Has it All Been Said?

After his death in 1973, BS Johnson was largely forgotten. Now the 'one man avant-garde' is finally getting the recognition he deserves.

'DON'T go pretending you've read BS Johnson,' Giles Coren combatatively began his review of the writer's biography in 2004. 'Because nobody has…You're thinking: "Is he related to Boris, perhaps?"'

Well, that was two years ago, and Jonathan Coe's prize-winning study of Johnson's life certainly raised the author's profile – but then, it was practically non-existent before. The bare facts are these: Bryan Stanley Johnson was born in 1933, and committed suicide aged just 40, leaving behind seven novels, two volumes of poetry and a handful of short story collections, television programmes and film scripts.

He had an ill-fated love affair in his twenties, and subsequently decided that being a great artist meant he would never find love – nevertheless, he married and had two children. He did all the usual types of work authors do to support their badly paid habit, including a stint as the *Observer*'s football reporter, and was in the middle of writing a trilogy about his upbringing (conceived as the summit of his work) when he died. He saw himself as the heir to Beckett and Joyce, the only writer of the time offering a way forward from these giants of modernist prose rather than retreating into safer, more conventional forms.

If finding out about Johnson in the first place weren't enough of a challenge, finding copies of his work is well-nigh impossible. Of his novels, only four are currently in print (three collected in an omnibus, leaving only *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* available as a stand-alone volume) and these are so only as a result of *Like A Fiery Elephant* – the biography mentioned above, which won the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction last year.

His most famous work is *The Unfortunates*, a 'book in a box' consisting of unbound sections to be read – apart from the first and last chapter – in any order the reader chooses. It was allegedly re-issued by Picador in 1999, but presumably all copies were instantly snapped up, because there's no trace of it on Amazon, and a 1969 Panther/Secker & Warburg first edition will set you back upwards of £100. (Literary trivia enthusiasts take note: Hari Kunzru gave Zadie Smith one as a wedding present.)

But why should you spend your hard-earned money on something by a relatively unknown author, let alone embark on a literary treasure hunt to do so? Because Johnson was not only a brilliantly innovative stylistic visionary, obsessed with pushing the novel in new directions, but a damn fine writer. And that's what counts. Yes, being able to talk about cut-out lines and randomly ordered narratives and the possibility that literature at last has found a worthy heir to Laurence Sterne will impress at dinner parties, but there's more on offer here than that.

To put it simply, there is no one else quite like BS Johnson – and as the publishing industry becomes ever more obsessed with big, easy-to-market names and profit margins, perhaps there never will be.

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So what’s distinctive about Johnson? Reviewers of Coe's biography seemed constrained by some unwritten journalistic law to mention *Albert Angelo*'s abrupt switch from a third to first person narrative, accompanied by the interjection – ‘oh fuck all this LYING’ – and indeed Coe picks a similar quote (‘telling stories is telling lies’) for the epigraph of his book. Johnson was on a quest for truth in narrative, saying: ‘The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.’ Accordingly he drew more and more heavily on his own experiences, eventually provoking one publisher into the outburst: ‘Aren’t you rather young to be writing your memoirs?’ Johnson not only utterly disregarded this criticism, but appropriated the question for the title of a book of self-justifying essays on literature.

His reasoning was, as he saw it, clear. Accepted literary forms were all ‘clapped out’; post-Joyce, all writers must accept that the nineteenth-century narrative novel ‘cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse.’ But there is another clue to his relentless drive towards formal experimentation in his poem, ‘The Short Fear’:

Certainly I feel it has all been said

The short fear is that even saying it
in my own way is equally pointless

I’m sure these words, expressed in typically stark fashion, speak to every author struggling to produce something new despite the suffocating weight of literature's past triumphs.

The unfortunate effect of the technical tomfoolery – apart from seriously pissing off every one of Johnson's several publishers – is that the novels are more remembered for this than for their content. ‘Ah,’ the rare people who have heard of Johnson at all will say, ‘that’s the book-in-a-box guy.’ And this obsession with form did infuriate his publishers, and the printers – a state of affairs not helped by Johnson’s assumption that he knew more about the production of books than they did. Several letters exist from Johnson, complaining about fonts, colours and other technical minutiae unthought of by more ivory-tower authors.

‘A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey,’ he wrote, loftily. ‘Therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point.’

That's a particularly piquant point, considering Johnson's own belief that form must be purely dictated by content, and that the form of his every work was in some way preordained and immutable. As he wrote in the introduction to *Aren’t You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?*:

I object to the word experimental being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems.

Where I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for what I have to say. The relevant questions are surely whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve, and how less good were the alternatives.

Of course, Johnson is being presumptuous here; it's up to readers to decide whether the devices work or not, rather than the author telling them what to think. Nevertheless, he makes the important point that the so-called gimmicks arise from the needs of the text – and formal experimentation should not detract from his (considerable) literary achievements.

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I have no shame in admitting I was introduced to BS Johnson at Christmas via the same medium as most recent readers – Jonathan Coe's painstakingly researched and beautifully emotive *Like A Fiery Elephant*. It's a book which deserves an article of its own, and more, but for now I shall confine myself to recommending it to you heartily, whether you plan to tackle any Johnson or not. It can be a painful read, as the depressive writer systematically alienates anyone who cares about him, including several of his publishers. Yet at the same time, he remains totally sure of his own talent, relentlessly quoting glowing early reviews comparing him to Joyce and Beckett. I finished it thinking: he can't be as good as he thought he was, can he?

Well, not quite. There are problems with his work, which I at least think make him a more interesting writer. Anyone who has developed a deep and abiding hatred of Beckett's novels (as I have) is going to find the fragmentary and repetitive *House Mother Normal* a bit of a slog, although ultimately rewarding. *Christie Malry…* is wilfully slight, clocking in at just over 20,000 words – explained away by Christie's own epigram on the modern novel's need to be 'funny, Brutalist and short'. But the scarcity of prose in the book, and in Johnson's oeuvre generally, does what it is intended to – it increases the reader's respect for what is offered. In *Statement Against Corpses*, co-authored with friend Zulfikar Ghose, the preface states: 'The short story deserves, but seldom receives, the same precise attention to language as that given normally only to a poem.'

And if you still find yourself questioning whether Johnson's work appeals because of its technical novelty, or despite it, don't worry – you're in good company. Julian Barnes, writing shortly after Johnson's death, might have praised the writer's 'genial, bearish capering round traditional narrative technique' but the *TLS* was less forgiving. In an anonymous review of *Christie Malry…*, Johnson was described as a 'gifted, ingenious, amusing – and frustrating'. He was forcefully urged to 'eschew gimmickry in favour of ambition'.

But stubbornness was the novelist's essential quality, as the Coe biography demonstrates all too graphically. He simply would not entertain the idea of caving in to commercial or peer pressure to stop – as others saw it – mucking about with cut-up pages and loose-leaf books, and concentrate on producing more of his superbly well-judged, blisteringly funny prose.

For readers brought up on Eliot’s dictum that modern writers ‘must be difficult’, this insistence on expanding the limits of the novel might seem reason enough to praise Johnson, but it's far from the only one. More than anything else, I love the compelling sensation of reading a great book, and yet somehow – I don’t know how – feeling it could be even greater. I suppose the nearest I could come to describing it is as glimpsing perfection as if in a mirror, but never being able to look it squarely in the eye.

Browning wrote that ‘a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / or what's a heaven for?’ At least BS Johnson was reaching, and trying to address the big questions. Johnson resolved to forge a new path. He might have stumbled here and there, and wandered down a few blind alleys, but twentieth-century literature is richer because of his efforts.

‘Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily,’ he wrote not long before committing suicide in 1973. He certainly left ends untied and untidy, but his literary legacy should not suffer on that account.

Helen Lewis