

Nick Lezard talks to author John Healy

Fighting Spirits

There's a scenario that regularly crops up in fantasies about publishing. In it, an editor discovers a manuscript, slovenly-typed, covered in gravy stains, perhaps with a curt covering note that says something to the effect of 'I don't give a shit what you think of this'. The manuscript is passed from reader to goggle-eyed reader and described as: raw, powerful, honest, the voice of the streets, *real*, etc.. The working-class author (the author is always working-class) becomes a literary star overnight. And that is where the fantasy usually peters out, when it becomes apparent that its purpose is to bring into relief not only the mannerisms of the publishers but also - and this is important - their credulity. The punchline is usually: and the funny thing was that the book was appalling all along. Boom boom. (Question: what does this scenario tell us about middle-class guilt?)

Something rather like this happened to John Healy. A London child of poor Irish parents, ex-army boxing champion, ex-dosser and, eventually, astonishingly, ex-chess master, he was advised to write down his life story while undergoing treatment for a savage kicking by the police. It ended up on ex-maverick Cambridge don Colin MacCabe's desk at the British Film Institute. As he read it, at a sitting, he declared that it was 'writing of the highest quality'. It was sent to Faber and Faber, published, and its author received the JR Ackerly prize for autobiography (1987 winner: *Little Wilson And Big God*, by A Burgess).

Books do not change people's lives, but they do change the way a life is looked at: **The Grass Arena** (Faber, pbk £3.99) is one such book. Questions of literary technique (as another critic said, Healy is no more Genet than MacCabe is Sartre) become irrelevant. Beside it Bukowski and Burroughs look like slummers. The trick is to carry a vision on to a work of fiction, and this is what Healy has done. He has written his first novel **Streets**

Above Us (Macmillan, hbk £12.95), and that is why I went to see him.

John Healy lives with his mother in a bog-standard late-60s council block that is neither gruesome enough to be railed against nor pleasant enough to be loved. The living room contains about a hundred books, maybe less, a chessboard, and a serious-looking chess computer. His mother, shy and perhaps nervous, brings us tea and biscuits. Twenty years ago she did not know whether her son was alive or dead.

You do not ask someone if they thought they were special when they were very manifestly at the bottom of the heap. Among his books are Martin Amis' *Money* and William Kennedy's *Ironweed*. Healy doesn't much like the genre of bum fiction. The dossers are all trying to be fucking Mozart, geniuses. The only thing they're interested in is money for drink and staying alive. That's the fucking genius. That's all I was interested in. I wasn't a writer.' When we talk about Amis he gets quite animated. 'It's good writing. I can't deny that. But he's just a middle-class ponce like all the rest. When he talks about drinking, about low-life, can't you see he's talking crap? Can't you see that? If he went on a drink for a week he'd come back *damaged*. (I'd make sure he was damaged.) But the class system protects all that lot. And they keep other writers out.'

An incident from *The Grass Arena*: just before a game his opponent said, 'Good evening, Mr Healy. I'm surprised to see you. They say you are a tramp off the streets.' Healy, naturally, went ballistic. But in the end that is what everyone he will meet from now on will say to him, with varying degrees of politeness, condescension, pity or awe. We mumble 'an extraordinary story' but choose to ignore its implications. And these are disturbing.

Healy watches over a powerful, relentless fatalism about the class system. From his treatment throughout his upbringing ('you get middle-class doctors, middle-class



John Healy - the publishing world comes down to earth

judges, and they're always pontificating about how the working class should behave themselves') to his treatment at Faber and Faber - 'a lot of middle-class ponces' - he has found the division in this country insuperable; not a matter for theoretical debate at all. Nothing he has done can change the fact that as soon as he opens his mouth someone is going to make a judgment about him. He doubts that there is anything he will ever be able to do that will change that. As one listens to him one realises just how crushing the system is. The middle class is not only in control of the literary world. It is in control of the language itself. *The Outsider* - a brilliant book. But a working-class bloke couldn't have come off the streets and written that. It took him years of training.' Training, he points out, that was denied him. It is as if only his success could bring his failures into relief: 'If my dad had taught me chess when I was six I could have been a grand master. As it is I only learned how to move

the pieces when I was 30, after years drinking on bombsites. My brain was damaged. Still, I could play 20 people at once, blindfold, and beat them all. Not bad, eh? If I'd been brought up with books....' He isn't bitter. Our chat goes on for two hours longer than I thought it would and we laugh a lot. 'I'm not getting at you, honest,' he says at one point.

Faber and Faber wanted him to change the last pages of *The Grass Arena*. The book ends with the battle against drink over, notionally, but with chess abandoned. It is curiously downbeat, but moving, and honest to his own experience. The standard happy ending militated by the convention of his story did not happen, and this irked his editors. We are happy to pigeonhole other people's experiences, to be able to reduce them to a formula. *The Grass Arena* is being filmed for the BBC, and they wanted the end changed too. 'They were going to get that Kenneth Branagh to play me.' Healy laughs. (Well, it is funny.)•