

## The Necessary Biro: Writers and writing in the novels of Jonathan Coe

‘I don’t get it,’ she said at last, after reading the sentence one more time. ‘I mean, what’s so funny about a biro?’<sup>1</sup>

A ‘biro’ is funny because it ought to be ‘brio’. The parting shot of Michael Owen’s, the central figure of *What a Carve Up!*, book review ought to read, ‘he lacks the necessary brio,’ but an editorial error and the inversion of two letters suggests that the author in question is sadly bereft of the required writing equipment. What was meant to be an acerbic reflection on the subject’s lack of panache becomes a source of humiliation to Owen. The biro confusion not only reveals Jonathan Coe as a humorist, but also distils, in the form of a gag; a number of concerns that pervade the novelist’s work, namely: the precarious status of text in the public domain; the author’s anxiety regarding the interpretation of their narrative; and the figure of the unfortunate writer. Furthermore, it is an ironic twist that the punch line should refer us back to the writing implement itself. In the moment of reading the act of writing is acknowledged, with ‘the necessary biro’ prioritizing the means and action of the physical composition of text.

The aim of this dissertation is to pursue an interest in the writers, acts of writing, and versions of text that populate the novels of Jonathan Coe; charting how these elements function in structuring, connecting, reinterpreting, and propelling his narratives; and how they provide a means for Coe to interrogate his own approach to writing narrative in the contemporary novel. Coe’s works show an author peculiarly sensitive to questions regarding the value of narrative in academic, personal, and commercial contexts.

Coe’s career to date can be divided chronologically into four eras. His early novels, *The Accidental Woman* (1987) and specifically *A Touch of Love*, (1989), focus on the writer in a university environment. His subsequent works, *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and *The House of Sleep* (1997) develop the writer-protagonist as anti-hero figure in entirely more complex, more politically engaged projects. *The Rotters’ Club* (2001) and its sequel *The Closed Circle* (2004) continue Coe’s political interest and generate textual fabrics crammed with writers and scraps of text. Finally, Coe’s most recent novel *The Rain Before it Falls* (2007) questions most directly the value and nature of narrative story-telling. Furthermore, throughout Coe’s career as a novelist he was writing his biography of the avant-garde British writer B.S. Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant* (2004). Johnson’s experimental agenda, designed to reinvigorate the narrative novel, at moments,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Coe, *What a Carve Up!*, (London, 1994), p.281. All future references will use this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

emerges in Coe's own writing, but always within the structure of commercially viable, mainstream novels.

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### *Coe in the Academy*

Coe's second novel *A Touch of Love* intersperses a narrative following the experiences of Robin Grant with four short stories composed by the neurotic languages student, whose life seems as troubled and stagnant as his interminable thesis. The interplay between Coe's narrative and Robin's texts raises matters of technical approach and thematic interest that will surface as pre-eminent concerns in Coe's future novels. The structure of the novel ensures that the writer and the written, and the relationship between the two, become key foci of the work. The figure of the frustrated writer as the central character emerges; Robin Grant is the forerunner of *What a Carve Up!*'s Michael Owen, *The House of Sleep*'s Robert and Benjamin Trotter in *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*. Furthermore, Coe's sensitivity to the physical existence of text in the public domain is highlighted through the presentation of a constructed writer's text as document or artefact within the novel, which, informed by the university setting of *A Touch of Love*, introduces theoretical debate concerning narrative causation, biographical criticism, and authorial status.

In exploring the role of the contemporary writer, the novel challenges the value of literary effort, acknowledging the potential failure or irrelevance of serious writing. Coe creates a tableaux that juxtaposes two manifestations of this anxiety in utterly antithetical forms; walking down a street his writer-character Robin sees graffiti, including the scrawlings, "Wogs Out" and "Nigger Shit",<sup>2</sup> before turning into a bookshop to be confronted by the volume, '*The Failure of Contemporary Literature* by Leonard Davis' (*Touch*, 25). The entirety of contemporary literature is equated, through this collocation in Robin's experience, with spray-can racist obscenities. Robin experiences a silent, internalized sense of anger, the narrator notes that he 'clicks his tongue' (*Touch*, 25), that the academy should be undermining his attempts at writing by prophesying the failure of literature, whilst the graffiti artist has access to this direct and visceral means of expression. A similar frustration at the impotency of literary writing is evoked in *The House of Sleep*, again through comparison with graffiti; Robert, angered that he cannot communicate his thoughts satisfactorily, finds the wall a more appealing writing surface than the

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Coe, *A Touch of Love*, (London, 1989), p.24. All future references will use this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

page. Coe shows his writers to be beset with anxiety relating to the potential failure of their medium.

Robin's four short stories, 'The Meeting of Minds', 'The Lucky Man', 'The Lovers' Quarrel' and 'The Unlucky Man', are presented in the novel as textual artefacts, the words on the page are the words from Robin's notebook. This problematizes the readerly experience as, in 'The Meeting of Minds' (*Touch*, 29-37), for example, the reader must simultaneously balance imagining Ted reading Robin's story in the Coventry pub alongside their own reading of the text as a separate document. The reader is forced to accept a duality in the status of these texts in that they exist both inside and beyond the narrative of the novel; they are at once narrative and extra-narrative. This tension between Coe's narrative and the texts that it encompasses foregrounds the author's construction of a layered textuality in his works; this breaking of continuous narrative to present various types of texts and documents becomes a signature feature of Coe's narrative technique in his later novels and, moreover, the device is particularly central to *What a Carve Up!* in the dialogue the novel generates between Coe's novel and the work of his character, Michael Owen, 'The Winshaw Legacy', that it contains.

In addition to this structural dynamic, Coe uses Robin's stories as a means of investigating the narrative medium. Using Robin as a mouthpiece Coe is able to introduce a critical awareness concerning the nature of narrative story-telling; he constructs a writerly voice that is so self-conscious of critical and theoretical concerns that the flow of narrative is halted and the text approaches a paranoid stasis. Coe has Robin break off the exposition of 'The Meeting of Minds' to say:

I dislike this mode of writing. You pretend to be transcribing your character's thoughts (by what special gift of insight?) when in fact they are merely your own, thinly disguised. (*Touch* 29)

The writer demonstrates an unwillingness to accept the conventions of narrative, such as the use of free and direct style, revealing a certain uneasiness that the surface artifice inherent in the form obscures what is truly meant. Robin's self-critical agenda challenges the reader to question Coe's use of narrative in these terms. Here, for example, Robin's notion that character is merely a device for veiling the thoughts of the author invites the reader to consider whether Coe's characters, including Robin himself, represent 'thinly disguised' versions of the novelist. Robin's shift outside of narrative to interrogate form is preceded in B.S. Johnson's novel *Albert Angelo*

(first published in 1964) in which the narratorial voice suddenly begins a section called 'Disintegration' saying:

-fuck all this lying what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about my writing im my hero.<sup>3</sup>

Emphatically the writer's identity moves to the fore and, demonstrating an acute anxiety regarding control over reception, attempts to tell the reader his exact purpose in writing. Coe, rather than enacting a 'colossal authorial intervention'<sup>4</sup> in his own voice, dramatizes one in his character's story. Robin experiences the same pressure to explicate his form, but, by containing these concerns in Robin's stories, Coe, unlike Johnson, does not associate them directly with his own voice.

The influence of Johnson's experimental attack on traditional narrative can be felt in another of Robin's short stories. 'The Lucky Man' proposes that all events can only be explained by accepting they are pure chance, narrative cannot provide rational reason for things happening, for example; a terrorist misses his train because the driver needed to rush home to watch a documentary that he couldn't record because his video was being fixed. Narrative is propelled, not by causal links, but a series of mundane coincidences. The central character admits, 'My life has been a chain of accidents [...] my system is to have no system.' (*Touch*, 69) B.S. Johnson's novel, *The Unfortunates* (1969), was published in a box containing several loose-leaf sections that, aside from the opening and conclusion, the reader was encouraged to read in a random order. This undermined the chronology of novel narrative by removing the physical constraint of the book. Johnson said: 'In this way, the whole novel reflected the randomness of the material: it was itself a physical tangible metaphor for randomness.'<sup>5</sup> Whilst Johnson's novel challenges chronological, causal narrative on a formal level, Coe's problematization of narrative's ability to rationalize through making links occurs within a conventional short story. Yet, emerging from both works is a shared interrogative attitude to the conventions and assumptions of continuous narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, first published 1964, reprinted in *B.S. Johnson Omnibus*, (Basingstoke, 2004), p.167.

<sup>4</sup> As Jonathan Coe described the opening of 'Disintegration' in *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson*, (London, 2004), p.14.

<sup>5</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London, 1973), p.25.

*A Touch of Love*'s setting in a 1980s university casts these concerns surrounding the role of the author in the context of academic theoretical debate. Coe, himself a student of English literature at Cambridge, and subsequently Warwick,<sup>6</sup> in the later half of the twentieth century, is aware of these questions. In this work the writer is pressurized by the concerns of the literary academy, rather than the commercial sphere which is the milieu of Coe's later writer-protagonists.

When Robin's stories become evidence in his criminal case the link between text and author is examined. The theoretical issue is raised concerning what the reader can assume about a writer from his works, and whether such practice of biographical reading is legitimate. The discussion between the lawyers foregrounds the problematical nature of assuming that everything an author writes, he himself endorses. Alun suggests that Robin's story 'The Lucky Man', 'projects a rather unusual personality' (*Touch*, 64), Emma argues that it is 'just a story' (*Touch*, 83), but her colleague insists on deducing autobiography from the text, he responds:

No it isn't though. That's precisely what it isn't. For a start the hero bears a great deal of similarity to Grant himself. The same occupation, the same lifestyle, the same homosexual tendencies [...] the hero of this story abdicates all responsibility for his sexual behaviour.

(*Touch*, 83)

The presence of this debate challenges the desire to read Coe's novel biographically and to associate his identity with that of Robin. In future works, especially through the figures of Michael Owen and Benjamin Trotter, Coe seems to flirt with autobiography; he teases the reader through biographical similarities between his own life and those of his characters to conflate the two. Thus, in the same way that Robin critically analyzes his writing, Coe allows this theoretical debate to challenge a reader's response to his text, making them wary of assuming links between author and character. Like Robin, Coe is sensitive to how his text might be read in the public domain. Along with the lawyers, Robin's friend Aparna cannot accept the writer's detachment from text and too believes that Robin's stories must be communicating something of himself.

Roland Barthes wrote in his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author' that, 'we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.'<sup>7</sup> Through the suicide of Robin, *A Touch of Love* ironically enacts a

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<sup>6</sup> Where he wrote his thesis on the work of Henry Fielding.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, reprinted in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London, 2000), p.150.

very literal death of the author that reverses the Barthesian dislocation of author and text. In throwing himself from the tower-block window Robin refuses to accept both the birth of Aparna as an autonomous reader and, consequently, the separation of himself from his text, forcing him to enact his own biographical fallacy. Barthes wrote that, 'as soon as a fact is *narrated* [...] this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.'<sup>8</sup> Coe, conversely, has his author, Robin, 'enter into his own death' to assert connection between his voice and his text; the novel's crowning irony is that his final act allows his stories, emphatically, to construct their author, through his literal destruction. He is convinced by a reading that he ought to be linked with his characters and acts decisively to affirm this. With the author dead, the survival of manuscript is highlighted through the physical existence, in the text, of Robin's notebook of stories; which promote an afterlife for the authorial presence. Narrative is seen to escape the theoretical concerns of the academy and the presence of the textual artefact, which emerges as a significant leitmotif in Coe's future writing, is foregrounded.

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### *The Frustrated Writer*

The two novels that Coe completed in the 1990s, *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*, maintain a number of the thematic and stylistic interests developed by *A Touch of Love* but are far more ambitious in their scope. They demand more from their readers in their elaborate plots, extended time-scales, and formal innovation; Coe conceptualizes the novel form to be capable of more intricate and profound effect than in his earlier work. Coe develops a more complex interplay between texts within his novels and the status and provenance of text becomes a problematic issue. He further seeks to invigorate the reading experience through both deliberate narrative patterning and formal inventiveness. The author's interest in the writer and acts of writing is developed and is considered in the professional and personal spheres.

The writer protagonist of *Carve Up!*, Michael Owen, provides the defining example of Coe's frustrated, neurotic writer; camped in his bedroom for years after the break-up of his marriage, Owen's career as a novelist has stalled, haunted by his childhood he harbours twin obsessions for

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.147.

the 1960's carry-on style movie *What a Carve Up!*<sup>9</sup> and cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Owen is an unlikely hero but he becomes the focus for Coe's investigation of the writer's condition. Owen admits: 'Perhaps that's why the writer's life had always seemed so attractive; the refuge it offered for the socially backward, the gleaming legitimacy it conferred upon solitude.' (*Carve Up!*, 267) Coe does not glamorise being a writer. Instead he is self-deprecating about his craft, his writers are generally outcasts, socially awkward, tormented figures. The reader senses a wry autobiographical resonance in Coe's attitude towards his profession.

Coe takes the reader inside the process of writing through Michael Owen and his struggle to inject a dose of passion into his work at the behest of his publisher. His first tactic is to produce a list of 'sexy' words, which he hopes will inspire his writing:

<i>suspenders</i>	<i>black</i>	<i>bullwhip</i>
<i>stockings</i>	<i>bra</i>	<i>unhook</i>
<i>orgy</i>	<i>grope</i>	<i>panties</i>
<i>erect</i>	<i>handcuffs</i>	<i>stretch</i>

(*Carve Up!*, 331)

The list is, in itself, humorously ridiculous and it questions whether narrative might be conjured from a bunch of words; an appropriate vocabulary alone is not enough. Furthermore, Owen's stalled attempt at narrative composition is enacted in the text by removing the reader from Coe's continuous narrative and into the writer's notebook which presents words, but no meaningful sentences. In being emptied of their erotic context these potentially passionate words become utterly bathetic and Owen's methods are presented as absurd.

Coe then has Owen move from the word to the clause and lays open the writer's mind as he attempts to develop and improve a sentence. Coe foregrounds how every word written represents a narrative choice that has an impact on connotation. For example, Owen has just abandoned attempting to describe the location of this particular sexual encounter:

To be honest, I didn't give a shit what kind of room it was. Neither would my readers, in all probability. Best to skip all that stuff and keep things moving.

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<sup>9</sup> Although not part of the 'Carry On' series, popular British films of the 1960s noted for their bawdy humour based predominantly on innuendo, *What a Carve Up!* (1961) starred a number of the actors associated with the series, including Sid James and Kenneth Connor, and shared the films' light hearted tone.

*He pulled her roughly towards the bed*

That wouldn't do. I didn't want to make it sound like rape.

*He pulled her gently towards the bed.*

Too wimpish.

(*Carve Up!*, 333)

Owen demonstrates a neurotic fastidiousness about construction of narrative that, combined with his anxiety surrounding sexuality, prevents him from writing a coherent scene. Coe grants his reader access to the mind of a writer grappling with the construction of narrative. Owen seems concerned about how, if he is not careful enough with his word choice, his narrative might be misinterpreted. The significance which Owen invests in each verb, adverb, and adjective suggests an authorial desire to control response. Coe makes the nature of narrative and its reception the focus for investigation. However, the writer is under pressure to impress his publisher and, by extension, fulfil a perceived audience desire. By positioning Owen within this commercial context Coe shows how narrative might be controlled also by marketability.

Robert in *The House of Sleep*, despite not being a professional writer like Owen, demonstrates similar writerly anxieties. Robert is forced to turn to writing in an attempt to deal with his unrequited love for Sarah. During the novel the reader accompanies him in the process of writing. In an episode akin to Owen attempting to write his sex scene, Robert struggles to find the appropriate adjective to describe his love interest Sarah's eyes. The narrative is interrupted to provide access to his cogitations as he experiments with various possibilities. The narrator's focus is split between the dialogue between Sarah and Robert, concerning her failing relationship with her girlfriend, and the act of composition occurring inside Robert's mind. He experiences an acute sense of failure in relation to his writing as he is unable to satisfactorily transfer the sentiments he puts on the page into real life:

All these difficult, tentative utterances, these early versions, revisions, alterations and rethinkings, pondered and erased, rephrased and agonized over, now appeared to Robert as objects of contempt. What was the point of all that secret labour if [...]when the opportunity to act upon his desires was offered to him on a plate, he had neither the courage not the presence of mind to seize it?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Coe, *The House of Sleep*, (London, 1994), p.234. All future references will use this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

These words, that stress the private, lonely vocation of the writer, invert Owen's concern involving dissatisfaction in transferring life experience to the page, instead the frustration emerges in being unable to act upon the sentiments which he so painstakingly transcribes. The process of writing which is so deliberately detailed in the above passage has served to produce nothing but 'meaningless scribble' (*Sleep*, 234). In an act that asserts the failure of literary writing, Robert scrawls 'FUCK' five times onto the wall. It is this four-letter outburst that remains as artefact, to be revealed later in the novel, rather than Robert's poem for Sarah, which the reader must wait until an appendix to read in full.

An important element of Coe's style that emerges in these novels is the interspersion of continuous narrative with texts of various media and source that will become the signature technique of *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*. On occasions the presentation of documents sits uneasily, even jarringly, with the narrative. In *Carve Up!*, Hilary Winshaw's two contradictory columns about Iraq are not presented unqualified by Coe, they are introduced by Owen in one of the sections of his first person narration: 'Although they were separated by roughly four years, I present them here as Fiona and I read them that day: side by side.' (*Carve Up!* 63) Owen uses the present tense to offer the texts to his reader, but this reader cannot be the same individual who is currently reading *Carve Up!*, the implied reader is different. The text is presented preserving the layout of a newspaper column, yet they form part of a continuous narrative rather than standing alone as other extracts do. Furthermore, it is very difficult for a reader to actually read Hilary's articles 'side-by-side', one needs to read them separately. Thus Coe's documentary style here challenges and disrupts the normal reading experience of novel narrative. The Winshaw portraits which intersperse Part 1 of *Carve Up!* are bricolages of snatches of narrative and scraps of texts from sources such as newspapers, interview transcripts, and ingredients labels. Bricolage forces the reader to abandon the expectations of following continuous narrative, instead the reader is invited to become detective or investigative journalist and treat the fragments of text that Coe provides as evidence.

In *Carve Up!* Coe borrows from the conventions of detective fiction to highlight such an investigative approach that reads text as clue. Through Findlay Onyx, the jasmine-soaked, arch-cottager, Coe pokes fun at the detective tradition whilst providing a model for a reader moving through the novel's scraps of texts. In conversation with the private-eye, Owen says that during his childhood he was a keen reader of Poirot and Holmes, he further admits: 'I even used to write detective stories once, when I was very little.' (*Carve Up!*, 232) And, ironically, at this very moment Owen's narration and Coe's text slip into the idiom of the detective story with the classic topos of the assistant unwittingly sparking the detective's mind, here through the word 'singular'

which alerts Onyx to the Lawrence's peculiarly non-plural request for 'biscuit'. However, the reader must wait until much later in the novel for the significance of this clue. Significantly, it is another text, the war-time spy memoir 'I Was "Celery"' that reveals the import of Lawrence's note and thus reveals the circumstances of Godfrey's death. Books function as clues and are significant in propelling narrative. Texts are imbued with the capability of manipulating Coe's narrative. Like the detective tradition, the thriller story also competes for textual precedence. Coe, having opened *Carve Up!* with the start of 'The Winshaw Legacy' imports another rival opening to begin part 2; the first paragraph is 'copied from the first chapter of King's *The Ghoul*<sup>11</sup> with one word changed.'<sup>12</sup> As the Winshaws gather to hear the reading of the will it becomes increasingly apparent that the narrative is being controlled by an existing model. The reader is thrown into a pseudo-thriller narrative and must accept the fantastic twists in plot which are the genre's commonplace.

Although *Touch* had interspersed Coe's narrative with Robin's short stories, their textual status was distinct and definite. *Carve Up!* and *Sleep*, conversely, question and challenge the nature and provenance of text within them. Coe establishes a more complex textuality in these novels that problematizes the boundary between Coe's narrative and constructed texts and narrators. *Carve Up!*, like the later pair *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, invents a narrative of how the text itself came to be in existence. Reading *Carve Up!* one is frequently aware of its relationship with another text, Michael Owen's 'The Winshaw Legacy'. Coe deliberately embraces the possibility that portions of *Carve Up!* are also parts of 'The Winshaw Legacy', he creates an intertextual dialogue between his text and a fictional text within it. This dynamic is foregrounded by a closeness between the personas of Coe himself and his central writer Owen. This desire to associate the two writers is invited through correspondence between their careers, the titles of Owen's first two novels, 'The Loving Touch' and 'Accidents Will Happen' mirror Coe's own efforts *A Touch of Love* and *The Accidental Woman*. Biographical echoes between author and character, which were examined in *Touch*, push a potential conflation of Coe and Owen and challenge the reader to question the authorship of text as they move through the novel. The opening sentence of 'September 1990', 'it was purely by chance that I found myself writing a book about the Winshaws,' (*Carve Up!*, 87) might refer to either Coe and Owen, both are engaged in writing books about the grotesque family.

*Carve Up!*'s opening and closing sentences, separated by 500 pages, are the identical:

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<sup>11</sup> Frank King, *The Ghoul*, (New York, 1929). The film *What a Carve Up!* is loosely based on this novel.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Coe, *What a Carve Up!*, Author's Note, p.500.

Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale.

(*Carve Up!*, 3 & 498)

However, this is more than repetition, the possibility is introduced that these are *actually* the same sentence. Coe generates an intertextuality in his work between the novel itself and Michael Owen's 'The Winshaw Legacy' that problematizes the status of the text. Are portions of it 'real' in that they exist in Owen's work or is the text the narrator's separate discourse? In terms of shape the novel appears to return to the point at which it started. The opening chapter of 'Prologue' in *Carve Up!* must also be, the reader can deduce, the opening chapter of another text, namely Owen's 'The Winshaw Legacy'. When the narrator mentions, 'the book which you, my friendly readers, now hold in your hands,' (*Carve Up!*, 3) he appears to refer not to the reader holding their particular copy of *Carve Up!*, but another reader, holding a copy of 'The Winshaw Legacy'. Coe demonstrates an awareness of the physical existence of text in the world as book. *Carve Up!* closes with an assertion of the survival of manuscript after the author's death, a topos that occurs in *Touch* through the stories in Robin Grant's notebook. Owen's book becomes the ultimate textual artefact in a novel that throughout has been interspersed with scraps of text. However, *Carve Up!* does not allow the reader the clear distinction between narration and documentary text that was afforded to them in the earlier novel. *Carve Up!* conditions the reader to actively challenge authorship and status of textual material contained within its covers, the reader must, again, play detective.

Even Coe's comic set-pieces are connected to this awareness of the physical existence of text. Two of his comic episodes, the 'biro' incident in *Carve Up!* and Terry's footnotes in *Sleep*, serve to emphasize his concern with the relationship between author and their published text. The biro gag contributes to the dialogue between Coe's novel and the texts that exist within it. During the joke's set-up, Owen, on a train journey, sees an attractive woman, Alice Hastings, reading one of his own novels, his writerly pride and his frustrated sexuality are both piqued and he becomes interested in her response to his text:

I could see that she was on about page fifty, roughly a quarter of the way through: only a few pages from what was (or so I had thought when writing it) the most riotously funny scene in the whole novel.

(*Carve Up!*, 265)

With the biro gag on the horizon a correspondence between Owen's novel and *Carve Up!* is constructed. Our reading experience mirrors that of Alice. As both reader of *Carve Up!* and Owen's novel approach what the writer hopes will be a funny scene, Coe introduces an anxiety about the reception of such comic set-pieces. He also pre-empts a reader who does not find his jokes funny. In placing the gag at the culmination of a layered sequence; if you don't laugh at the punch-line, then you must appreciate the ironic humour in Coe's portrait of Owen, a writer himself who is perturbed by the failure of his text to elicit what he believes to be the appropriate response. The joke's function in the novel, therefore, is more than simply to amuse the reader, it exemplifies the interplay between Coe's novel and the texts that it encompasses.

Terry Worth's 'Frame' article that is said to have attracted six libel suits in *Sleep*, like the necessary biro, is a joke that involves an editorial error (the omission of a single footnote) making the text unintentionally funny. As Trev Broughton writes:

To elaborate would spoil the joke, Suffice to say that as a humorist, Coe achieves what most postmodernists can only dream of: an authentic blend of Jacques Derrida and Ronnie Barker.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to providing an assault of punch lines, including insinuation that the Pope reads erotic fiction and that Cliff Richard is 'one of the undisputed queens of British popular music' (*Sleep*, 274), Coe voices the anxiety that a text is subject to the machinery of publication. Editorial, not authorial, fault alters the meaning and impact of what is written. Terry's article simultaneously is a vehicle for humour, at the expense of its actual content, and plugs into a writerly anxiety about the sanctity of text in the public realm.

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*From Longbridge to London*<sup>14</sup>

B.S. Johnson wrote in the introduction to his collected short prose *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?:*

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<sup>13</sup> Trev Broughton, 'Crashing Out', *Times Literary Supplement*, (May 23 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Title of David Horspool's review of *The Closed Circle* in *Times Literary Supplement*, (September 10 2004).

Novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality, their own reality and not Dickens' reality.<sup>15</sup>

This 'cobbling' of various forms of media becomes the dominant device in both *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, yet the purpose of Coe's textual bricolage lies in evoking a sense of period rather than his own 'reality'. If the interrelated fabric of texts in *Carve Up!* constructed a suitably macabre Thatcherite fantasy world, Coe moves towards a documentary realism in evoking the brownness of the Old Labour 70s<sup>16</sup> and the vacuity of the New Labour 00s<sup>17</sup>. Yet Coe is appealing to more than a desire for period accuracy; in this pair of novels writers and text are imbued with a privileged potency to connect, propel, challenge, and reinterpret narrative. The 'Bill Board', the school magazine that links the central characters of *The Rotters' Club* and which began itself as a collection of papers pinned to a notice board, provides a neat symbol for Coe's approach to the novel as a whole.

Benjamin Trotter writes in his reminiscence of his family's holiday to Skagen:

But slowly, irresistibly, I can feel it beginning to dissolve into the hazy falsehood of memory. That is why I have written it down, although in doing so I know that all I have achieved is to falsify it differently, more artfully. Does narrative serve any purpose? I wonder about that. I wonder if all experience can really be distilled to a few extraordinary moments... and any attempt to trace a connection between them is futile.<sup>18</sup>

His concerns echo those of B.S. Johnson who argued that, 'life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification.'<sup>19</sup> Coe invests in texts the capability to make connections within this apparent randomness. Benjamin's text voices an anxiety concerning the value of narrative that is shared by Coe too. However, there is an important irony running through Benjamin's thoughts. His text itself is presented in Coe's novel as an artefact, it is not merely a passage of first person narration but an *actual* text that won first prize in a school writing competition. Furthermore, his story will provide an important connection between *The Rotters'*

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<sup>15</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London, 1973), p.16.

<sup>16</sup> Typified by the administrations on Wilson and Callaghan 1974-79.

<sup>17</sup> Associated with the administration of Tony Blair 1997 - 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Coe, *The Rotters' Club*, (Viking, London, 2001), p.128. All future references will use this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>19</sup> *Memoirs*, p.14.

*Club* and its sequel *The Closed Circle* as it anticipates and explains the meeting of two characters in the later novel. In making this link Coe proves that narrative has indeed served a purpose, the anxieties of his writers like Benjamin Trotter, Michael Owen, and Robin Grant are allowed to question Coe's own craft.

Indeed, artistic attempts that do try to deal with the narrative of the whole of life are held up as impossibly ambitious. Terry's proposed film that would follow a single actor for his entire life, described in *Sleep*, and Benjamin's project to blend music and literature in the form one grand narrative, 'Unrest', are presented as interminable, unmarketable projects. Their pretension in assuming that a single work of art should be able to achieve such a complete narrative is mocked when it is taken to a comic extreme in the unfortunate Philip Chase's attempts to compose a progressive rock symphony, which is written off as, 'a ludicrous attempt to squeeze the history of countless millennia into half an hour's worth of riffs and chord changes.' (*Rotters*', 182) This example demonstrates Coe's ability to blend a satirical period sensitivity, joking about the excesses of the progressive rock movement, with a genuine interest in the capabilities and limitations of his own form.

Having rejected the possibility of an over-arching narrative, Coe nonetheless embraces the potential of text to impact on the lives of his characters and therefore offer comment on narrative progression. *The Rotters' Club* provides a number of models of this phenomenon. Louis and Malcolm's relationship that ends in tragedy in *The Tavern in the Town* is initiated by a personal advert in 'Sounds' magazine (*Rotters*', 13). The words of class-prankster Sean Harding impersonating a National Front politician reading from a fascist pamphlet resurface as Benjamin's progressive rock band turn punk with the vocalist screaming 'the maws, the maws, the very maws of doom!' (*Rotters*', 180). Furthermore, texts are able to reinterpret events; Benjamin's discovery of a spare pair of swimming trunks (*Rotters*', 72) that sparks religious faith in him is revealed in *The Closed Circle* through the memoirs of poet Frances Piper not to be the result of divine intervention but, instead, of the seedy theft and shamed disposal of the garment. Philip Tew reads Coe's construction of a tapestry of texts and voices in the following terms:

He sets out a series of middle class voices – including his own implied narrative position – where each one exists simply as a contributory viewpoint in the generality that is the order and disorder of social affairs.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London, 2007), p.84.

His use of 'simply' highlights how Tew has misread the subtlety of Coe's craft, Tew fails to recognise the interconnectedness of all these 'viewpoints' that, as well as contributing to a sense of period accuracy, operate within the novel as powerful narrative devices linking and manipulating character and plot. Texts, of whatever status or nature, plug-in not only to a system of social affairs but also to a literary debate concerning Coe's approach to narrative. This blending of literariness with humour and wry observations about politics, society and the pain of growing up (*The Rotters' Club*) and growing old (*The Closed Circle*) is one of the reasons why Coe has achieved the level of commercial success and critical recognition that he has enjoyed. Unlike B.S. Johnson, whose formal experimentalism was borne out of a desire to reinvigorate the contemporary novel, Jonathan Coe's uses his documentary tapestry approach to allow him to switch unjarringly and justifiably between forms, interspersing his narrative with textual artefacts that break continuous narrative.

*The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, through the character of Benjamin Trotter, further the Coe topos of the frustrated, socially awkward writer and, again, suggest correspondences between this figure and the author himself. If the desire to see Michael Owen as an analogue to Jonathan Coe was invited in *Carve Up!* through the uncanny similarities of their back catalogues, similar autobiographical resonances exist between Coe and Benjamin in their shared Birmingham upbringing, formative years at King William's School (a thinly disguised King Edward's Edgbaston, Coe's alma mater), Oxbridge education, and vocation as writers. Coe teases his readers and plays with their urge to read biographically. In a conversation between Benjamin and Cicely Boyd, the object of his amorous schoolboy desires, the blonde darling of the drama society says: 'I hope you aren't going to put me in your book. I'm sure your portrait would be very unflattering.' (*Rotters'*, p.232) Of course, Cicely is the motivation behind Benjamin's artistic projects, so naturally his portraits are flattering. Yet, if we, as readers, allow ourselves to believe that Jonathan Coe *is* Benjamin Trotter then we might assume that a Cicely figure did exist for Coe during his school days so, ironically, she *does* end up in 'your book.' Rather like the conflation of *Carve Up!* and Owen's 'The Winshaw Legacy', here Coe appears to embrace overlap between his world and that of his novels. *The Rotters' Club* closes with the enormous stream-of-consciousness single-sentence of 'Green Coaster', in this concluding chapter Coe and Benjamin are moved closer through the first person form and, in a similar dynamic to relationship between Owen and Coe's texts in *What a Carve Up!*, whether this section represents the text Benjamin's writing or Coe, the novelist, using interior monologue is ambiguous. The definition between textual artefact and Coe's narration that was made explicit throughout novel here becomes deliberately problematized.

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*Every picture tells a story?*

When Jonathan Coe's latest novel, *The Rain Before it Falls*, appeared in the summer of 2007 the critical consensus was to view it as an atypical addition to the Coe corpus. Patrick Ness said: 'If his name weren't printed on the cover, you might never guess that *The Rain Before It Falls* was by Jonathan Coe.'<sup>21</sup> His justification for this statement was that the novel was neither 'wildly plotted' nor 'politically tinged'. It seems that critics, such as Philip Tew, have stressed Coe's role as a socio-political novelist to the extent that this tag has come to define his oeuvre.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in a television interview given by Coe, Mariella Frostrup seemed confused that the novel contained, 'no jokes, no political satire, no mention at all of politics'.<sup>23</sup> Whilst it is true that the novel does not satisfy a 'consumer demand for the *retro*'<sup>24</sup> like the period observations and sensitivities of *The Rotters' Club* managed, the work is, in fact, utterly typical of Coe both in its interest in the value of narrative storytelling and, as the author explains in the same interview, its thematic concerns:

JC: I wanted to scale everything down, everything that was at the core of my previous books is still here...

MF: A story!...

JC: Well, a preoccupation with family relationships, passing of time, youthful ideas shading into something more bitter and disillusioned [...] I stripped away politics, humour, and satire.<sup>25</sup>

*Rain* concerns a dying maiden aunt, Rosamund, who decides that she must narrate the story of her family for the benefit of Imogen, her blind great niece. She constructs her narrative around twenty photographs and records her responses to these images on a tape-player. The idea of developing a family narrative through memory was floated in *The Rotters' Club*, in which the novel's story is

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Guardian*, September 8, 2007, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,2164568,00.html>, accessed on 10/3/07.

<sup>22</sup> See also Rod Mengham's introduction to *Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Mengham, Lane, and Tew, (Oxford, 2003), where he discusses a renewed interest in the historical novel among British writers since the election of Margaret Thatcher, and his 2008 lecture 'Fiction's History' which places Coe in a tradition of novelists (including Adam Thorpe and Barry Unsworth) interested in 'doing history'.

<sup>23</sup> Sky Arts, Episode 4, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZAoVR4Ldvo>, accessed on 10/3/07.

<sup>24</sup> Rod Mengham, *General Introduction*, in *Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Mengham, Lane, and Tew, (Oxford, 2003), p.1.

<sup>25</sup> Sky Arts, Episode 4, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZAoVR4Ldvo>, accessed on 10/3/07.

supposedly told by representatives of the next generation in a Berlin restaurant, but this frame device disintegrates as the reader is moved back to the Birmingham of the late 1970s and the detail and layered textuality of the novel's substantive content render such a retelling impossibly implausible. *Rain*, conversely, keeps the reader within the present moment of recall and composition.

*Rain* concludes with Rosamund's niece, Gill, responding to the tapes; she attempts to discover reason through narrative:

The pattern she had been searching for had gone. Worse than that – it had never existed. How could it? What she had been hoping for was a figment, a dream, an impossible thing: like the rain before it falls.

(*Rain*, 278)

In *Rain* Coe presents a delicate meditation on the capability and honesty of narrative in telling stories, an extended critique of his own medium, yet, as the possibility appreciating an overarching design dissolves, Coe invests value, similar to his earlier novels, in the fragment and the artefact. Coe has said that, "I remember, when I was at school, reading about Socrates and his dictum that the height of wisdom is to know that nothing could be known, and I've always had that as my goal,"<sup>26</sup> and this seems to be the prevailing attitude towards narrative's potential to explicate experience in *The Rain Before it Falls*.

The name of the central character pays homage to the novelist Rosamund Lehmann, one of Coe's influences, but it is to B.S. Johnson, rather than Lehmann, that *Rain* owes a stylistic debt. The transcripts of Rosamund's tapes, which have provided narrative responses to photographic artefacts, in recording her death, become artefacts themselves. Coe uses an inventive mise-en-page to replicate Rosamund's death; a technique informed by B.S. Johnson's novel *House Mother Normal* that equates page space to the actual passing of time. This device is used in *The Rain Before it Falls* in the empty space on page 189 when Rosamund leaves her microphone to fetch a glass of water. However, the parallels in technique between Coe and Johnson's text are most evident during Rosamund's suicide. Johnson uses mise-en-page to reflect the mental state of his geriatric characters:

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<sup>26</sup> Sky Arts interview

Let me out, or I shall die

No, I do  
n o t g e t a n y  
l i g h t e r, I v y[...] <sup>27</sup>

Coe, similarly, breaks up the page during Rosamund's death:

Someone pulling me.

Darling...

Are we back now? Soon?

Take my hand. Take it. Pull me towards you.

(*Rain*, 258)

The significant difference between the two is that Coe's text represents an attempt to replicate a recorded voice, whilst in Johnson's work, dispensing with the convention of continuous text represents an experimental approach to interior monologue. Like the correspondence between *A Touch of Love* and *Albert Angelo* discussed earlier, here Coe, again, associates contravention of conventional narrative with an artefact voice, rather than the authorial voice. Nevertheless, Coe deploys an unusual mise-en-page to demonstrate that a reader's response to the text is not solely constructed by continuous narrative, but can also be dependent on factors such as the shape of the words on the page. Thus, Coe introduces the irony that Rosamund, whose voice has been so concerned with the validity of narrative to describe and recall honestly, in her death, presents an alternative to continuous narrative and an assertion of the power of the artefact itself to signify. In *Rosamund*, like through Robin Grant twenty years earlier in his career, Coe constructs a narrator whose suicide becomes an ironic comment on their own problematical relationship with composing narrative.

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<sup>27</sup> B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal*, in *B.S. Johnson Omnibus*, (Basingstoke, 2004), p.176. Every effort has been made to replicate the original setting of the text.

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### *Writing Home*

For my conclusion I turn to Coe's own coda to his biography of B.S. Johnson; the final paragraph begins:

And those are the last words I intend to write about B.S. Johnson. I write them, appropriately enough, late at night in the kitchen of my parents' house, at the same table where I can remember writing the final paragraph of my first published novel.<sup>28</sup>

As in the 'necessary biro' incident that started this essay, here, Coe foregrounds the physical act of writing; the means by which text comes into existence is highlighted. He generates an apt intertextual dynamic in the mirroring of this current act of concluding (the coda is given a specific time and location; Birmingham, 23 October, 2003) with the completion of an earlier text, whilst simultaneously evoking the image of Benjamin Trotter writing his homework, and later his novel, at his parents' kitchen table in *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*.

In mentioning his 'first published novel' Coe foregrounds his own career as a commercially successful novelist to date, something that B.S. Johnson did not achieve and seems unlikely that Benjamin Trotter might either. Coe's novels are populated by writers less successful than himself whose texts interrogate Coe's own craft. Although Coe may not have 'run with the baton'<sup>29</sup> of Johnson's experimental agenda, he shares his interest in the validity and capability of narrative. Coe's works construct complex fabrics that imbue textual artefacts with a narrative potential that construct a critical dialogue with his own writing and are given ability to communicate between time periods and works. The significance attached to the documentary fragments that intersperse his novels convey an awareness of the physical existence of text in the world, which includes that of his own works in the commercial marketplace and the hands of a reader.

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson*, (London, 2004), p.454.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p.454.

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