

It is given to few books to transform a culture – or rather, so to alter its outward appearance that it becomes difficult to remember how things were before that book arrived. In the early 1990s, *Trainspotting* was not so much a novel as a social phenomenon; not only did Irvine Welsh's jagged, energetic style inspire a host of imitators, it also reinforced a set of ideas about the "real" Scotland that have proven as appealing to outside observers as they are difficult to counter. Of course, Welsh himself cannot be held responsible for this; indeed, what is striking about his career so far is the deft self-management by which he has avoided becoming an icon for a generation. Although *The Acid House* (1995) and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1996) consolidated his reputation, he soon grew restless and, in spite of their commercial success, both *Ecstasy* (1997) and *Filth* (1998) seemed strained and unconvincing, the work of a writer who wants to move on, but is not altogether sure where he wants to go.

Meanwhile, the fan base never wavered, and, for many, *Glue* will be welcomed, not only as a return to form, but also as a return to familiar territory. Yet, while it is true that this portrait of four young men growing up in the Edinburgh housing schemes may seem familiar, *Glue* is far more than a replay of *Trainspotting*. Indeed, it could be argued that, by sacrificing some of the élan and the easier humour of the earlier novel in exchange for an extended range, greater complexity and real compassion, Welsh has produced, not only his most ambitious, but also his most complete and engaging work to date.

*Glue*, as its title suggests, is about the forces – good and bad; social, psychological and imaginative – that bind a group of young men together. One of the book's main ideas, introduced by the sex-obsessed Terry, is "maturity":

The thing is, ah am mature an aw. Ah mind ay that one teacher in art, that Miss Ormond, she says tae ays, – You're the most immature young man I've ever taught. Ah hud tae jist tell her straight, ah am mature miss, ah've been fuckin well shaggin fir years an ah've shagged mair birds than any cunt in this school.

Given Terry's nature, this initial consideration of the theme is obviously superficial; later, however, as his more thoughtful friends, Billy, Gally and Carl, work through the problems and fears that beset their boys' lives, the question comes into focus. Each of these characters is faced with a series of moral and emotional

# The long boyhood

JOHN BURNSIDE

Irvine Welsh

GLUE

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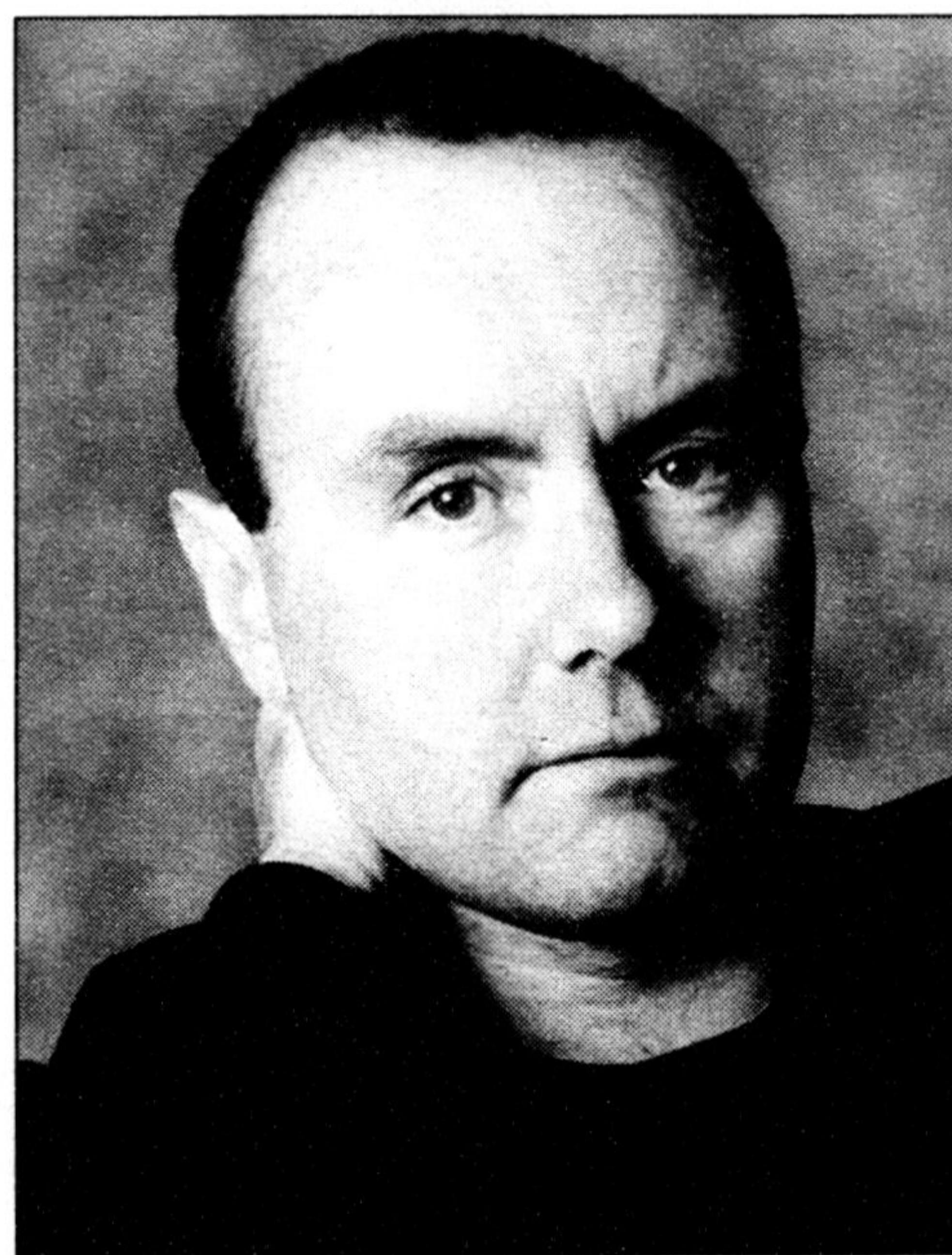
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challenges to his adolescent preoccupations with football, drinking and group loyalty; in turn, each discovers that any extant moral framework does not apply, that living demands the ability to improvise, to discover an individual and provisional basis for appropriate action.

That the characters' preoccupations are adolescent reflects the lifelong boyhood of a certain type of Scottish male, and this is informed by a suitably adolescent code, summed up in ten "rules" by Carl's father, Duncan:

1. NEVER HIT A WOMAN
2. ALWAYS BACK UP YOUR MATES
3. NEVER SCAB
4. NEVER CROSS A PICKET LINE
5. NEVER GRASS FRIEND NOR FOE
6. TELL THEM NOWT (THEM BEING POLIS, DOLE, SOCIAL, JOURNALISTS, COUNCIL, CENSUS, ETC.)
7. NEVER LET A WEEK GO BY WITHOUT INVESTING IN NEW VINYL
8. GIVE WHEN YOU CAN, TAKE ONLY WHEN YOU HAVE TO
9. IF YOU FEEL HIGH OR LOW, MIND THAT NOTHING GOOD OR BAD LASTS FOR EVER AND TODAY'S THE START OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE
10. GIVE LOVE FREELY, BUT BE TIGHTER WITH TRUST

The list is both crude and revealing, as it sets out the limits by which the men here fail. Contradictions within the code reveal its inadequacy, as Carl discovers when Gally is arrested for a crime he did not commit: "One ay ehs rules is thit ye eywis back up yir mates. Fine. Then eh says ye never grass anybody. Well, how kin ye dae baith wi Gally? How kin ye back him up without grassin oan Polmont?" Inevitably, the code is not fully thought



through; while the boys are supposed never to hit women, it is apparently quite in order to treat them very badly. Indeed, until some of them are liberated by "E", all the male characters are at once fearful and contemptuous of females, and, though they appear from time to time as wives or sex objects, we hear very little from the women in *Glue*. This is not really a failing, however; Welsh's business is to explore the essential immaturity, if not of the male per se, then at least of a certain masculine subspecies. The women's frustration is summed up by Sandra Birrell, wife to Wullie, mother to Billy: "Ah've got one son beatin up men for a livin, and the other daein it in the streets for fun! What is it wi you stupid, daft bloody men, she sniffed and rose tearfully, storming into the kitchen." It is a good question, but one the men are still not ready for: "Wullie and Duncan rolled their eyes at each other. – One nil tae the girls, Wull, Duncan said sardonically."

*Glue* is too perceptive to be a "laddish" book, and it would be a mistake to see it as typical of that genre, with its cheeky, smug and, at bottom, despicable boy-men. Nevertheless, it is a book about male inadequacy, in which we see that the essential characteristic of the boy-man

is fear, and that his deepest fear is of being embarrassed – of looking a fool, especially in front of his mates. Inevitably, the boy-man's life is full of dangers: though he may be clever, he must avoid seeming intelligent; nor can he appear too compassionate, imaginative or emotionally complicated. Yet, for these boys, the possibility of embarrassment hovers ominously in every situation.

Just as it was important not to work at school – because to work is to try, and to try is to risk failure – so it is essential not to be "taken for a mug", like their socialist fathers, betrayed during the Thatcher years. This fearful attitude leads to an obsession with being hard: though hardness here has less to do with durability than with a form of emotional and spiritual sclerosis.

Because their world is all about money, the boys see economic success as the essential prize. By the 1990s (the novel is divided into dated sections), the older generation have used their redundancy pay to become the proud owner-occupiers of their council houses, adding the new burden of a mortgage to their existing worries. Meanwhile, Billy has become a professional boxer, "doing well and making it big". As he moves up in the world, he makes visible gains: money, respect and a girlfriend with a suitably genteel-sounding name (an Anthea, as opposed to the Gails and Yvonne from his old scheme). Yet, when he is approached by a pair of "sponsors" who want him to front a bar, he admits that, with the possibility of real success, he is scared "for the first time in years":

Me, having my ain bar, my ain business. Sounds good. It's the only way to make money, having your ain business, buying and selling. And having money is the only way to get respect. Desperate, but that's the world we live in now. Ye hear the likes ay Kinnock n the Labour Party gaun oan about the doctors n nurses n teachers, the people that care for the sick and educate the kids and everybody's nodding away. But they're thinking aw the time, ah would never dae that kind ay joab, just gie me money. It's drastic, but you'll never change it. You try tae be decent tae people close tae ye, but everybody else can piss off, n that's the way ay it.

As Billy pursues his dream, Terry and Gally wallow in that long boyhood to which they have been conditioned, and it is left to Carl to find a tentative moral stance of his own. Transforming himself into the DJ "N-SIGN" and moving, first to London, then to Australia, he begins to understand that maturity is being prepared to risk not only failure, but embarrassment. As he matures, so the book reveals possibilities *Trainspotting* withheld. The strength of *Glue* lies in its revelation of the pathos inherent in the immaturity of that male subspecies to which its "schemies" belong; at the same time, Welsh's relinquishment of his earlier panache, in favour of a more questioning narrative, and an occasionally flatter style, is a mark of his own increased maturity as a writer. Ending, as it does, in forgiveness, *Glue* is, arguably, his best book, a seasoned examination of the Scottish male.

## Down among the wheelie bins

Rebecca Smith's charming first novel is set in Southampton, and it provides us with a contemporary study of provincial life complete with wheelie bins. Lucy sets up the vegetarian Bluebird Café, fuelled by bohemian aspirations and a grant from the local council. Her boyfriend, Paul, works as a volunteer at the Badger Centre, in order to avoid completing his PhD thesis on "Climatic Change and Prickle Density Variation in Urban Hedgehogs", thus postponing the need to look for a "proper job". Like the author, both are graduates of the city's university who have never got round to leaving after their finals.

Across the street from the café, John Vir runs "Vir and Vir – News and Food", with the reluctant assistance of his indolent teenage daughter Guralp. The other Vir – his brother – never shows up, and his wife has been "visiting" her mother in India for the past five years. (After his wife's departure, John finds a list of reasons she had made for and against staying with him. Those for are "quite tall" and "opens pickle

SALLY CONNOLLY

Rebecca Smith

THE BLUEBIRD CAFÉ

208pp. Bloomsbury. £14.99.

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jars".) No taste is left uncatered for on the shop's dusty shelves, from copies of *Gay Times* to *The Lady*, from "every spice under the sun" and out-of-season Diwali cards to confectionery with 1986 sell-by dates ("he thought perhaps it might be valuable. . . perhaps his descendants could sell it when 2086 came around"). John gradually falls in love with Lucy, and his half-hearted plans to dispose of Paul almost accidentally succeed. The action of *The Bluebird Café* gently meanders between the comings and goings at the café, shop and

wildlife centre, and its denouement aptly turns on omission rather than commission.

There are also forays into the life of the local dustman, Gilbert, Lucy's least favourite customer. The novel portrays the blossoming love between Gilbert and eccentric Mavis, the bane of the local council, who thinks nothing of walking around Southampton in her slippers in the rain. Such deft, and often squalid, comic touches are characteristic of Rebecca Smith's acutely observed vignettes of the everyday. Her humour is more tender than satirical, as she affectionately explores the shabbier aspects of the town and the compromises people make for the sake of a quiet life. Her style is light and engaging, though some of her metaphors have a slightly laboured quality ("empty cans lay around the room like very small sleeping dogs"). Though slight, the plot and its denouement are satisfying. The apparent lack of direction is fitting in a novel concerned with how people lose the plot, and how love can happen to you when you are not looking.

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