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## Rita, Sue and Bob Too

Katie Beswick.

If you are or ever were a teenage girl, you'll likely know the strange, disorienting and sometimes intoxicating experience of living in a body under transformation. The adolescent female is an embodiment of becoming: not quite yet, but almost. In puberty we are suddenly fleshly: beautiful, ridiculous and gross. Our bodies turn alien and womanly, often literally overnight. These changes mark us as sexually viable in the eyes of the world, heralding lustful glances and unsolicited gropes, cat-calls and lewd comments from men. Meanwhile, beneath the surface, our desires sharpen — we develop sexual appetites, 'passionate sensations',<sup>1</sup> discovering rich and surprising facets of ourselves: carnal longings that the world at large still perceives as threat, and so compels us to treat as shameful. Yet in spite of enduring social stigmas, teenage sexual experience is a contradictory matter, conferring a certain sophistication, a worldliness that transcends physical pleasures, which is not without elevated social status. Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* takes such stuff of female adolescence as its primary material. Despite this, however, the play has rarely been analysed as a serious exploration of female desire on its own terms. More often, Dunbar's work is lauded as gritty realism; her three plays (*The Arbor* 1980, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* 1982 and *Shirley* 1986) widely understood together<sup>2</sup> as semi-autobiographical depictions of working-class life, in which the sexual politics are an incidental by-product of an undereducated young woman's reality, mediated only insofar as it was written down. This tendency to treat women's, and especially working-class women's, art as if its primary merit is as a window

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Kraus *Aliens & Anorexia* (London: Tuskar Rock Press, 2013) 140.

<sup>2</sup> although *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* is the most famous and most frequently performed.

into personal experience is widespread; perhaps it is why so few working-class women writers become part of any literary canon that is not circumscribed by class position.

Dunbar's testimony in interviews, encapsulated by the oft-quoted statement, 'You write what's said, you don't lie'<sup>3</sup>, perhaps drives the critical focus on the reality of the work, and its intersections with her own life story. But the dramatic and literary potentials of Dunbar's writing exist beyond its function as autobiographical realism. And despite her protestations that she was not a feminist,<sup>4</sup> Dunbar's work can be understood as deeply feminist in its commitment to offering a view into women's experiences, in revealing the conflict inherent in the pursuit of desire for women, and in illuminating the compromises women, and especially working-class women in the late-twentieth century industrial north of England, have often been forced to make between their inner longings and the reality of their daily lives.

In literature, the intensity of female desire is often subsumed by a patriarchal focus that sees men as the only legitimate sources of sexual intensity, even where that intensity is depicted as ludicrous or improper (Nabokov's *Lolita*, in which a middle-aged academic seduces his step-daughter, remains the seminal example of this trope). But, as the author Lisa Taddeo argued in her non-fiction exploration of female desire, *Three Women*, men's sexual desire actually provides limited potential for literary exploration, ending as it almost always does in orgasm, the point at which women's desire is 'often just beginning'.<sup>5</sup> *Rita Sue and Bob Too* appears at

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<sup>3</sup> Yvette Hutchinson 'Andrea Dunbar and the story behind the Bradford playwright who wrote Rita, Sue and Bob Too' *Yorkshire Post* (4<sup>th</sup> June 2019) <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/arts-and-culture/theatre-and-stage/andrea-dunbar-and-story-behind-bradford-playwright-who-wrote-rita-sue-and-bob-too-1754457> [Accessed 30th January 2021]

<sup>4</sup> Adelle Stripe *Writing Andrea Dunbar: Framing the Non-Fiction Novel in the Literary North* (PhD Thesis: University of Huddersfield 2016) 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Taddeo *Three Women* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2019) 4.

the outset to centre male desire, opening with Bob, a grown man of at least twenty-seven,<sup>6</sup> driving Rita and Sue, teenagers he and his wife employ as babysitters, onto the moors in order to have sex with them. This is ostensibly an act of grooming: Bob has clearly given this excursion some forethought. He offers the girls a lift home, suggesting almost immediately that they take a detour. He quickly switches the conversation into sexual tone, asking whether Rita and Sue are ‘courting’. He ascertains their sexual experience (‘Are you both a virgin?’), before pulling a condom (he uses the brand-name ‘Durex’) out of his pocket and inviting them to try putting it on him. Bob is gently patronising throughout the scene, adopting an avuncular tone in order to coerce the girls into ‘a jump’ (a colloquial term for sex) in his car. The girls respond to his attention with a childish ignorance.

**Bob** [...] First you have to have an erection.

**Rita** A what ‘-tion?

**Bob** An erection.

**Rita** (to **Sue**) What’s that?

**Sue** I don’t know.

**Bob** An erection is a hard-on. Do you know what a hard-on is?

**Rita** Yes.

**Bob** Well the proper term is called erection.

**Sue** Well instead of using the proper names, use hard-on and things like that.

Because that’s all we understand.

**Rita** Yes you should. We’ve never been taught words like erection and Durex.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the age he tells the girls he is. But Bob is a liar, and can’t therefore be trusted to offer an accurate account of himself.

On stage, this opening scene is usually played for comedic value, despite the disturbing fact of an adult coercing children into sex. But who is grooming whom? Dunbar does not make this straightforward for her audience, as the girls — and particularly Sue — suggest they may be far more knowing and in control of the situation than they initially let on. ‘Do you think he believes we were a virgin?’ Sue asks Rita, as they sit in the back of the car after Bob jumps them, one after the other— the bodily reality of sex portrayed in all its awkward physicality as they struggle to find a comfortable position on the reclined car seat, looking afterwards at the used, sperm-filled condom, lying limp on Rita’s leg, an absurd totem to all that spent pleasure. If Bob’s demeanour seems perfunctory once he’s ‘shot his muck’, the girls’ desire for Bob is only piqued by the culmination of the sex act. They have gleaned little in the way of physical satisfaction from Bob’s affections, both comment that the sex ‘hurt’ and Sue remarks that, ‘He seemed to enjoy it a lot more than we did.’ Still, they are already anticipating what might come next: ‘I hope he brings us here again,’ Rita says. ‘Oh he will,’ Sue replies, ‘Make no mistake about it.’

Rita and Sue are not merely compliant then — they frequently express active appetites for sex with Bob (‘I could shag the arse off him’). This, added to their ambivalent, sometimes hostile, attitude towards his wife Michelle, and their playing Bob against one another as they both sneak off for secret lone trysts with him, is difficult to reconcile with prevailing moral sensibilities — both now and when the play was first staged. Indeed, this aspect of the plot — in which Rita and Sue are positioned as willing and enthusiastic participants in the affair — has received criticism throughout the forty years of the play’s existence. The film version notoriously caused deep upset among the local community on Dunbar’s Bradford housing estate, where it was set. Bradford City Council called the film a ‘slummy, false image’<sup>7</sup> of the

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<sup>7</sup> Lynn Gardner ‘Born to Write and Die’ *The Guardian*. (July 4<sup>th</sup> 1998)

town. The novelist Adelle Stripe has described Dunbar's version of working-class life as 'uneasy and contradictory'.<sup>8</sup> When *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was revived in 2001, staged in a double bill with a verbatim drama called *A State Affair*, Dunbar's daughter Lorraine was quoted in the latter, saying her mother had depicted herself as a 'right tart'<sup>9</sup>—no better than a low-class prostitute. Meanwhile, in a review of a 2017 revival, performed in the wake of the #MeToo movement, in which women across the world spoke out as victims of sexual abuse and assault, the journalist Catherine Love referred to the production's refusal to offer moral judgment as 'appalling'.<sup>10</sup>

This ongoing compulsion for moral certainty on the part of commentators tells us little about the play itself, and more about the persisting unease with which adolescent female desire is received and framed. At what point can we understand women, and especially young working-class women ('girls'), as legitimately sexually autonomous in a patriarchal and class-riven social system where they are also always subordinate? The impossibility of answering this question satisfactorily, at least within existing conceptions of consent, desire and related UK legislation, coupled with the tendency for the lives and desires of working-class girls to be treated as abject by society at large, is perhaps where *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* offers its most compelling insights. What Dunbar gives us here is a means of conceiving questions of underage sexual activity beyond binary paradigms of predator and prey. Certainly, Rita and Sue's desire is childish at points, and Rita's growing infatuation with Bob— she eventually falls pregnant with his baby and marries him — feels utterly doomed

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<sup>8</sup> Adelle Stripe *Writing Andrea Dunbar: Framing the Non-Fiction Novel in the Literary North* (PhD Thesis: University of Huddersfield 2016) 6.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Soans 'A State Affair', in A. Dunbar and R. Soans (eds), *Rita Sue and Bob Too/A State Affair*, London: Methuen (2000) 134.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Love 'Rita, Sue and Bob Too today: Andrea Dunbar's truths still haunt us' *The Guardian* (14<sup>th</sup> September 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/sep/14/rita-sue-and-bob-too-andrea-dunbarausterity-council-estate> [accessed 1 February 2018].

given he is a serial philanderer who cheats on the mother of his children with two teenagers. Yet the girls never relinquish control entirely and cannot be understood, in the terms in which Dunbar delivers them to us, as victims.

In scene six, Rita and Sue shirk a day at work on a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) to visit the countryside with Bob. Their decision to shun monotonous and low-paid labour in a textile mill in pursuit of carnal pleasure sheds some light on why the affair is attractive in the first place — avenues for pure enjoyment in a context of poverty, domestic violence and menial work are few and far between. This hedonistic pursuit fails, however, as Bob cannot get an erection. His preceding tirade against the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher point both to the political turmoil of working-class communities in the industrial north in the early 1980s (indeed, employment prospects have continued to retract in the region ever since as a result of the neoliberal policies first introduced by Thatcher's government) and to the possibilities for women that were opening up as a result of wider cultural and social changes during the same period. Thatcher was, after all, the first female prime minister. This is an unstable picture, as women, and especially working-class women, have suffered terribly as a result of the deindustrialisation and concurrent social policies that have created conditions of soaring unemployment, drug abuse and poverty in former manufacturing towns like Bradford. Yet, as the feminist cultural critic Angela McRobbie suggests,<sup>11</sup> the 1970s and early 1980s provided one of the first points at which significant numbers of working-class women could find expression for their desires beyond marriage and children.<sup>12</sup> Movements such as second-wave feminism and punk, the widespread adoption of reliable contraception, grants for higher education and the expansion of media forms, particularly magazines, pop music and

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<sup>11</sup> Angela McRobbie *Feminism and Youth Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) second edition. 1-11 and 208-209.

<sup>12</sup> We should not over-emphasise this point, however. Marriage and children were still also the only paths available for many women.

television, made it possible for girls to imagine and sometimes to realise a life lived differently, and markedly less painfully, than the ones lived by their mothers, aunts and grandmothers.

Bob's misery in scene six, as he sits morosely in the car, penis flaccid, raging against the country's female leadership, is a spectre of the impending decline of respectable working-class masculinity. Unlike their female counterparts, the horizons of possibility for working-class men cannot be understood to have improved in any significant way since the end of the twentieth century. High rates of unemployment, declining educational attainment and increased levels of suicide have replaced manual work as the lot for working-class men in many regions of the UK. Sue's amusement at Bob's temporary impotence, therefore, holds a particular power here — as, to a lesser extent, does her and Rita's nervous laughter as Bob and Michelle argue after returning home from a night out — foreshadowing a society in which Bob's social position is utterly eroded. Their laughter might also be perceived as defensive. The girls' piss-taking in the face of Bob's marital difficulties ('I'm amazed at the pair of you', he tells them. 'You can just laugh everything off as though you haven't a care in the world.')

can be read as an example of what Angela Carter refers to as the 'giggle':<sup>13</sup> the means by which teenage girls throughout history have ridiculed male desire.

The giggle – inherently girlish and unthreatening, is one of the few tactics women have to humiliate men without risking violent retribution, thus maintaining some semblance of control in a sexual dynamic where they are usually subordinate. And violence towards women, in all its guises, is within Dunbar's purview. This not only because of her own life

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<sup>13</sup> Angela Carter 'Alison's Giggle' in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Vintage Classics 2013) 663.



experience (Dunbar was famously ‘discovered’ in a Women’s Aid refuge after she wrote her first play), but because — to separate her literature from her life — it is the means by which the women in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* are made subject to male desires. Sue is hit around the head by her violent, drunken father, Bob threatens Michelle with violence when she berates him over the affair in public, Sue’s mother, ‘Mum’, is wary of her husband’s reaction (‘there’d be murder’) when Michelle asks her to stay for one more drink in the final scene. The fact that sexual pleasure, or indeed any pursuit of desire that does not centre the male ego, carries risks for women – pregnancy, death, violence, shame — is always under the surface of the action. Thus, the giggle functions as a means of momentarily neutralising such risks. It is a way of asserting control for the girls in a situation where their capacity for control is usually subject to the whims of Bob’s needs in the moment, notwithstanding their active participation in the affair. The comic tone of the play might also be understood in a similar register — it’s a giggle, a comic interpretation of an experience which, as any working-class girl who has found herself embroiled in relationships more adult than she was ready for will no doubt attest, is bleaker in reality than it can be made to seem on stage. ‘It weren’t so funny when it were happening,’ Dunbar reportedly observed during a rehearsal.<sup>14</sup>

Michelle and Mum, though minor characters, are also compelling explorations of the complexities and contradictions of female desire, and the disappointments that have often met working-class women looking for autonomous pleasure. The role of wife, which both women have assumed, has historically functioned as the only means by which a woman might acquire ‘a licence to legitimately explore her own sexuality in relation to a man, as well as

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<sup>14</sup> Anna Coatman ‘Rita, Sue and Bob Too at the Royal Court’ *London Review of Books* (19<sup>th</sup> December 2017) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2017/december/rita-sue-and-bob-too-at-the-royal-court> [Accessed 31st January 2021].

acquiring part shares in her husband's public status and wealth'.<sup>15</sup> Michelle's enviable wardrobe, comfortable house, and nights out at the pub certainly provide a cushion to her husband's infidelity (what else can she mean when she says 'I love him'?). At least until he leaves her. But the role of wife is also often disappointing. Indeed, the girls are themselves ambivalent about the prospect of marriage. As Mum reflects, and as Rita and Sue are fully aware, desires change. What once seemed a romantic adventure can quickly become a prison.

**Mum** Anyway, all men are no good. They want shooting for all the trouble they cause.

**Michelle** Well you get good and bad ones. I just got a bad one.

**Mum** Mine's bloody stupid. When he got that piece of paper he thought he owned me.

**Michelle** It's all right for them to do what they want. But when it comes to you, oh no, you're the wife. Stop at home, look after the kids, cook for me, that's what men want for you. And sex of course. They can't do without that can they?

In this way, the depiction of female desire in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* resonates with McRobbie's findings in her ethnography of working-class girls during the 1980s, where marriage functions as an object of desire (although the girls in her study know full well the reality of its limitations), and, eventually, as a curtailment of that same desire as the impossible promises of romance that circulate in popular culture fail to materialise.<sup>16</sup> If Rita, whose idolisation of Bob intensifies until she falls pregnant, feels momentarily satisfied when

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<sup>15</sup> Angela Carter 'Alison's Giggle' in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Vintage Classics 2013) 662-676.

<sup>16</sup> Angela McRobbie *Feminism and Youth Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) second edition, 146 and 172-176.

he leaves Michelle to set up home with her, there seems little pleasure in her ultimate fate as the wife of an adulterer.

Michelle, Mum and Sue bump into one another in a local pub at the close of the play, and we learn Rita is too busy with her new family to visit Sue, who has moved away from the area. Michelle expresses bitterness at the end of her marriage and anger at Rita. We know little about Sue's fate, other than that she is living with a boyfriend in a different town. Although this is an oblique ending, and while she doesn't exist beyond the drama, it's a comfort to know that there were cracks in the established social structures of the late twentieth century, through which women like Sue could find opportunities to explore and now and then realise their desires, beyond shame, ridicule and inevitable disappointment. Beyond men. But if there is hope in fiction then Dunbar's reality reminds us there can be little comfort in fictional hope. It is enduringly tragic that Andrea Dunbar died aged twenty-nine, succumbing to a brain haemorrhage in the Bradford pub where she drank and socialised. The least we can do is recognise that her literature speaks beyond only the facts of her life. The lasting interest in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* that justifies this new edition exists not because it holds a mirror to Dunbar's gritty reality, but because it remains an incisive and revealing account of adolescent female experience. The play offers perspectives that still resonate, which are still relevant, and which, almost forty years past its stage premier, are still rare in contemporary drama.