

commit suicide. Then he turned on his co-heir, Tiberius' grandson, Gemellus, accusing him of having prayed for the emperor's death. The young man's breath smelt of cough medicine, which Caligula was convinced was really an antidote to poison. When so charged, Gemellus replied: 'An antidote — how can one take an antidote to Caesar?'

There was to be no antidote to Caligula save assassination. In the spring of 38 he turned against the man who had made him emperor, the Praetorian prefect, Macro, having at the same time an affair with the man's wife. This sort of killing, with a left and a right, became Caligula's style. Philo the Jew was there at the time and tells the story. Caligula performed his wickednesses in open court and one day when Macro, only ever a loyal servant but presuming to give advice, approached his emperor, Caligula opened his mind to the people around him thus:

Here comes the teacher of one who no longer needs to learn... the censor of his superior in wisdom, who holds that an emperor should obey his subjects... Does anyone dare to teach me, who even while in the womb, that workshop of nature, was modelled as an emperor?

Caligula then accused Macro of being a pimp for his wife! These words and actions, which, with omnipotence, can be simultaneous, are pure Caligula, lucid, vile and in a horrible way, funny. For Caligula was a terrible tease. He decided to organise the wives and daughters of senators into a brothel and auction them. He was a brilliant auctioneer, and one tired old equestrian woke up to find he had bought 14 gladiators. When a man whom Caligula had inspired to kill himself and leave him his money turned out to have none, Caligula sighed, 'He died in vain.'

He taunted once too often — mimicking the high and squeaky voice of one Cassius Chaerea, a tribune of the Praetorian Guard. When he was killed three years and seven months after his accession, the deed was done by Chaerea, with the assistance of a nobleman whose wife's prowess in bed Caligula had often publicly deplored.

Ferrill in his jolly way refers to the Penthouse movie, off of which the egregious Gore Vidal took his name. Malcolm McDowell is better looking than Caligula, but the manic laugh, the grief for his sister, the violent changes of mood and costumes were convincing. The erotic scenes were juicy. The sets glittered with false marble, and gilt and porphyry. The floors were spattered with stage blood and the entrails of the tortured. In Caligula's palaces the blood and the spunk and the shrieks of pain were real.

Professor Ferrill's short biography says little new about Caligula but provides an entertaining curtain-raiser for those who would like to know more about an autocracy, which, amazingly, he left stronger than he found it.

## The novels of B.S. Johnson

Jonathan Coe

'The end can't come quickly enough for me,' wrote B.S. Johnson in the closing pages of his second novel, *Albert Angelo*. In 1973, some nine years later, he committed suicide at his North London home. From the perspective of Britain's ever changing literary landscape, amidst the perpetual ebb and flow of fashions and reputations, it all seems a long time ago. Only one of his seven novels remains in print, and instead of being forgotten Johnson has been consigned to what some might regard as an even worse fate: that of being endlessly invoked as a reference point in a sporadic and none too fruitful argument about something called 'experimental' fiction. It is high time that his other novels were made available again, so that we can all be reminded of what he was really up to.

Johnson published two volumes of poetry, edited three anthologies, directed numerous short films and television programmes and wrote at least six plays. All of these must be seen as important aspects of his creative personality, but his central achievement lies in the series of novels

which appeared between 1963 and 1975: *Travelling People*, *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl*, *The Unfortunates*, *House Mother Normal*, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* and *See the Old Lady Decently*. *House Mother Normal* is nominally still available as a Bloodaxe paperback, but getting hold of any of the others now requires hard work and substantial capital outlay. And if, in fact, some of Johnson's books are now over-valued by his admirers, this has everything to do with their current status — quite independent of literary merit — as precious objects, which may not be entirely inappropriate in the case of a writer whose work made so much play with the notion of book as artefact. (Meanwhile, prospective Johnson-hunters should take heart: a friend of mine recently picked up a copy of *Trawl* — signed, no less — in Newcastle for 70p.)

The long-term unavailability of these books merely adds fuel to the sense that Johnson has in some way been excluded from the mainstream of British letters — written out of its history, if you like. There is a strong B.S. Johnson cult in this country, busy buying up his novels from second-hand bookshops and contributing occasional revaluations to literary magazines, and he is much admired in America and Europe, where more of his books are in print. But he has, to an extent, been ghettoised, and what this proves, according to some people, is that Johnson's technical innovations, his radical reappraisal of the novel's formal possibilities, continue to constitute a challenge which is simply too daunting for the essentially timid and conservative British literary establishment.

As it happens, I don't think this is true. What strikes me most forcibly now, looking back over his work as a whole, is its consistent accessibility. In particular, there is nothing at all obscure about the famous 'devices' which seem to have caused so much fuss at the time. Take the most well-remembered of all, the 'novel-in-a-box', *The Unfortunates*, which consisted of 27 unbound sections to be read in whatever order the reader chose. Its rationale can be summarised in a sentence: the workings of the human mind are random; this is a novel about the workings of a human mind; therefore it will imitate this randomness as closely as possible. It is nonsense to pretend that this concept could have appeared 'difficult' to the readership of a country which now puts Salman Rushdie on the bestseller list and awards top prizes to Nicholas Mosley.

Many of his other most talked-about (and supposedly problematic) techniques have since cropped up in books which have won enormous mainstream success. In *Travelling People* he told every chapter in a different style: epistolary novel, diary, film-script, etc. Does this ring a bell for readers of David Lodge's *Changing Places*? In *See the Old Lady Decently* Johnson abruptly breaks off from the narrative to sketch



scenes of his own domestic and family life while writing the novel: was it not just such a moment of authorial intimacy which everybody adored in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*? When Peter Ackroyd reviewed *See the Old Lady Decently* in the pages of this very magazine back in 1975, he sneered at Johnson's 'lamentably archaic "experimentation"' and said that

the problem with the whole book... is that it is actually an anachronism masquerading as something different and new.

Yet the patently Johnsonesque introduction of Ackroyd's own person into the pages of last year's Dickens biography usefully became one of its main talking- and selling-points.

The poet and novelist Zulfikar Ghose, who knew Johnson well and wrote an immensely moving memoir of him for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* a few years ago, casts a different light on the reasons behind his lifelong sense of exclusion. Recalling two separate occasions on which Johnson lashed out at some hapless critic or publisher at a dinner party, he said:

Both these men whom Bryan abused belong to a particular class, socially much higher than Bryan's; they are of that group of gifted or fortunate people whose class, together with an Oxbridge education, assures them a privileged position in London's literary power struggle. Bryan despised them: perhaps because they were what he could not be, or because they acquired so easily what he, with his great talent, was denied.

In other words, the forces against which he had to battle went further and deeper than mere literary prejudice.

Of course, he was also the victim of his own dogmas, the most tendentious of which was his belief that 'telling stories is telling lies', so that novelists should in effect confine themselves to providing accurate recreations of their own personal experience. This theory was not at all well thought out. Joyce, for instance, who was one of Johnson's great idols, never did anything of the sort, neither did Beckett, another mentor. Eva Figes argued the point with him a number of times and provides all that we need by way of counter-argument:

By concentrating too much on form, on literal truth, I think Bryan lost touch with an essential, greater truth, that the only way to tell the truth is by lying, and that is the real starting point of meaningful fiction.

But there is no doubting the passion with which he clung to this central conviction, because it burns through the pages of his three most intensely autobiographical books, *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*. *Albert Angelo* is, I think, the funniest of his novels, as well as being a superb, and scrupulously realistic, account of what it was like to teach in a tough London school in the early 1960s. *Trawl* is more difficult, relying for its effects on dense patterns of imagery and plunging the reader

into the rhythms of a strange, lurching prose which makes the central metaphor (deep-sea fishing) seem uncomfortably vivid. And the more I read *The Unfortunates*, the more I feel that it represents the peak of Johnson's achievement — the closest he ever came to a perfect blend of personal honesty with formal innovation.

It describes a Saturday afternoon in Johnson's life when, arriving in Nottingham to report on a football match (he was a soccer reporter for the *Observer*), he realises that he remembers the city well for its association with a close friend who died an early death from cancer. The novel therefore combines a sustained lament in the tradition of *Lycidas* with a vibrant celebration of the sort of provincial intellectual life which tends to go unrecorded in British fiction. And I believe it is this very conflation of raw feeling with unrepentant intel-

lectual vigour, neither of them masked by any kind of metropolitan smartness, which guaranteed *The Unfortunates* its muted reception — although naturally the alleged 'gimmick' of its presentation provided critics with a ready-made weapon of attack which spared them the trouble of engaging with the book on its own terms.

It is no use urging people to read it now, however, because just about the only ways of finding it are either to go to the British Library or to track down a dealer in first editions — who will let you have it, if you are lucky, for about £60. Meanwhile, your local branch of Waterstones will continue to burst at the seams with novels written at only a fraction of its level of intelligence and commitment. Slowly but surely, the work of one of our finest post-war novelists has been allowed to dribble out of print. Is anyone going to remedy this situation?

## Harmonica

Her tunes were vamped through lipstick, played to show  
The child I was just how to suck and blow  
Enough to turn a tinny doh-re-mi  
Into a broken-hearted melody,

The quaver in her stream of sopping notes  
A dole queue in its Thirties' overcoats  
Whistling through nostalgias of gaslit  
Chromatics proletarian with spit.

Her elbows planted on her bony knees  
Moved up and down to breathy harmonies,  
The busker in her picking up by ear  
A smoke-filled, wheezy-chested atmosphere,

Her mothballed coat and man-sized walking boots  
Shook with coughs and giggles, red-veined hoots,  
The racket stopping so she could begin  
Another tumblerful of Gordon's gin;

On every birthday calling to rehearse  
A sixpence just discovered in her purse  
Then drawing breath to cup each phrase between  
Big chip-nailed hands orange with nicotine.

The cancer caught her quickly, left her grim,  
The price, she said, for years of keeping slim;  
A different world then, one that had no cure  
For a life so unconventionally pure:

A game brunette, a card, as bold as brass,  
Who dragged herself downstairs, turned on the gas,  
And died between the lethal suck and blow  
Of brick-vents in her basement studio.

John Levett