

## Introduction

In the final chapter of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, the hero, Paul Morel, gazes out beyond the light of his home town into the darkness, unsure which way to turn. With a suitcase in his hand and a train ticket in his pocket, Keith Waterhouse's narrator faces a similar dilemma at the end of *Billy Liar*. Like Paul, he has just suffered a family bereavement. Like Paul, he has just rejected an offer of marriage. Like Paul, he knows that his artistic talents will only be expressed if he escapes his claustrophobic family, his boring job and his provincial enclave. But will he dare catch the train to London? Or are his dreams of a life elsewhere just an adolescent fantasy? 'It was a day for big decisions,' we're told at the outset, and the narrative, set over the course of one long day, leads inexorably to Billy's moment of decision at the railway station.

Keith Waterhouse wouldn't have cared for the comparison with Lawrence, whom he'd have seen as insufferably earnest. The tone of *Billy Liar* is comic and what is attractive about Billy is his irreverence. But both novels are highly autobiographical and both protagonists are faced with the same question: should one be loyal to home, family and the past, or to self, art and the future? 'We gotta get out of this place/If it's the last thing we ever do,' Eric Burdon and The Animals sang in 1965, about a dirty old city where the sun refuses to shine. Billy would recognize the place and echo the sentiment. But being a big fish in a small pond has its advantages. And even when events conspire to make a departure the obvious move, his resolve to leave is put to the test.

*Sons and Lovers* may have been a distant precedent, but it wasn't until the 1950s that novels featuring a provincial hero, or anti-hero, came to prominence – among them William Cooper's *Scenes from*

*Provincial Life* (1950), John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953), Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958). There was talk of a generation of Angry Young Men, with Amis's Jim Dixon and John Osborne's Jimmy Porter the most frequently cited examples. W. Somerset Maugham dismissed them as 'scum' and would doubtless have felt the same about Billy Fisher, with his putdowns of fools and phoneys. But Waterhouse's novel was also part of a more specifically northern sub-genre: in its wake came Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960), David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1960), Bill Naughton's play *Alfie* (1963) and, later, Barry Hines's *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968, better known under its film title *Kes*). No less important, *Billy Liar* was published on the cusp of the 1960s, when a whiff of sexual adventure and literary experiment was in the air. Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* appeared in the same week, and William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* in the same year.

It's true that Billy moans about his native Stradhoughton 'dragging its wooden leg about five paces behind the times', but sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll have arrived nevertheless. There are coffee bars, record shops, pubs with stand-up comedy acts, and 'all-pop nights' at the Roxy dance-hall. And though Billy has no luck persuading the frigid Barbara to let him touch her above the knee, even after dosing her with 'passion pills', the adventurous Liz is as eager for sexual experience as he is. When it comes to the act itself, Waterhouse's language turns euphemistic, as if fearful of the censor: Billy talks of his 'moment of satisfaction'. But elsewhere, by the standards of the time, the idiom is boldly profane. 'Does she shag?' and 'Are you getting it regular?' are questions rarely met with in fiction published before the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial in 1961. Even the repeated use of the word 'bloody' was mildly shocking, and occasioned some booing when the stage version opened.

It's a mark of the novel's resonance that it became not just a play (starring Albert Finney) but a film (with Tom Courtenay and Julie Christie), a Drury Lane musical, a British television series and a US sitcom. The naughtiness of the hero was part of the charm.

The catchy title helped, too, though Waterhouse took some time to find it: the novel, his second (*There Is a Happy Land* had appeared two years earlier), began life as *The Young Man's Magnificat* ('the supposed freewheeling inner thoughts of a north-country adolescent'), but when Waterhouse left the typescript in the back of a taxi he had to start again from scratch. The final draft, completed in a frenzied three weeks, was provisionally called *Saturday Night at the Roxy* until the appearance of Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* made a further change of title inevitable.

Billy's ordeals are ones faced by most young men in any age – trouble with parents, trouble with women, trouble with the boss. What sets him apart is the richness of his fantasy life: in the first chapter alone, he invents a land called Ambrosia where he'll be Prime Minister; recreates himself as the indulged son of liberal, middle-class parents; plans to write a public-school novel; and – having failed to post to clients the 200-odd calendars promoting the firm of funeral directors where he works – imagines being sent to prison for his crime. Billy's private fantasies are harmless fun; they help make his life more interesting. But the lies he tells to impress his girlfriends are more troubling and show how confused he is about what he wants. His machinations soon land him in a mess: both Barbara (the Witch) and Rita (waitress at the Kit-Kat milk bar) believe they're engaged to him, but it's Liz (a freer spirit and his natural soulmate) whom he seems to love. All the wrangling over a ring seems dated now. Those passion pills are worrying, too: aren't they the fifties equivalent of a date-rape drug? But we know that Billy will get his comeuppance in due course. And when it arrives, he's denounced with a vehemence that restores the moral order. 'You miserable, lying, rotten, stinking get! . . . You think you're it but you're shit!'

If Billy retains our sympathy, it's because of his wit and brio. The double act with his friend Arthur sets the tone: they while away the working day with banter, practical jokes, music-hall routines and linguistic games ("Never use a preposition to end a sentence with," he said, "I must ask you to not split infinitives,"

I said'). Farce and lavatorial humour also appear, notably in Billy's efforts to dispose of those unposted work calendars. Above all, there are the parodies and piss-takes, as the clichés of elders and betters are exposed to merciless pastiche. Solemnity is a particular target; snobbery, too, including the inverted kind. As for Yorkshire, awareness of how it is changing makes Billy satirize the nostalgia of his dialect-speaking employer, Councillor Duxbury: 'Ah only had one clog on me foot when ah came to Stradhoughton. Only one clog on me foot. But very soon ah were riding about in taxis . . . Ah had to take a taxi because ah only had one clog.' A local newspaper columnist, Man o' the Dales, is similarly sent up for his sentimental platitudes. In a passage that looks back to Dickens's evocation of Coketown in *Hard Times* and forward to the takeover of the British high street by chain stores, Billy takes on the pair of them, if only in his imagination:

. . . our main street, Moorgate, was – despite the lying reminiscences of old men like Councillor Duxbury who remembered sheep-troughs where the X-L Disc Bar now stands – exactly like any other High Street in Great Britain. Woolworth's looked like Woolworth's, the Odeon looked like the Odeon, and the *Stradhoughton Echo's* own office, which Man o' the Dales must have seen, looked like a public lavatory in honest native white tile. I had a fairly passionate set-piece all worked out on the subject of rugged Yorkshire towns, with their rugged neon signs and their rugged plate-glass and plastic shop-fronts, but so far nobody had given me the opportunity to start up on the theme.

'Dark satanic mills I can put up with,' I would say, pushing my tobacco pouch along the bar counter. 'They're part of the picture. But' – puff, puff – 'when it comes to dark satanic power stations, dark satanic housing estates, and dark satanic teashops . . .'

If Stradhoughton is no different from anywhere else, there's little reason for Billy to stay there. And it's not as if London is hard to reach: 'you just get on a train and, four hours later, there you are.' The problem is that Billy is far more fearful than his cocky

manner suggests. To work as a scriptwriter for the comedian Danny Boon would fulfil his most cherished ambition. But the prospect fills his bowels with 'quick-flushing terror'. As Liz tells him, 'You're like a child at the edge of a paddling pool. You want very much to go in, but you think so much about whether the water's cold, and whether you'll drown, and what your mother will say if you get your feet wet . . .' Billy has a touch of Hamlet about him, the native hue of resolution sickli'ed o'er by the pale cast of thought. That's why his fate is still hanging in the balance until the last chapter, on a railway platform at 1.35 a.m.

Keith Waterhouse did leave for London, where he became a high-profile journalist, wrote for film, theatre and television, had a West End hit with the play *Jeffrey Bernard Is Unwell*, and – as a long-time campaigner for clear and simple English – founded the Association for the Abolition of the Aberrant Apostrophe. His range and energy were remarkable. But *Billy Liar* is the work he will be remembered for. Its lasting power is something the former US president Bill Clinton and the former Conservative party leader William Hague can ruefully attest to, both having earned 'Billy Liar' tabloid headlines for their sins. But what makes the book unique is its mixture of laddish humour and exorbitant fantasy. And the hero, of course – a rebel in the cause of comic realism.

Blake Morrison