

BY RODDY DOYLE

‘This is presented as a work of fiction and dedicated to nobody.’ These are the first words I ever read by Charles Bukowski. I’d just picked up a second-hand copy of *Post Office*, his first novel. I’d never heard of the man, and the cover, a bad drawing of a postman, wasn’t promising. But the words on that empty dedication page had grabbed me. ‘Presented as a work of fiction’ suggested that there was more than story-telling going on inside, that there was real living behind the disclaimer, and ‘dedicated to nobody’ yelled anger, frankness, desolation and a sense of humour that was right down my alley. I forked out the 50p and started it on the bus home.

‘It began as a mistake.’

That was the first sentence, and paragraph. It was plain, yet intriguing, a good start to a crime novel perhaps, or a story of love gone wrong. I liked it, and read on.

‘It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought.’

What writing, I thought. It wasn’t just the words that made this a tough, real world. It was the awkwardness of the writing, its closeness to speech. ‘... and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back.’ So you went where? And what happened then? And then? It was the absence of this information that appealed to me. It reminded me of kids telling me about a video, charging through the plot of a ninety-minute film in less than thirty seconds; arms, head and shoulders supplying the action and special effects. It had the same rush, the same fight for attention. It was the men I’d listened to when I’d worked as a sweeper for Westminster Council, every lunch-time in the depot canteen. Men from Scotland, Galway, Jamaica, men who lived in hostels, council flats or nowhere, who wore their uniforms to and from work, who stood up in the canteen to describe last night’s sex, who took their brown envelopes on pay-day and never came back. The book’s narrator, Hank Chinaski, was one of these men. The city, Los Angeles, was different but the world was the same. Bukowski’s writing was inarticulate, but deliberately so. Each word clung tight to the next; there was no room for any more. It was a tightly choreographed clumsiness. And it was great.

Fifteen or more years later, *Post Office* still seems great. Published first in 1971 when Bukowski was fifty-one, it is a book about work, ‘the sweat dripping, the hangover, the impossibility of the schedule’. It is ugly – very, very ugly in places – and hilarious and more genuinely shocking than it seemed back then. The writing is relentless in its refusal to relax or sentimentalise. The boredom, pain and stress of the working day are carved into every page, and the crazy attempts at escape are carved even deeper.

And the next novel, *Factotum* (1975), was great, too. It came four years after *Post Office* and the narrator was still Hank Chinaski. But it’s a younger Hank this time, falling from city to city, woman to woman. It’s a fuller, more sophisticated book than *Post Office* – Hank’s restlessness is brilliantly captured in the chapter breaks and jumps that fling him around America, and in and out of work. And there’s a well managed, less blunt humour that the Hank of *Post Office* wouldn’t have managed: ‘I always started a job with the feeling that I’d soon quit or be fired, and this gave me a relaxed manner that was mistaken for intelligence or some secret power.’ But it is still Bukowski, still crude, still funny, never comfortable. It’s a hard, mean world he’s describing. The sex is ugly and shocking but the biggest shock, when I read *Factotum* again recently, came when I read this sentence: ‘At some point during one of our hellish nights World War II ended.’ It’s the first reference to the war, exactly halfway through the book. Hank wanders from New Orleans to Los Angeles to New York to St Louis, through the great cities of our favourite songs,

at a time when the world was sneering at their naïveté. It was a time for huge, searching books but Hank's is the small, desperate world of the next drink or meal, and the book captures it brilliantly.

Then I read *Women* (1978). The women in Bukowski's books are mean and devious, sex-mad and lazy, just like the men. They are often just parts of the body. Betty, Hank's girlfriend, or 'shackjob', in *Post Office*, is 'nice legs' and 'that ass' until page fifty when we're given her name. The first attempt at a full description comes even later: 'Betty had gotten old, fast. Heavier. The lines had come in. Flesh hung under the throat. It was sad. But I had gotten old too.' Less than twenty pages later, she's dying: 'Yellow spittle had caked at the left corner of her mouth. I took the cloth and washed it away. I cleaned her face, hands and throat.' It isn't pleasant but it's good. Hank notes the signs of age under Betty's throat and feels sorry for himself, then washes the same throat as she dies. It's a scrambling mix of selfishness and tenderness, brutality and the blackest humour that makes one want to fling the book away but is, at the same time, very, very compelling. But *Women* didn't have the mix. The tenderness, what there was of it, was gone. What was left was just a list of ugly encounters. It was boring, and I read no more Bukowski for a long time...

Until *Ham on Rye*.

It was published in 1982 when Bukowski was 62, and I read it ten years after I'd read anything by Bukowski. And the shock this time was in the newness of the world and the writing that made it, The narrator was still Chinaski but that was all that *Ham on Rye* had in common with the earlier books.

'The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there.' I was immediately reminded of my own book, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, a story told in the language of a child. In that book there is an episode where Paddy watches the world from under a table – his father's crossed legs, the socks, his mother's movements, the dust, its beauty. He's secure in there, happy. Little Chinaski, Henry, not yet Hank, also feels good under his table. 'I liked being under there. It must have been in Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922.' The surprise delighted me. I'd never have guessed that the Chinaski of *Post Office* had once been a child, but here he was under the table – his world, his height, his priorities. 'The legs of the people were not interesting, not like the tablecloth which hung down, not like the table, not like the sunlight.' What impressed me most was the ability to splice the language of the small child – 'It was a table ...' – and the language of the adult: 'It was 1922.' The words were the same; it was the commas and slight shifts that put the years between them. I loved this first paragraph, and I sat back to enjoy the second one.

'Two large people fighting, screaming. People eating, always people eating.' It was a Bukowski book, after all. It was Hank explaining how he became Hank, Bukowski explaining how he became Bukowski. And it was brilliant. Not the sunny story the first paragraph had dangled in front of me, but a scorching account of a childhood, an adolescence, a life of ugliness, pain, escape, alcohol, loneliness. It is a book about writing, finding a voice – 'Everybody was listening. My words filled the room, from blackboard to blackboard ...' – searching the books of others for help and solidarity; DH Lawrence, Dos Passos, Hemingway: '... these men who had come into my life from nowhere were my only chance. They were the only voice that spoke to me.' It is a book about history – 'Hitler was acting up in Europe and creating jobs for the unemployed' – and ignoring it.

It's often very funny:

"I was laid when I was seven years old."

"That's nothing. I was laid when I was four."

More often it's disturbing. But, always, it's good. At the start of the second chapter the narrator remembers his father's Model-T. He remembers Sunday rides to the orange groves a drive away from Los Angeles, 'miles and miles of orange trees'. He remembers a picnic basket, cans of fruit on dry ice, liverwurst and salami sandwiches, potato chips, bananas and soda-pop. He remembers counting the pyramids on his father's packet of Camels: 'Camel cigarettes were magic cigarettes.' He recalls one particular Sunday, the drive through the groves. And, suddenly, that one Sunday sneers at the rest of the Sundays, at the Sundays we've been fooled into expecting. 'Then my father kicked the door open and got out.' The picnic basket is empty. His father goes through the groves in a fury. 'He seemed angry, yanking oranges from the trees, and the branches seemed angry, leaping up and down.' This is an adult writing – 'yanking oranges from the trees' – but only a child sees angry branches, only a frightened child sees them. Yet 'frightened' and 'scared' aren't there, not in the sentence, paragraph or on the page. They're not needed. We know. The repetition of one word, the absence of others, the childlike observation, the dreamy detachment – this is writing by someone who remembers being terrified and can still feel it. This is Bukowski's best writing, and *Ham on Rye* is full of it. At the end of the chapter, after a humiliating encounter with the grove's owner and his shotgun, the father is driving away:

"Daddy, we'll have a nice dinner tonight. What would you like?" my mother asked. "Pork chops," he answered. I had never seen him drive that fast.

Not so fast, *that* fast.' I had never seen him drive that fast.'

Less drama, more power. *Ham on Rye* is a powerful book. *Post Office* was dedicated to nobody; *Ham on Rye* is dedicated to 'all the fathers'. They should all read it.