

arts

Bigmouth strikes again as Morrissey's book hits the shelves

It's self-absorbed, overlong and essential reading. Will Hodgkinson dives into the weird world of Mozza



Great authors lose their edge when they become too big for editors to do battle with. Famous pop stars are too big from the start. Perhaps that's why the man who wrote lines of such economical depth as "Punctured bicycle, on a hillside desolate", contained within exquisite brevity on *This Charming Man* by the Smiths, was allowed to begin his 457-page memoir with a five-page

paragraph aiming for a T.S. Eliot-style evocation of Mancunian squalor.

"Past places of dread, we walk in the center [sic] of the road," Morrissey writes, possibly by quill, on the city of his childhood. "Local kids ransack empty houses, and small and wide-eyed, I join them, balancing across exposed beams and racing into wet black cellars; underground cavities where murder and sex and self-destruction seep from cracks of local stone and shifting brickwork where aborted babies found deathly peace instead of unforgiving life." You can imagine him penning such heroic prose, pausing to catch his own reflection, nodding with satisfaction, and continuing. Morrissey hasn't just fallen in love with his own writing. He's fallen in love with the very idea of himself as a writer.

On the other hand, who wouldn't want to spend almost half a thousand pages with Morrissey? Here is the first and probably last pop star to make a virtue of celibacy, whose bookishness and introspection gave hope to millions similarly disposed, and whose appearance on *Top of the Pops* in 1983, miming *This Charming Man* into a bunch of gladioli, was as revolutionary for the Thatcher generation as David Bowie was for the one before.

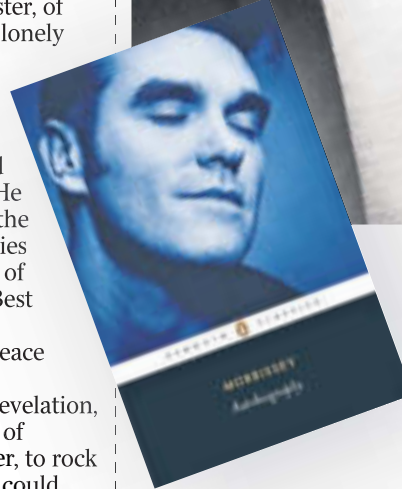
Morrissey's lyrics blend self-pity, queeny wit and maudlin sentimentalism in a way that has more in common with Philip Larkin than Bob Dylan, and that sensibility spills over onto the page. Yes, he's self-important, but he's never boring.

He's also extremely funny, taking himself far too seriously, while at the

same time being aware of his own preposterousness. "Naturally my birth almost kills my mother, for my head is too big," he announces. He finds the first of many opportunities to be a martyr within hours of his birth, when his sister Jackie tries to kill him; "whether this be visionary or rivalry no one knows". A few years later, he trips, falls into a fire and burns his wrist. "A heavy bandage is worn with pride for months to come, teaching me all I shall ever need to know about attention and style."

Morrissey writes elegantly about working-class life in Manchester, of ancient, embittered teachers, lonely lollipop ladies who smell of attics and "slackly shaped and contaminated" children finding escape in the excitement of *Miss World* and the *Eurovision Song Contest*. He describes the psychic weight the Moors murders had over Sixties Manchester and the delirium of being a child seeing George Best play for United: "As I see the apocalyptic disturber of the peace swirl across the pitch, I faint."

Amid such poetic prose is revelation, from wandering on to the set of *Coronation Street* as a teenager, to rock writer Nick Kent asking if he could join the Smiths. He describes his first crush: on a man, but one dressed as a woman. "Jerry Nolan on the front of the Dolls' debut album is the first woman I ever fell in love with," he states, after two pages of breathless praise of the proto-punk band New York Dolls' rent-boys-in-drag aesthetic. His first serious relationship,



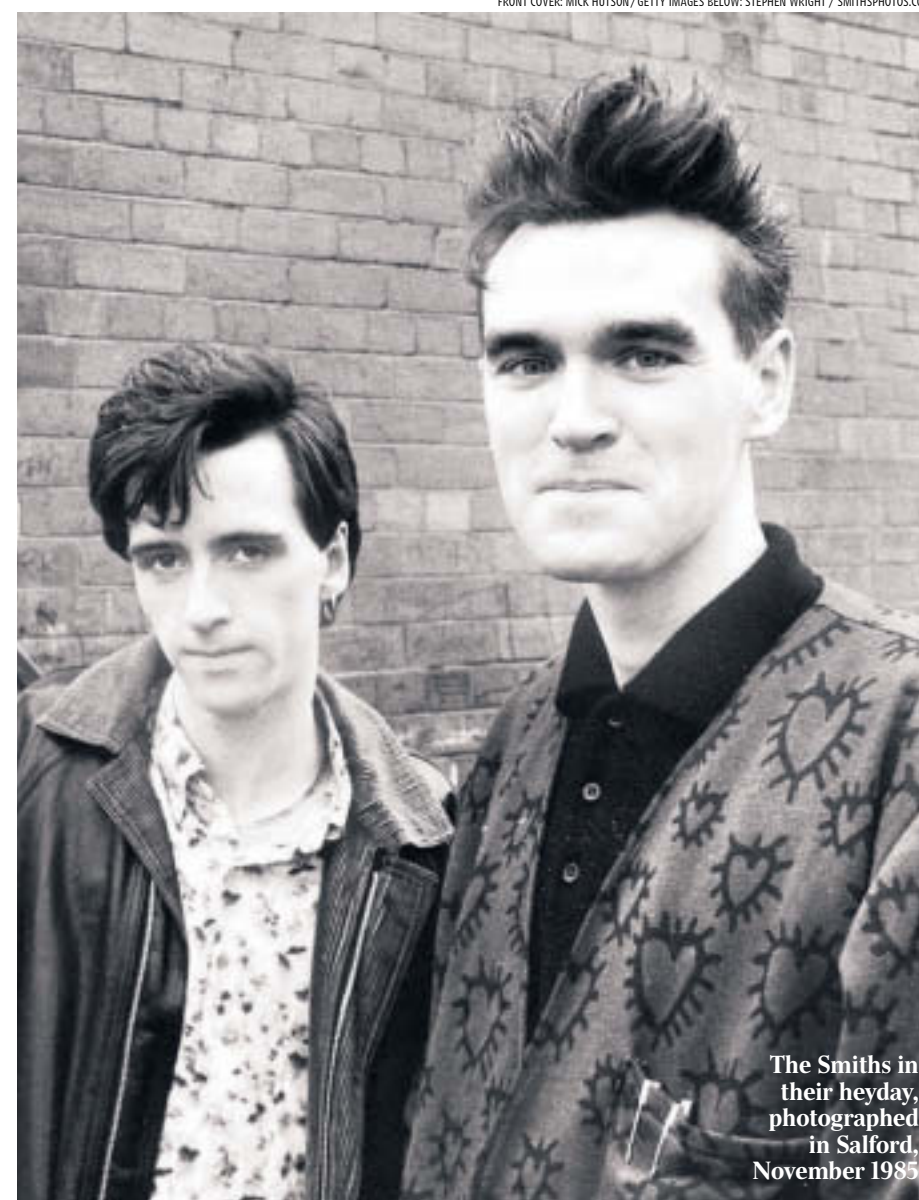
Autobiography by Morrissey

Penguin Classics, 457pp
£8.99*£7.99; e-book £8.99

*To order at discounted price please telephone 0845 2712134

with the photographer Jake Walters, only happened in his thirties. It ended, aptly, when Alan Bennett visited the pair and commented that something seemed wrong between them. Later, he describes falling in love with a real-life woman, Iranian Tina Dehghani, with whom he even considers having "a mewling miniature monster". It doesn't happen.

Then there are the Smiths, the band who were "reacting against everything". He describes meeting guitarist Johnny Marr, sociable, ambitious and musically gifted, as "a matter of finding yourself in possession of the one vital facet that the other one lacks, but needs". He later claims to have discovered that



The Smiths in their heyday, photographed in Salford, November 1985

Marr had left the band only when he turned on the television to see the guitarist playing behind Bryan Ferry. On Mike Joyce, the Smiths' drummer, who took Morrissey and Marr to court for a 25 per cent cut: "a flea in search of a dog". And when the court case is over and the dreams of the best band of the Eighties lie in tatters, Morrissey writes movingly about sitting alone in "a squatty hotel room, wondering how *Hand In Glove* led to this".

Needless to say, there are plenty of characters to take aim at. At the top of the list is Judge John Weeks, "an old, weathered tree trunk" who presided over the Joyce case; Sarah Ferguson ("the Duchess of Nothing"), Factory Records' Anthony Wilson

("a professional fusspot"), Julie Burchill ("like all bullies, she had never thought much of herself") and even the paraplegic singer Robert Wyatt ("there could be no shame attached to wheelchairs, but there aren't many in the Top 40") all come in for a bashing. He berates John Peel for never coming to a Smiths concert and laughs at Vanessa Redgrave for turning up at his house the moment he is famous.

Autobiography is overlong and you grow weary of the documenting of yet another grievance or perceived slight, but it's honest. Morrissey may be vain, but he's not too vain to hide his unpleasantness and, hence, the way he sees the world. For this reason alone, *Autobiography* is essential reading.

Morrissey was a genius, but he's still singing the same song, says lifelong fan Robert Crampton

If I had to rank the most seminal moments of my youth, the Jam splitting up in 1982 would be one, the Clash falling to bits in 1983 would be another, and the Smiths calling it a day in 1987 would be a third. Looking back, of the three ruptures, the last was by far the most significant. Morrissey and Marr still had plenty of creative energy left in the tank, yet as their respective solo careers suggest, they needed each other to alchemise that energy. So a lot of great songs never got written.

I was 18 when I first heard the Smiths. I bought all their albums on the day of release, played them obsessively and could not quite believe what I was hearing, which is best described, at the risk of sounding pretentious, as Englishness set to music. Equal measures of hope and despair, idealism and cynicism, morbidity and slapstick. It was a certain sort of Englishness: bitter; Northern; unhappy; occasionally radical. But it felt authentic and well-intentioned.

The Smiths were always categorised as Manchester miserabilist, but that was never fair. Morrissey was more than that. He was funny, bawdy, witty, ironic, a touch of music hall, brutal social realism interlaced with the farce of a saucy postcard. For a few years, Morrissey's lyrics felt like the best depiction of what it meant to be English in the mid-Eighties. And he didn't just cover the easy stuff; it wasn't just politics and the big picture. He did the psychology and the neuroses; the small picture too.

"I am the son and heir of nothing in particular." "Let me get my hands on your mammary glands." "Belligerent ghouls run Manchester schools." And so on and so forth. "When the leather runs smooth on the passenger seat" — that's pretty damn good, that is; it transports you right into the texture of English life.

The lyrics of popular music never look very profound when stripped away from their music. But, as a lyricist writing about England, Morrissey's output in those years ranks with the best. Ray Davies hit the spot a few times. So did Elvis Costello, Ian Dury, Ian Curtis and Paul McCartney. But, however much we love them, and we do, if you analyse the Beatles' lyrics, they are, with a few exceptions (Penny Lane, Eleanor Rigby) unimpressive. They don't tell you much about what it is or was to be English. There is more information — and flair — contained in a Smiths title than in most entire songs by the Stones or The Who.

And yet, for such an unashamedly autobiographical lyricist, the Morrissey paradox is that we've never known much about the guy's actual life. Does his long-awaited book enlighten us? No, I'm afraid it doesn't. We know he endured a sad, sickly childhood in the rain, that he got turned on by Bowie and Iggy and Lou, that celebrity isn't all it's cracked up to be. We know he can turn a phrase — and he still can, although his fondness for show-off, sixth-form punning is tiresome. And

we know that he can hold a grudge, and my goodness, he can.

He has a pop at Steve Harley and Noddy Holder. And more than a pop — it gets tedious — at the judge who presided over the court case (that he lost) when the Smiths' bassist and drummer wanted a bigger share of the band's royalties. The appeal court judges get a kicking too. As do John Peel, Rough Trade, Spandau Ballet. Pretty much everyone.

The Smiths split up more than a quarter of a century ago. In the five years when they were together, Morrissey tended to hammer away at the same few themes: growing up in Manchester is crap; transitioning from being a boy to a man is crap; England is crap; life is crap; it's all crap. Fair enough. But he's got the intelligence and the talent to have moved on from that, and it turns out he hasn't.



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It was something I'd thought I might not be here to see and I was so proud that day I almost popped. The next morning she turned to me and said "Thanks for being here Dad". I think she meant being in Cambridge for her graduation, but the words meant so much more.

Joe from Derby
Diagnosed with lung cancer in 2008



Being able to see my daughter graduate

Mozziebites — his acid tongue

On his first love, Jake Owen Walters

Inside the house, the doorbell rings. It is Jake ... He steps inside and he stays for two years. Conversation is the bond of companionship (according to the Wildean scripture), and Jake and I neither sought nor needed company other than our own for the whirlwind stretch to come, and for the first time in my life the eternal "I" becomes "we"; as, finally, I can get on with someone.

On Chrissie Hynde

She is by far the funniest person I have ever met ... Chrissie could make people laugh at the funeral of triplets. [In a bar] a screech-owl female frump begins a beer-sodden tire-slashing attack on Chrissie with,

"You used to mean SO MUCH to me," to which Chrissie breaks in with, "Yes. But I don't now — so f*** off."

On Bowie

Suddenly David Bowie telephones the studio and asks to speak to me. I am thrilled, but he tells me that he would like me to do a cover of one of his recent songs, and he stresses that if I don't do the cover, "I will never speak to you again, haha," which is hardly much of a loss since David doesn't ever speak to me.

On Vanessa Redgrave

My social status leaps after decades of disqualification on grounds of radiation. The doorbell rings and there stands Vanessa Redgrave. "Marcie," she begins, and then goes on about social injustice in Namibia, and how we must all build a raft — preferably out of coconut matting.