ANDREW TATE

Nick Hornby's Melancholy Comedy

[M]elancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness. (Critchley 2002, 111)

Four strangers, each depressed enough to seek a swift, violent end to their lives, fortuitously meet on New Year's eve on the roof of a north London tower block callously nicknamed Toppers' House, a dwelling notorious for its high-rise suicides. This collision of disparate (and desperate) individuals, united only by their shared desire to die, might be either the starting point of a very sick joke or the culmination of poignant melodrama. Yet Nick Hornby's A Long Way Down (2005a) does not quite belong to the capacious family of genres labeled "tragic" nor is it a taboo-transgressing satire about the contingencies of precarious mental health. Hornby's fourth novel is a story of loss, anomie, isolation, loneliness, disappointment, failure, and disastrous ethical choices – all signifiers of tragedy, to be sure – but it is also, despite the bleak subject matter, full of laughter, diffident wit, chronic non-self-awareness, farce, incongruous friendships, ill-advised holidays with virtual strangers, awkward family reunions, creative swearing and other tropes of comic fiction.

Martin, a shamed former breakfast television presenter, and the only member of this unlikely quartet of thwarted suicidal narrators to be recognized by his new acquaintances, reflects on the odd (at least temporarily) salvific outcome of that evening: "I'm not sitting here now because I suddenly saw sense. [...] That night turned into as much of a mess as everything else. I couldn't even jump off a fucking tower block without fucking it up" (Hornby 2005a, 11). The three others that he meets have very different reasons for despairing: Maureen has lived as a single-parent for twenty years to a son, Matty, who is so severely disabled he is unable to respond to her; teenage Jess is angry and confused about almost everything; JJ, a struggling musician, has lost his sense of purpose and self-worth. All of these protagonists are privately ashamed of their motivation, though Martin, who has recently served a prison sentence for sleeping with a fifteen-year old girl, in his pursuit of a swift end to a life that he has wrecked, is initially the most single-minded member of the new desolate fraternity.

The non-event of the New Year's eve suicide – a relief to readers but not a source of immediate, life-affirming joy to Hornby's characters – is transformed by a pact not to die, at least not deliberately and not before 14 February, Valentine's Day, the next significant calendar date of compulsory happiness. Martin is grimly funny about his despairing state of mind and, foreshadowing a major theme of Hornby's novel, he also dismisses the cultural expectation that sorrow results in the sufferer's moral improvement characterized by deeper wisdom and the discovery of new reserves of compassion. Indeed, the novel as a whole simultaneously resists and is tempted by traditional comic "happy" resolutions. One does not need to be an aficionado of black comedy to find the luckless protagonists' initial meeting, a kind of literal anti-catastrophe in which nobody falls, funny as well as sad. To laugh even when faced with the joyfully absurd outcome of such a distressing situation is, unsurprisingly, deeply uncomfortable but it is also a reminder that many strands of comedy are informed by loss and hurt as vivid and inescapable as that experienced by characters in more austere narratives.
In his study of "laughter and the novel," The Irresponsible Self (2004), James Wood makes a consciously imprecise distinction between two principal comic styles in fiction: the first he describes as "tragi-comic stoicism which might best be called the comedy of forgiveness"; the second is "the comedy of correction." This latter form is "a way of laughing at; the former a way of laughing with" (Wood 2005, 4). Both comic modes, however, involve a painful transformation of perspective. Comedy and suffering, as Eric Bentley argues in The Life of the Drama (1964), are not entirely separate phenomena. Tragedy, he concedes, citing Philip Sidney, "openeth the greatest wounds" and may be a more legible way of encountering grief but the comic mode frequently depends on pain, both physical and emotional. Slapstick, farce and social comedy all rely on humiliation. "The plain man," claims Bentley, "goes wrong only if he assumes that comedy has nothing to do with pain at all" (Bentley 1992, 138).1 And Bentley's description of the stage comedies of Shakespeare and Molière as "sweetly melancholy, and at moments overwhelmingly sad," might also be an apt description of many of Hornby's novels (137).

Can Hornby's characteristic narrative form – described by Dominic Head as "serio-comic" (2008, 18) – represent such grave subject matter as attempted suicide without trivializing it? This article explores the style and structure of Hornby's melancholic comedies. It places A Long Way Down in the wider context of his writing, with particular reference to High Fidelity (1995), About a Boy (1998), How to Be Good (2001), Juliet, Naked (2010) and Funny Girl (2014). The article argues that Hornby's fiction belongs to the tradition Wood names "the comedy of forgiveness" (2005, 4).2 The article will address the ways in which Hornby's realist mode engages with ideas of human agency, the capacity for change at a personal and shared level. Is Hornby's comedy cruel? Does it rely on the ritual humiliation of its characters? The article will draw on theorists of humour including Simon Critchley and Peter Berger and argue that melancholia, depression and different kinds of sadness run through Hornby's comic fictions of the contemporary self.

1. After "Ladlit:" Genre, Gender and Criticism

Hornby is frequently read as a social realist whose bestselling novels and memoir reflect rather than refract popular debates regarding gender, class and social belonging. McCombe, for example, locates Hornby's fiction "squarely within the tradition of Dickensian comic realism" and argues that the writer's typical "hero eventually reconciles his own values with those of the larger community in which he lives" (2014, 166). This is the classic move towards conformity or social integration of the Bildungsroman. Later work, including Hornby's only novel written primarily for a 'young adult' readership, Slam (2007), and the apocalyptically-inclined short story "Otherwise Pandemonium" (2005), draw on the magical realist tropes of time-travel and enchanted technologies. Such experiments with genre quietly subvert aspects of the traditional rites-of-passage plot; the comic-visionary elements of both of these contemporary fables, narrated by teenage boys, undermine the idea of a

1 Bel Mooney cites a different passage from Bentley's The Life of the Drama in her defence of A Long Way Down (2006).
2 Hornby is not, I should stress, one of the subjects of Wood's study. Indeed, in his review of DBC Pierre's Vernon God Little, Wood made an acerbic comparison between Hornby's How to be Good and J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello in a withering reference to the opinion of John Carey, former Oxford Professor, sometime Booker Prize judge, and noted hight-culture sceptic. Carey had indicated his enthusiasm for Hornby's novel as an example of a book worthy of the literary award (Wood 2003, 25).
happily achievable future, a time of stability that will reward the hero after years of uncertainty and struggle.

The critical reception of Hornby's writing, based primarily on his thematically-connected first two books, *Fever Pitch* (1992) and *High Fidelity*, has focused on his ambivalent, witty representation of contemporary masculinity (Bentley 2008; Falk 2007; Keskinen 2005). Head, for example, describes him as the originator of a peculiarly 1990s phenomenon and the male counterpart of Helen Fielding whose *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) shares both Hornby's confessional style and emphasis on "the tribulations of urban twenty- and thirty-somethings faced with changing heterosexual mores and the pursuit of a desired lifestyle" (2002, 248). The most marketable examples of "Ladlit" and "Chick Lit" – the latter tag, in particular, popularized in the British press, is so sexist it seems bizarre that the soubriquet was ever used without irony or anger by literary critics – typically focus on the misadventures of straight, middle-class "post-youth" men and women, faced with romantic and professional disappointment, finding, for the most part, traditionally happy, romantic resolutions.

Head suggests that both Fielding's and Hornby's bestsellers "reveal something more interesting about the social function of the novel than the generic straightjacket was soon to allow" (2002, 248-49). However, even this acknowledgement of nuance and aesthetic value is indicative of a certain critical condescension towards popular fiction in general and comic-romantic narratives in particular. Indeed, in a later study of the "state of the novel," Head uses Hornby as an example of a writer who occupies a difficult middle position between popular and literary-critical success. For Head, Hornby "is one of those writers who seems to flirt with seriousness" but "as a popular comic author he clearly does not belong to the elite group of contemporary novelists" (2008, 13-14).

Why do the adjectives "comic" and "popular" make it clear that a writer may not belong to an elite rank of contemporary authors? Head restates the views of critics such as Sean O'Brien who were sceptical about Hornby's endeavours in *A Long Way Down* "to graft a philosophical treatment of misery on to his familiar comic style;" according to this view, a comic writer's struggle with solemnity "exposed the limitations of his method, the seriousness undermined by formulaic devices and tics" (Head 2008, 18, 16; O'Brien 2005, 20; see also Mars-Jones 2005). One reviewer of *A Long Way Down* notes that he feels defensive of the writer because "there's an insinuation in even the positive reviews that Hornby's work is, at best, a guilty pleasure;" he wishes to "make a case for Hornby as a serious writer, producing serious literature – it's just a shame I have to feel so furtive about it" (Coake 2005, 17). Hornby, Head notes, has located himself on one side of the hypothetical divide in making the claim that he could not write literary fiction (Hornby 2006, 28, qtd. in Head 2008, 13). The critic does not mention, however, that this disavowal of literary fiction appears as a glib aside in an entry in Hornby's collection on his (mis)adventures in reading, *The Complete Polysyllabic Spree*, in which a passage in Paula Fox's *Desperate Creatures*
(1970) causes him to realize "with some regret that not only could I never write a literary novel, but I couldn't even be a character in a literary novel" (2006, 28). This kind of self-deprecation might say something about Hornby's relationship with high culture but more revealing still is the difficulty that critics have in taking fiction that is popular and comic seriously.

The terrain of literary lad culture is the subject of an influential article by Elaine Showalter who argues that the genre was not, in fact, a new phenomenon but, by the time of the millennium, one that was on the brink of extinction. "Ladlit," argues Showalter, thrived, in multiple fashionable and "high end" iterations, from Kingsley Amis' 1950s comedy to the era of his son Martin and, more widely, of "developmentally arrested good of' boys of 1990s popular culture" (2002, 60). For Showalter, the latter days of the genre were eclectic enough to embrace "the addicts and petty criminals" of Irvine Welsh's ecstatically soiled iteration of magical realism, "the postmodern urban picaresques of Martin Amis, Will Self and Hanif Kureishi" alongside "the underemployed thirtysomething heroes of Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons" (61). Hornby is frequently – if unfairly – placed side-by-side with writers such as Parsons as well as Tim Lott, John O'Farrell, David Baddiel and, in the words of Joseph Brooker, "a congeries of former stand-up comics" (2006, 7). Martin Amis' Money: a Suicide Note (1984), with its grotesque but, for Showalter at least, "intensely likable" narrator, John Self, is sometimes read as the unholy scripture that accidentally invented a subgenre of men-in-crisis narratives. Brooker, in an echo of blokeish antagonism, suggests that as stylists none of the authors who feature in Showalter's list "are fit to light Amis' cigarettes" (6). One of the differences that Showalter identifies between the 1990s generation of "male coming-of-age" storytellers is that they were "no longer able to blame" outside forces – class or their father, for example – for personal struggles. Narrators like Rob in High Fidelity, she suggests, recognize that "their problems are their own fault" and they are "the most introspective of all the lads, constantly self-monitoring and monologic" (2002, 73).

The bestseller status of many of these writers might, as Peter Childs has suggested, be a result of their appeal to "a readership that had found little reflection of itself in fiction before 1990" (2012, 255). This may well cause other readers, surprised to be told that middle-class white men have been under-represented in popular narrative, to raise an eyebrow. Hornby's early books bear superficial comparison with some of the popular titles that followed his success: for example, John O'Farrell's memoir of his love-hate relationship with the Labour Party, Things Can Only Get Better (1998), echoes the self-deprecating wit and rite-of-passage structure of Fever Pitch; and Tony Parsons' Man and Boy (1999), like High Fidelity, is about a no-longer-very-young man facing up to responsibility, uncertain about how to belong in the modern world. However, reading Hornby's near 25-year career as a whole, another contemporary novelist might more fittingly be regarded as his true peer: Roddy Doyle. Like Hornby, Doyle has written fiction, screenplays and creative non-fiction and has a comparable aptitude for melancholic comedy and the rhythms of everyday speech; he has also contributed to two collections edited by Hornby, My Favourite Year (1993) and Speaking With the Angel (2000).

Doyle's Barrytown quartet, set in a fictional, working class area of North Dublin – The Commitments (1987), The Snapper (1990), The Van (1991) and The Cuts (2013) – connect a fascination with community, character and popular culture also visible in Hornby's novels of middle-class north London. The sequence is a comic iteration of the family saga and, though the novels are full of wry wit they are also frequently
permeated with a sense of sadness about the reality of love, family loyalties and friendship as it plays out over time, particularly in the life of Jimmy Rabbitte Jr, an entrepreneurial, loudmouth teenager in the first novel and a 47-year-old family man awakening to the rude fact of his mortality in *The Guts*.

Hornby is both celebrated and disparaged for the way in which he weaves together pop culture and men who define themselves by their obsessions with football, music and television. Mikko Keskinnen, for example, observes that *High Fidelity* "epitomizes the British author's oeuvre, which is populated by male monomaniacs, perennial bachelors, or early-middle-aged adolescents" (2005, 3). In Keskinnen's view "the football enthusiast in *Fever Pitch*, the commitment-avoiding womanizer in *About a Boy*, and the seemingly saintly men in *How to be Good* can be read as versions of Rob Fleming, the protagonist and narrator of *High Fidelity*" (2005, 3). *High Fidelity* certainly anticipates a twenty-year focus on masculine embarrassment and personal failings. However, Hornby's fiction after *About a Boy* has shifted from singular masculine perspectives to something more diverse in narrative terms: *How to be Good* is narrated by Katie Carr, a GP on the verge of leaving her husband ("The Angriest Man in Holloway," [Hornby 2001, 4]); *A Long Way Down* has multiple narrators – two women, two men – rather than just a middle-aged man in crisis. His more recent fiction shifts to third person narration: *Juliet, Naked* shares the pop culture territory of *High Fidelity* but focuses on a woman whose long-term relationship with her selfish partner is coming to an end; *Funny Girl* is focalized via a young, working-class northern woman, a gay man and his (possibly) bi-sexual writing partner.

*High Fidelity* created a kind of comic chiaroscuro style that many of his subsequent novels have followed, focusing on genial (if sometimes secretly melancholy) characters in moments of loss or grief. As the novel opens, its narrator, Rob Fleming, has been ditched by Laura, his long-term partner, a successful lawyer. Rob runs Championship Vinyl, a specialist music shop, the kind of place that was able to exist, once upon a time, in an era before internet shopping, "because of the people who make a special effort – young men, always young men, with John Lennon specs and carrier bags [...] young men who seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time looking for deleted Smiths singles" (Hornby 1996, 38). Rob Fleming is more confident and self-aware than Dick and Barry, his colleagues and fellow vinyl enthusiasts; in many ways they are conventional comic sidekicks (Dick is shy and tongue-tied; Barry assertive and continually rude to customers). However, Rob is not Hornby's mouthpiece for enlightened contemporary masculinity. Indeed, for Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene, Rob and his colleagues "seem like tragic casualties of a not-yet-quite-post-patriarchal age" whose competitive best-ever-band-and-song list-making compensates for personal failures (2003, 13). These are bewildered men – confident about the minutiae of pop culture but emotionally inarticulate – who frequently "relapse into anachronistic and blatantly inadequate behavior" (Lea and Schoene 2003, 13).

Rob's laconic reflection on obsessive collectors ("as close to being mad as makes no difference" [1996, 39]) is ironized by his own compulsive nature; he lists records and romantic catastrophes with corresponding intensity. The most significant of these bruising losses he describes in terms of cinematic narrative and consumption: "I lost the plot for a while then. And I lost the subplot, the script, the soundtrack, the intermission, my popcorn, the credits and the exit sign" (Hornby 1996, 25). Rob is the first of a number of Hornby's protagonists to see the world through a pop cultural haze. In *A Long Way Down*, Maureen describes the rapid rhythm of her three new friends as "[l]ike people in a soap opera, bang bang bang" (38). This perspective on her garru-
lous cohort shaped by the grammar of television drama is rather different from the kinds of social isolation that many of Hornby's other characters achieve via the media. For example, Will Freeman in About a Boy is able to escape ordinary commitments – work, love, the messy awkwardness of long-term friendship – because he lives on the royalties of a bestselling Christmas song that his father wrote more than 50 years earlier. "Santa's Super Sleigh" is an expedient narrative conceit that allows Will's comically extreme selfishness to thrive but it also implies an undercurrent of pathos about the commercial exploitation of creativity. Pop music, in particular, recurs in Hornby's writing as a powerful mode of expression and shared memory; a great piece of pop, as the essays in Hornby's 31 Songs (2003) suggest, can crystallize a moment and exceed its status as an ephemeral, cheap form of culture. In About a Boy, the festive favourite might be a link between the tragically immature Will and his father but, instead, the unearned wealth that it brings is represented as a source of rather dreary corruption. A comic counterpoint to this cynical use of pop music is the communal singing of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" by Will's teenage friend, Marcus, and his bohemian mother, Fiona. Hornby intensifies the comedy of discomfort in relation to such public expression of emotion: Will is deeply embarrassed by the "sincerity" of their singing – with eyes closed – in part because it reminds him of his lack of engagement with the world (Hornby 1998, 97-98).

In Juliet, Naked, Duncan, who is neither as affluent nor as self-assured as Will, is similarly dependent on music as a kind of displacement; Duncan's romantic life is circumscribed by his obsessive, quasi-academic focus on Tucker Crowe, an American singer-songwriter whose cult status is perpetuated by his mysterious withdrawal from public life.

The novel begins, comically enough, with an English man in a toilet: Duncan and his preternaturally patient lover, Annie, are on a road trip of the United States but instead of visiting the Empire State Building, Disneyland or the Grand Canyon, they are on a "Tucker Crowe pilgrimage" (Hornby 2009, 5). This "dank, dark, smelly and entirely unremarkable" toilet in an unprepossessing Minneapolis club has aura for Hornby's infatuated protagonist only because it was the last place Tucker visited before abruptly cancelling his last ever tour and shunning life as a musician. This mildly scatological opening – a kind of mischievous homage to English toilet humour – parodies overzealous enthusiasm for creativity that is a mirror-image of Will Freeman's dread of authenticity. Indeed, Duncan might have been one of the fanatical young men who spent too much of their time in Championship Vinyl, looked at with a mixture of empathy and scorn by Rob and his colleagues. Juliet, Naked features a tragi-comic twist; Annie, disappointed and eventually betrayed by Duncan, following a series of social-media-governed connections, ends up in a relationship with a revitalized Tucker. It is not entirely clear whether Duncan is, finally, more jealous of his former partner or of the enigmatic musician.

Popular narrative as a kind of alternative for conventional forms of intimacy is a trope that persists in Hornby's recent fiction. In Funny Girl, for example, an affectionate but unsentimental revisiting of 1960s British television comedy, Tony and Bill, who later become a kind of Lennon and McCartney of sitcom scriptwriting, are initially bound by a shared secret, something that they "may or may not have in common" (Hornby 2014, 53) and which they never discuss. In December 1959, during the final days of their National Service, Tony and Bill meet in a holding cell of a police station in Aldershot. They have been arrested, two hours apart, in a gentlemen's public lavatory at a time when gay men were criminalized. They are not prosecuted but forge
their friendship during the boredom of their brief incarceration. They bond over their "mutual passion" for Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, the writers of Hancock’s Half Hour. Instead of sharing their hopes and fears, they repeat, near word-perfect, scenes from the famous "Blood Donor" episode of the series. In a moment when two men are faced with "humiliation and possible ruin," Hornby’s characters find a way of addressing their situation obliquely by finding solace and connection in the words written for a famously melancholic comedian (52). Their lifelong friendship frequently involves evasion and social disconnection – Tony marries and leads a suburban, conventional lifestyle; Bill rejects conformity and embraces his sexuality – but they are always able to talk, and to argue, about comedy and the mechanics of getting a laugh. The conventions of comedy give Bill and Tony a vocabulary for speaking about all those things that they – and, indeed the stars and producer of their show – otherwise cannot articulate. The four series of "Barbara (and Jim)" that the pair write in the mid-1960s, watched by millions, tackle differences of class, politics, sexual confidence and, eventually, marital breakup. This might be an oblique comment on Hornby’s wider fictional world: melancholy comedy is a way of looking at the world that makes sadness comprehensible, both to ourselves and to others.

2. "We’d formed a nation:" Melancholy versus Superiority

The sad situation in which the four narrators of A Long Way Down find themselves at the beginning of the novel is swiftly enmeshed in a bathetic humour. Martin and Maureen are the first characters to meet, the latter stumbling upon the recently disgraced television presenter; attempting to diffuse tension, Martin, formerly famous for his silver-tongued interviewing technique, quips: "I'll give you a shout on the way down" (Hornby 2005a, 18). Maureen, set up by Hornby to play the straight woman role in an unlikely double act, is not amused but her poker-faced reply ("I suppose I'm not in the mood, Mr Sharp.") elicits laughter from her suicidal acquaintance. When Jess and JJ join them on the roof, Martin reflects that "we were in the process of turning a solemn and private moment into a farce with a cast of thousands" (25). What is initially conceived by each of these individuals as a tragic end is transformed by the presence of others into another genre characterized by perfect bad timing, coincidence and comic frustration. Elements of this approach are deployed elsewhere in the novel. When the coincidence of the four characters’ non-suicide is discovered, they are interviewed on television with the hope that it will elicit tearful catharsis. In reality, the interview degenerates into recrimination, uncomfortable laughter and another end to Martin’s modestly revived career. Similarly, the group’s decision to go on a foreign holiday – rather like an overseeing episode of a sitcom produced after other ideas have been exhausted – is not quite the therapeutic, bonding experience that they desire. This plays with readerly expectation: the experienced (or even jaded) student of comedy expects amusing calamity and is rewarded. However, for Maureen, who has never in her adult life been on holiday, the experience is liberating. The friction between these two interpretations of the same mildly chaotic events – drunken arguments and romantic embarrassment, for example – produces a hopeful comedy. For Eric Bentley, the crucial distinction to be made is not between comedy and tragedy but comedy and farce: the latter form, he argues, always refuses to look at the darkness and misery that comedy "has seen; taken note; and has not forgotten" (1992, 137). In Bentley’s reading, true comedy is far from an "unfeeling" genre; indeed the "bitterness and sadness that so readily come to the surface constitute our first, best evidence that in comedy feeling is not only present but abundant" (Bentley 1992, 137). Hornby’s narrative draws on the
conventions of farce but produces something that is closer in shape to the "adult genre" of comedy that takes place "on the other side of despair" (137).

Simon Critchley has argued that humour "views the world awry, bringing us back to the everyday by estranging us from it," a form that offers "an oblique phenomenology of ordinary life" (2002, 65-66). A Long Way Down is not only a tragi-comic novel; it is also a narrative about the ways in which humour might transfigure a sense of disconnection. This is emphatically not to argue that Hornby’s novel endorses the trite notion that "laughter is the best medicine." Rather, it embodies a critique of comedy as an attitude of cruelty or superiority. In The Seven Basic Plots, Christopher Booker presents a version of this theory – the notion that comedy is frequently based on judgement and scorn: "Almost all Comedy intended to make us laugh is [...] centred on [...] a contrast between the self-regarding delusion of someone who is in some way blinded by egotism, and our capacity to see from outside what [he] is unable to see. We even do it, of course, when we laugh self-depreciatingly at ourselves" (Booker 2004, 2). Such a form of comedy allows spectators to laugh – and to feel morally or intellectually superior – in comparison with the fool on (a figurative or literal) stage (Stott 2005, 131-37; Critchley 2002, 2).

Hornby’s fiction resists this model; his narratives do not simply mock the pompous comedic victim as useful scapegoat for shared laughter. In A Long Way Down, Martin is closest to embodying that traditional figure associated with both comedy and tragedy, the great man brought low; he is a hypocrite because he vigorously campaigned in the tabloid newspapers against criminals who were guilty of the very thing for which he was imprisoned. Hornby does not, however, exploit this comedy of hypocrisy: Martin is arrogant and not a little self-pitying but he is also ashamed, world-weary and damaged. He even acknowledges that, though the popular press "have been full of shit about me [...] every word of the shit was true" (Hornby 2005a, 127). He has almost nothing in common with the three people he meets on New Year's Eve "beyond that one thing" and this is enough to forge a new identity:

the one thing was enough to make us feel that there wasn’t anything else – not money, or class, or education, or age, or cultural interests – that was worth a damn; we’d formed a nation, suddenly, in that couple of hours, and for the time being we wanted only to be with our new compatriots. (57-58)

The life-threatening sorrow of Martin and the "Toppers" House Four with which A Long Way Down begins is an extreme version of something that haunted many of Hornby's earlier narratives: in How to Be Good, Katie Carr's brother suffers from long-term depression and in About a Boy, Fiona attempts suicide following a number of personal losses. Will Freeman insulates himself against too much feeling (being "engaged") and "that he knew would guarantee him a long and depression-free life" (Hornby 1998, 98). Indeed, the reality of Fiona’s illness frightens Will back into a flight from maturity or living for anybody other than himself. However, this apparently free man with a plan to avoid any potential emotional pain is far from typical.

Melancholia and anxiety has figured in Hornby's writing since Fever Pitch. The bestselling memoir is not only about the twinned agonies and ecstasies of following Arsenal FC and other forms of romance but also candidly addresses "the bouts of vicious, exhausting depression" which the author suffered during the 1980s (1993, 123). Watching his team with unforgiving relentless focus during a losing streak because of, rather than despite, their bad form, Hornby confesses that this was partly inspired by his "latent depression, permanently looking for a way out," but also as an act of faith that the club might prove "that things did not stay bad for ever, that it was
possible to change patterns, that losing streaks did not last" (162). *Fever Pitch* is also, in part, a narrative of recovery and, though it does not have the teleology of conventional comedy it certainly moves towards a renewed sense of self, one that remembers the experience of depression without fear. Late in the narrative, Hornby reflects that "all I could feel was the place where the ache had been, and that was a pleasurable sensation, just as when you are recovering from food poisoning and eating again, the soreness of the stomach muscles is pleasurable" (184).

In *High Fidelity*, Rob is more circumspect than the narrator of *Fever Pitch*. Hornby as narrator alludes to depression in a glib fashion – a kind of joke that, perhaps, reveals more than is intended about his state of mind. He also admits to a suicide attempt, many years ago, after his first major heartbreak ("I took an overdose of valium, and stuck a finger down my throat within a minute") (Hornby 1996, 26). Perhaps more important is Rob's oblique confession that he is not, on the whole, a happy man. That his favourite songs are melancholy classics – "Only Love Can Break Your Heart," "Last Night I Dreamed that Somebody Loved Me" and "I Don't Want to Talk About it," among others – is not unusual. Yet even a man whose life is caught-up with both enjoying and selling music, in its most authentically moving forms, is sceptical about the influence of so much sad music. The comic plot of the novel is partly an awakening to the ambiguous position of melancholy art: Rob learns to live with his sense of yearning and loss.

### 3. Almost Comic Endings

Hornby's comedy, then, is defined by painful sympathy rather than easy judgment. Readers are made aware of his characters' failures, limitations and self-deceptions, but these shortcomings are not used as a pretext for eventual exclusion from the community. His narratives rarely, if ever, feature a character that might occupy a position similar, for example, to the unrepentant Don John in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, who, in Christopher Booker's words, "remains off stage as the 'unreconciled dark figure', due for punishment" (2004, 119). The protagonists of Hornby's first two novels, Rob Fleming and Will Freeman, are granted the qualified promise of romantic contentment as a kind of reward for their new self-awareness; they have left behind part of their former selves without being required to relinquish every aspect of their egotism. Indeed, Will's cynicism, moderated by his conscience waking up to a wider world, still gets the last word. When his awkward teenage protégé refuses a playful invitation to sing one of his mother's favourite folk-tinged songs (he now professes to "bloody hate Joni Mitchell") Will is assured "beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Marcus would be okay" (Hornby 1998, 26). These are "happy endings" in the traditional comic sense that Showalter identifies as typical of the genre of "popular male confessional literature" also known as "Ladlit" (Showalter, 2002, 60). Indeed, Hornby's initial penchant for emotionally reassuring comedy was gently, but not inaccurately, burlesqued in a parody of *About a Boy for Private Eye* magazine; it concludes with a mischievous re-writing of the last line of the novel in which "Will Goodbloke" realizes "beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the reviews were going to be OK" (Taylor 2012, 56). However, few of Hornby's 21st-century novels precisely correspond to the kind of cheerful denouement in which a likable enough everyman can return to a life of insouciance, changed, but only a little, after a few life lessons.

*How to be Good* is the first of Hornby's novels that explicitly subverts traditional comic resolution in an ending that mixes fragile hope with a foreboding atmosphere. Katie, warily reunited with her husband, reflects on the near biblical downpour that
has been flooding the country, the kind of rain that might persuade this committed rationalist to believe in a supernatural reality. "It feels like the end of the world," she observes as the novel draws to a close with a secular sense of imminent judgment: "we are drowning because we abused our planet" (Hornby 2001, 243). During the storm, her husband ineffectually attempts to clear the gutters, precariously clambering onto a windowsill like a 21st-century Harold Lloyd. The final image of this novel of marital disappointment and liberal frustration is tragi-comic:

Tom and I grab hold of one back pocket each in an attempt to anchor him, while Molly in turn hangs on to us, purposelessly but sweetly. My family, I think, just that. And then, I can do this. I can live this life. I can, I can. It's a spark I want to cherish, a splutter of life in the flat battery; but just at the wrong moment I catch a glimpse of the night sky behind David, and I can see that there's nothing out there at all. (Hornby 2001, 244)

The scene is both one of resolution – a family in crisis finds meaning in mutual support – and of potential disintegration as the group clings together. The final, anti-epiphany is similarly ambiguous: there is "nothing" out in the night sky, suggesting, pace Peter Berger's "redeeming laughter," a stark lack of transcendence (Berger, 1997). "The consolations of humour," Simon Critchley claims, "come from acknowleding that this is the only world and, imperfect as it is and we are, it is only here that we can make a difference" (2002, 17). The final line of How to be Good resonates with this idea and suggests that the ordinary comedy of everyday, mundane life is sacred. Juliet, Naked, by contrast, ends with another female protagonist, Annie, who is expecting a child, refusing to settle for unhappy domestic routine when she rejects the conservative advice of her counsellor: "This is how England spoke, and she couldn't listen to her any more" (2009, 247). She abandons relative security for an uncertain future in America. The ending is one in which agency is asserted: it's clear that ineffectual or overpowering men will no longer prevent Annie from making her own choices.

Hornby's equivocally merciful attitude to his richly flawed characters, many of whom do not quite learn their lesson, connects with what James Wood argues is a relatively new kind of comedy, one that emerged only with the advent of the "modern" novel, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Earlier forms of the comic, Wood suggests, routinely echo Aristotelian ideas in which "comedy arises from a perceived defect or ugliness that should not be so painful that we feel compassion, since compassion is the enemy of laughter" (Wood 2005, 5). The "comedy of forgiveness," according to Wood, with its greater sense of pathos, comes close to inverting Aristotle's model. "If religious comedy is punishment for those who deserve it," argues Wood, "secular comedy is forgiveness for those who don't" (6). This chiastic taxonomy of old and new, religious and secular, upsets traditional understandings of a Christian comic ending as one defined by forgiveness, the visible operation of divine grace in which erring characters are restored to the community. For Wood the older "religious" mode of comedy – exemplified by Molière's plays – favours moral stability, didacticism and "the closure of punishment" (6). The "tragi-comedy" made available in the modern novel, however, registers a much more ambiguous relation to the world and "replaces the knowable with the unknowable, transparency with unreliability" (8).

The four "unreliably unreliable" narrators – to borrow Wood's phrase – of A Long Way Down make reference to their lives as narrative, as a series of events that needs a shape and that will be defined by their end (Wood 2005, 8: 9). JJ is the most self-consciously literary of the quartet ("I read the fuck out of every book I can get my hands on" [Hornby 2005a, 29]), citing Dickens, Faulkner and Vonnegut as favourites,
and confessing (to the reader rather than his new friends) that he had considered clutching a copy of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* when he took his own life: "not only because it would have been kinda cool, and would've added a little mystique to my death, but because it might have been a good way of getting more people to read it" (29). This gallows humour is self-deceiving but anticipates the novel's wider focus on the construction of meaning in relation to a conventional teleology, in which a happy end transfigures prior suffering. JJ cautions against reading Yates' novel on "Christmas Day [...] in a city where you don't really know anybody [...] because the ending is a real downer" (29). Maureen, who enjoys escapist romance, has constructed her own mini-narrative of an imagined New Year's Eve get-together in order to justify leaving her son in a care home on the night of her planned suicide: "And I suppose I came to believe in the party a little bit myself, in the way that you come to believe the story in a book" (6). The four even plan to read books by authors who have committed suicide ("They were, like, our people," (207) observes Jess). This experiment in literary therapy is quickly abandoned after a disastrous reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Although Jess is the least literary and literate of the group – indeed, unnecessarily long words make her angry – she is aware of the desire for narrative closure. After talking about her missing (presumed dead) sister, she abruptly warns the future reader not to expect Jen "to pop up later to rescue me [...] forget about that sort of ending. It's not that sort of story" (140). This self-consciousness introduces a metafictional strand to the novel: if this is not the "sort of story" that includes improbable, near miraculous reunions, what kind of story is it? Jess later naively attempts to construct a *deus ex machina* that will bring Martin back together with his ex-wife and children. She senses that "our story was sort of coming to an end" and despite her aversion for literature she does have a sense of what constitutes a proper comic resolution: "That's when stories end isn't it? When people show they've learned things, and problems get solved. I've seen loads of films like that [...] we'd meet on the roof after ninety days, and smile, and hug, and know that we had moved on" (248).

The impact of her intervention is, as we might expect, comically disastrous and defers rather than accelerates the denouement: more arguments and public humiliations ensue from Jess's good intentions. For Dominic Head, this "preoccupation with the populist happy ending," with each character thinking about "the cliché of the propitious felicitous outcome," reads "a little bit like Hornby seeking to persuade us that this is not the sentimental book it appears to be, with four strangers [...] finding salvation in a discovered community [...] and, of course, the central idea of the book is to show that they do find salvation in a new community" (2008, 17). However, the end, when it comes, is neither as cathartic as Jess might hope nor quite as sentimental as Head implies. In the final pages of the novel, a few things have changed: Maureen and JJ have both achieved modest, but significant, steps forward; Martin's arrogance, meanwhile, though tempered, has not disappeared and Jess remains as frustratingly obtuse as she is insensitive. Yet neither of these endlessly bickering figures is omitted from the final gathering, narrated by Maureen, as the group reconvenes at a pub opposite 'Toppers' House, to mark progress since their improbable first encounter. The ending of the novel rhymes with the original, almost tragic meeting on the roof; as the conventionally unconventional quartet quarrel and confess ongoing doubts about the future, they gaze out at the iconic monuments of the modern metropolis, a frantically ludic world from which they might feel alienated. The London Eye – a gigantic wheel that affords cheery tourists a similarly elevated view to the mock god-like perspective at the summit of Toppers' House – appears, from a distance, to be static: "We stared at
it for a long time, trying to work it out […]. It didn't look as though it was moving, but it must have been, I suppose" (Hornby 2005a, 332-33). This is a terse way to end any novel and might seem a particularly muted conclusion to such a sequence of gar- rulous interior monologues. However, it's crucial that this mundane vision is, in an echo of the ambiguous ending of How to be Good, a shared moment, this time with a surrogate family: Maureen's laconic summation, qualified by the tentative "I suppose," suggests that life, however decelerated, remains possible in communion with others.

4. Conclusion

For a nation whose self-image is much invested in its gift for irony, satirical impulses and absurd sensibility, contemporary Britain has an uneasy relationship with comedy and comic fiction, in particular. Occasionally, however, a critical voice will capsize orthodox thinking about depth and wit. In a scathing review of Alan Bennett's television play The Old Crowd, originally published in The Observer on 4 February 1979, Clive James suggested that Lindsay Anderson's direction had cut all of the jokes and that the piece had bought into "the delusion that solemnity equals seriousness" (James 1991, 307). In the review James argues that for a writer "like Bennett the jokes are not decoration but architecture." He offers the most eloquent salute to the comic that I know: "common sense and a sense of humour are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humour is just common sense, dancing. Those who lack humour are without judgment and should be trusted with nothing" (307).

Hornby's fiction, full of "common sense, dancing," indicates that he takes the business of laughter quite seriously; his novels have little time for those who deride it as a debased form of feeling. A key episode in Funny Girl embodies this perspective. Dennis Maxwell-Bishop, the Cambridge-educated, rather unworldly producer-director of "Barbara (and Jim)," is required to defend the sitcom on a late night talk-show named "Pipe Show" (the kind of programme "in which men with beards and spectacles […] talked with annoying certainty about God and the H-bomb" (Hornby 2014, 154)). The deadpan comedy of this antiquated homosocial environment is intensified because Dennis’ opponent, a snooty aesthete named Vernon Whitfield, has also been having an affair with his wife. Dennis unexpectedly beats the pompous critic, using the man's vanity and temper against him; Whitfield is the kind of man who claims to "love ordinary people individually" but is troubled by them "en masse" (59). The critic's arrogance – and simmering embarrassment regarding his erotic misdemeanor – cause him to swear on air in a still somewhat censorious era. More importantly, Whitfield embodies a kind of flushed, high culture contempt for shared laughter. The episode might be Hornby's fierce apologia for a "comedy of forgiveness" that is generous but not always peaceable in addressing its cultured despisers.

Works Cited


