

A novel instance of Sharpe practice



Tom Sharpe pictured on his arrival in England 18 years ago. He had been deported from South Africa for an anti-apartheid play he had written.

Simon Midgley meets the one-man fiction industry and envy of former colleagues

Eight years spent attempting to interest apprentice bricklayers and motor mechanics in *Lord of the Flies* and *Candide* is not on the face of it a very hopeful matriculation for a novelist struggling for recognition.

From this distinctly unpromising material, however, one-time technical college lecturer Tom Sharpe managed to distill *Wilt*, a black comedy that securely established his reputation as a comic writer.

Today Sharpe, aged 52, is one of the most successful and prolific popular novelists working in Britain.

He is, in fact, the stuff of which publishers' dreams are made. All his works are still in print, each new novel has sold better than the last and film rights are snapped up with almost indecent haste.

Having produced a novel a year for the past eight, he is now something of a cult, not to say a one-man industry.

To his former colleagues still teaching in the Cambridge College of Arts and Technology and to other further education teachers wrestling with reluctant learners up and down the country this relentless achievement must be regarded with baleful envy.

(Writing the successful novel is, one suspects, a fantasy to which teachers, especially liberal studies and arts lecturers, are especially prone. For a contemporary to achieve the impossible dream must serve as both a triumphant affirmation of life's rich possibilities and as a constant indictment of personal failure and slothfulness.) An irony that is certainly not lost on Tom Sharpe.

To rub salt in what may well be a lingering sore, *Wilt*, which was his fifth novel, wrings much of its humour from a sharply satirical look at the pretensions and pompousness of the world of further education.

Its autobiographical origins are at times only thinly disguised. Like Henry Wilt, the novel's anti-hero, Tom Sharpe began his career in further education as an assistant lecturer in liberal studies.

The author also happens to have taught in a technical college: Cambridge College of Arts and Technology as opposed to the fictional Fenland College of Arts and Technology.

And like his hapless protagonist Sharpe was also required to meet the weekly challenge of engaging the interest of apprentice plumbers and butchers, *Monsieur I*, who were often slow to see the relevance of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to slouching a leaky pipe or boating a shoulder of mutton.

Wilt, says Sharpe, "is verbatim. *Monsieur I* is verbatim. I can't even look at *Lord of the Flies* without it making me want to vomit."

Only the improbably farcical plot

satirical and macabre by turns, is clearly a freewheeling fantasy of the author's own fertile imagination.

The detail, however—the frustration of teaching a subject with no precisely defined content to a group of reluctant learners, the hilarious account of a Council for National Academic Awards visit and the academic bitchiness—has a ring of cruel authenticity about it that will be familiar to many involved in further education.

His other famous "educational" novel, *Porterhouse Blue*, which is set in a fictional Cambridge College, is, one feels, less precisely autobiographical in character.

Although he went to Peterhouse both as an undergraduate (he took what used to be described as "a gentleman's degree" in History and Social Anthropology) and some years later to train as a teacher, the college described in this book appears to draw more generally on the experience of "being at Cambridge".

Although Tom Sharpe describes himself as a "farceur", much of the incidental humour of his novels inheres in his unerring ability to deflate pomposity and pretension.

In his educational "farces"—there are three, *Wilt*, *The Wilt Alternative* and *Porterhouse Blue*—this satirical vision betrays, if only intermittently, a passionate interest in what is being offered in the name of education in Britain.

This is more than simply the professional interest of a man who has spent the better part of his working life teaching (18 years altogether including experience in South African primary and secondary schools and a secondary modern in Aylesbury).

It is as much a reflection of a father's parental concern that his children should get the most out of their formal education. (He and his American wife, Nancy, have a family of three—Melanie, his step daughter, aged 15, Grace nine, and Janina, eight.)

Although he went to a public school—Lancing—through the generosity of a South African aunt and could now quite obviously afford to send his children to private schools he prefers to keep the family together. They go, instead, to the local primary and comprehensive schools in Bridport, Dorset, where he and Nancy, who was a teacher herself in the U.S.A., can keep an eye on their progress.

(Should they become dissatisfied with the state's efforts they could always start their own school at home. There is a purpose-built primary school in their one and a half acre back garden which was erected by the old town grammar school's former classics teacher.)

Tom Sharpe is the first to admit that he is "terribly opinionated" about education. "That's the whole business about teaching," he says brightly, before slightly pug-naciously and perhaps not altogether seriously advancing the view that arts subjects like history and English should not be taught at all because they are speculative subjects which consist of little more than sets of opinions.

More temperately he adds: "I just think that the system is out of balance. There's far too much opinion-orientated learning."

"We have an exam system which is pointed towards the ability to articulate in writing and this is a very special skill in a sense. The vast majority of people are not equipped to do this... certainly not in the public sector schools."

A deeply humorous man he is appalled by the "colossal" reservoir of talent that is wasted by specialization too early and a narrowly academic view of what constitutes useful abilities and of how intelligence makes itself apparent.

More efforts should be made to find out what skills people possess and to foster them. Recalling his days teaching *Monsieur I* at the tech, he says the important thing was not to write people off too early: to make sure that they came out of every lesson feeling that they had accomplished something; and, above all, to give them a sense of confidence in their own abilities.

"Teaching is about getting across," he says. "When to let up a bit and when to put the boot in. At the end of the day what you have got to do is to get their interest."