

Trainspotting, High Fidelity, and the Diction of Addiction

During the 1990s, two journalists penned novels that would quickly become modern classics in the canon of British Literature. In 1993, Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* presented the story of heroin addicts in Edinburgh, told mainly through the narration of junkie Mark Renton. Nick Hornby labeled Welsh as "the best thing that has happened to British writing for decades" (Welsh i). Two years later, Hornby would follow with his work, *High Fidelity*, depicting another group of young adults existing in a state of arrested development, their lives ruled not by a heroin needle but a diamond needle. (Editor's note: Cf. Kavadlo.) Hornby's narrator came in the form of self-absorbed record store owner Rob Fleming. It is not possible to say much in terms of the plot, simply because there is not much of one in either book. The ensuing years saw their works translated onto celluloid, although *High Fidelity* came to the big screen in an Americanized adaptation, courtesy of star and scriptwriter John Cusack's moving the setting from London to his native Chicago in a fit of affective fallacy. As he explained in an interview on the DVD release, "People said, 'How can you change the locale from London to Chicago?' And I thought that was probably the simplest part of the whole process. [W]hen I read Hornby's book, I could transpose it directly" (*High Fidelity*). Director Stephen Frears was similarly troubled as latecomer to the project, saying "The idea of it not being set in England was quite shocking When [the novel] came out and people said to Nick Hornby, 'Well, what's it about?' He would say 'Well, it's about England.' So, in a way, you were denying the whole subject matter that the

author thought he was writing about” (*High Fidelity*). In the original novels, both Welsh and Hornby present images of youths frightened by the prospect of adult responsibility in the bleak geographic and economic landscape of late twentieth century Great Britain, choosing to deal with it by *not* dealing with it, opting instead to use their respective addictions as shields from reality.

To place both works in context, youth culture in England hardly existed until after World War II. Colin MacInnes’ 1959 Mod bible *Absolute Beginners* catches that age group in full bloom. Despite his friend “The Wiz” believing “I won’t regret it when the teenage label’s torn off the arse pockets of my drip-dry sky-blue jeans” (12), MacInnes’ unnamed narrator states, “This teenage ball had had a real splendour in the days when the kids discovered that, for the first time centuries of kingdom-come, they’d money . . . and our world was to be our world, the one we wanted” (12). Later on, he speaks of one of his junkie friends, Dean Swift, who “is convinced that . . . you and I, who don’t jab hot needles in our arms are just going through life missing absolutely everything worthwhile in it” (64). Though he disagreed with Dean, history demonstrates that perhaps Dean was onto something. The “splendour” MacInnes’ character spoke of faded in the ensuing decades, assuming it *ever* existed. Three weeks after V-J Day, America called in the Lend Lease agreement. England owed three billion pounds (Savage 108). Great Britain’s status, or lack thereof, in the global power structure following World War II left it in a state closer to the Airstrip One future envisioned by George Orwell than most realized. Of those who did realize it, none of them wanted to admit it. The decades that followed would make the truth as unavoidable as the desire *to* avoid it, by any means necessary.

When Kevin McDonald asked Welsh if his novel could be considered a period piece, he responded, “Yes, it’s dated in the context of Edinburgh because the whole drug scene has changed slightly there. . . . The fact that there’s just so few opportunities for people that it’s not surprising that they try to escape from it or try to obliterate as much of the pain of the world as possible. So while the drugs have changed, the issues are just the same” (121-22). Pressed further, Welsh admitted, “If you’re being pedantic about it, you could say [*Trainspotting*] was set in Edinburgh between 1982 and 1988, but the issues of drug addiction and drug abuse and the on-going HIV

issues are as pertinent as ever” (122). In Hornby’s novel, Rob Fleming “celebrates” his thirty-sixth birthday (213). Considering the novel’s publication of 1995, simple mathematics demonstrates that the characters in both works would be roughly the same age today. The historical context is relevant, for Welsh and Hornby as individuals and in their respective works. Both were shaped by growing up in a nation in denial.

According to journalist Jon Savage, “England was smug and static, full of imperial pretensions, even in areas such as the celebration of the Beatles’ worldwide fame after 1964— one of the country’s few successes” (108). Shortly before his death, former Apple publicist Derek Taylor recounted in a WGBH documentary, “[B]y the Autumn of 1963, [The Beatles] were . . . now a major topic. . . . Life was going to be good now, because we had the Beatles” (“Shakespeares in the Alley”). It is easy to draw a connection between the Beatles and the drug culture; it is already well-known that they were a part of it by the middle of their careers. The Beatles served as a gateway opiate for England under Harold Wilson’s administration.

1964 saw Wilson’s Labour Party oust the Conservatives after over a decade in control. Socialism rose to power on what Philip Norman described as:

a tide of stupendously opportune verbal gimmickry . . . culled almost entirely from the pop idiom used by teenagers and would-be teenagers. ‘Let’s Go With Labour,’ the decisive campaign slogan, borrowed pop music’s preeminent image— that of being galvanized, as by music, into keen and exhilarating life. (245)

In 1965, the Queen’s official birthday was designated as a time to bestow royal honors. The queen’s duties consisted of, as they had the previous year, signing the list made by the Prime Minister. On June 12, the Beatles received their MBEs (246). Rather than the fruition of the Socialist threat feared by British subjects, the Wilson administration, according to Norman:

is remembered not for white heat or driving dynamism but for short-sighted euphoria and feather-headed extravagance. It is remembered, above all, for an hallucination which descended on England’s capital city, brilliant at first,

but in quickly fading, tawdry colors—the hallucination of Swinging London. (247)

Instead of the hard times foretold by Wilson, one only saw the spending boom centered on a youth culture barely two decades old. Its most concrete expression came in the high hemlines and loud patterns of Carnaby Street. It was “an attitude . . . [that] to a great extent, came from the Beatles” (247). However, at the same time the Beatles ceased touring, the positive economic climate began to crumble. July 1966 was marked by a six-month wages freeze and a devaluing of the pound. Early in the next decade, unemployment would top one million for the first time since the 1930s (Savage 42).

The whitewashed Jubilee celebration in 1976 occurred at a significant time in both parties’ lives. Savage writes, “The United Kingdom was not only bereft of Empire, but also divided within itself” (352). Of particular interest where Welsh’s work is concerned, Savage notes, “Scottish nationalism [was] at a peak while the Civil War in Northern Ireland had spread onto the mainland with the post-1974 IRA campaigns” (352). Recounting the sociopolitical climate that greeted *Leaving the 20th Century*’s publication in England, Richard Parry wrote, “In 1974 . . . the second miners’ strike effectively brought down the Tory government. The early Seventies were marked by mass and wildcat strikes, street fighting and terrorism in Ireland and political protest in England from the mass demonstrations to attacks by the Angry Brigade” (vi). If times seemed bad, by the time of Thatcher’s election, it was clear the worst was yet to come for citizens in the United Kingdom.

Jon Savage cites a 1985 report for the *British Journal of Addiction* that notes:

1978-9 was a watershed year for heroin use in Britain. Political events in Iran contributed to a substantial increase in supply on the British Market. This combined with a decline in the existing subcultural taboos against heroin use, filled existing demand and seemed to encourage experimentation. (qtd. in Savage 494)

That experimentation continued into the 1980s, no doubt spurred on by the gloom of the Iron Lady’s reign of terror. The Conservatives’ victory in May of 1979 by forty-three votes set the gears into motion for the “applica-

tion of market forces, jingoism, a hard-line morality and the explicit disenfranchisement of the dispossessed” that would define “Thatcherism” in the coming decade (Savage 541). Margaret Thatcher’s election was the pavement the country hit after decades in freefall after World War II.

In Welsh’s fiction, one finds, according to Simon Reynolds, “characters too unsavory for the sedate drawing room of literary fiction: junkies, [football] hooligans. . . and other species of British lowlife spawned during the Thatcher-Major government’s [eighteen]-year long project of systematically transforming a united, unionized working class into an autodestructive lumpenproletariat” (71). Jane Mendelsohn describes *Trainspotting* as “A ragged tale of young junkies in their [twenties], living on the dole, fending off adulthood and trying to escape from a world of AIDS, death, and emotional despair, . . . set in a milieu so miserable that it is easy to understand the characters’ desire for oblivion” (31).

In 1997, Brian Groom noted in the *New Statesman*, “[D]uring the politicking leading up to the decision on Scottish home rule, the character Renton’s remark, “ ‘Fuckin’ failures in a country ay failures’ has become axiomatic of the 1990s” (12). Renton continues in the same speech, saying, “It’s nae good blamin’ it on the English fir colonising us. . . . They’re just wankers. . . . We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin’ low, the scum of the earth. Ah hate the Scots” (qtd. in Groom 12). According to Groom, one can see, “[The] collective lack of national confidence, the self-loathing that results from the admission of it” (12). If one is in Scotland long enough, he or she “start[s] to share the perceived slights to national honour” (13). These slights range from Scotland being referred to as “a region,” to the BBC and ITN giving priority to stories that have no relevance to life in Scotland, and to Thatcher’s assumption that England’s history was Britain’s history. “Worse,” Groom noted, “[Y]ou even start to enjoy feeling slighted” (13).

The drugs that Welsh uses in his book Simon Reynolds views as “sacraments of dissident subcultures, surrogates for thwarted dreams of social transformation. If these drugs can’t change the world, they can at least change the way some individuals walk through the world” (73). As Mendelsohn explains, the title of the novel comes from “the depressing British hobby of keeping obsessive notes on the arrival and departure times and it is a metaphor for shooting heroin and the obsessed, hopeless nature

of the addict's life" (33). All of the main characters in *Trainspotting* either have or develop a heroin habit during the course of the novel. The usage of the word "habit" is important because it implies a lack of choice, a very real lack the characters experience (34). In what one could argue is the manifesto for Welsh's novel, the main character/narrator Mark Renton says:

Society invents a spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae's behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose ah ken aw the pros and cons, know that ah'm gaunnae huv a short life . . . but still want tae use smack? They won't let ye dae it . . . because it's seen as a sign ay thir ain failure. The fact that ye just simply choose tae reject whit they hav tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. . . . Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, it's thair fuckin problem . . . ah jist intend tae keep right on to the end of the road. (Welsh 188)

According to Mendelsohn, "This is a terrific passage. It is a manifesto not for suicide, but for the sidelines— for the limbo of addiction, sarcasm, escape" (34). In our accelerated age, the only part of Timothy Leary's credo that still works is "Drop out."

Ginia Bellafante, in a review of Hornby's *High Fidelity*, notes, "If there is a single grating habit that has afflicted young writers of the past decade, it is a tendency to define characters not necessarily by their histories . . . but more economically, as a sum of their pop cultural tastes" (85). Unfortunately, Bellafante does not group Hornby among those writers, saying, "Happily, Hornby does not rely on pop cultural allusions to limn his characters' inner lives, but uses it instead to create a rich, wry backdrop for them" (85). The exact opposite is true. Case in point, when discussing his many failed relationships, Rob tells his audience he seeks repair. He wants closure, but he wants it to play out the way he would like. To no surprise, he wants his life to be "like a Bruce Springsteen song. . . . I'd like to phone all those people up and say good luck and good-bye, and then they'd feel good, and I'd feel good. We'd all feel good" (158). His own life is so bankrupt he has to borrow scenarios from Bruce Springsteen lyrics. Pop cultural allusions run rampant in *High Fidelity* as that is the high, the addiction of Rob Fleming and his fellow addicts.

Chris Savage King comes closer to the mark in his review, recognizing the addiction of Rob Fleming and the other chief characters, saying, “[Hornby] writes for the generation who drew their formative cues from pop music and TV. Impressions sink in deep because there was nothing exceptional about the childhood view except for the outlets that provided dreams for the future. . . . Pop music and romantic life nudge each other along” (47). Of Rob’s addiction, he seeks solace in the typically, though not always, black disc of audio. He asks the reader, “Is it so wrong, wanting to be at home with your record collection? . . . There’s a whole world in here, a nicer, dirtier, more violent, more peaceful . . . more loving world than the world I live in” (83). This is not a new idea. In *Jubilee*, filmmaker Derek Jarman’s vision of a futuristic England, the character Borgia Ginz states, “As long as the music’s loud, we won’t hear the world falling apart” (*Jubilee*). In moments of emotional distress, Rob likes to reorganize his record collection. He tells us, “There are some people who would find this a pretty dull way to spend an evening, but I’m not one of them. This is my life, and it’s nice to be able to wade in it” (54). It is not difficult to imagine Rob, like a preschooler, building a massive fort out of his albums.

The image is driven home when Rob informs the audience of which artists he uses to blot out negative feelings. As the rest of Britain used the Beatles as a shield from reality, Rob Fleming almost demonstrates a sense of nationalism when he informs the reader, “The Beatles were bubblegum cards and *Help* at the Saturday morning cinema and toy plastic guitars and singing ‘Yellow Submarine’ at the top of my voice in the back row of the coach on school trips. They belong to me . . . and though they’ll make me feel something, they won’t make me feel anything bad” (45). The Beatles are associated with childhood. He is able to regress through their music to a time before hormones and adult concerns complicated things.

While as draining on the bank account as addiction to illicit drugs, a fair number might scoff at pop culture, namely pop music, being classified as an addiction. Record producer David Rubinson drew a very concrete comparison between the music of the 1960s and the counter-culture for which it provided the soundtrack. He recounted attending an industry function where he said, “You have to understand the only people we trust right now are our friends and the people we buy dope from. . . . You’ve got to

market this music like you were a dope dealer. You've got to get the trust of your clients and then you can sell them anything" ("Blues in Technicolor").

Though the film version of *High Fidelity* remains crippled by its Americanization, it and *Trainspotting*, in their film incarnations, provide important opening scenes in discussion of their dual images of addiction, be it the traditional form of drugs or popular culture. In the film adaptation of Hornby's book, Rob (Fleming) listens on headphones to "You're Gonna Miss Me" by the Thirteenth Floor Elevators, the Texan psychedelic group led by Roger Kynard "Roky" Erickson. The image works on the level that while Rob listens to Erickson wailing "You didn't realize, you're gonna miss me, baby" (*Psychedelic Sounds*), his girlfriend Laura is removing her belongings from his apartment. And another level is there: As recounted in the recent documentary on his life, Erickson has spent his life in and out of mental hospitals since pleading insanity on a marijuana possession charge in the late 1960s, suffering from schizophrenia complicated by his abuse of hallucinogens during the Elevators' recording career (*You're Gonna Miss Me*).

As for *Trainspotting*, many people remember the opening chase scene where Ewan McGregor as Renton gives the "Choose Life" speech while "Lust for Life" by Iggy Pop plays in the background (*Trainspotting*). Iggy recorded the song, fresh from rehab, during the cocaine-fueled holiday he spent with David Bowie in Berlin in the mid-1970s, recording the album it provided the title track for, as well as *The Idiot*, as recounted in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's oral history *Please Kill Me* (255). His renouncement of his vices rings hollow, especially considering his mention of "Johnny Yen" from *The Ticket That Exploded* by William S. Burroughs in the lyrics (*Lust for Life*), an author whose influence Iggy discussed with Lynn X in *Search and Destroy* magazine (66). Burroughs was no stranger to heroin or the "meat injection" that Alison, one of the female junkies in *Trainspotting* prefers heroin over, saying "That beats any meat injection . . . that beats any fuckin cock in the world . . ." (Welsh 9). The Iggy connection is used to lesser effect in the book when some of the characters attend one of his concerts, and during "Neon Forest," Iggy changes the first word in the line "America takes drugs in psychic defense" to "Scatlin' [Scotland]" and "defines us mair accurately in a single sentence than all the others have ever done" (75).

Writing on the effects of heroin, Jon Savage cites the example of Sid Vicious, who actually embodied both the heroin addict as well as the addict of popular music, starting out a fan of the Sex Pistols before becoming one of them. Savage wrote, “One of the problems of heroin use is that, although the drug offers insulation from the stresses of everyday life, it does so by effectively embalming the user’s body and emotions. Sid [was] . . . locked into permanent adolescence” (502). At the end of his co-worker Dick’s revelation that he has a girlfriend, Hornby’s narrator Rob is left on his own with Dick going off with Anna and his other co-worker Barry storming off angry. Rob thinks, “I feel as though I have been having conversations like this all my life. None of us is young anymore, but what has just taken place could have happened when I was sixteen We got to adolescence and just stopped dead; we drew up the map then and left the boundaries exactly as they were” (Hornby 151). In both novels, it appears the characters “got to adolescence and just stopped dead.” Earlier on, Rob discusses his fleeting relationship with Alison Ashworth, telling the audience, “It would be nice to think that as I’ve got older times have changed, relationships have become more sophisticated, females less cruel . . . [b]ut there still seems to be an element of that evening in everything that has happened to me since” (9). Whose fault is this?

Among the dream jobs Rob would like to have, his top five, a convention that Hornby’s characters carry throughout the book, include his first choice, a journalist for the *New Musical Express* during the Punk explosion of the 1970s. His reasons were “Get to meet the Clash, Sex Pistols, Chrissie Hynde, Danny Baker, etc. Get loads of free records—good ones, too” (290). His second dream job was to be a producer for Atlantic Records during the glory days of rhythm and blues. He would get to meet such luminaries as Solomon Burke and Aretha Franklin and of course, “[g]et loads of free records—good ones, too” (290-1). Three and four are musician (of any kind except classical or rap) and film director (though he would prefer not to be a silent or German film director), respectively. Rounding out the list is “architect” (291). Rob informs us, “It’s not even as though this list is my *top* five, either. . . . I just thought that if I failed to come up with five, it would look a bit feeble” (291). As if the number thereof would make any real difference.

In Rob Fleming's catalogue of the songs he has listened to since he was a teenager on the average of once a week or "three hundred times the first month, every now and again thereafter," he counts "Last Night I Dreamed That Somebody Loved Me" by Manchester's masters of mope The Smiths, and "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" by Neil Young. Rob asks his audience:

How can that not leave you bruised somewhere. . . ? What came first—the music or the misery? Did I listen to music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to music? Do all those records turn you into a miserable person? (Hornby 24-25)

No matter what the genesis was, Rob and his records exist in a symbiotic sickness.

In his review of Danny Boyle's screen adaptation, Richard Grenier wrote, "[T]he heroin addicts of *Trainspotting* are deprived of any redeeming virtues. They lie to each other, steal from each other, betray each other. They lack of the slightest speck of morality of conscience as they sink into the squalid depths of heroin addiction" (13). Grenier cites Welsh's statement on his characters, writing "[They] are not 'victims' and their heroin addiction is not the result of . . . any of the old-fashioned Marxist reasons. The problem is larger than that. It's 'life,' 'the world'" (13). Grenier's review may reek of moral outrage, much like Bob Dole's condemnation of the film when he protested its content during his presidential campaign, but as Mendelsohn notes, "[T]o say that *Trainspotting* glorifies heroin is like saying that the *Inferno* glorifies hell" (31). Mendelsohn further explains, "*Trainspotting* is not the radical manual for the destruction of society that it sometimes pretends to be, but it isn't a moralizing tract prescribing sentimental answers either" (35).

When we are introduced to the characters in Welsh's novel, courtesy of Renton, certain traits of the heroin junkie are introduced along with them. The main supplier of the group is Johnny Swan or Mother Superior, called such due to "the length of his habit" (Welsh 6). "'Mother Superior' wis Johnny Swan . . . hud once been a really good mate ay mines, back in the auld days," Renton says. "We played fitba together fir Porty Thistle. Now he wis a dealer. Ah remember um saying tae us once: Nae friends in this game. Jist associates" (6).

The junkies in Welsh's novel are only connected in their mutual addiction. According to Renton, "[T]he real junky . . . doesnae give a fuck about anybody else" (7). Although they share the addiction, they refuse to share needles. Sick Boy protests, "Ah dinnae share needles or syringes. Ah've goat ma ain works here" (9). The fear of death from AIDS as opposed to overdose loomed large over the junkies. At least they had *that* much concern for their health. When talk turns to "Goagsie," and his test coming back positive, all agreed that even though he had it, he still had to go on with his life, however short it might be. Of course, "It's easy tae be philosophical when some other cunt's goat shite fir blood" (10).

The lack of friends also pervades Hornby's depiction of vinyl addicts. Hornby's narrator admits, "I'm thirty-five years old, and I own a tiny failing business, and my friends don't seem to be friends at all but people whose numbers I haven't lost" (Hornby 74). When he phones up some "friends" for a drink when his thirty-sixth birthday rolls around, they are characterized as "people I haven't spoken to for months, ex-colleagues or old college friends, or people I've met through ex-colleagues or old college friends . . ." (218). Their response is one of shock. Hornby writes, "They're aghast, they're baffled, they're kind of amused but most of all, they just can't believe it" (218).

Rob survives in his failing business via his clientele, whom he characterizes as "young men, always young men, with John Lennon specs and leather jackets and armfuls of square carrier bags. . . . I get letters from young men, always young men . . . who spend a disproportionate amount of their time looking for deleted Smiths singles and 'ORIGINAL NOT RERELEASED' underlined Frank Zappa albums. They're as close to mad as makes no difference" (37). Of his best customers, Rob says:

[They] are the ones who just *have* to buy a record on a Saturday, even if there's nothing they really want; unless they go home clutching a flat, square carrier bag, they feel uncomfortable. You can spot the vinyl addicts . . . I know that feeling well (these are my people, and I understand them better than I understand anybody in the world): it is a prickly, clammy, panicky sensation, and you go out of the shop reeling. (95-96)

Is it purely coincidental that the symptoms described sound like withdrawal of an addict in need of a chemical fix? In this light, Rob allies himself more with “Mother Superior,” being both user and dealer. Welsh provides description of the fix being satisfied in the injecting of Alison by Sick Boy. He writes, “She pulls back her head, shuts her eyes and opens her mouth, givin out an orgasmic groan. Sick Boy’s eyes are now innocent and full ay wonder They baith look strangely beautiful and pure in the flickering candlelight” (9).

Of Rob’s co-workers, Dick is described as “thirty-one years old, with long, greasy black hair . . . wearing a Sonic Youth t-shirt” and reading a Lou Reed biography when Rob arrives to open his shop (37-38). In reductionist terms, Dick is a stunted adolescent, dressing like and having the concerns of someone half his age. Dick is unconvivial about anything other than the mix tapes he makes for Rob which he never listens to. Rob hypothesizes that if he tried to tell Dick that his girlfriend Laura left, or for that matter, *anything* of a highly personal nature, “He’d probably just crumble to dust” (39).

As for Barry, he enters humming the riff to a Clash song, or rather “he’s making that guitar noise that all little boys make, the one where you stick your lips out, clench your teeth and go ‘DA-DA!’” (41). To further emphasize the stunted emotional growth of Rob and his co-workers, Hornby notes Barry’s age of thirty-three (41). Barry’s conversational skills rival Dick’s. He provides “simply an enumeration: if he has seen a good film, he will [rank it] in his best-of-year list . . . he thinks and talks in tens and fives, and as a consequence, Dick and I do too” (42). This desire to reduce people to the sum of their tastes takes on an almost scientific slant among the three.

Rob informs the reader, “A while back when Dick and Barry and I agreed that what really matters is what you really like, not what you are like, Barry proposed the idea of a questionnaire for prospective partners, a two- or three-page multiple choice document that covered all the music/film/TV/book bases. . . . [T]here was an important and essential truth contained in the idea. . . . [T]hese things matter, and it’s no good pretending that any relationship has a future if your record collections disagree violently, or if your favorite films wouldn’t even speak to each other if they met at a party” (117). One need only look at the way Rob characterizes prudish

Penny, number two in his top five split-ups, in chronological order. Hornby writes, "[Penny was] nice-looking and her top five recording artists were Carly Simon, Carole King, James Taylor, Cat Stevens and Elton John" (10). Seemingly, Hornby ties in her chaste nature with her fondness for the sensitive singer/songwriters of the 1970s as if this is the reason why "she wouldn't let me put my hand underneath or even on top of her bra, and so I was finished with her" (10). In the opening paragraph, the flat, lifeless adjective "nice" is used to describe Penny and the elements surrounding her *eleven* times (9-10).

The three's audiophile snobbery emerges, at least from Rob, when they go to watch American singer (and Rob's future interim girlfriend) Marie LaSalle. When she covers the Peter Frampton song "Baby I Love Your Way," Rob breaks down and cries, which confuses him because it was one of the songs he and his college girlfriend Charlie used to stick their fingers down their throats to when "invariably a geography student, or a girl training to be a primary school teacher played it" (61). Is Rob stereotyping? He rationalizes his two characterizations, saying "I don't see how you can be accused of snobbishness if all you are doing is stating the plain, simple, truth" (61). And the "plain, simple truth" is that, despite what Washington D.C. punk band Fugazi sang (an allusion Rob, Dick and Barry would no doubt appreciate), you *are* what you own (*Repeater*).

At least to the three of them, this is true. When Laura returns to get her belongings from Rob's apartment, Rob asks her about her new boyfriend Ian/Ray's place. She says it is less cluttered. Rob responds by remarking, "That's 'cause he's only got about ten records, and CDs." When Laura asks him, "And that makes him an awful person, does it?" Rob replies, "In my book, yes" (209).

When Dick introduces Rob to his girlfriend Anna, Dick throws a monkey wrench into the threesome's hypothesis that there is no point in trying to get on with someone whose tastes differ. Dick informs Rob that Anna is a fan of Simple Minds. Rob admits, "I don't know what to say. This, in our universe, is a staggering piece of information. We hate Simple Minds. They were number one in our Top Five Bands or Musicians Who Will Have to be Shot Come the Musical Revolution. . . . Barry wanted to shoot the Beatles, but I pointed out that someone had already done it" (160). Dick's connection to Anna is emotional, as opposed to the "chemical" con-

nection of vinyl he shares with Rob and Barry. In a sense, Dick has outgrown the two of them.

Life revolves around addiction to records, but so does death, as well. Laura calls Rob to inform him of her father's death. If concern for her exists, it is fleeting as Rob, Dick and Barry turn the occasion into an opportunity to list their top five songs about death. Barry's catalogue of potential songs for the funeral runs the gamut from "Leader of the Pack" because "[t]he bloke dies on his motorbike," to "Tell Laura I Love Her" for the obvious reasons. For his own funeral, Barry's list includes "One Step Beyond" by Madness and the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want," a choice for which the other two give him grief due to its inclusion in the funeral scene from *The Big Chill* (234). Recognizing the ghoulishness of their exercise, Rob says "I'm glad Laura isn't here to see how much amusement her father's death has afforded us" (233-34).

As for Rob's list, he admits he could never list it in front of anyone as they would laugh at him. All the same, they include:

"One Love" by Bob Marley; "Many Rivers to Cross" by Jimmy Cliff; "Angel" by Aretha Franklin, and I've always had this fantasy that someone beautiful and tearful will insist on "You're the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me" by Gladys Knight, but I can't imagine who that beautiful, tearful person will be. (235)

Death also looms large for Welsh's junkies. When Dawn, Lesley's baby, dies, Renton describes the scene, saying, "Ah can feel death in the room before ah even see the bairn. It wis lying face doon in its cot. It, naw, she wis cauld and deid, . . . Ah didnae huv tae touch her tae ken" (Welsh 52). The other junkies respond first with shock, such as Spud's response of "Fuckin' heavy this . . . eh, likesay, em fuck" (52) to a resigned stance along the lines of "Yeah. Well, what can you do?" Matty says, "The way ah see it . . . is thit it's Lesley's bairn, ken? Mibbe if she'd looked eftir it right, it might not be deid" (53). Renton agreed, "Hate tae say it, bit Matty's got a point." His bigger concern? "Ah'm startin tae hurt really badly," Renton says. "Ah jist want tae take a shot and fuck off" (52). He tries to show some compassion, saying "Ah feel thit ah love thum aw. Matty, Spud, Sick Boy and Lesley. Ah want tae tell them. Ah try, but it comes oot as: — Ah'm cookin" (55). And what of the mother, Lesley? She goes into where

Renton is cooking up his next shot of heroin and declares, “Ah need a shot Mark. Ah really need a fuckin shot. C’moan Marky, cook us up a shot” (55). It is eerily appropriate. Without the dawn, it stays dark.

The number of bystanders who become casualties in the junkies’ orbit does not stop with Baby Dawn. Tommy, arguably the *only* morally upstanding character in the text, descends into junkiedom after breaking up with his girlfriend, Lizzie. Before Tommy’s downfall, he is characterized by Renton as “[O]ffensively fit. . . . It has to be said that Tommy’s a fairly handsome cunt wi a tan. . . . Handsome, easy-going, intelligent, and pretty tidy in a swedge. Tommy should make you jealous, but somehow he doesnae” (87). Then he approaches Renton about taking up heroin. Renton informs us, “Normally Tommy’s daein a bad impersonation ay ma auld lady . . . yir killin yirsel/pack it in/ye kin live yir life withoot that garbage, and other such shite” (89). He wants to try it. Renton justifies his turning Tommy on, saying, “Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up oor lives wi shite, things like careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless. Smack’s an honest drug, because it strips away these delusions. . . . It’s the only really honest drug” (90). Renton admits his culpability in Tommy’s using, “He nivir used before. It’s probably our fault; probably ma fault. . . . Lizzy’s kicked him intae touch” (175). Not long after, and perhaps not surprisingly, Tommy contracts HIV.

Strangely though, to Renton, “Tommy looks well. . . . He’s gaunny die. Sometime between the next few weeks and the next fifteen years, Tommy will be no more. The chances are that ah’ll be exactly the same. The difference is, we ken this wi Tommy” (314). He considers giving Tommy the same “The show must go on” speech, but he knows “Tommy cannae afford tae heat this gaff. He isnae Davie Mitchell, never mind Derek Jarman. . . . He willnae live five, or ten, or fifteen years before he’s crushed by pneumonia or cancer. Tommy will not survive winter in West Granton” (317).

Though Tommy’s doom is certain, what of Renton? Mendelsohn writes, “Whether [Renton] will have the strength to move on and become his own person . . . betray his friends and his heroin habit becomes the single most important question of the book” (33). As he does in the film adaptation, in Welsh’s novel, Renton takes off with the money made from a

deal he worked on with Sick Boy, Spud, Begbie, and the others. What of his fate? He thought, “[W]as he a junky? True, he had just used again, but the gaps between his using were growing. However, he couldn’t really answer this question now. Only time could do that” (343). The road ahead “appears” bright enough. Welsh writes, “Now, free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be. He’d stand or fall alone. This thought both terrified and excited him as he contemplated life in Amsterdam” (344). Mendelsohn writes, “Even if he doesn’t choose the straight road, he does, despite all indications to the contrary, choose life” (36). Does he? Looking at where Renton is headed at the novel’s resolution, one wonders how short the life Renton has chosen will be. Amsterdam, during the late 1980s when Welsh’s novel takes place, was arguably the center of European drug culture. One recalls the prediction Renton made regarding his own mortality in relation to Tommy’s and in doing so, one might assume Renton will either lead or follow Tommy to the grave.

Before Anna, Dick’s method of expressing himself came in the form of making a mixtape, passing it on to a person in a form not unlike needle sharing. Upon their reunion, Rob reminds Laura of the Solomon Burke song he first copied for her. Rob exclaims, “Solomon Burke! ‘Got to Get You Off My Mind’! That’s our song! Solomon Burke is responsible for our entire relationship!” To this, Laura responds, “Is that right? Do you have his number? I’d like a word with him” (Hornby 263). In the dénouement, the vicious cycle begins anew as Rob informs the reader he is compiling a new mixtape in his head for Laura of “stuff she’s heard of, and full of stuff she’d play. Tonight, for the first time ever, I can sort of see how it’s done” (323). The night marking his return to being a club disc jockey is viewed by Rob as “like the end of a film. The entire cast is dancing” (322). Has he learned nothing from the past? Apparently not.

To varying degrees, Renton and Rob are doomed characters, representing the adolescently post-adolescent in Great Britain. Neither is able to relate to anyone outside of his own little community of addicts. Both Mark and Rob’s lives are ruled by a needle. In the interactions, for lack of a better term, that Renton has with Sick Boy, Tommy and his other fellow junkies, and that Rob has with Dick, Barry, and other musically inclined members of his circle, a picture is drawn of a latter-day, now older Tiny Tim hobbling on his crutch with Mother Britain still suffering from a close-to-

sixty-year postwar hangover. Given the abysmal environment surrounding the two, as well as the two authors, addiction becomes all the more unavoidable as a way to blot out reality. One may argue that Hornby and Welsh represent the vanguard of a new wave of British novelists in turn of the century England. Certainly the two realistically depict life in England and how the latter part of the twentieth century shaped it.

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