JONATHAN COE

Contemporary British Satire

EDITED BY PHILIP TEW

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Jonathan Coe

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Jonathan Coe

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Jonathan Coe:
for a friend and fellow aficionado of the work of B.S Johnson,
in fond recollection of many days spent together in the
Manuscript Reading Room with Dr Julia Jordan in the
British Library preparing Well Done God!

In memoriam:
Dr Stephen Patrick James Knapper 6 May 1964–4 July 2012

Contents

Notes on Contributors viii
Preface *Philip Tew* xi

A Critical Introduction: or, (Re-)contextualizing Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* *Philip Tew* 1

1 Jonathan Coe: The Early Novels *Merritt Moseley* 21
2 Jonathan Coe's Stories of Sadness *Joseph Brooker* 35
3 Sexing Britannia: Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* or the Re/de-Sexualization of Thatcherite Britain *Raluca Iliou* 51
4 A Comedy of Horrors: Thatcherism in *What a Carve Up!* *Emma Parker* 67
5 'These *are* my books': *What a Carve Up!* and Video Aesthetics *James Riley* 81
6 What Became of the People We Used to Be?: *The House of Sleep* (1997) and the 1970s Sitcom, *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (1973–5) *Nick Hubble* 95
7 From Prog to Punk: Cultural Politics and the Form of the Novel in Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* *Nick Bentley* 109
8 Jonathan Coe's *The Closed Circle* and a Satiric Mirror *Sebastian Jenner* 125
9 A Terrible Precariousness: Financialization of Society and the Precariat in Jonathan Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* *Francesco Di Bernardo* 141
10 Jonathan Coe's Rewriting of Popular Genres in *Expo 58* *José Ramón Prado Pérez* 155
11 Gothic Horror and Haunting Processes in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11* *Vanessa Guignery* 169
12 Neo-Gothic Minutiae and Mundanity in Jonathan Coe's Satire, *Number 11* *Philip Tew* 185

Afterword: An Interview with Philip Tew on *Number 11* *Jonathan Coe* 201

Index 205

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Jonathan Coe began writing fiction at around eight, and he published his first novel – written while completing a doctorate on Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* at Warwick University – *The Accidental Woman* with Duckworth in April 1987. He has published nine further novels, including *The House of Sleep* (1997), *The Rotters' Club* (2001), *The Closed Circle* (2004) and *Expo 58* (2013). His work has attracted numerous prizes including, for his most famous novel, *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in 1995; the Prix Médicis Étranger for *The House of Sleep* in 1998, and the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for

The Rotters' Club in 2001. His biography of B. S. Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant* (2004), was awarded the Samuel Johnson Prize in 2005. In 2004 he was elected Chevalier l'Ordre des Arts and des Lettres.

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José Ramón Prado Pérez lectures at the Universitat Jaume I (UJI) in Castelló de la Plana, Spain. He specializes in post-war political drama in contemporary British theatre, and has research interests in popular culture and literature. His works include *Revisiones críticas del teatro alternativo británico contemporáneo 1968-1990* [Critical Revisions of British Alternative Drama 1968-1990] (2000) and the co-edited *New Literatures of Old: Dialogues of Tradition and Innovation in Anglophone Literature* (2008). He is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Cultural, Language and Representation*, a cultural studies journal. He was a member of the 'Estudios sobre intermedialidad como mediación intercultural', a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, and also participated in 'Representations of the Precarious in Contemporary British Theatre', a project funded by the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD).

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Philip Tew is Professor in English (Post-1900 Literature) at Brunel University London. He serves as the Director of the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW) and the Hillingdon Literary Festival (HiLF). Among Tew's main publications are: *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester UP, 2001); *The Contemporary British Novel* (Continuum, 2004; rev. second ed. 2007); *Jim Crace* (Manchester UP, 2006); and, co-edited with Glyn White, *Re-reading B. S. Johnson* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). He co-authored a policy report on ageing, *Coming of Age* (Demos, 2011); and with Nick Hubble, *Ageing, Narrative and Identity: New Qualitative Social Research* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); edited *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); and, with Jonathan Coe and Julia Jordan, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S.Johnson* (Picador, 2013).

Preface

Philip Tew

This volume represents a scholarly output that is an outcome of my personal relationship with Jonathan Coe for the past twenty years. As he reminded me by email, when I erroneously suggested that we might have first met early in the 1990s (yes, to be sure, one's memory does play tricks with age), in fact I first encountered him on a sunny summer's afternoon in Waterstones bookshop in Hampstead High Street where he was publicizing *The House of Sleep*, first issued several months earlier in May 1997. Curiously, given my later academic interest in his work, to prepare for the possible meeting, the previous weekend I had bought and read my first Coe novel, the paperback edition of what would become his most famous book, *What a Carve Up!* (1994). It had been discounted at half price (I know because an orangey-red £3.50 label still adorns my copy). On that day I was not drawn primarily by Coe's fiction, rather my motivation to cycle up Rosslyn Hill from Pond Street on a hot day to this particular venue was because of his interest in B. S. Johnson, a writer we both greatly admire. In fact, as I got to know him, Coe was to lavish much time and attention in producing the magisterial and innovative authorized biography of this 1960s experimental novelist, entitled *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (2004). This volume, which I was privileged to read in its first draft, rightly won the 2005 Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction. Much later he and I (together with Julia Jordan) would compile and edit an anthology of Johnson's prose and drama from material newly acquired by the British Library for its Manuscripts Reading Room, a project that we two had hatched many years previously in around 2001. It took a deal of time to acquire permissions, find an appropriate publisher and wait for the archival material to be transferred the approximate 1.25 miles (as the crow flies) from the author's final home behind St. Mary's Church in Islington to its current depository on the Euston Road. *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson* (2013) finally appeared a dozen years later.

During the years since our first conversation in Hampstead I have read all of Coe's fiction with increasing admiration, pondering at times why on earth he is

not more celebrated and does not feature far more on the academic curriculum. Although rightfully celebrated for his Thatcherite satire, *What a Carve Up!*, the other novels, even the early ones, deserve equal attention, although there remain subtle differences. He admits as much in a journalistic essay reflecting on writing his Johnson biography, 'Nothing but the truth', where he observes 'Like many novelists (*myself included*), he started off by writing about thinly fictionalised versions of himself' [emphasis added]. Like Johnson, perhaps even more so, in later works the self-reflective elements lay deeper, with hidden motifs and emblems invoking the authorial self.

Significantly, recent scholarship covering his work has started to emerge in several monographs; most notably two volumes produced by contributors to this volume, namely Vanessa Guignery's *Jonathan Coe* (2015) and Merritt Moseley's *Understanding Jonathan Coe* (2016), published only seven months apart. As Guinery observes in her study, Coe as a novelist is 'resolutely anchored in the present, dealing with topical issues' (15), adding that his most famous satire was a response to and rejection of the faux nostalgic historicity, what Guignery labels 'retro-Victorian fiction and pastiche' that so dominated literary prizes, 'epitomized by the 2001 Booker Prize longlist on which only three out of 22 books were set in contemporary Britain' (15). For Guignery, his most famous novel 'combines political awareness with a comic satire of the worst excesses of Thatcherism and the ruling elite' (16). For Moseley,

> The novel is not about Margaret Thatcher as a person, and she is almost unmentioned by name; it is about the whole complex of attitudes embodied in the society that developed during her premiership, to some extent with her encouragement and that of her party. The ruling force was greed, and it was unleashed by a growing heartlessness about the weak and unfortunate. (38)

One ought perhaps to mediate such claims by extending the context to the real-world reception of books that are on one level very funny (although as Joseph Brooker explores in this collection, sadness very much features too), and as Coe explained in an interview with Vanessa Guignery, 'So, primarily, I put funny things in my books – I hope they are funny – to give people pleasure. That is the first reason. There are other reasons, but they are secondary.' In addition I would suggest thematically either real or perceived vulnerability or a precautionary timidity are central threads to the whole of Coe's oeuvre, to which one might add other sub-themes or expressive motifs such as passion, often unrequited, and the symbolically charged mundanity of everyday petit-bourgeois existence, with people almost always manipulated by authority or fate. Finally, though,

a zealous need to admonish permeates the text at various levels, much as the author admitted to Guignery:

> One of the key lines from *What a Carve Up!* comes at the end of the novel when Mortimer Winshaw, the head of the Winshaw family, tells the narrator, Michael Owen: 'there comes a point when greed and madness become practically indistinguishable'. The implication is that Britain – and the West generally – has crossed that line between the two at some point and Mortimer Winshaw adds that if we learn to live alongside greed and even tolerate it, then we've crossed a line into madness.

Some readers might well assume Coe's origins were radical, combative, given what in his study of the author Moseley describes as 'Coe's anti-Thatcherism' (42) with critics and readers drawn to 'his domestic, class based analysis' (43). As Moseley indicates there is more, and certainly one might understand this aspect better by examining Coe's own ruminations about his upbringing and roots.

In 2010 he contributed to a multi-authored article in the *Guardian*, 'A Return to Grassroots', published prior to the then impending 2010 general election, in which he recollects the area of Bromsgrove which 'was my home, after all, for the first 19 years of my life [...]. It may be almost three decades since I left, but I have been coming back ever since, and that sense of ambivalent belonging never goes away. Not for me, at any rate'. He knows the area intimately. He accurately predicted the electoral demise of Labour MP, Jacqui Smith, in nearby Redditch, and reflects on the political instincts of his hometown: 'Bromsgrove, however, is a solid Tory constituency. Always has been. Well, ever since I can recall, anyway, apart from an aberrant three-year interlude in the early 1970s'. Ironic, then, that such a committed opponent of Thatcherism came from not only a Tory heartland, but was the offspring of conservatively inclined parents. Coe's fictional world is replete with such contradictions.

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A Critical Introduction: or, (Re-)contextualizing Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!*

Philip Tew

Jonathan Coe is a novelist who offers both great variety (especially regarding settings, scenarios and the subjects of his humour and satire) and consistency (offering dark themes, celebration of the everyday, characters who endure an often maudlin, nostalgic sense of loss and failure, and cultural and filmic coordinates used allusively and suggestively) and he is arguably emerging as one of the most important of British novelists to bridge that period encompassing the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This collection of essays hopes to both contextualize and analyse his work through a variety of approaches useful to both the academic and general reader of his fiction, which has attracted critical attention in particular in mainland Europe. Regarded as a significant writer, he has been awarded: the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in 1996 for *What a Carve Up!* (1994); the Prix Médicis Étranger in 1998 for *The House of Sleep* (1997); and the Premio Literario Arcebispo Juan de San Clemente in 2004 for *The Rotters' Club* (2001). As I write on 20 June 2017 to date he has published eleven novels, three non-fiction books which included his celebrated biography *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (2004), which was awarded the 2005 Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction, and two books for children (published in Italian). Having studied English at Trinity College, Cambridge University, Coe undertook a PhD in eighteenth-century literature at Warwick University, which was awarded for his thesis on Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. During this period he also completed *The Accidental Woman* (1987), which was the first of his novels accepted for publication and published in April of that year in the UK by Duckworth. His work reflects a divide between (and occasionally a putative synthesis of) a regional perspective derived from his provincial origins having been born on 19 August 1961 in Lickey, a suburb of south-west Birmingham, and a metropolitan worldview reflecting his post-university life in London, to which

city he moved and has subsequently lived there since the late 1980s. Musically inclined, his aim in the capital was to write songs and perform. He participated in short-lived band The Peer Group and an even shorter-lived feminist cabaret group called Wanda and the Willy Warmers. With such ambitions frustrated, he returned to writing fiction, a passion explored from around age eight, his early attempts recollected vividly during an earlier interview with me published in 2008:

> My earliest memory of writing was when I was about seven or eight. I don't remember having read many proper books at that stage, but I was constantly reading comics; in particular one called *The Lion*, which had one particular neo-gothic comic strip, called either the Necromancer or the Sorcerer. I began a story in imitation of that strip, which is the earliest thing I can remember. [...] I wrote in a small notebook, around 150 pages, proud of myself because I assumed I had written a novel. My father got his secretary to type it up and when the typescript came it was only twenty-four pages. Each chapter which I imagined was full length was less than a page. I remember being deflated and realizing that I had a long way to go still. (35)

Coe's self-effacement and humility about his youthful self's literary ambition is also typical not only of the writer in adult life, but his reflections capture something of the zeitgeist of the type of suburban, provincial community in which he was raised, and to which his affinities and understanding of life are inextricably bound. He comments 'Increasingly I feel more comfortable writing novels which are set outside the capital; because at heart I think I'm a provincial writer, not meaning that in a negative sense' (45). For Coe the metropolitan centre remains suspect, a focal point for the advantaged to congregate while exploiting the rest, dismissing 'the London Literary Establishment – whatever that means – [who] quite often gets its choices wrong because it has its own agendas' (43).

Subsequently in this introduction I will revisit and re-contextualize what is undoubtedly Coe's most famous work to date, *What a Carve Up!*, in which such a binary divide of affiliation outlined above features in what is a sprawling, layered and complex gothic tale of various generations of the Winshaw family and their associates. In a general sense Coe emerges as belonging to a phase and strand of the Anglo-American novel described by Colin Hutchinson in *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel* as 'social' fiction which 'can be understood as more or less direct representations of the deleterious effects of Reaganite and Thatcherite economic policies upon both individuals and the social fabric' (6), later commenting on 'the pessimism of the contemporary social

novel' within a context of Thatcher and Reagan undertaking 'an appropriation of a more general popular discontent' which might yet offer 'the left-liberal writer the possibility of unmasking the ideological nature of that appropriation' (17). Michael Owen, the novel's protagonist, is a left-liberal in crisis; he seems distant, detached, neurotic and even brooding. Ryan Trimm effectively summarizes the scope and context of the novel, including certain aspects of Coe's pastiche approach which offers a cultural coordinate drawn from popular, nostalgic art, suggesting a link between the monstrous in the imaginary and their political afterlife, as if Thatcher haunts the present as these filmic encounters provided the spectral fears and obsessions of the past, the ridiculous becoming the reality:

> *What a Carve Up!* lifts its title from a campy 1960s horror film, a slasher comedy the 1994 novel raids to satirize the economic and social cuts of Margaret Thatcher's premiership. The Thatcher years targeted the postwar consensus on social welfare and nationalized industries and services. These transformations [...] severely impacted the lower and middle classes. Coe's novel uses its generic source to offer a furious indictment of the prime minister and the impact her economic slashing had on Britain. The novel personalizes these wounds through the complex relations between novelist Michael Owen (*Carve Up*'s narrator) and the aristocratic Winshaw family. Owen is hired to chronicle the Winshaws, whose Conservative members lead a vast array of Thatcherite projects in politics, finance, the media, industrial agriculture, and trade in art and arms. (158)

Certain businesses are horrific on a local level, such as Dorothy Winshaw's agribusiness which industrializes cruelty and death; the food produced from such slaughter is unhealthy and unnatural, leading very largely to the early death of Owen's (apparent) father. Others are global in their impact.

Death is also central to Mark Winshaw's trade as an arms dealer, but vicariously so given he exports shamelessly the capacity for others to torture and kill, remaining indifferent to the consequences of his sales to dictators and despots, such as Saddam Hussein.[1] As Trimm notes, 'Thatcherite enterprise is revealed to be so centred on greed as to operate without regards to consequences, even when military wares might be turned against British troops' (168) and the latter scenario proves to be the outcome, concerning which Mark seems disinterested. This is a crucial and most evocative detail that mirrors an underlying reality of these years when such sales grew exponentially. As Mark Phythian explains, 'Mrs Thatcher viewed such competition in personal terms and, especially during her first two terms in office, became in effect Britain's premier arms salesman' (276). Such active promotion is far more direct an involvement than Trimm's notion

concerning the novel that 'Mark's rise is redolent of Thatcher's sly winks to the arms trade' (168). According to Phythian, her son, Mark Thatcher, was also involved, facilitated by his mother, securing for him commission fees (through a corrupt intervention and abuse of power), for which trading Phythian offers evidence that includes commentary by Howard Teicher, a member of President Reagan's National Security Council (283). Andrew Feinstein refers to the 'most corrupt arms deal in history, the Al Yamamah deal [...]. Mark Thatcher, son of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who had negotiated the deal with the Saudis, was paid £12 million on the deal' (198). Hence Coe's use of the name 'Mark' plays a double function, satirizing activities that would have been dismissed at the time if made the substance of direct accusations.[2] Through dark and oblique humour Coe has enshrined in cultural memory a vital link in understanding how our world functions, perhaps indelibly so, which would not have been the case with press coverage of the son's activities, which were easily dismissed. As Feinstein reports in 2015, 'Of an estimated 502 recorded violations of United Nations arms embargoes since their inception in 1990, two have resulted in legal action, one of which ended in conviction. It should therefore come as no surprise that the trade in weapons is less regulated than the trade in bananas!' (197–8). Hence in the last resort the Thatcherite ethos and ideology are marked up (excuse the pun) by Coe correctly as an undeniable symbol of an immoral political system of cronyism, corrupted, corrupting and offered as a sign of a culture with inverted values, generationally undifferentiated, like mother, like son. And, moreover, in effect the overall conceit is that Coe's novel is the book Owen ought to have completed, when in fact he feels overwhelmed by what he uncovers. Initially he thinks the commission an act of fate. 'It was purely by chance that I found myself writing a book about the Winshaws' (87), which of course turns out not to be the case, as ever such details being highly significant retrospectively, and doubly ironic. As Owen concludes, the outcome of Thatcherism seems dire as represented by the Winshaws' misdeeds:

> They've all got blood on their hands. It's written all over their faces. [...] Roddy and Hilary have certainly done their bit. If imagination's the lifeblood of the people and thought is our oxygen, then his job's to cut off our circulation and hers is to make sure that we all stay dead from the neck up. And so they sit at home getting fat on the proceeds and here we all are. Our businesses failing, our jobs disappearing, our countryside choking, our hospitals crumbling, our homes being repossessed, our bodies being poisoned, our minds shutting down, the whole bloody spirit of the country crushed and fighting for breath. I hate the Winshaws, Fiona. Just look at what they've done to us. (413)

And yet ultimately Coe's narrator is defined by what in *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel* Colin Hutchinson observes of his group during this period: 'Ambivalence is the distinguishing feature of the contemporary white male left-liberal' (3). Unsurprising in a way, since in the real world, as Feinstein suggests, 'corruption, poor decision making, and outright criminality, as well as the efforts to conceal them, undermine the rule of law, distort the market, and pollute the business environment, the political process, and the functioning of the state' (198).

Such undermining subversions of democracy are the bedrock of Coe's view of how contemporary Britain functions, explored in a number of his novels, critiquing Blair and Cameron as well as Thatcher, including in the most recent novel, *Number 11* (2015), a novel I discuss at greater length in my contribution to this collection, which shares key themes and certain characters (including some Winshaws) with *What a Carve Up!*. The narrative revolves in part around perceptions of the contested death on Harrowdown Hill of Dr David Kelly in July 2003. A scientific authority on biological warfare, employed by the British Ministry of Defence, and former weapons inspector with the United Nations Special Commission in Iraq, in the period running up to the Iraq War his evidence had raised questions about Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, the official justification for the UK government's decision to invade Iraq. Kelly was pressured by authorities, 'outing' him as a source of certain reports, so as to undermine his credibility. In 2010 Lord Hutton deemed related evidence, including the post-mortem report and photographs of the body should remain classified for seventy years, but both were made public later that year. Many commentators find the death highly questionable, a suspicion and possibility that animate aspects of several strands of Coe's text, linking them.

Owen is far from the sole powerless person in *What a Carve Up!*; all the characters are revealed as either willing or more often unwilling (accidental) accomplices to each member of the family's particular greed, whose viciousness and malice are sanctioned very largely by Thatcherite ideology, although as such malignity has a dynamic of its own for those drawn to such behaviour and attitudes. As François Flahault points out in *Malice* (2003),

> Now – as we saw when we compared the respective advantages of love and hate – being nice means internalizing the split between oneself and the other; it means limiting oneself in order to make room for the other, and is therefore a kind of renunciation of being whole. The monster's malignity is a kind of affirmation of its wholeness. (87)

However, it is essential to concede that implicitly in Coe's novel such negative dynamics are evident even in earlier periods than Thatcher's governments, but remains dormant or secretively obscure (as with the odd and mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Godfrey Winshaw during the Second World War, and whether his brother, Lawrence, was complicit in that tragedy). As Hutchinson notes, Owen's research allows him to 'discover that the riches of the Winshaw's have been ill-gotten for centuries, and that in Thatcher's Britain, the family's unscrupulous methods are flourishing' (50). One of Coe's overarching points seems to be that such latent nastiness and madness might have lain dormant or at least out of sight until amoral tendencies (Thatcherism) create the circumstances to unleash such forces destructively on a widespread basis, and his satire of the Thatcher government and its acolytes demonstrates how wilful and savage such policies were as regards the cultural and sociopolitical perspectives they engendered more broadly in the general population, but among the wealthy and influential in particular. Such negativity has its own logic, for as Flahault observes:

> Hatred serves the undertaking of occupying the mind of the other, and it can get there by itself without having to depend upon his or her consent. By hating, I can enjoy the power of affirming myself absolutely and unconditionally. I can haunt the other with my hatred and impose myself upon him as the image of the beloved possesses the lover; in this case it is the other who depends on me, not me on him. (71)

This dynamic of the Winshaws is represented as typifying the selfish, egotistical spirit of the age, a genie released from the bottle, although there was opposition and protest, however ineffectual. As Coe writes in '1980s' of the Tory party election rally in 1983: 'You realised then that the 70s were over, and there was a new spirit in the air: a new meanness, an aggressive triumphalism, which of course was a post-Falklands feeling as much as anything else.' In the novel, Mortimer Winshaw cautions Phoebe, '"Let me give you a warning about my family," he said eventually, "in case you hadn't worked it out already. They're the meanest, greediest, cruellest bunch of backstabbing penny-pinching bastards who ever crawled across the face of the Earth. And I include my own offspring in that statement"' (209). At one level, this particular novel serves as a fictionalized compendium of Coe's various responses to those Thatcherite years, and its perceived excesses. Hutchinson says of its protagonist (in part a self-deprecating persona for Coe himself): 'Owen is infuriated not only by Thatcherism, but also by his own failure to channel his anger into effective political action' (50). Apart

from the political, ideological contexts, as to the novel's wider literary origins, in my interview with Coe, he describes:

> discovering a series called *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, from the original novel by David Nobbs (one of the best of the 1970s), *The Death of Reginald Perrin*. The latter had a very powerful influence on me. Although unknown as literature, it deserves better, possessing a combination of melancholy, satire, farce, seriousness, and a distinctive melange of tones which I have tried to capture in my fiction probably from *What a Carve Up!*. (37)

Clearly the comedy in *What a Carve Up!* is exceedingly dark, different strands overlapping or interwoven, and as Vanessa Guignery details its concerns itself with much murder and blood, both literally and in terms of various repeated allusions to the mystery and detective sub-genres of the novel and their filmic adaptations (428–9). There is an irony concerning Owen, being as Guignery observes someone 'who had assumed the role of uninvolved observer (as in classic detective fiction), [and who] realises little by little that his life is intricately linked with that of the Winshaws as he probes into his own past' (430). As Coe indicated in my earlier interview, 'In my youth there were no book-lined rooms, no bookish family. My Dad used to read Harold Robbins and Arthur Haley, my Mum Agatha Christie. Those were the names on our bookshelves' (36). Such unravelling of certainty and use of revelation, as Coe would surely be well aware as a bookish son of an aficionado of such works, was typical of a subset of detective fiction, which included the sixth detective novel by Agatha Christie and the third featuring Hercule Poirot, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). This tale is finally revealed as being narrated by the murderer himself, Dr James Sheppard, who has 'assisted' Poirot and writes of the detective's failings before committing suicide (presumably implicitly leaving behind his manuscript to be discovered and read posthumously, which is presumably the same conceit inherent in *What a Carve Up!*'s ending). Such curious and vexed complicity with complex strands and dimensions are evident even in classic writers of the form, which is an element Coe often foregrounds, but particularly in *What a Carve Up!*. Coe is noted for his satire and humour, but its elements remain often poignant and melancholy, imbued more with a sense of fatalistic admission of the inconsequentialities of existence rather than any sense of doom or dread. Emanuela Gutkowski says of the reader:

> In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the receiver [reader] is deceived twice: First, because, in most cases, he or she does not arrive at the same conclusions as Poirot (but the game is unfair: Who ignores the power of the Belgian's 'little

> gray cells'?). Second, his or her intuition is offended, because the murderer is the narrator – the kind, reliable figure who took the reader by hand from the first page and accompanied him or her through the comforting English environment, in which all people seem incapable of doing harm to others and the frantic course of life is replaced by the sleepy rhythm of everyday activities. (52)

In Christie's novel the environment, characters and readerly expectations are rendered as entirely paradoxical and implicitly multilayered engagements, and the underlying truth resides in the unpalatable quality of the various sets of relationships that make up the apparently liberal and stable village community. This is a truth embraced by Coe, using Owen as a naïf whose expectations will always be refuted, whose innocence is a set of vulnerabilities and neuroses. His reading of Tabitha ignores the self-evident clues, which he misses. 'This, Michael guessed, was Tabitha Winshaw: her resemblance to Aunt Emily, the deranged spinster played by Esma Cannon in the film *What a Carve Up!* was unmistakable' (431). Given the mystery and detective sub-genres are the models paraded and alluded to throughout the text, significantly he does not deduct or observe closely enough. In this collection Emma Parker notes that Owen 'assumes the role of detective' (74). In considering him perhaps one ought to focus upon Poirot as a precursor, but an Anglified version cursed with petit-bourgeois timidity rather than pride, perspicacity and certainty, and whose typically English characteristics naturally recur with Thomas Foley, part of Coe's recalibration in *Expo 58* (2013) of a Graham Greene protagonist accidentally and comically pitched into the world of espionage and intrigue. Returning to Poirot, in general terms, too, the archetypal detective figure is subverted by Christie, in a fashion both co-opted and parodied by Coe, aware that any 'postmodern' reflexivity and instability are prior possibilities of that sub-genre, what Guignery labels its 'decenteredness' (431). Clearly at the beginning of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Sheppard seems to be one type of paradigmatic character, helpful, beneficent, but is revealed finally as representing quite another, indifferent to killing. In a sense so too does Owen, seemingly a recluse and subsequently discovering from his mother his hidden father, but the double irony is that any secret concerning his underlying identity is hidden from him until toward the end, until told by his mother after the man Owen had believed was his father had died, and after that revelation still the true connection of his real father with the Winshaws remains hidden from him as well as from the reader until a comment by Tabitha Winshaw forces him to guess his father's identity, and so Owen is triply transformed: first by his second paternal bereavement, second by Tabitha divulging the truth, and finally by becoming another victim of the Winshaws,

not a perpetrator of foul deeds like Sheppard, mirrored in this by the two Winshaws, Mortimer and Tabitha. The latter, an apparently kindly eccentric and spinster who commissions Owen to write a family history, is exposed as a pathological manipulator, monster and madwoman. Even fate conspires against Owen as Tabitha concerning a magazine given her because of an article on the Mark 1 Hurricane aircraft where she found: 'A picture of you, Michael! You as a little boy! Fate has delivered you into my hands, at last, and not only that, but it turned out that you'd become a *writer*. It was all too, too perfect!' (476). Despite transformations of a kind, Owen is a dupe at the beginning, and remains so at the end, acted upon, excluded, sustained in his marginal status, and finally killed.

As to the repeated, matter-of-fact awfulness of the Winshaws, why would such a diminishment of others and the associated violence (symbolic, ideological or literal) be so compulsive and recurrent for these family members? Why is it not simply farcical, unbelievable? I would argue that first the popular cultural references ground the behaviour drawn from genres where it is familiar and accepted, but second, I would also suggest, it is a way of being all readers recognize, however reluctantly, at least unconsciously, even while Coe's gothic allows them to position its familiar, but unusual otherness. Much as people turn away from such realities, sublimating them, as Flahault reminds us: 'Being decent, just and benevolent is a way of existing. Being malicious is equally a way of existing' (167) and he concludes too that 'Every form of relationship between human beings, even if it contains something intolerable, engenders an "addiction"' (173). In truth, such degradation compels us in our appalled spectatorship in the main, hence Coe's fascination with the super-rich and the Gothic monstrous in *Number 11*, nastiness both casual and deliberate found intertwined amidst all the trappings of contemporary popular culture. As with the Thatcherite arms dealers highlighted in *What a Carve Up!*, one comprehends in *Number 11* the proximity of casual, careless evil, which produces and is mirrored in the swarm of huge black spiders at the end chasing Alison, one of the central characters who watches as 'they clambered on to cars, overturning them, toppling the massed rows of Range Rovers, Porsches and Jaguars. They ran up the walls of the vast arrogant houses, tearing into brickwork, smashing glass. Property was their first target; after that would come people' (343–4). By the chapter's end the literal quality of the events is interrogated, by implication they are symptoms of Alison's breakdown, but other possibilities remain, including a dark, brooding vengeance to which Coe returns, with its possibility of rough justice.