

BOOKS

Sue Townsend is English but not proud of it **True Brit**



When asked my nationality, I invariably answer 'English'. I know this is frowned on - we are all supposed to be Brits today, a happy cohesion of cultures - but my Glaswegian friends would sooner drink Babycham than write 'British' in the box provided. And doesn't this also go for the Welsh and the Irish? So why this squeamishness about admitting to being English?

I know why, and I resent it. The word has been commandeered by *The Sun*, the Tory Party and the Royal Family. So sensitive lefty souls have turned their faces away and taken to calling themselves 'Britons.' But where will it all end? What will future Dave Sparts enter in the hotel register under 'nationality'? 'British and Euro-

pean and World citizen, but also member of Universe and Galaxarian'?

I'm the first to admit that the English have been utter bastards. I bow my head in shame when I think of the countries we've looted and the people we've subjugated. But the descendants of those countries are now having their quiet revenge.

Marsha Rowe has edited an anthology of short stories which she has entitled **So Very English** (*Serpent's Tail*, pbk £7.99). One expects to see a picture of a toothy Joyce Grenfell on the front cover, and inside a 'frightfully, frightfully amusing' or 'cor guv', strike a light, hain't we English got some funny little ways' stuff. But *So Very English* is not a celebration of Englishness; it is a sly and

subtle demolition job. There are 33 stories and poems in this compilation. I'll mention a few of my favourites.

Roy Heath's 'According To Marx' is a little gem about the disenchantment of Debendranath Ghose on trying to join the Acton branch of the Communist Party. Gohar Kordi's autobiographical story, 'From Missionary School To Mitcham', is upfront about the differences between Iranians and the English. Her moving account of her mother mourning her father's death is particularly effective. Contrast the English praise of a widow at a funeral, 'she held up well', with the ritualised outpouring of Iranian grief, complete with howling, wailing and tearing of hair - 'What am I going to answer the children when you ask me where is their father? Where have you gone? Why have you left us?'

After 40 days she is encouraged to put aside her black clothes, but she receives positive family support. Gohar Kordi writes: 'What would have been the work of psychotherapy in the West

for years was done by the family in these 40 days'.

Nicole Ward Jouve's story of a French woman coming to live in the cold damp English countryside and her growing disenchantment is funny and telling. Her heroine, Jocelyne (no English person can pronounce her name) battles with a Rayburn and nature-hating farmers, 'trees are nothing but a damn nuisance!' Her French visitors Jacques and Sophie keep their fur hats on in bed. Jacques rails against the paucity of the English hearth. 'That's why they stood up against Hitler, after their minuscule fires they couldn't have cared less about the bombs.' Colm Toibin's piece, 'Fecking Off To England', is a delight; short but not fecking sweet.

There are one or two duds in this book, but, my dears, I'm far, far too English and polite to tell you what they are, in print. But come round to my house... there may be something nasty in the spare bedroom (see Jill Neville's 'Common Decency'), but we won't let that spoil our fun, will we?