



# BRIT WIT

WE ARE ALL BEING URGED TO RETURN TO FUNDAMENTALS, JOANNA HUGHES THINKS THAT SHOULD INCLUDE HUMOUR

**OF** late, I have been contemplating why it is the French, with all their superior artistic and culinary achievements, are not funny. France had to import Jerry Lewis from the US to be their comic-in-residence, which leaves even Americans puzzled.

Britain, on the other hand, perhaps because it lacks an exaggerated sense of amour-propre, has produced everything from *The Goon Show* (you had to be there) to *Monty Python* (we are still there). Television aside, the best of British humour – and that is saying a lot – is in its literature.

Evelyn Waugh, the progenitor of the late, unlamented (at least by me) Auberon Waugh, is nowadays most often associated with *Brideshead Revisited*, which is a mistake. Martin Amis found that the snobbery of *Brideshead* was “a failure of imagination, an artistic failure.” Why read *Brideshead* with its tedious and precious web of thwarted desires when one could read the wickedly funny *Vile Bodies*?

Critics are trying to rehabilitate *Black Mischief* (1932), which has in this era of political correctness when Singaporean bus drivers are “service leaders” (then who, pray, is driving the f\*\*king bus?) been consigned to the “naughty dead white men colonialist imperialist racist” section of bookstores. However, the story of Seth, Emperor of Azania and Bachelor of the Arts of Oxford University and his struggle to drag his fictional island realm into something like the 20th century, resonates today when countries like Zimbabwe have inflation rates (at press time) of something like 16 billion per cent, and where polio inoculations are seen as a plot by whites to sterilise African women. Of course one could – and perhaps should – begin with *Decline and Fall*, or *Vile Bodies*, or *Scoop*; there are lovely new editions of all of these. Just remember that under the satire and bite, there is not just one of the last century’s great masters of prose in English, but a man who deeply believed in something besides the moment, which is the basis from which all good satire comes.

I am now on my third copy of *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) by E M Delafield, who has not had much luck with cover art. Do not let the latest rose chintz design fool you; this book is a little gem of self-deprecating humour. Our Lady lives in Devon, in a rambling house with dodgy plumbing (“He says The Ram has stopped. (This to me sounds biblical.)” and servant problems. Daily she struggles with financial difficulties. When pawning her great aunt’s diamond ring for the umpteenth time, the pawnbroker asks: “And what name shall it be this time, Madam?”, the vicissitudes of village life and the insufferable Lady Boxe, for whom her husband works as estate agent.

Delafield herself has many local connections; her step-father, Sir Hugh Clifford GCMG was at one time governor of the Malay States. Her husband, Colonel Paul Dashwood OBE built the massive docks in Hong Kong harbour; after their marriage in 1919, she spent two years with him in the then Malay States, including time here in Singapore.

Samuel Pepys has undergone a bit of a revival in the last 10 years or so; no doubt George and Weedon Grossmith had him in mind when writing *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892). “Why should I not publish my diary?” asserts Charles Pooter. “... I fail to see – because I do not happen to be a ‘Somebody’ – why my diary should not be interesting.” Pooter is a clerk in London, slowing inching his way up the social ladder and trying on new ways of thinking and acting. (“He leaned back in his chair and said: ‘You must take me as I am’; and I replied: ‘Yes – and you must take us as we are. We’re homely people, we are not swells.’ He answered: ‘No, I can see that.’”) A holiday in Broadstairs, an invitation to a ball, a troublesome son who drops his pedestrian Christian name William for the classier-sounding Lupin: all are portrayed with a certain gentleness that underlies the send-up of suburban life. ■