

# The Listener

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**IRAQ**

**Saddam: the  
explosive  
paradox**

*LIBRA*

**DM THOMAS**

**Faithful in  
my fashion**

**TELEVISION**

**Taking sides  
in the bias  
debate**

**ALBERT FINNEY**

**on location  
in Dorset**

**A PRE-BOOKER  
COCKTAIL**

**reviewing  
Paul Theroux  
William Boyd  
Peter Ackroyd  
Philip Roth**



## NEW TERM BLUES

### How goes the Revolution?



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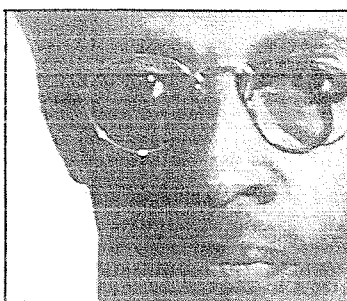
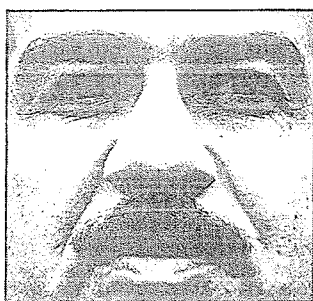
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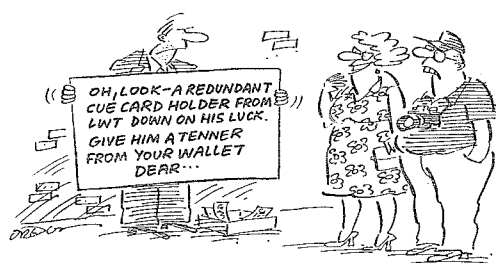
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# Criminal Classes

NICK KIMBERLEY

GOING WRONG

Ruth Rendell  
Hutchinson £12.99

The *Listener* recently asked various celebs what they would be reading on holiday this year. Ruth Rendell, after the obligatory disclaimer about not getting a holiday at all, said that if she were to take one, the books she would read would be by Ian McEwan, Joseph Heller, Milan Kundera. Serious stuff, *quality* stuff.

I take this as some sort of guide to the writers Rendell might like to be associated with. Since her first published novel in 1964, she has written something in excess of one novel a year, including three under the pseudonym of Barbara Vine, as if to disguise just how prolific she is. In this country at least, if you write that many books, you can't hope to be taken seriously—especially if your work is classified as crime fiction, mere entertainment, the sort of thing you take on holiday (unless you're Ruth Rendell, of course). In the quality press, still so influential in making or breaking reputations, crime fiction is a secondary consideration, deserving a critical vocabulary no more elaborate than 'rattling good yarn, unputdownable'.

There are signs that things are changing. PD James not only gets nominated for the Booker prize, she has her own television programme. Cultural studies departments offer options like 'Crime Fiction: Ideology and Discourse'—as if to say that crime fiction is still a little *infra dig*, but permissible if you read it to deconstruct it.

Perhaps we can't blame Ruth Rendell for trying to cast off the tarnished tag of Crime Novelist. To be sure, she has long abandoned the strictures of the whodunit. Even her Inspector Wexford novels, which usually still require a mystery to be solved, have little time for the mechanics of clues, red herrings, mistaken identities which are the proper stuff of police procedurals.

Not that her latest novel, *Going Wrong*, doesn't revolve around a central mystery, but it's one that allows no solutions: why do people behave like this? There are no sensational dismemberments, no messy spillages of blood, no swapping of bodily fluids. Instead there is the uncomfortable pleasure of watching a dangerous obsession take shape in the most mundane circumstances. Guy, once a working-class ne'er-do-well, now a flourishing and only slightly shady merchant, still carries the torch for Leonora, the nice middle-class girl he mixed with at school... The perils of comprehensive education.

He is convinced that she loves him and will eventually share his *nouvelles richesses*, if only he can get around the snobberies of her family and friends. In reality, Leonora is terrified of him but can't bring herself to reject him. She tolerates his daily phone calls, even

agrees to have lunch with him every Saturday, despite the fact that she is engaged to someone else.

Ordinary enough, yet Rendell induces an eerie sense of Guy's utter strangeness—strange men being one of her specialities. Can't he see that Leonora doesn't love him, that plotting murder is hardly likely to send her running into his arms? And what's in it for Leonora? Why doesn't she give this creep the elbow? Each needs the other in order to make sense of the world. Guy's *arriviste* aspirations, Leonora's snobby liberalism: the two worlds will never meet, they are fixed in place, the one obsessed with the other.

That makes the novel sound like a schematic chart of the English class system. Rendell is too clever for that: no hectoring social realism here. Nor is she concerned to provide psychological 'answers' to her mysteries. Details of broken family backgrounds are data, not explanations.

And yet Rendell, like Guy, longs to be part of a different class. Eager to show her powers of observation, she never misses a chance to identify characters by the brand names they wear, as if she lives in a delirious adman's dreamworld where what we consume is what we are. In her finest novel, *A Dark Adapted Eye*, incidentals of smell, colour, taste provide



Rendell: too fine an eye for detail

an almost tangible sense of memory at work, colouring the present with infinitely fine sensual impressions. Here, her fondness for such details becomes oppressive, an end in itself, a sign of *quality*.

I'm quite prepared to believe that Ruth Rendell shares the obsessive tics, even some of the party snobberies of the characters she describes. Yet even a novel as flawed as this opens a grimy window on a world rarely glimpsed in the pages of English fiction. For my sake if not for hers, I hope Ruth Rendell is never nominated for the Booker prize. □

## Laugh Lines

DAVID HONIGMANN

UNAUTHORISED VERSIONS

Edited by Kenneth Baker  
Faber £14.99

Politicians knocking off books in their spare time inevitably send critics scrabbling for Doctor Johnson's views on the similarity between women preaching and dogs walking on their hind legs. But an anthology is, perhaps, excusable as the inevitable by-product of time spent scouring reference books for quotations to add a touch of literary distinction to workaday speeches. We can, accordingly, ask whether in this case it is done well. Well, yes minister and no minister.

The expected things are here, originals and parodies neatly set out on facing pages. Lewis Carroll's twisted homilies for children and their forgotten originals are exhumed. Henry Reed's portmanteau TS Eliot is in:

As we get older we do not get any younger.  
Seasons return, and today I am fifty-five,  
And this time last year I was fifty-four,  
And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.

Hugh Kingsmill's Housman ('What, still alive at twenty-two / A clean upstanding boy like you') and Alan Bennett's John Betjeman ('Cold the seat and loud the cistern / As I read the Harpic tin') are familiar from Bennett's *Poetry In Motion* programme.

There is a host of re-tellings of familiar nursery rhymes in incongruous styles, a treat for John Sessions fans. Housman does Jack and Jill in the style of the Romantics—'From rock to rock the charms of Beauty bump / And

shrieks of anguish chill the conscious pump'; G K Chesterton sets Old King Cole to the meandering rhythms of Walt Whitman. 'I see you are inhaling tobacco, puffing, smoking, spitting (I do not object to your spitting)'.

On most pages there is something rare and worthwhile. Simon Rae takes an unkind smack at Tony Harrison. Wendy Cope parodies everyone. Kit Wright parodies Wendy Cope. Noel Petty has fun with William McGonagall, who might have been thought immune from parody. And who can fail to have a soft spot for an anthology whose index juxtaposes Pound, Ezra and Python, Monty?

The keenest parodists, as Baker notes, often seem to be minor poets, including the legendary sportsman J K Stephens. Housman and Swinburne, among many others, are here both as parodists and as butts. The nastiest parodies, and some of the funniest, once seemed to come from unpleasant people, such as Pound, Chesterton or Belloc, but in modern times Roger Woddis is singled out for praise for 'a huge number of fine parodies for the *New Statesman*, *Punch* and *Radio Times*'. (Evidently Baker considers Woddis's work for this magazine less than fine.)

If an anthology were simply a question of collecting good things, Baker would have discharged his duties admirably. But his notes are patchy, explaining things that everyone understands already while falling irritatingly silent when the reader could do with some help.

Critical judgements are unreliable: *The Satanic Verses* contains 'disrespectful and satirical attacks on the prophet Mohammed' and Robert Frost is 'garrulous and platitudinising', for example. (Neither the anonymous 'I sometimes think I'd rather crow' nor Kenneth Koch's 'Mending Sump', both surer Frost parodies than the ones included here, make it in.) Frost deserves better than to be accused of platitudinising by Baker, whose level of



# The Tricky Ouch of It

NICK HORNBY

LIKE LIFE  
Lorrie Moore  
Faber £12.99

Some books—and Lorrie Moore's first collection of stories, *Self-Help*, is one of the very few of them—are not like books at all. Most books lie on the bedside table, spines stiff, glaring at you dolefully as you re-read the free offers page at the back of *Time Out*. 'What did you buy me for?' you can hear them saying if you ever get close enough. 'How come I ended up in this pile, gathering dust? Why did it have to be you that picked me up? Why...' 'Stop whining,' you tell them when you're feeling brave. 'It's your own fault. You shouldn't sit there looking so po-faced. You should at least offer the *promise* of a bit of fun.' (There is the possibility, of course, that your books don't

critical discourse is summed up in his comment (on Wavell's anthology *Other Men's Flowers*), that 'it is a very good book and I have learnt a lot from it'.

More serious is the way in which Baker uses his role as anthologist as an excuse for a gratuitous party political broadcast. 'Within nine months of the election, the Alliance had foundered on the pique of David Steel and the pride of David Owen'; Labour's new [defence] policy was a fudge [that] pleased no one: the left of the party felt betrayed, while the right knew they were being conned.' A poem about the community charge is explained without the words 'poll tax' being mentioned once. Perhaps he has been po-faced for so long that the wind has changed.

Tellingly, although Baker sportingly, or vainly, includes the occasional reference to himself ('I could have been... A shorter Peter Walker or a meeker Kenneth Baker' muses a *Spectator* competitor, without obvious regret; Roger Woddis lampoons Baker's vision of market forces in the Church of England), there appears to be no reference at all to the prime minister. Baker is as loyal as

talk at all, and that therefore you don't feel compelled to answer them. There is the possibility that I need a holiday.)

*Self-Help* isn't one of the whingers. It is funny and sad and elegant and beautiful and serious, but most important of all, reading it doesn't make you feel virtuous. Reading it is easy, like dancing or going to the cinema or singing along to Tamla Motown records (which is probably why it could be found remaindered at £2 in almost any bookshop you care to name.) And when *Like Life* came through my letterbox I felt the sort of anticipation that has only previously been provoked by the theme music from *The Man From UNCLE*.

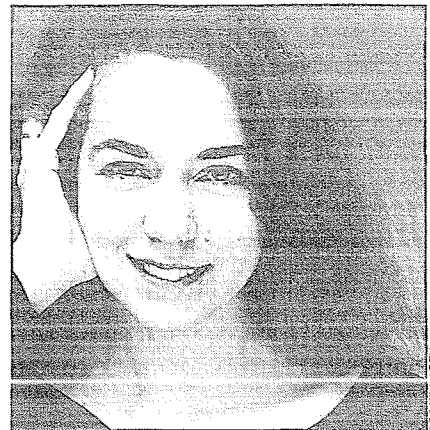
Luckily, it is, on balance, not a disappointment. The bad news is that in two or three of the stories here, Moore writes as if she has been listening to advice from grown-ups: 'Rein yourself in more! Forget those stories narrated in imperatives! Don't feel you have to be witty all the time! Read more Alice Munro!' Consequently, 'Joy' and 'Places To Look For Your Mind' are beautifully-written, credible, well-observed and somehow anonymous, the product of the best computer in the best American creative writing class. The good news is that in the remaining half-dozen tales, she sticks her tongue out at the grown-ups and

a schoolboy who knows that unkind words will never hurt *him*, but flies into a rage if anyone makes a disparaging remark about his parents.

If an academic adopted the same partisan editorial stance (or, more probably, the reverse), it would be equally irritating, but at least the opinions might not be so dreadfully predictable. We know who Kenneth Baker is, we know what he thinks.

Perhaps the worst example comes at the end of a masterly parody of Reed's 'Naming of Parts', dealing with the GCSE. 'Today we have marking of folders. Yesterday / We had assessments...' To gloss this, Baker notes 'This exam had been planned for more than ten years and proved a great success, but it had teething troubles... Many teachers had to learn a new system that involved more practical work and regular assessment, and it is to their credit that they did it so well.'

Anyone who can stand this mixture of self-justification and sanctimoniousness (unless it was self-parody?) will find much to laugh at here. The pity is that, as ever, Baker doesn't know when to leave well alone.



Moore: empress of new clothes

concentrates on what she does best.

The characters in all eight stories are the familiar lonelyhearts and malcontents, most of them of a certain age (let's avoid the 't'-word) and with responsible, or at least interesting, jobs (let's avoid the 'y'-word): Breckie is a surgeon, Zoe teaches American history, Odette is a poet, Harry is a playwright. Most of these people are either locked into unhappy, fitful, unsatisfying relationships, or at least wish they were: 'One of these days, she knew, she would have to give up dating. She had practised declarations in the mirror. "I don't date. I'm sorry. I just don't date."'

This, of course, has been the staple diet of middlebrow American culture—Woody and his (author) sisters—for a long time now. Perhaps 'highbrow pop' is a more exact categorisation. *Like Life*, however, is much, much more than simply 'When Harry Met Lorrie'. For starters, Moore's language, her deceptively casual arrival at a beautifully skewed phrase, is above and beyond the call of Highbrow Pop duty: 'Dennis was always kicking himself on a phone, not an easy thing, the tricky ouch of it.' And in this volume, as in *Self-Help*, the author looks consistently and successfully for new clothes in which to dress her themes. The title story, for example, is a bleakly impressive work of romantic science-fiction, just as sharp as the rest of her work but with apocalyptic trimmings.

But most of all, Lorrie Moore is funny—funnier than just about anyone operating in this territory, including the director of the hilarious *Interiors* and *September*. While Zoe and Jane and Odette grapple with life, the tricky ouch of it, they produce thousands of wry, self-deprecating, apparently effortless one-liners or they become embroiled in dumb, hilarious, confused conversations with dumb, hilarious men. Zoe's meeting with Earl at a Halloween party, he dressed as a naked woman, she with a bone through her head, he desperate to talk about love and marriage and relationships, is particularly memorable.

It is easy for a man to fall in love with these women, with their wit and their insecurities and their tendernesses, and by childish extension with their creator. Lorrie Moore is the post-feminist woman that post-feminist men are looking for in their non-predatory way; and the lonelinesses of these characters are as unbelievable as the wonderful Melissa's hopeless struggle to find a partner in that lower-case 't'-word programme. Mary, Zoe, Odette, Lorrie... we want to marry you. You don't have to feel that way to love *Like Life*, however: Lorrie Moore's stories are still the most fun you can have between hard covers.

