rather bland suburb of London into the centre of town every day and gradually being driven mad by the crushing routine of what it is that he does, and the absurdity of what it is he does. He doesn't sell toothbrushes but works for a company that makes ice creams and desserts and he gradually begins to see that what he does is absurd, and he is driven crazy by the fact



that nobody else sees it this way.

It is a beautiful novel, a wonderful novel to read if you want to understand the zeitgeist of Britain in the 1970s, which is very different from what happened after the Thatcher revolution. It could, in its way, have become a classic if he had not then turned it into a television series—not just a television series but a television sitcom with a live studio audience and with a laughter track—and one which was incredibly successful, which was watched by fifteen or sixteen million people every week. That is now what people remember of David Nobbs, that he wrote this fantastically popular television series. But it existed first as a novel which is different, darker, more serious than the series and he went on to write other books. *Second from Last in the Sack Race* is a beautiful, tender but hilariously funny memoir of a young boy growing up in industrial South Yorkshire, in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. It is one of the great British coming-of-age novels, but again it is not seen that way because of David Nobbs's reputation as a television writer.

There is a lot of melancholy, a lot of nostalgia, a lot of sexual embarrassment in his books, and a lot of social commentary as well, all things which you find in my own novels. When I reread his books now, I'm astonished to see how much I have not just been influenced by him but stolen from him, in fact. A lot of the situations in *The Rotters' Club* for instance, the whole episode of Benjamin losing his swimming trunks and finding God, is there in embryo in David Nobbs's book *Second from Last in the Sack Race*. A lot of the way that the schoolchildren talk to each other in that book fed directly into the conversations between the schoolchildren in *The Rotters' Club* and a lot of the combination of social comment and low comedy in my novels can be traced directly back to *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*.

Joëlle Pornin: In *Expo 58*, you use other forms of comedy such as, for example, linguistic playfulness with the tongue-twister 'He had the sachet and the packet in the pocket of his jacket'. Can you say a few words about the context of this quote?

JC: *Expo 58*, amongst other things, is a homage to Hitchcock. Most of what I know and like about Hitchcock is contained in his long, book-length interview with François Truffaut. One of the things I've always remembered from the interview: whenever he set a film in a foreign country or a specific location, he always liked to take the most clichéd thing about that location and include it in the film somehow. So in *Foreign Correspondent*, some of the film is set in Holland and they have a fight in a windmill. In *Secret Agent*, a lot of it is set in Switzerland, so they visit a chocolate factory. A lot of *Expo 58* is set in a pub, a fake British pub, and there's an espionage plot at the centre of it. A lot of messages are passed backwards and forwards in a secret way between the two different sides and I thought: 'How could you do this, given that it's in an English pub?' Of course I thought of a packet of crisps, because what can be more British and pub-like than a packet of crisps? In those days you didn't get salt on the crisps already, they came in little envelopes—a blue sachet of salt in fact—and you had to shake it onto the crisps. I thought that would be a good place for the spies to hide the microfilm. So when the hero is finally having explained to him how the system worked, it comes thus:

'Mr Chersky had the sachet.'

'He had the sachet and the packet.'

'He had the sachet and the packet in his pocket.'

'He had the sachet and the packet in the pocket of his jacket.' (243-244)

This is also a homage to Danny Kaye's 1956 film *The Court Jester*, which has this line: 'The pellet with the poison is in the vessel with the pestle, the chalice from the palace has the brew that is true!'



CPM: I would like to ask you about the difficulty of choosing an ending for a story. Comic novels

are supposed to have a happy ending, which your novels seldom do, and I was wondering whether you ever get pressure from publishers to end in a particular way?

JC: I think that is a very old-fashioned view of the comic novel, actually, to think they should always have a happy ending. Everything for me comes back to Henry Fielding. After having invented the English comic novel with *Tom Jones* in 1748 and having already brought it to a point of perfection, Fielding then moved on from that and wrote *Amelia*, published in 1751, which does the opposite thing. It begins with a couple having already been married, having already gone through those comic, romantic misadventures, and it sets itself up as a study of a marriage and the trials and tribulations of a marriage, and has a very different tone as a result. I read *Tom Jones* and *Amelia* when I was seventeen or eighteen, as a teenager, and both of those novels had an equally powerful effect on me.

I usually begin with the endings of my books. It is one of the first things I think about. It was certainly the case with *The House of Sleep*. You may remember the open-ended nature of that final page where Robert (now Cleo) and Sarah, having missed each other for twelve years, are finally reunited on the doorstep and all you have is them saying a few words to each other. Robert (now Cleo) simply says: 'It's me: Robert'. You don't know whether they are going to be together, whether they are going to live happily ever after or not. People often ask me what happens to Robert and Sarah after they meet on the doorstep and I don't know, because that's the ending of the book and I've never imagined them after that and to do so would involve writing another book altogether, but that was already in my mind as the ending of the novel. It would have been very difficult for me to change that at a publisher's instigation.

The one thing which has caused me to fall out with a publisher about is the ending of *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. Here you have a full-on postmodern final chapter where the narrator of the novel—me—physically encounters Maxwell on a beach in Australia and tells him that the whole novel has been a fiction, that he can will him out of existence whenever he wants just by clicking his fingers, and that's what he does in the last sentence of the book. My British editor loved this ending. I assumed I would be having a big fight with him about it, but not at all. On the other hand, my American editor liked the book but hated this final chapter and we had long and rather fierce email exchanges about that for quite a few weeks. I dug my heels in and kept the ending. I still don't know whether it was the right thing to do. A lot of readers have had a problem with that chapter and have reported throwing the book across the room in rage. It's good to provoke a reaction, I suppose.

LM: In an essay about Jacques Tati in *Marginal Notes and Doubtful Statements*, you write that 'the need for laughter is universal and absolute'. Would you say that there is an equally universal and absolute responsibility of artists to answer that need as best as they can?

JC: Not the need for laughter necessarily, but the need for pleasure. If a book or a play is not giving me pleasure on some level, then I want to know why. The author has to have a good reason. I remember doing a panel on comic writing with a British stand-up comic called Alexei Sayle who is now more a writer than a comedian, and a very good writer of short stories and novels. His point was that it seemed to count against you in the British literary hierarchy if you wrote funny books. It is very rare for the Booker Prize to be awarded to a comic novel for instance and he couldn't see why it was. In fact he felt the opposite: that you should get extra points, extra praise for writing a serious novel and making it funny at the same time, that you've done an even more clever thing than a more solemn writer.



I don't know if people still watch Jacques Tati in France. I was in Le Havre earlier this year and I was talking about comedy and films with a French woman in her late sixties. I

said that I loved Jacques Tati and she laughed at me and said: ‘That’s what my parents used to watch’. That was a bit of a shock for me because I thought that Tati was a permanent cultural icon in France. To me, there is almost something Wodehousian about his films, not in the sense that they are remotely similar in tone but because, as I said earlier, Wodehouse’s comedy was so pure that it was almost abstract, and I find that with Tati as well. *Playtime* is a film I love and I love it more and more every time I see it, but I laugh at it less and less every time I see it. It is almost like a diagram of a comic film, whereas *Jour de fête* and *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* are both just warm, funny films full of great gags. I know *Playtime* was a great disaster for Tati. It bankrupted him and bankrupted the people who made it. Maybe his comedy was becoming so pure, so abstract, so diagrammatic that in fact it wasn’t giving pleasure to enough people anymore, and the audience rejected him as a result and turned their back on him.

François Gallix: A few years ago in Paris, there was an exhibition showing Jacques Tati’s films and you could watch various scenes of all his films in small booths. My wife and I watched those sequences and we were laughing away, but we were the only ones. In all the other booths, there were young people also watching, with no reaction at all. So we thought that must be something about age.

JC: It can’t just be a generational thing. My daughters who are fifteen and eighteen now don’t like Tati. They find the films slow, maybe they find them a bit too gentle. But they don’t hate all comedy: they love Buster Keaton, they love Laurel and Hardy, they like the Marx Brothers. So it’s not just that these films have had their time. There is something about Tati’s comedy which refined itself out of existence, and now in the light of *Playtime*, you can look back and see the seed of that in the early films as well. The gags are almost so perfect that they become cold. What stopped it becoming cold was the figure of Hulot himself, and of course, famously, Hulot is hardly ever glimpsed in *Playtime*. He is always around the edges of the action, which is what is so brilliant about him, but also maybe one of the things that made it hard for an audience to engage with.

VG: It’s also that different people don’t necessarily laugh at the same things. Have you had any experience of an audience not laughing when you read a funny passage from one of your novels?

JC: That did happen with *The Rotters’ Club* in Canada. When I was promoting *The Rotters’ Club*, the passage I usually read was the one in which Benjamin might have to swim naked because he’s forgotten his swimming trunks. I read it for the obvious reason that it always got a terrific laugh... but not in Canada! As it became clear that the thrust of this episode was that a young boy was going to be made to swim naked in front of his peers because he had committed the minor transgression of forgetting his swimming trunks, the audience fell more and more silent and started just staring at me in horror, and we finished the reading in a deathly silence. There was a question from the audience: ‘But did this happen to you?’. I said that it didn’t happen to me personally but it happened to other boys in school. The person in the audience asked: ‘So did they get counselling? Have they been to social services, the police, this kind of thing?’ I said: ‘Well, we thought it was kind of funny, really...’ But I could see their point. Thirty years on we look back on this barbaric practice in English boys’ schools and maybe it’s not as funny as I thought it was. Perhaps Canada was ahead of the rest of us, and that scene would be as unfunny to the readers of the future as Jacques Tati’s *Playtime* now appears to be to today’s generation.



VG: Your most recent novel *Number 11* (subtitled *Tales that Witness Madness*) takes up some characters from *What a Carve Up!*. Can you say a few words about this book and about why you decided to get back to the Winshaws?

JC: It's a sort of 'Jonathan Coe's greatest hits': everything I've done in fiction before is thrown into this novel and done in concentrated form. You can either read it as a novel or as a collection of five short stories because there are five different stories which are largely self-contained, although as the book unfolds you realise there are connections between them and the characters start to recur and the themes and images start to recur as well. In the 1960s and 1970s, one of the things that was devised to try and keep the flagging British film industry going was the portmanteau film, a horror film, almost invariably with five separate stories in it, all made by the same director, usually with a linking device. There is one called *Tales from the Crypt* and another was called *Tales that Witness Madness* and is set in a lunatic asylum and it is the psychiatrist, the guy who runs the asylum, who is telling a listener different stories about how each of these characters became mad and ended up there. It's not a particularly good film but—just like *What a Carve Up!*, the film that inspired my 1994 novel—I enjoy it and I like its narrative vulgarity. Vulgarity to me is not a pejorative word when it comes to aesthetics. I like strong stories, I like mysteries, I like humour, I like all the things that some readers and critics consider vulgar in a work of art. These are all the things that draw me in in the first place.

One of the key lines from *What a Carve Up!* comes at the end of the novel when Mortimer Winshaw, the head of the Winshaw family, tells the narrator, Michael Owen: 'there comes a point when greed and madness become practically indistinguishable'. The implication is that Britain—and the West generally—has crossed that line between the two at some point and Mortimer Winshaw adds that if we learn to live alongside greed and even tolerate it, then we've crossed a line into madness. That's why the title *Tales that Witness Madness* appealed to me and I used the line from *What a Carve Up!* as the epigraph to *Number 11*, as a way of signalling to the reader the connection between the two books. I don't normally reread my novels but I reread bits of *What a Carve Up!* to try and find out what it was that people liked about it so much and one of the things I noticed was that it was a horror novel. I had forgotten that that's what it became towards the end: all the characters end up at this big old mansion, on the Yorkshire moors and they all start getting bumped off by a maniac. I thought: 'That's fun! I haven't done that for twenty years or so. It would be nice to write something a bit grisly, a bit nasty again'. I also felt that there seemed to be some correlation between the ruthlessness of the political times during the 1980s and this note of gothic horror pastiche that I had struck, so I thought that maybe this would suit the present time as well. I have written five slightly grisly, slightly macabre, slightly horrific stories which, in one way or another, look at some aspects of British life in the present years. It is a novel about the age of austerity, it is a post-financial crisis novel and the idea is that it should be both funny and horrific in the way that *What a Carve Up!* was.

David Quantick: In *Number 11*, there is one story, 'The Crystal Garden', which should be in the horror film *Dead of Night*. It is a comic horror vignette which involves somebody coming to an untimely end, largely because of nostalgia. Given that *Number 11* is quite a brutal novel, given that you killed at least two people in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, given that you talked a lot about nostalgia, I wondered if you got bored with nostalgia, and were longing for the death of the past now?

JC: Possibly, yes. Again, rather in a way that *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* pushes this archetypal Jonathan Coe figure of the indecisive, melancholy, slightly inert, but sweet and good-natured male to its conclusion and dispenses him towards the end of the book with a click of a finger, so in *Number 11*, in the central story, the story which is a keystone in the book, you have a man who is obsessed with the past and chooses to pursue this obsession by making a desperate search for a film which he vaguely remembers having seen on television in the 1960s. The nature of the film itself, the



content of the film is hardly the point. What he remembers is the atmosphere in his parents' living room when he was watching it: the hiss of the gas fire, the snowscape outside the window, the knowledge that his father was coming home from work at the same time, coming home from the job he had been doing for ten or twenty years, that his mother would be cooking the same meal on the same day of the week. It was a longing for stability and security, and also in a way a longing for boredom, which in the universe of this novel becomes the correlative of a longing for a pre-Thatcher Britain, a longing for what we called the nanny-state, to come back and make life simple for us again, because for many people life was simpler in the 1970s, when we didn't have so much choice, when choice wasn't such a politicians' buzzword. So yes, the character almost wrecks his marriage with this obsession and at the end of the story, at the moment when he finally feels that he has found the film again, it all goes tragically wrong. It's also a postmodern retelling of one of my favourite short stories, 'The Door in the Wall' by H.G. Wells. A little boy is taken through a green door in the wall in some anonymous London suburb when he is very young and discovers a kind of Edenic, paradisaical garden on the other side. Then he becomes a politician, spends the rest of his life trying to find this door again and of course when he finally finds it, what he finds on the other side is not what he is expecting. I don't know what I'm going to write next so I can't say definitively that I'm done with the subject of nostalgia but I have certainly taken it about as far as it can go (for the moment) in *Number 11*, as I've taken most of my other favourite themes in this book.

Bibliography

- COE, Jonathan, *The Accidental Woman*, 1987, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *A Touch of Love*, 1989, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *The Dwarves of Death*, 1990, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *What a Carve Up!*, 1994, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *The House of Sleep*, 1997, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *The Rotters' Club*, 2001, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *The Closed Circle*, 2004, London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *Like a Fiery Elephant – The Story of B.S. Johnson*, London: Picador, 2004.
- COE, Jonathan, *9th & 13th*, London: Penguin, 2005.
- COE, Jonathan, *The Rain Before it Falls*, 2007. London: Penguin, 2008.
- COE, Jonathan, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, London: Penguin, 2010.
- COE, Jonathan, *Expo 58*, London: Penguin, 2013.
- COE, Jonathan, *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements. Non-Fiction, 1990-2013*, London: Penguin ebook, 2013.
- COE, Jonathan, *Loggerheads and Other Stories*, London: Penguin ebook, 2014.
- COE, Jonathan, *Number 11, or Tales that Witness Madness*, London: Penguin, 2015.

Notes

1 "The Two Ronnies. Crossword Sketch". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVWdbO6FFfw>. Last accessed on November 25, 2015.

2 The piece with misplaced footnotes in *The House of Sleep* (270-274) is inspired by a sketch by David Renwick on *The Two Ronnies*, where a contestant in the quiz show 'Mastermind' chooses the subject "Answering the question before last". "The Two Ronnies: Mastermind." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOC59pI_yqQ. Last accessed November 25, 2015.



3 “Monty Python: Travel Agent Sketch.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yz2LaJOVAiA>. Last accessed November 25, 2015.

References

Electronic reference

Vanessa Guignery, “Laughing Out Loud with Jonathan Coe: A Conversation”, *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 51 | 2016, Online since 01 December 2016, connection on 30 December 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3371>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3371>

About the author

Vanessa Guignery

By this author

The Book of Mrs Noah (1987) de Michèle Roberts : un roman aux sentiers qui bifurquent

[Full text]

The Book of Mrs Noah (1987) by Michèle Roberts: a Novel of Forking Paths

Published in *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 28 | 2005

Introduction [Full text]

The Trails and Travails of Transmission

Introduction : les chemins escarpés de la transmission

Published in *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 66 | 2024

Introduction [Full text]

Exploring Faults and Fault Lines

Introduction : L'exploration des failles et des lignes de faille

Published in *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 64 | 2023

The Destabilisation of Genre in Alain de Botton's Iconotexts [Full text]

La déstabilisation générique dans les iconotextes d'Alain de Botton

Published in *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 31 | 2006

Introduction: Contemporary Literary Renaissances [Full text]

Introduction : Renaissances littéraires contemporaines

Published in *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 62 | 2022

MOSELEY Merritt. A History of the Booker Prize. Contemporary Fiction Since 1992 [Full text]

London and New York: Routledge, 2021

Published in *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 62 | 2022

All documents

Copyright



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are “All rights reserved”, unless otherwise stated.

