

by **FRED INGLIS**

Hitch-22: a memoir

by Christopher Hitchens
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This book has been reviewed absolutely everywhere, mostly, it seems, by Pharisees at pains to express their gratitude that they in no way resemble the great Hitchens. Decca Aitkenhead in *The Guardian* took up her entire interview, indeed, with explaining in a frenzy of self-righteousness that she didn't like him and anyway he was a drunk.

It's true that, once alienated, Hitchens looks to swap offensiveness for offences taken. His dust-jacket is a close-up of the man drawing heavily on a cigarette of which he has smoked so many thousands, defying them to kill him (sixty-one and still going strongly for the top) and defying also his well-intentioned reader to disapprove and stop him.

The enviable recognition, the notoriety, the controversiality, the sheer cheek and bounce of the man are not, surely, the topics which should first preoccupy pious readers of the *THE*, concerned that the books whose subject-matter is the state of the world, should be well-written, well-informed, judicious, balanced if not wholly without the unsteadiness of strong feeling, and expressive of a coherent enough vision of human bondage.

Hitchens embodies all these exigent qualities in abundance. He also possesses enough vitality for three men, and enough love of life and of others to fill the hearts and the biographies of the several splendid writers whose close friendship is so richly celebrated in these pages – Martin Amis, James Fenton, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and, in a dying fall, Edward Said. He turns a beautiful sentence, is frequently funny enough to make one laugh aloud, loves the best, the right books, knows from the inside and is utterly lighthearted and dead serious about the acute dangers of, as they say, low intensity conflict (Iraq), sudden and bloody liberation (Ceausescu's Romania), backstreet bombing (Belfast), all this while shaking the hands of monsters (General Videla of Argentina) and of saints (Nelson Mandela). He has met every political celebrity and, however partisan in his judgement (which of us, necessarily, is not?), never fails to make his cutting insights slice open bleeding truths, about Gore Vidal or Norman Mailer, say, on his own side, or about Noam Chomsky or (even)

Edward Said on the other, when a clash of principle over the interpretation of the present caused irrevocable division.

For he is a man for whom any and every political act is moral. This is a frightful burden; borne as unshakably as Hitchens bears it, it would make ordinary politics impossible to conduct. It renders Hitchens himself resolutely blind ("I see no signal") to any distinction between his own conviction and certainty itself. But – my word! – it fairly braces lax or morally paralytic readers to sit up a bit straighter, even to stand up for what feels right.

In a useful rule of procedure for the practical criticism of ideas, Hitchens recommends us to pay much more attention to *how* a thinker thinks rather than *what* he thinks.

Naturally, all his likely readers will know of Hitchens's vehement support for the decision to invade Iraq. It is still a bit weird to realise just how many liberal-minded people turned out to protest against the dislodging of a horrible tyrant whose record, here so abundantly documented with now-forgotten atrocities (Kurdistan chemical warfare, the slaughter and expropriation of the Marsh Arabs, the mass graves outside Baghdad, Saddam's snuff movies), was so much worse than the monsters previously dislodged by 'liberal intervention' in Serbia or Sierra Leone. "Not in my name" rang in his ears with an emetic sanctimony and remains an abominable affront to liberty herself and the gracious freedoms of the 1776 Declaration.

Such are the momentous admonitions of Hitchens's autobiography directed at *bien-pensant*, mildly principled and perfectly safe academics with no ambition to win the queasy fame of television's soft-hard talk. The life lived and betokened in his fluent, just occasionally hasty and too-voluble writing, enacts a dramatic message. Consider not what but how he thinks and lives. In 2007 he took the oath of American citizenship with characteristic bravura, swank even, before the Director of Homeland Security and beside the historic Potomac.

This is how Hitchens's thinking about the necessity of atheism and the stupendous freedoms of the "many Americas" he relishes and admires translates into action. "America's is the only revolution still going strong," he writes, and it is an aphorism one might set for discussion in an exam paper to try out the depth and tenacity of that loose-mouthed and routine anti-Americanism to be found so easily in any academic canteen.

Hitchens's vivid, nonchalant, talkative, gripping narrative is, no doubt, unemulable. It is also immensely generous-hearted, its celebration of great friendship if not emulable (who else knows *all* the best writers of the day?) then a high ideal worthy of all our aspirations; his is the work, no doubt, of a monster raving loony ego, but then you'd have to have one to bring off such a glorious, laughter-filled, gallant and garish epic. Whatever his passport, he belongs incorrigibly to English literature in that wide apse of the Pantheon where the great tradition of traveller-intellectuals and defenders of the faith of freeborn Englishmen and women is commemorated. I hope it is a long time before his statue is needed there.