

Library Life
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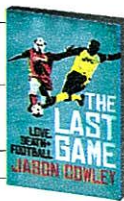
2004 Colm Tóibín's novel about Henry
The Master, happened to come out around the same time as David Lodge's novel about James, the author. Imagine Mr Tóibín's dismay when he realised that his new novel, *Brooklyn*, due from Viking in March, had the same title as a novel due from one of his American publishers. However, its author, Joanna Smith Rakoff, who had chosen the title years ago, was happy to change hers to *Age of Reason*. The subject matter and period of the novel is different: Ms Rakoff's is set in the 1950s. Of course this is not the time the New York borough has appeared in a novel. The three most obvious references are Hubert Selby Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, John Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* and Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies*.

Readers love anniversaries - especially if they are
tragic, man-made or otherwise. It will be 100 years on 20 April since Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 13 people in less than 20 minutes at the High School in Colorado. Among the new books being published to commemorate the event are *Columbine* by Dave Cullen, *Columbine: The True Story* by Jeff Kass and *Why Kids Kill: The Minds of School Shooters* by Peter Dinklage. Meanwhile, it was recently announced, 75 years after the keel of the Titanic was laid at Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast, that Random House will publish Nick Barratt's *Last Voices From the Titanic* in the autumn. The book is billed as the 'oral history' of the tragedy.

It is good to see that at least someone is making
money out of the current financial crisis. Henry Kissinger, the former American Secretary of State, who organised a controversial \$700 billion bailout for some banks and arranged the government takeover of failing mortgage companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, has sold an autobiography about his experiences to Business & Economics imprint of Grand Central Publishing and the Random House Book Group. 'This period was so chaotic and there are so many insights and so many lessons learned that I think an understanding of this extraordinary period is important,' said Mr Kissinger, who has not revealed the size of his advance. No doubt ex-employees of Lehman Brothers - which Mr Paulson allowed to go under - would be delighted for him.

Selling Skinny Bitch by Rory Freedman and
Kimberly Snyder has spawned several sequels: *Skinny Bitch: The Kitch: Kick-Ass Recipes for Hungry Girls*, *Skinny Bitch: Don't Stop Cooking Crap (and Start Looking Good)*, *Skinny Bitch: Bun in the Oven - A Gutsy Guide to Making One Hot and Healthy Mother!*; and *Skinny Bitch: A 'Get Off Your Ass' Journal to Help You Change Your Life, Achieve Your Goals, and Rock the World!* Clearly, in the case of diet titles, less is more. Surely, though, if the slimming recipes and fat-free products would not be in need of further help?

SPORT
The Last Game: Love, Death and Football By Jason Cowley
SIMON & SCHUSTER, £14.99, 276 pp



An Arsenal fan's autobiographical reflection on the changing face of the sport hits home for **Leo McKinstry**

Despite the passion and drama so often aroused by football, writing about our national sport was rarely treated seriously in literary circles until the Nineties. That decade brought a revolution in attitudes to the game, not least because of the phenomenal success of Nick Hornby's masterpiece *Fever Pitch*. In addition, increasing commercialisation in publishing led to the realisation that football could be a highly lucrative market.

The author and journalist Jason Cowley epitomises the changing outlook of the literary world. He admits that as a teenager in the Eighties, he 'accepted the false dichotomy between the so-called highbrow and lowbrow'. Having been obsessed with football in childhood, he turned away from the game and embraced other, supposedly more elevated, pursuits such as literature, politics and music. But the legacy of his early life could not be entirely suppressed. Gradually, he found himself returning to the game he had once loved. As he did so, he saw that there was no need to make a choice between two cultures. He could embrace them both. The result is that Cowley became a true Renaissance figure, equally at home writing about Michael Heseltine, West Ham's central defence or the works of Toby Litt. It is a reflection of his breadth that he has edited both *Granta* magazine and *Observer Sports Monthly*. Now the editor of the left-leaning *New Statesman*, he has also penned an elegant London-based novel.

A devotion to football is at the heart of Cowley's compelling new book, which skilfully weaves together a memoir of his suburban youth with an account of the nerve-shredding climax to the 1988-89 season when Arsenal, against all the odds, won the league championship by beating Liverpool with almost the last kick of the season. It was the most dramatic finish in the history of league football, made all the more remarkable by the fact that Arsenal accomplished the feat in Liverpool's home citadel of Anfield. But, as Cowley reflects, this glorious match also marked the end of an era, not just in his own life as he moved away from the parental home, but also in football and in wider British society.

The years after Arsenal's visit to Anfield saw a transformation in the sport, through the introduction of all-seater grounds, the creation of the Premier League and an explosion in wealth from the sale of television rights and the arrival of a new breed of billionaire club owners. At the same time, on the political stage, the Berlin Wall was crumbling, communism was in its death throes and the age of Thatcher, with all its conflict and upheaval, was drawing to a close.

There was always a danger that Cowley's book might fall under the shadow of Hornby's masterpiece, since both are autobiographical

journeys of youthful self-discovery as Arsenal fans. Through the quality of his writing and his thought-provoking material, Cowley triumphantly avoids such a fate. He is excellent on the match itself, his descriptions of the game enlivened by first-hand testimony from many of the players he interviewed. The character of the Arsenal manager George Graham, suave but full of inner steel, is well-drawn, as is the club's self-reverence, with its 'grand pseudo-aristocratic traditions' and 'its culture of benign paternalism'. In another typically lyrical passage about a recent anniversary dinner at Arsenal, Cowley describes the red-headed former striker Perry Groves as looking like 'a plump Tintin moving towards middle age'.

The book has so much more than just football. There are reflections on racism, first romance, indie music and England's addiction to social status, Cowley admitting that at university he suffered his own 'tortured class anxieties' about his place in the hierarchy as a football-loving, Essex-bred son of a clothes salesman and designer.

Looming over Cowley's tale is the impact of the Hillsborough disaster, when 96 Liverpool fans were crushed to death in Sheffield just weeks before Arsenal's title-deciding visit to Anfield. An account of the tragedy forms the moving prologue to the



Drama Michael Thomas wins Arsenal the title in '89

book, and Cowley argues convincingly that the horrific events of that April afternoon were a watershed in football, forcing the game to abandon its primitive tribalism.

But by far the strongest theme is the author's close relationship with his father, who fostered his son's love of football. Disciplined but also open-minded, hard-working but playful, he emerges as a huge influence on the author. His premature death from a heart attack was a severe blow for Cowley, and some of the most poignant scenes cover his father's last brooding months, when, as if aware of his approaching end, he became obsessed with recalling the wartime Blitz of his youth.

Indeed an air of sadness hangs over the entire last section of the book, in which the author expresses his regret at the way football has become utterly dominated by foreign money and players, with the result that clubs have lost all sense of identity. Even Cowley's beloved Arsenal has 'ceased to be an English club in any recognisable sense'. New wealth has come at a terrible price. The book ends, not just as a tribute to a famous Arsenal victory, but also as an elegy to his departed father and a vanished footballing tradition.