

“I help people with their writing, take people to the toilets, break up fights. It’s just like being back at the Groucho”

An assignation with Julie Burchill can’t help but give one pause for thought. For three decades, since she famously answered *NME*’s call for “hip young gunslingers” to chronicle the punk scene in Thatcher’s Britain, she has written prose so acid it would have shocked even Dorothy Parker. In person, while you wouldn’t describe her as charming, she is rather endearing. It’s probably that piping voice with its Bristol burr giving her a vaguely little-girl-lost quality. “I’m so very very nice in person,” she declares, when you suggest that her reputation precedes her. “I do my charitable works but there’s obviously a nasty thing inside me. I’ve got a black heart. When I write, it all comes out.” Insults, casual and considered, have always come easily to her apparently. “One of my earliest memories is of my mum dragging me out the room and hitting me around the head because I’d said something about the hat my Auntie Connie was wearing. I just thought *Jesus, that’s so unfair!* It was a great piece of luck to realise that what I’d been doing all my life, which was offending people, I could now get paid for.” She has, she claims, “always wanted a quiet life – nobody ever believes me, it just didn’t work out that way. But I can’t help telling the truth as I see it.”

Actually, in a world of political correctness run rampant, when every utterance has to be sugar-coated lest it offend someone’s delicate little sensibilities, Burchill’s unrestrained but stylish invective is a welcome relief. She is nothing if not

Anyway, *Brighton* was suggested by K T Forster, MD of Virgin Books and a Brightonian, who’d wanted to call it *We Are Not Chavs*, which Burchill thought inappropriate. “I am one, so why should I be in self-loathing denial... To be honest with you, it sounded like a really good skive because we could just go on about the stuff we was [sic] doing already and get paid for it. And also I do love Brighton. I’ve been here for 11 years and I still feel I’m on holiday. So it was a chance to combine passion with skiving, which often doesn’t come along together.” She laughs, a laugh as high and reedy as her voice. “To me, the main thing about the book, although it sounds cheesy, is that it will introduce the world to Dan’s writing, which is just amazing. It’s almost better than mine. Mine is bombastic, Dan’s has a dry elegance.” She is less keen on what she describes as “his really sick sci-fi,” a description he contests.

Raven, whose day job is testing software for a web design company, came to Brighton when he was eight, so has been there twice as long as Burchill. But the city – a Labour redefinition to which both object – is “a place outsiders come to”, like New York. Between the two of them, in alternating chapters, they examine 21st century Britain through the prism of Brighton, tackling topics such as architecture, money, sex and music. “I would describe the book as somewhere between a love letter and a bitch-slap to Brighton,” she explains, adding that when they actually started writing, it became apparent that a lot of “really quite unpleasant” stuff was going on. “The

# A once hip young gunslinger

Thirty years after she was hired by *NME*, Julie Burchill is on a Christian journey. Along the way she writes. **Liz Thomson** met her in Brighton

Burchill and Raven: getting paid for skiving

extreme but, unlike, say, Germaine Greer, who seems often to take a position just for the hell of it, you get the impression Burchill believes every word she writes. She has recanted on Stalin, on deathbed advice from her once Stalinist father, but remains constant in her admiration of Margaret Thatcher (“she wasn’t a pussy or a cry baby – she just got on with the fucking job. When I saw her bleating in the car, that’s the only time I thought: *you stupid bitch!*”) and steadfast in her defence of Israel (“I’m a Christian Zionist and the state of Israel means more to me than practically anything in the world... I’d like to live in Tel Aviv but my husband won’t go there”). And *don’t* get her going on Islam, or “Islamofascism” as she insists on calling it. Actually, “I prefer not to talk about Islam because my views are so virulent it would slant the whole piece”.

That piece is occasioned by Burchill’s latest opus, *Made in Brighton*, co-written with her third husband, Daniel Raven, 13 years her junior and, on the surface at least, an unlikely partner. She met Tony Parsons, her first husband, on *NME*. After him came Cosmo Landesman. Then there was an interregnum with Charlotte Raven, Daniel’s sister. “We’ve been together for 11 years and married for two. We don’t live together – no fucking way – but we’ve made a bargain that whoever’s health breaks down, the other one has to move in and look after them. We don’t talk about politics or religion,” on which they disagree, fairly virulently.

council is trying to cleanse the white working class from Brighton... What they want to do is get all the council homes back and sell them to rich, incoming homosexuals. Where are the fire-fighters going to live?”

In between writing, and while Raven goes to the office, Burchill works two days a week with people with severe learning difficulties. “I do that Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I can’t get drunk on Mondays and Wednesdays... I balance my week between acts of extreme Christian charity and acts of extreme debauchery,” she muses, anxious lest anyone think she has been “saved”. “I’m a literacy assistant. I help people with their writing, take people to the toilets, break up fights. It’s just like being back at the Groucho and I love doing it; it’s part of my Christian journey.” In September, she will start training as an advocate for Age Concern and, one day, embark on a theology degree at Sussex. “I’m very interested in Protestant theory and practise and in Martin Luther. The Reformation is the most exciting thing that happened in human history. I’m very very anti-Catholic... Catholicism is the white man’s Islam; it represents all that is evil and backward about society.” She goes to Church “about once a month – I can’t go more often because it makes me cry. But they don’t sing ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ or anything warlike, and that sucks. I’d like to sing it, but I’d have to join the Salvation Army and I don’t like the uniforms.”

*Made in Brighton* is published this week by Virgin Books, price £14.99

