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**Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Jonathan Coe* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2016). £30.86 / \$39.99 (Hardback). 135pgs. ISBN: 978-1-61117-650-6.**

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Author of eleven novels, the contemporary British writer Jonathan Coe has enjoyed a career that is characterised by its variety and success, yet critical attention has tended to focus explicitly on his 1994 novel *What a Carve Up!*.<sup>1</sup> Merritt Moseley's *Understanding Jonathan Coe* (2016), however, offers a full discussion of Coe's fictional and non-fictional work. Moseley presents 'one of the most important and most consistently rewarding novelists of his generation', drawing particular attention to the variety of Coe's oeuvre: 'His output includes vertiginously experimental fictions, broad-canvas depictions of British society, political satire, and careful delineations of lonely or frustrated individuals'.<sup>2</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup> August 2016 Coe tweeted, 'So this book came in the post today and it turns out I'm much harder to understand than I thought.'<sup>3</sup> With the tweet is a picture of Coe hooked in a literary selfevaluation with an open copy of *Understanding Jonathan Coe*. Coe's plots are simultaneously funny, emotive and didactic, but the exaggerated claim that his work is difficult is typical of Coe's wry

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<sup>1</sup> This criticism has offered multiple ways of interpreting Coe's novel. For example, Michael Shallcross's

'The Parodist's Game': Scrutiny of Cultural Play in Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!*. *Adaptation* 9.2 (2016): pp. 123-141 explains Coe's manipulation of detective fiction using game theory and board games, whilst Pamela Thurschwell's 'Genre, Repetition and History in Jonathan Coe'. *British Fiction Today*. Eds Philip Tew and Rob Mengham. New York: Continuum, 2006. pp. 28-39 comments on Coe's use of farce with comparative reference to Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and the pervasive influence of film culture, especially the 'Carry On' series, in *What a Carve Up!*. Elsewhere, John Su's 'Beauty and the Beastly Prime Minister'. *ELH* 81.3 (2014): pp. 1083-1110 traces the influence of the Thatcher government on fiction of the 1990s, arguing Coe, alongside Alan Hollinghurst and Zadie Smith, define beauty against the ugliness of Thatcher's legacy.

<sup>2</sup> Merritt Moseley. *Understanding Jonathan Coe*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016. p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Coe [@jonathancoe], (17<sup>th</sup> August 2016). Retrieved from:

<https://twitter.com/jonathancoe/status/765959627615809537> Last accessed 6th September 2016.

sarcasm. One of the continually appealing factors of Coe's work is that, despite a variety of historical, political, social and scientific themes, his work remains immensely readable and Moseley's companion is certainly a useful and effective tool for uncovering some of these 'harder' messages.

The dustcover of *Understanding Jonathan Coe* claims to be the first complete study of the novelist, though Vanessa Guignery's *Jonathan Coe* was published late 2015. Both adopt a broadly chronological organisation, though Guignery's book discusses Coe's most recent novel *Number 11*, which is not covered in Moseley's study, and also includes an exclusive interview with the author. Problematically, this interview threatens to contradict some of Moseley's conclusions: Moseley suggests *The Rain Before It Falls* sharply deviated from Coe's previous work with little politics and less satire, yet in his interview with Guignery the novelist extends the definition of 'political' to include any group where an 'abuse of power' can occur, suggesting, ultimately, that the novel is political 'in the sense that it examines a systematic abuse of power over several generations.'<sup>4</sup> If not including *Number 11* perhaps dates Moseley's study, then this interview displaces his ability to help readers accurately understand Coe. Furthermore, in Guignery's interview Coe talks about projects still to come, including a continuation of the fifteen-part *Unrest* project, of which *The Rain Before It Falls* (2007) and *Expo 58* (2013) are respectively parts one and two, and a play, *The Magnificent Death of Henry Fielding*, which is again unfortunate considering Moseley's monograph claims to be the first comprehensive study of the novelist.

*Understanding Jonathan Coe* opens with a biographical introduction to Coe's published material, relating the production of his literary work with the details of his

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Coe in Vanessa Guignery. *Jonathan Coe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. pp. 144-145.

life; for example, Coe's hometown of Birmingham features heavily throughout most of his novels. Each award won by a particular novel is judiciously explained for its relevance – for example, *The Rotters' Club* (2001) won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic writing – and comments from critics, academics and tabloid press are insistently provided.

Chapter Two, titled 'Early Novels', begins by listing Coe's literary influences, namely: Flann O'Brien, B. S. Johnson, Alasdair Gray, Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne.<sup>5</sup> Using Patricia

Waugh's definition of postmodernism to define Maria's narratorial remarks, *The Accidental Woman* (1987) is called 'an exuberantly metafictional text'.<sup>6</sup> Moseley proceeds to displace Philip Tew's assertion of *A Touch of Love* (1989) as 'a satirical campus novel', claiming it instead to be a satire on the life of a postgraduate literature student, an examination of the role of chance on life and as an outlet of political anger.<sup>7</sup> *The Dwarves of Death* (1990) is found to be 'much richer in plot [...] and qualifies as something of a thriller', though the first person narrator, William, is 'less interesting, less ironic [and] less knowing' than the narrators of the previous texts.<sup>8</sup> Moseley's own mixed perception is supported by critical comments from Christina Koning, Jennifer Potter, Julian Symons, who praise the novel, whilst Corinne Le Dour-Zana retrospectively found it less forceful than *What a Carve Up!*. Though *Dwarves of Death* indicated a new direction for Coe, Chapter Three breaks from the general chronological structure of the monograph and shifts onto 'Short Fiction and Nonfiction', posing cursory glances across Coe's short stories, film criticism and book reviews, revealing 'ongoing interests' in biography, contemporary fiction, experimental writing and

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<sup>5</sup> Moseley, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18 and p. 20.

popular culture (film, television and comedy).<sup>9</sup> Further brief comments on Coe's prefaces and introductions follow, leading onto his biographies of Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Stewart and B. S. Johnson. Providing coverage of these non-fictional outputs certainly enables Moseley to present a more holistic understanding of Coe as a writer: he concludes that *Like a Fiery Elephant* (2005), Coe's award-winning biography of Johnson, 'brings to bear all the deepest and most original aspects of the novel' in its engagement with how fiction can be moral and the relevance of storytelling in the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

Discussing *What a Carve Up!* as the turning point in Coe's career, Chapter Four is (un)imaginatively titled 'Breakthrough'. Moseley proves that *Carve* has attracted more academic criticism by providing a (slightly detached) kaleidoscope of individual critics and reviewer's comments. A mass of critical opinion – including Dominic Head and Anthony Quinn, whose opinions Moseley concludes are inadequate without full explication – is assembled to assess whether *Carve* is a Condition-of-England novel.

Ultimately, however,

Coe is quoted in a 2009 *Guardian* article as being unconvinced of this assessment (and here

Moseley excels over Guignery: the latter concludes the novel is 'both a postmodernist Condition-of-England novel and a sensitive *Bildungsroman*').<sup>11</sup> Moseley emphasises that where other critics have often focused on domestic matters, the role of British foreign policy in the novel is equally important, realising the novel negates any single definition. Further topics covered on *Carve* include the inclusivity and multivalence of forms and genres in the novel, and Coe's 'ever-present humour'.<sup>12</sup> Moseley also highlights the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Guignery, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

features shared with *House of Sleep* (1997), most explicitly postmodernism, comedy and intertextuality, and suggests it 'is multifarious in many ways', including its various modes (including a transcript, rap and poem).<sup>12</sup> Chapter Five focuses on *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle* (2004), which, amidst a more general consideration of the role of music and the famous final line of *The Rotters' Club*, usefully delineates some of the connections between characters across both novels. The insular nature of the *Closed Circle* of characters and the intimation that the two works form the beginning and end of a six-volume series is neatly implied by Moseley: 'a series [...] was finished after the second instalment and he seems unlikely to write another'.<sup>13</sup> Truly, the *Closed Circle* is just that.

The penultimate Chapter Six begins with *The Rain Before It Falls*, though some of Moseley's conclusions have already been contradicted by Guignery's monograph as indicated above. The novel's connections to Rosamond Lehmann, whom Coe thought an "astonishing writer", however are neatly elucidated, and which, with Coe's essay 'My Literary Love Affair' and his introduction to Lehmann's *Dusty Affair* (1927), introduce the novel's desire to successfully present a female character.<sup>14</sup> Claiming that to find the cause behind *Rain* is 'reductive', Moseley confusingly proceeds to offer his own biographical *raison d'être*: the birth of Coe's two daughters 'is likely to foreground daughterhood as a subject matter'.<sup>15</sup> The ambivalent reception of the novel after the success of *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* invites quotation from Adam Mars-Jones, Patrick Ness and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Daniel Soar, whose views Moseley neither affirms nor denies, briefly highlighting the text's

'kind of unflinching honesty' before moving on to discuss *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sims* (2010).<sup>17</sup> Maxwell's insipidity joins the compendium of Coe's frail (and male) protagonists, including Michael Owen, Robin Grant and Thomas Foley. Once more Moseley draws on numerous critical voices – here including Chris Barton, Alex Clark, Ed Park and Leo Robson – to assess this thoroughly average protagonist. Ultimately, Moseley realises, he is an unsatisfactory Everyman figure; but, according to Coe, we find the 'strangeness of the heart of the deeply ordinary'.<sup>18</sup> A conventional analysis of Britishness, the use of the espionage plot and the humour of the spies Wayne and Radford in *Expo 58* occupy the rest of the chapter whilst a passing, yet jarring, conclusion on *The Story of Gulliver* (also published in 2013) enhances the discussion of travel motifs in the previous two novels.<sup>16</sup> By way of conclusion, Moseley explains that Coe exists within a 'special niche' since his books are popular and literary, with complex plots and an insistence on humour.<sup>17</sup> However the final sentence of the monograph quotes Nick Hornby's assertion that Coe is 'probably one of the best English novelists of his generation' and it is somewhat disappointing, if characteristic of the monograph, that Moseley ends with a voice that is not his own.<sup>18</sup>

The strength of this book comes in its engagement with the majority of Coe's work in pleasing detail and the cogent recognition and exploration of themes and fascinations across all these texts: the use of music and film especially across many works is dealt with an insightful dedication. Coe is a prolific writer, simultaneously contributing to *The Guardian* and maintaining his own blog alongside, as the beginning

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

of this review showed, an active presence on social media. As a companion to Coe, Moseley's study helps to realise how the novelist's work extends beyond his fictional output, with Coe frequently quoted throughout the work to support or initiate Moseley's points. In terms of providing an Understanding of Jonathan Coe, Moseley thus succeeds, even if the work at times borders on being a patchwork of critical opinion that is sometimes left unengaged.

To return to the quotation from Twitter provided at the beginning, Understanding Jonathan Coe proves the author is 'harder to understand than [he] thought.' Being the second monograph published singularly on Coe, Moseley's work is certainly a meticulous resource in providing a comprehensive introduction to the author, implying the potential for more work to challenge and adapt to Coe's work as more is published. In considering the multiple forms of Coe's output – biographical, non-fiction and fictional – Moseley proves the importance of recognising 'the breadth of his work, the originality and the willingness to swerve off in new directions'.<sup>19</sup> Moseley's book is a valuable companion for those interested in contemporary fiction and necessary reading for the scholar, student or fan of Coe. To borrow a word from Michael Owen, Understanding Jonathan Coe has the necessary 'brio'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Coe. *What a Carve Up!*. London: Penguin, 2008. p. 277.