



Last Exit to Brooklyn

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Few novels have caused as much debate as Hubert Selby Jr.'s notorious masterpiece, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and this Penguin Modern Classics edition includes an introduction by Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting*.

Described by various reviewers as hellish and obscene, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* tells the stories of New Yorkers who at every turn confront the worst excesses in human nature. Yet there are moments of exquisite tenderness in these troubled lives. Georgette, the transvestite who falls in love with a callous hoodlum; Tralala, the conniving prostitute who plumbs the depths of sexual degradation; and Harry, the strike leader who hides his true desires behind a boorish masculinity, are unforgettable creations. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was banned by British courts in 1967, a decision that was reversed the following year with the help of a number of writers and critics including Anthony Burgess and Frank Kermode.

Hubert Selby, Jr. (1928-2004) was born in Brooklyn, New York. At the age of 15, he dropped out of school and went to sea with the merchant marines. While at sea he was diagnosed with lung disease. With no other way to make a living, he decided to try writing: 'I knew the alphabet. Maybe I could be a writer.' In 1964 he completed his first book, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which has since become a cult classic. In 1966, it was the subject of an obscenity trial in the UK. His other books include *The Room*, *The Demon*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Willow Tree* and *Waiting Period*. In 2000, *Requiem for a Dream* was adapted into a film starring Jared Leto and Ellen Burstyn, and directed by Darren Aronofsky.

If you enjoyed *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, you might like Larry McMurty's *The Last Picture Show*, also available in Penguin Modern Classics.

'*Last Exit to Brooklyn* will explode like a rusty hellish bombshell over America, and still be eagerly read in 100 years'

Allen Ginsberg

'An urgent tickertape from hell'

Spectator

Last Exit to Brooklyn Details

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Author : Hubert Selby Jr. , Gilbert Sorrentino (Editor)

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From Reader Review *Last Exit to Brooklyn* for online ebook

Alex says

Hubert Selby's travelogue brings you deep into an exotic land you've never visited before. I mean, technically Sunset Park in Brooklyn is like ten minutes away on foot, but Brooklyn's come a long way in forty years and I don't know anyone like anyone in this book, which is great for me because there is an awful lot of rape going on.

And the thing is that Selby is such a terrific observer of people, and he has this wonderful sympathy for them, so he gets you inside even the most loathsome of characters - and everyone here is basically loathsome, so when I say "most" I mean **MOST** - and you understand a little of why they're like this, the loneliness and hopelessness and hurt fury inside them. It's really pretty terrific stuff, but you get the feeling he doesn't trust it, he doesn't think it's quite enough to get your attention, so after all that he's like **AND THEN EVERYBODY GOT RAPED**, like a kid kicking his brother because any attention is better than no attention. For all I know that worked; maybe this wouldn't be a cult classic if it wasn't notorious for its groundbreaking obscenity trial. I'm just saying, he's a really good writer and this book gets a little dark sometimes.

It isn't a novel, it's a collection of loosely linked short stories. *Tralala*'s story is the famous one, partly because obscenity and partly because I think the 1989 movie focused on it. But the best, and the longest, is *Strike*, about a crooked union rep for a crooked union striking against a crooked factory while looking for crooked love from crooked people. The ending makes no sense - did I mention rape? - but everything else is basically a masterpiece.

The only really weak story is *Landsend*, the final one, which is too sketchy to amount to anything and besides Selby's point is more than made by then and it starts to feel repetitive. Up 'til then, the stories actually build on each other very nicely and then everybody got raped.

Barry Pierce says

This book is an assault.

Thematically it's an assault.

Stylistically it's an assault.

Emotionally it's an assault.

So reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and enjoying it, like I very much did, could be akin to a kind of literary Stockholm syndrome.

Less a novel and more a collection of vignettes, Selby Jr.'s first major work is a dark, depressing, visceral, gruff, and scroungy account of the lives of some of the most depraved and tragic characters this side of Shakespeare. Perhaps the most famous book to be banned in the UK in the 60s, along with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. However the content of *Last Exit* makes Lawrence's novel look like *The Gruffalo*.

Written in a style that I can only describe as somewhere between Kerouac and nonsense, the book takes the reader hostage. Due to its style it is nearly impossible to skim this book, or not give it your full attention. So you are forced to read every single word in order for any of it to make sense. Which means you are forced to

witness every murder, every rape, every mutilation, and every single blowjob. In many ways it reminded me of Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, both are written using 'difficult' prose and both do their best to completely destroy the reader.

I like to think that I'm not easily shocked, that it would take something truly bleak for me to be disturbed. I mean, I'm someone who was left pretty disappointed at how tame *Salò* seems now. During *2 Girls 1 Cup* I just feel sorry for the cleaner. But there's one story in here, *Tralala*, that once I finished it, I had to say, 'well fuck me'. Bleak doesn't even begin to cover it.

Obviously this book will not be for everyone. There's literally more rapes than full stops. But it does wonderfully capture that odd time in American literature. The 60s. Post-Beats, mid-Vietnam, pre-psychedelia. A time when really anything went. And it did. And this is the result.

Megan says

Good God, this is a brutal book. The writing style's brilliant, but the stories are so vivid that the pain of the characters is visceral. It's not a novel so much as it's a series of short stories that tie together to portray the hell-hole that was 1950's Brooklyn. There was a whole obscenity case about this book when it was published in the early 1960's: the story that received the most attention for being obscene, however, was not the one I found most painful. The most infamous story was "Tralala", which is about a teenage girl who slowly destroys herself (and is destroyed by others) as she uses her body for male attention and for money. However, her character was not as sympathetic as that of Georgette in "The Queen is Dead". This is one of a few stories written in a hybrid first/third person stream of consciousness style, which makes you feel for Georgette, a young gay man and sort of transsexual. Overall, it's amazing how words on a page can break your heart, but *Last Exit to Brooklyn* definitely does.

Steven Godin says

Had I read this at the time of release in 1964 it would have seemed like being struck by a lightning bolt from hell where one was made to feel sick, disgusted and appalled by it's graphic depiction of pretty much the worst that human behaviour has to offer. Fast forward to 2015 and nothing has changed, this is a shocking, gut-wrenching read which creates a vision of hell on earth for a bunch of New Yorkers who are just about as far away from the american dream as possible. Selby Jr was a genius in my view, he really had a pair of balls to even be thinking of putting pen to paper and you truly do stand up and take notice. You want to run and hide but you can't, you want the pain to stop, but it doesn't, you want the book to end, but you don't, then you start to think, hang on a minute this guy has got a point, this is human nature whether we refuse to believe it or not, this IS real life in all it's horrible glory, and a wake up call for all those who think america is a big fat cream cake sprinkled with stardust and a cherry on top.

Fabian says

Harrowing portraits of men hating women, mothers hating children, and the truly devastating absence of love. A phenomenal work of art that's raw, revolting, & insidious. Owes a large debt to the dementedness of M d Sade, though the prose--as stark and jarring, as opaque, as a broken shard of obsidian--is just damn

Beautiful.

I can hear from my window some kind of Requiem suddenly coming on...

K.D. Absolutely says

My second Selby and I was just as amazed. My first one of him was his 1978-published book, *Requiem for a Dream* (4 stars also).

Hubert Selby, Jr. (1928-2004) wrote like no other or maybe I have not encountered those "others" yet. I have encountered Saramago's and Garcia Marquez's novels with practically no punctuation marks. Selby's had some but he substituted apostrophes with forward slashes "/". According to Wiki, Selby's reason for this was the symbol's *proximity to his typewriter, thus allowing uninterrupted typing*. Selby was a high school dropout and got seriously ill (his lung was operated due to tuberculosis) while in the Marines. Suffering from chronic pulmonary problems for the rest of his life, even without formal training, he began to write reasoning to himself that "I know the alphabet. Maybe I could be a writer."

And he did and I am not only amazed but also inspired. Who knows? I even have already attended a writing workshop. Selby did not and yet his writing was brilliant. He did not use quotations and was not concerned about grammar. *His prose was stripped down, bare and blunt*, Wiki says. For me, that's what makes his unorthodox writing simply beautiful.

This book contains the five short stories that were originally published in magazines. *The Queen is Dead* in 1958 and *Tralala* in 1961. Both stories, in fact all of the 5 stories in this book, deal with and vivid depiction of homosexuality, drug addiction, rapes, pornography and cruelty to ones' own children. This detailed shameless portrayal of post-war Brooklyn in the 50's was the reason why this book was originally banned in Great Britain and Italy in 1967.

My first impression of the book was: shocking. A homosexual being beaten by his lover. A prostitute getting gang-raped. Small toddlers being unattended because the father is a slob and the mother has to work. A closet union shop steward manages the picket in the morning and moonlights as a gay lover frequenting the gay bars at night and dreaming of killing his wife. All these disturbing characters can make a reader drop the book and move to one with positive and uplifting theme (I used to do that, so I know what I am talking about). However, Selby's prose is beautiful and has the ability to make his characters practically leap off the pages of his book. You can't help but be sympathetic to those people whose main problem really is that they are poor.

Hold on though. There is **Ada** the widow who still washes and irons the pajamas of her long-dead husband and puts them on their marital bed. The woman in the neighborhood talk at her back referring her as "that filthy Jew" and the children mock her. Selby used Ada as the only sympathetic character in this book and it worked like magic because of the contrast and irony that she provided.

One of my unforgettable reads this year.

Izzy says

I read *Last Exit to Brooklyn* a few years ago, when I actually lived in the titular city and tried to “run” a ~~regular drinking session where my friends and I discussed incest~~ book club. I chose this book for: its reputation, a trusted friend’s personal recommendation, and because Hubert Selby Jr. also wrote *Requiem for a Dream* (never read, love the movie). Though I generally have a sunny disposition, I also have a penchant for sad songs, movies about addiction, and slutty women. It is a reflection of a core that doesn’t usually see the light of day, one that stays hidden mostly due to an annoying need to be liked by the entire human race (unless you are *really* close to me, then I will abuse you much more than the people I hate).

This novel has acquired cult status level for the same reasons that a lot of other creative works have. It exploits a variety of taboo subjects: here we have sex, drugs, and a metric fuckton of violence. Gay sex, Bible quotes, alcoholism, spousal abuse...it’s all there, set to the backdrop of a long-ago Brooklyn, glorified by the relative newcomers for being more real, more authentic. These particular readers are trying to erase their own roots for their own reasons, and in the mindless appropriation of all things related to their newly adopted city, piles of thick-rimmed black glasses are left too dirty too see what this book is actually made of.

Hubert Selby, Jr. writes strangely yet evocatively, and *Last Exit* is obviously meant to represent a largely ignored (in literature published before 1964) class of human.

The New York Times Book Review says it is: “An extraordinary achievement...a vision of hell so stern it cannot be chuckled or raged aside.”

Harry T. Moore says: “The raw strength and concentrated power of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* make it one of the really great works of fiction about the underground labyrinth of our cities.”

Imagine a hundred more reviews like these. The above two were lifted directly from the book’s Amazon page, which proves that the novel is being marketed in such a way as to cement it as a “classic of postwar American writing.” To appeal to those of us attracted to sad songs, addiction, and slutty women. To appeal to those who identify with, or at least try to project an image of identifying with, the seedy underbelly of life.

The problem with this is that they are looking to explore the seedy underbelly of a city that is a seedy underbelly itself.

Synopsis (credit, Wikipedia, obviously):

Last Exit to Brooklyn is divided into six parts that can, more or less, be read separately.

-*Another Day, Another Dollar*: A gang of young Brooklyn hoodlums hang around an all-night cafe and get into a vicious fight with a group of US Army soldiers on leave.

-*The Queen Is Dead*: Georgette, a transvestite hooker, is thrown out of the family home by her brother and tries to attract the attention of a hoodlum named Vinnie at a benzedrine-driven party.

-*And Baby Makes Three*: An alcoholic father tries to keep good spirits and maintain his family’s marriage traditions after his daughter becomes pregnant and then marries a motorcycle

mechanic.

-*Tralala*: The title character of an earlier Selby short story, she is a young Brooklyn prostitute who makes a living propositioning sailors in bars and stealing their money. In perhaps the novel's most notorious scene, she is gang-raped after a night of heavy drinking.

-*Strike*: Harry, a machinist in a factory, becomes a local official in the union. A closeted homosexual, he abuses his wife and gets in fights to convince himself that he is a man. He gains a temporary status and importance during a long strike, and uses the union's money to entertain the young street punks and buy the company of drag queens.

-*Landsend*: Described as a "coda" for the book, this section presents the intertwined, yet ordinary day of numerous denizens in a housing project.

Like I said: evocative. Not to mention the author's distinct neglect of "proper" grammar and literary conventions. However, as I quickly thumbed through the pages of this surprisingly fast read, all the deep, dark, supposed "truths" of how people really lived rang so empty that I became disgusted by all the fucking *tricks* he was using. He skipped the more subtle yet infinitely more powerful inner darkness of things, to focus on dry, famously "colloquial" accounts of girls getting gang raped, girls being beaten, transvestites slogging through life on benxies, etc etc ETC.

It brought another of our "book club" selections to the forefront for comparison: Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I didn't love this book either, but for all its shallowness Capote nailed the dialogue head on. It sounded like actual people *talking*. *Last Exit's* supposed mastery of the same thing is a complete farce.

This was my original review, from 2009:

"I thought it was successful in its goals, and innovative, and very interesting structurally and it affected me profoundly. However, I couldn't get past the violence and single-mindedness of this book. In its "realistic-ness" I found no reality, if that makes sense."

I gave it 3 stars originally, but I will reduce it to 2.

I still stand by that short and sweet account, but I have finally figured out where my intense dislike for -- NAY, repulsion towards, this novel comes from.

The Brooklyn of this book is not my Brooklyn. I don't think it was the Brooklyn of its characters, or the Brooklyn of 1964. If there is one goddamn thing I have learned about life, it's that it's hard, and full of things and people that make you feel bad. There is a yin to that yang however, and sometimes the hardest shit reveals more beauty than any empty life of ease and luxury could offer. I would have found *Last Exit to Brooklyn* more believable and real if Georgette the transvestite had found some solace in her friends, if Selby Jr. had included moments of muddled joy in between the raucous, never-ending torment and hard-hitting unlikeability of the characters.

My Brooklyn was sweaty migrant workers broiling in the relentless August sun, yes, but who knows what unholy hell they escaped from? Brooklyn was and *is*: empty, drugged out eyes at parties, quick fucks in bar bathrooms, countless empty mornings robbed of endorphins – tempered by the heady highs of pursuing Dionysian fun. The terror of a walk home in Bed Stuy at 3 am folds its leaf over gently and reveals the awesome beauty of a walk in Park Slope on a glorious May afternoon.

Brooklyn is a million things; so is every other city.

Do you see my point? This book neglects the roundness of life. It cuts corners and goes for shock value instead. That's not authenticity, and those who loved this book because it was *real and authentic* should reevaluate...everything.

They say any press is good press...

A.K. says

Rare is the book that leaves me so disoriented and raw-nerved. When I finished this I sat slack-jawed for a minute letting my cigarette burn out and trying to fix my mind on something/anything. This is an excruciatingly penetrating vision of the total dregs; a narrative of self-delusion, rough trade, addiction and thanatos thanatos thanatos. Selby, Jr. never seems to slant toward exploitation or pulp and strangely enough, in spite of the godawful hopeless hate-filled suckers that populate his writing, seems to have some sort of very real and desperate heart. I didn't like the characters (you can't) but oh god did I want to stop with the beating into senselessness, I really really wanted them to claw out some bitty iota of self-awareness, life-force, something/anything. Do I sound like some dumbfuck blurb or what? Whatever. Read this.

BlackOxford says

A Society of Laws

The pomposity of the literary establishment in the 1960's was as bad as it ever has been. I can recall my encounter, as a twenty year old, with *Last Exit*. But before I bought it, I got a copy of the New York Times review. 'Another Grove Press porno piece,' or something roughly equivalent is what I remember. So I ignored the book for the next 50 years. A big mistake, only to be excused by lack of experience. As Sam Goldwyn put it: "Don't pay any attention to the critics; don't even ignore them."

The fact that the book rates on the filth scale at about the same level as a middling episode of Law & Order SVU, proves just how obsessed with limiting literary experience those who controlled the book trade really were. Narcissistic street boys, casual prostitutes, transsexuals with authentic feelings and thugs were people who couldn't be taken seriously as people. Nor did their views about what constitutes human relationships, especially the language in which those relationships are described, have any place in literary fiction.

What amazes (and frightens) me is how much nothing has changed in the last half century except for a more general awareness of the under-culture of casual violence and criminality as a way of life. There is of course nothing new in its existence except its increasing publicity. So the world looks like its gone to hell in a hand basket. And the improved visibility of this world is used to justify everything from racism to evangelical

revival; from the war on drugs to the war on immigrants. But it is bunk. Selby knew that a substantial portion, often the largest portion, of the 'civilized world' lives in uncivilized conditions. And so has it always been, even if the rather more civilized portion ignores it.

Membership in the under-culture is not a choice; it's an adaptation to reality. The most significant component of that reality is law. It is the law that creates the under-culture of addicts, street sex workers, and petty thieves who mature into not so petty thieves. St. Paul, he whose mission was overthrowing the law, had it right when he quotes the law to his own advantage, "*for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?*" But Paul had one law on his side - Roman citizenship. There is no such loophole for those of the under-culture. The law applied to and in the under-culture is essentially arbitrary oppression by the strong of the less strong. In that situation, survival means knowing your place, sticking to your assigned role, and accepting your lack of relative strength.

The under-culture is a culture of victims who accept their status and act in implicit protest with as much malice as they can get away with. Hopelessness not love is the most powerful emotional force. Love presumes hope; it doesn't create it. So the law of the under-culture is not the law of the jungle. In the jungle, there are adaptations of speed, size, coloring, and intelligence that give hope and consequently the opportunity for instinctive love. In the under-culture, hope is a lethal trait, a delusion that literally kills.

Despite its grisly content, therefore, *Last Exit* is a book created out of empathy. Selby knew his characters, and he recognized their dilemma: adapt or die. Since the under-culture doesn't change much from generation to generation, what he has to say is as important now as it was then. There are many, apparently an increasing number, who share much with Georgette, Shelby's transvestite sacrificial figure, whose "*life didnt revolve, but spun centrifugally, around stimulants, opiates, johns...*"

Evan says

HIGHEST RECOMMENDATION!

Grabbed this from my stash Saturday evening and started blazing through it, rapt! Could not put it down. Finished Sunday...

Uncompromising portrait of petty slothfulness and violence in grim Brooklyn in the 1950s. The 1989 Jennifer Jason Leigh film was fine and disturbing, but it can't capture the earnest immediacy of this book and the machine-gun style of expression of the colloquialisms and the stream of consciousness. This is masterly, it seems to have flowed off Selby's fingers the way Kerouac's "On the Road" did. No quote marks or identification of speakers, but they're not needed because it makes sense without all that. (Books this good sometimes make me question the need for punctuation, actually...)

I actually had difficulty trying to start this book in the past, but reading Joyce's "Ulysses" has raised my reading comprehension level greatly, so this thing flows like buttah. The terms "gay" and "Miss Thing" were already in use in 1957. Who knew?

This is raw and frank and vivid and emotionally harrowing. The cold amorality of the city. Selby's expression is refreshingly free; he's a genius at depicting squalor...

It's a world of coffee in styrofoam cups and queens who suck cum out of used condoms found in the park...

This could end up being a favorite. Let's see.

UPDATE:

More than halfway through now. "Strike," which takes up the entire middle third of the book, is the kind of proletarian literature one rarely encounters. A real, on-the-ground look at a brutish, closeted gay married shop steward, swaggering like a little Caesar, trying to draw attention to his pathetic self...It's rare to see labor and unions depicted so unflatteringly in American literature. It's nice for a change to see actual WORK LIFE depicted in a book. Too often we get the after-hours doings of characters and nothing more in novels, always the sex bits and never the workaday stuff that takes up most of our daily lives. Gotta respect this. Great historical value in this book as well. I'd add this along with "The Jungle" and "Christ in Concrete" to the list of best proletarian lit.

This part of the story starts with a hint of gay pedophilia and ends with an overt act of same. Not much that Selby shies from...

Also must note, "Strike" is written in somewhat more a conventional style by comparison to the preceding chapters. Omniscient narrator and punctuation, though a lot of ellipses... (like that)

Also, a must in the realm of gay/queer lit in its evocation of gay bars, drag balls, rough trade, and repressed sexuality taking the form of violence and compensatory extreme male hetero behavior.

The heroes of the book, if there can be said to be any, are the stoic, browbeaten women. Selby's portraits of women are by and large sympathetic, even in the face of the menfolk's rampant misogyny. Women also are seen as sexual beings who want orgasms as much as men. I doubt this was commonly admitted in much other lit. in 1957.

The last section of the book, "Landsend" is a concentrated portrait of a half dozen family tenants in the tenement block, alternating stories of the same characters. Heartbreaking vignettes. The old woman, Ada, probably the only truly sympathetic character in the novel. Selby's depiction of her reality is lyrical, perhaps the only real lyricism in the book. It gave me chills.

This is a classic. Definitely a new favorite.

MJ Nicholls says

A searing sift through the slurried slums of post-war Brooklyn. The only book that uses shock, violence and vulgarity to depict a world of tragic isolation that truly pierces the heart, gets you so deeply you feel you are THERE, in this boneyard of brittle bones and broken bodies, crying and fighting and fucking and SHOUTING AT YER FREAKIN KIDS TA SHUT THERE TRAPS.

Selby's editor on this book was Gilbert Sorrentino, who helped Selby refine his extraordinarily precise style, his pitch-perfect dialogue, distinctive abuse and misuse of punctuation, his staggering pacing. His essay in the collection Something Said illuminates the construction of these elegant art-bombs, unlocking the complexity and beauty in Selby's compositions.

Best Brooklyn novel, bar none.

Paul Bryant says

This novel was like a car packed with high explosives and driven into the middle of American literature and left there to explode in a fireball of nitroglycerine sentences containing jagged ugly words which could shear your mind in two. I can't believe how powerful it still is, I read it years ago and it seared my thoughts and turned me inside out, and it practically did the same again even though a lot of cruelty and evil violence and scenes of underclass horror have flowed from other writers of other fictions since 1964

1964, year of the cheeky moptops singing I want to hold your hand and the year of Last Exit to Brooklyn in which we meet teenage hooker Tralala.

Two years later it was published in Britain and immediately prosecuted for obscenity and found guilty and withdrawn. Then it was cleared on appeal. When I look at the title page of my hardback copy I find it's the first 1966 British edition, the one that was busted. (Hey – I'm rich! No, it hasn't got a dust jacket, so it's probably still worth the two quid I paid for it instead of the £100 I'd get with the dust jacket. What a crazy world. But I'm not selling anyway.)

This is a great novel but its greatness is difficult. The difficulty does not lie in its famous non-punctuation (I nearly went into shock when I spotted an apostrophe in the word "we're" on page 57 – it was such an obvious misprint) and busted up Brooklynese syntax:

Goldie lit a few candles and told her Sheila was turning a trick so they had come down here and Im sure you don't mind honey, handing her some bennie, and told Rosie to make coffee. Rosie lit the small kerosene stove in the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. . When it was ready she passed out paper cups of coffee then went back to the kitchen and made another pot, continuing to make pot after pot of coffee, coming in inbetween to sit at goldies feet. The guys slowly snapped out of their tea goof and soon the bennie got to their tongues too and everybody yakked.

This is not difficult. The prose flows hypnotically from almost boring and then and then and then narrative to dialogue to interior monologue and back again without any breaks. The minutely described incidents trundle along and without warning violence erupts and the violence is then described in the same slightly stoned unemotional way. Selby makes no judgements, he's just on a mission to tell you about this stuff he knows and he knows you don't know. So this book's difficulty comes from the constant depiction of degeneration, the unredeemed bleakness and horribleness of Selby's truthtelling, that all the characters are relentlessly graceless, nasty, violent, or nervewrackingly stupid, and that their lives both internal and external are revealed pitilessly to our flinching ears, that the men appear to hate the women, that the couples all have babies and children who they find unbearable, that there's never any money which causes most of the bitterness, that there's never any love.

And here's the other difficulty. The two longest and greatest of the intertwined stories are the Queen is Dead and Strike. Both depict gay men and both I think enshrine the worst possible images of gay men.

That night Harry went to the dragball. Hundreds of fairies were there dressed as women, some having rented expensive gowns, jewelry and fur wraps. They pranced about the huge ballroom calling to each other, hugging each other, admiring each other, sneering disdainfully as a hated queen passed. O just look at the rags she's wearing. She looks like a bowery whore. Well, lets face it, its not the clothes. She would look

simply ugly in a Dior original, and they would stare contemptuously and continue prancing.

In Strike Selby gives us a guy who finds out he's gay and goes through a horrible personal meltdown during which he performs a sex attack on a ten year old boy.

So Selby has prancing fairies in drag and he has a gay man attacking a child. Underneath its avant style, Last Exit is about as politically incorrect as its possible to be. You really can't say that, Hubert.

Of course there was a tradition in literature of dragging the people of the abyss into the light of day - Zola and Dostoyevsky in Europe, Jack London and Sinclair Lewis in the USA. But Selby makes those guys look like mealymouthed tergiversators, which they really weren't. Selby's amplifier goes to 11, not ten like everyone else's. His book is a white hot shriek of pain. It's awful.

Last Exit's influence has been massive. Andy Warhol's early films and Lou Reed's Velvet Underground songs start here (Sister Ray is like a scene from Strike), likewise his "New York" album. Madame George by Van Morrison likewise. Last Exit also bequeathed Trainspotting to us (and fortunately Irvine Welsh was able to suffuse great humour and pity into his tales of junkie scumbags.)

It's five stars from me, but I don't know if I'd honestly recommend it to anyone.

Guille says

Creo que no había leído un libro que me estuviera provocando tanto asco y rechazo como lo estaba haciendo este de Hurbert Selby Jr. Y yo, que soy profundamente rencoroso, pensé en imponerle un castigo ejemplar, darle donde más dolía: le otorgaría una vengativa y solitaria estrella.

✱

Y sin embargo, uuuf, era incapaz de dejar de leer. Ahí estaba yo, pegado a sus páginas a pesar de la incomodidad que me suponía no poder saber si únicamente estaba hechizado por lo abyecto de la narración o si algo tenía que ver en ello “la maestría literaria” del autor. Era incapaz de desligar una cosa de otra o quizás demasiado cobarde para intentarlo. Quizás no quería indagar en las causas de por qué la lectura me estaba afectando de la manera en la que lo estaba haciendo, quizás sentía que eso tan horrible y monstruoso a lo que me estaba enfrentando también vivía en mí. Me estaba ablandando y, como suelo intentar ser tan justo como rencoroso soy, pensé que concederle solo dos estrellas seguía siendo un castigo apropiado.

✱ ✱

Pero empecemos por el principio. Con esta cita se abre la primera de las 6 partes en las que se divide el libro:

“Porque el hombre y la bestia tienen la misma suerte: muere el uno como la otra, y ambos tienen el mismo aliento de vida. En nada aventaja el hombre a la bestia, pues todo es vanidad.” (Eclesiastés, 3, 19)

La cita, aunque se entiende su sentido, no es ajustadamente fiel a lo contado en la novela.

La especie humana comparte con otras especies animales muchos de los instintos que nos mueven a actuar. Aquí se muestra, o mejor dicho, se exhibe con una escalofriante dureza a hombres y mujeres que son incapaces de dominar esos impulsos. Pero lo que leemos en este libro y lo que no tiene parangón en el reino animal es la crueldad, la depravación y el más absoluto de los desprecios por la dignidad humana, incluso por la propia, de la que hacen alarde muchos de los personajes.

Había que reconocer que la novela estaba logrando conmigo con una eficacia máxima aquello que el propio autor confesó perseguir: *“No quiero que leas una historia, quiero que la experimentes. No quiero contarte una historia, quiero llevarte a una experiencia emocional.”* Y ya empezaba a estar bastante seguro de que algo tenía que ver la forma en la que estaban relatadas esas depravaciones y crueldades. Una forma nada ortodoxa, que en su día fue objeto de desprecio por los académicos pero que yo ya había disfrutado en otros autores como James Kelman, un escritor que comparte con Selby ética y estética y que recibió el mismo desprecio de la crítica. Se había ganado una estrella más.

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Pero aun así, la novela me seguía pareciendo gratuitamente escandalosa, una objeción que ya había tenido con otra de sus obras, *“La habitación”*. Imposible leer Tralala y no quedar horrorizado y sobrecogido, pero también indignado por la, pensaba, innecesaria degradación y violencia a la que era sometida su protagonista. Y en esas estábamos cuando, casualidades de la vida, leo en la prensa una noticia sobre una reciente sentencia de cuatro años, sí, solo cuatro años, a tres individuos que en 2008, sí, en 2008, se turnaron para violar a una chica de 18 años en un coche en el aparcamiento de la discoteca en la que la acababan de conocer. La víctima, bastante perjudicada por el alcohol, fue introducida en el asiento trasero del coche, desnudada y sucesivamente penetrada vaginalmente hasta la eyaculación sin el uso de preservativos. Según declaraciones de testigos, mientras uno de ellos la violaba, sus amigos le jaleaban e invitaban entre risas a otros jóvenes a sumarse a la acción: *“Entrad, que hay barra libre”, “venga, que no se entera de nada”*. Y Cuatro años... como cuatro estrellas.

* * * *

Mis reticencias se habían ido deritiendo una tras otra, y aunque solo fuera por aquellas palabras de Kafka acerca de los libros que muerden y pinchan, aunque solo fuera porque había conseguido en mí una de las funciones más importantes de la literatura que, en opinión de Vargas Llosa, es *“recordar a los hombres que, por más firme que parezca el suelo que pisan y por más radiante que luzca la ciudad que habitan, hay demonios escondidos por todas partes que pueden, en cualquier momento, provocar un cataclismo”*, aunque solo fuera por la belleza sórdida de ese relato maravilloso que es *“La reina ha muerto”*... ¡¡qué coño, ahí van las cinco estrellas!!

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Chris says

I can picture this book being read in college literature classes. I am sure that it deserves its place in modern American Literature and I am also sure that this book and Selby have their fans. I won't dispute his genius. My rating is not based on the "merit" of the book, but on whether I liked it and the truth is that I found this

book to be repulsive and nauseating. I think that I was expecting it to be sort of like Kennedy's Iron Weed (which I liked) but much darker but Last Exit isn't dark---it is more like wallowing in a sewer and I kept reading only by hoping to see what Selby was trying to say to the reader. I kept looking for insight into the human condition. I must confess that in the end I just didn't see the point. I found the loosely related stories that make up this "novel" to be repetitive. Follow a repellent and completely repulsive character around, watch them victimize people, and then watch them subjected to extreme violence at the hands of other equally repellent and repulsive characters. As much as I hated reading this book one thought never left my mind. I felt sorry for Selby. He must have lived with a terrible darkness inside him to have written this book. The scary thing is that as bad as this book is, his novel The Room is supposed to be much darker. Looking at the reviews I see one person stating that they felt like burning their copy---and they LIKED the book! That's a common thread. Even the people that give his books 5 stars didn't enjoy reading them.

Fede says

What follows was the first version of this review:

" Due to very personal reasons, I can't review this book. Sorry, I just can't.
Due to the same very personal reasons, it gets five stars. "

Then I took a deep breath and thought that sooner or later someone else will inadvertently come across this book and feel the same, there's a lot of people out there who will decide to give it a go out of sheer curiosity. They will feel the same sensation of being punched, not in the stomach - oh, no. It goes deeper, so much deeper than that. Each one will feel punched and kicked where it hurts the most... where no one else can see. Too deep inside for the wounds to be cured, wounds that have always been there, waiting to be opened again. That's why I decided to talk about "Last Exit to Brooklyn": to warn against it. Only those who see life through pink spectacles should read it. Only those who have never experienced the deepest sense of self-contempt should read it. Those who have no idea of what real life is or can be. All the others should carefully avoid it, or get ready to have their heart beaten to a pulp.

Six stories, told in a rough language and deliberately bad grammar, each of them introduced by a biblical quote; recurring places (seedy bars and streets of Brooklyn in the late 50s/early 60s), names, characters - all of them perfectly recognisable although playing slightly different roles in each story.

Stories of urban decay reflecting the spiritual filth of the dwellers, tales of physical ugliness and moral monstrosity.

In Part One we witness the nightly routine of some hoodlums starting a street brawl and beating almost to death a military. Then they get back to their bar, wash their hands, laugh and joke and drink as though nothing had happened. Teddy Boys with Italian-sounding names playing "A Clockwork Orange" and listening to jazz tunes.

Part Two is the portrait of a desperate underworld of homosexuality, prostitution, addiction. Georgette, a transvestite and benzedrine addict, is in love with a boorish no-good who exploits her (his) need of affection and sexual promiscuity. It's basically the account of a sex & drug party that will inspire, almost thirty years later, Irvine Welsh (the Scottish author of "Trainspotting" owes a lot to this book).

Then, a short interlude, Part Three, in which a nice suburban couple - an alcoholic father, a vaguely neurotic mother - must face the unexpected pre-marriage pregnancy of their daughter. Youths already destroyed by alcohol, lethargy, indifference gather to 'celebrate' the marriage and the hasty christening of the not-so-welcome child.

Part Four is the most heartrending story I have ever come across. I had to put down the book while reading it, because the physical need to wash my hands and face was just overwhelming.

It's the story of a teenage hooker who sets off on a descent to hell, a downward spiral of frightful degradation that will lead her to a disgusting, horrible end (?). The last scene, a gang-bang which is actually a gang-rape, made me throw up and cry simultaneously. It really did. Since I'm not exactly a novice in outrageous literature, this says everything.

Then, Part Five. Another heavy blow, another gut-wrenching finale.

Harry is a unionist, in charge of a strike that becomes too lucrative for both the union and the company to be called off... especially for Harry, who is free to spend the union's funds in alcohol and fun. Desperately hungry for friendship, respect, attention, he accidentally meets a transvestite who introduces him to her friends and fellow male prostitutes; Harry, who has a reputation for being tough and virile, lets his latent homosexuality burst out uncontrollably. He falls in love with a young 'queen', but the romance is over as soon as the strike is called off and the easy money dries up. Drunk and mad with sorrow, he tries to have sex with a little boy; he's almost slaughtered by his drinking friends.

Part Six is a 'Coda': a choral scene of domestic violence, physical and psychological abuse, filthy apartment blocks, loneliness, lack of love, lack of feelings, lack of humanity. It's a perfectly fitting conclusion as well as a framework, a 'dissolve' as well as an intro. It's the table of contents of the whole book.

After reading this, one feels unbearably disgusted, hurt, uncomfortable. That's a good thing, because it means you can tell yourself: I'm not like that. Oh Christ, I'm not like that - I'm still a human being. So, after the shock comes the relief.

On the other side, there can be another kind of reaction to this book; the one that comes from reading words that for whatever reason sound familiar, words that ring a bell, words that tear your skin and flesh and guts apart. There's no relief in this case, only an emotional hemorrhage.

If you're lucky, you'll find yourself among those experiencing the most cathartic liberation.

If you're not, well this book will stay with you longer than you would like.
