



***The Football Factory*, the first novel by young writer John King, is on one level the most authentic book you're likely to read about the culture surrounding a group of Chelsea football 'hooligans'. But it is much more than that. Mixed in with graphic descriptions of gang violence are wonderful vignettes about laundry women, old men, small children and warehouse dreamers. In short, a spicy (and very funny) slice of inner-city London life, which appears to have struck in the Gullit (ahem) of certain reviewers. As Euro '96 reaches its climax, 'King' John (as Jimmy Jones might call him) talks to MARK PIGGOTT about the book, religion, and fighting for fun.**

I don't want to go to Chelsea. Camden Town on a sunny June evening is, despite Suggsy's interminable song, and the worry of bumping into Damon Albarn, one of the more pleasant aspects of London living. Even more so for John King, whose first novel has been the subject of rave reviews, hysterical condemnation, and a wholehearted endorsement from that old trainspotter himself, Irvine Welsh. As we wander down the High Road in search of a pub, we pass the shop window of Waterstone's bookshop, where *The Football Factory* is displayed prominently. John shrugs modestly; I go green.

In Liberties, we sit at the window watching the wildlife, sipping Fosters and putting the world (or our part of it) to rights. I begin by asking John, a youthful 35 year old West Londoner, what he makes of the mixed reaction to the book. Is he pleased by its success?

“Yes, I didn’t expect it at all. I was told a new book usually sells about 3,000 copies; they (Cape: the publishers) can’t say exactly, but reckon it’s had about 10,000 orders already. I didn’t really expect to have to do publicity, either, so that’s been an experience in itself; going on the radio, stuff like that. It’s all a bit strange really.”

Interviewers, myself included, are constantly struggling to think up original questions. Such as: Has John based the central character, Tom Johnson, on himself? Tom, for those of you yet to read it, is at the centre of roughly half the chapters, each with titles like ‘Coventry at Home’ or ‘Tottenham Away’. Nearly all of these stories have the build-up to a fight at their centre, but they also map out the country as it appears to the hooligan. It has to be said, the description of most of the places visited are less than flattering; but then, most football grounds are in poorer, working-class areas. I put it to John that although Tom gets all the publicity, the author has more in common with another character, Vince Matthews, more of a dreamer, with plans to travel, to write, to escape somehow.

“Well, if anything, that’s me, yeah. (The book)’s not ‘about’ me anyway, but a lot of it’s based on what I’ve been around and seen. The chapter ‘Running The Bulls’ (about being in Spain in the 1982 World Cup) is the closest thing in the book to being accurate. But it’s fiction. By showing things through the character’s eyes, you prevent yourself moralising.” It is this supposedly amoral stance which has drawn some sections of the press, including, regrettably, the more liberal papers, to some rather lazy conclusions. In the first place, the character of Tom does have his own morality; he disapproves of the abuse of women; he has a healthy respect for older people. Second, these same broadsheets have focussed on the ‘racist’ language within the book, apparently blissfully unaware that this is how most people talk. John himself is both bemused and amused by some of the reviews.

“One reviewer said the book was just about violence, no attempt to put it into context. *The Guardian* said it was ‘joyously politically incorrect’ whereas *The Independent* said it was ‘implausibly politically correct, none of the gentle voyeurism of *Trainspotting*’. The whole point of the book was criticising voyeurism and curling up with your cocoa to read about hooligans. Anyway, as my mate said, ‘what do you expect from *The Guardian*? Trendy lefty fucking wankers’. I read their reviews and laugh at them.”

What these armchair hooligans fail to point out is that this book is not about football. For instance, *The Observer*, despite its excellent review by Kevin Mitchell, tucks *The Football Factory* away in the sports section, as opposed to the review pages. To an extent I’m also guilty of this ghettoisation, by way of the fact that this interview is timed to coincide with Euro ‘96. But the very title itself shows that there is much more to this book than ‘kick and tell’.

“Society is a production line. That’s where it (the title) comes from. That’s what I’m interested in writing about. There is a lot of violence in the book, and in everyone; whether verbal or physical violence. There’s the violence of politicians who cut housing benefit, or cut back a granny’s heating allowance. It’s all different levels of violence. Maybe physical violence is easier to condemn; but it gives people a thrill. You have to look at levels of violence. A mob of blokes running up the road, a couple of punches, then everyone goes home, is one level. I’ve gone to a harder edge, a more cynical, organised violence.”

Within the media as a whole, if you had to pick a despised bunch of individuals, you’d look no further than football hooligans. No one, it seems, has a good, or even understanding word to say for them. This is not to say, of course, that your average Chelsea or Millwall fan is

going to start demanding equal rights and grants from the council. But it does lead to a perception that the world is out to get you. So you behave accordingly. There is a telling passage in 'West Ham at Home' where the gang 'seig heil', not through any political belief, but just to upset the lefties. It is reminiscent of the Pistols in 1977, a time John remembers fondly. It is in describing this alienation that John is at his best.

"There is this disenfranchisement of the working class. They've been told they're shit for so many years, they've no culture, they're no good." King, although not from 'a military background' as some have classified him, has a belief that England's history is at least partly to blame. So many generations have been sent out to die for it; now, the children and grandchildren of those armies are rejected by society, and reject it in turn.

"Yes, there is that difference between doing it in uniform and doing it off your own back. It's that justification of violence. Going into World War I - was that justified? I had three great-uncles come back from the so-called Great War, and they threw their medals in the dustbin." Throughout the book there is this respect for older people, this respect for what they've been through. Perhaps some reviewers might like to mention this in future, when wheeling out the unusual clichés about young people. And hopefully, the book could make some think twice about the old. In one wonderful story, 'Poppy Day', an old boy takes exception to two young racists on the tube, with a very satisfying response. By focussing on people from across the generations, John has illuminated that idea of the production line:

"The idea was to draw parallels. There's the story about the child ('Never Never Land'), the youth, another a bit older; you can see they're all a part of the same thing."

The same, but different. The expectations of some are limited; others, like the warehouseman in 'Worker's Dream', or the security guard in 'Bomber Command', show how doing the most banal of jobs can let your mind soar away, your imagination go into overdrive. It's called making the most of a bad job; just like doing a runner, just like downing bang lassis, just like putting the boot in.

On the same theme, escape, there are several references to religion within the book. Some of the characters, for example the laundrette woman in 'Sweet Jesus', have a strong belief; others are either atheist or agnostic. John strikes me as the latter.

"Everyone needs a crutch. Maybe you only use that crutch if something happens to you. I don't come from a religious family at all, but I am quite interested in religion. I spent a couple of months in a Thai monastery, I'm very interested in some of the Eastern ideas, such as Buddhism."

Hardly what the media would expect from its 'average' thug. On the contrary, John is quietly spoken, modest, and polite; and he stands his ground. Though he would never claim to represent 'our' generation, he does have what to me is a typical scepticism about the mainstream politics of the Big Match: Labour v Tories (sold out). "Yeah, they're a joke. Labour and the Tories are more or less from the same background, with a few exceptions. They always seem to have to claim this moral high ground; it's the same sort of thing I encounter in interviews. That two-party thing is going to break down; more young people need to get into issues, like green issues. There's still that boundary where crusties are seen as posh and educated; you have to get in there to change that. It's no good (these people) appearing on telly with massive dreadlocks and a posh accent; but if you can break that down..."

Alongside the issue of issues, if you like, there is the generational phenomenon of ecstasy and

dance music. In the North, there are well documented accounts of Man Utd and Leeds hoolies hugging ecstatically at the clubs. I put it to John that this has helped cool down the problems of crowd violence; but the danger is that ecstasy and other activities may take over working-class priorities, leaving football to the born-again middle classes.

“With ecstasy, I think that’s maybe a regional thing. I don’t know many like that at Chelsea, but maybe that’s the difference between London and the rest of the country. Like maybe clubland in Manchester or Scotland- I don’t know this because I’m not a particularly club person - but maybe it’s a more working class club culture than in London.

“Following football is still perceived as a white working-class thing. But it’s more accepted now.” This acceptance probably started with Italia ‘90 and Pavarotti; Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch* helped it along; then came *Fantasy Football League*, with the aristocratic Baddiel and working class oik Frank Skinner. But John feels this new media attention is hardly reflected at The Shed- apart from in the prices.

“The same people go now as went ten years ago. They’re the core of football, the life blood.” As for the current all-time high surge of popularity: “It’s a part of society; and in society, things go round in circles.”

There is a circle, or a cycle, to *The Football Factory*. It begins with ‘Coventry at Home’ and ends with ‘Derby at Home’. Tom, having received a severe kicking and subsequent hospitalisation at Millwall, is back with his friends looking for trouble; or at least, looking for excitement. Unlike Vince, with his escape clause that is Australia, Tom has few expectations. England’s cannon fodder has become her factory fodder. Perhaps that - rather than the odd scuffle - is the real tragedy of our times.

Ends

