

A libertarian between the lines?

Graham Smith examines the novels of Tom Sharpe

The Times has called Tom Sharpe the funniest novelist writing today. His books are characterised by exquisite craftsmanship of language, sheer unpretentious skill with words, and a distinctly Libertarian flavour.

He is at his best when describing the antics of bumbling authority, particularly when confronted with resourceful individuals who have not learned that authority is there to be respected. His fundamental assumptions about the coerciveness of State organs and the behaviour of officials are faultless. At the risk of reading too much into the Sharpe best-sellers, I think that there may be a Libertarian lurking between the lines.

Riotous Assembly and *Indecent Exposure* were Tom Sharpe's first two novels. They are both about South Africa, from whence he was deported in 1961. To be precise they are about the South African Police Force whose efforts to preserve Western Civilisation in Southern Africa are, one suspects, as murderous as Tom Sharpe's description of them.

In *Blott on the Landscape* he turns his attention to the English town and country planners. It is almost as if he looked around for the English equivalent of the South African police and lighted upon the planners. *Pace* the VAT inspectors, he made the right choice.

Blott plays merry hell with the planners. Dundridge, Controller Motorways Midlands, is no ordinary planning official. Faced with a formidable lady who has the temerity to defend her property against compulsory purchase, he starts off by devising a scheme to make random bulldozer sorties on a defenceless countryside and ends up by sending in the Army. In portraying the Army as the logical extension of the planning authorities Tom Sharpe displays a rare

understanding of the coercive nature of planning. In the end justice is done to Dundridge, who is incarcerated in the ultimate planned environment.

In *Wilt* Tom Sharpe loosens off a few shots at the police. He is much kinder to the British police than to their South African counterparts, attributing to them only a penchant for interrogation stopping short of brutality. In his latest novel, *The Great Pursuit*, he contrasts efficient incentivised insurance investigators with police who are, in the words of investigator Synstrom, sitting around waiting to see what we come up with. They come up with the truth.

The main broadsides in *Wilt* are reserved for State further education. Tom Sharpe points out, for instance, that apprentice butchers and gas-fitters sentenced by the Education Act to Day Release courses are far better off learning how to read and write and fiddle their income tax returns than being forced to read *The Mill on the Floss* in Liberal Studies ('The difficulty with Liberal Studies is that no-one knows what it means').

He punctures the pretensions of a technical college trying to gain polytechnic status by concocting a Joint Honours degree in Urban Studies and Medieval Poetry. He digs at "progressive educators such as "Mrs. Chatterway", who prided herself on being an advocate of progressive education, in which role she had made a substantial contribution to the illiteracy rate in several previously good primary schools".

Pretentiousness, particularly when indulged in at other people's expense, is perhaps Tom Sharpe's second favourite target after officialdom. *The Great Pursuit* highlights the pretensions of the literary world. It also appears to have been misunderstood. Even excerpts from a *Listener* review printed on the cover of the paperback edition give entirely the wrong impression. "Tom Sharpe's individual blend of robust farce and deeply cutting satire makes merry mockery of Grub Street." Like hell it does. In fact it makes merry mockery of the sort of people who could think that the novel is an attack on

Grub Street. True, his main Grub Street character is decidedly roguish. But he is driven to deception by the hypocrisy of a dried-up old literary pseud, Tom Sharpe's description of whom is reminiscent of Ayn Rand in full flood.

He also gives his Grub Street rogues some telling lines. Hutchmeyer, the rich and illiterate American publisher says to the young "serious" writer who has just accused him of pandering to the public taste for pornography "What sort of books do you think the public are going to read if you don't give them what they want?" Frensic, the commercially minded literary agent, says to the fusty literary hypocrite who cannot comprehend his insistence that he has a reputation worth maintaining: "Grub Street, and proud of it. Where people write without hypocrisy for money." Tom Sharpe also points out that whilst "significant" novelists may be able to get away with pages of description of thought and emotion, commercial novelists have to work to research their subjects.

Tom Sharpe does not set out to write ideologically significant novels. He writes for his market and is good at it. But there seems to be a consistent pro-market anti-authoritarian theme running through his novels. Perhaps It takes a Libertarian to notice it, but it is refreshing to see popular novels apparently based on good Libertarian principles. They are also very funny.