

Know thy Self

Philip Watson gets a taste for the perverse world of Will Self

Few first novels get noticed. Fewer still get favourably reviewed. And rarer yet is the literary debut that hints at a talent for providing something new, something original.

Will Self's *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* was such a book. A collection of six interlinked stories which looked at the madness and allure of popular ideology, the book was a teasing confluence of comedy and absurdity, menace and miasma that garnered much praise. "If a manic JG Ballard and a depressive David Lodge got together, they might produce something like *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*," wrote Martin Amis. It was a paean echoed by many, including novelists Doris Lessing and Beryl Bainbridge.

Self's is a world that mirrors his own bizarre and unsettling life story, a personal history that reads more like a Freudian bad joke, the kind one of his sicker characters might recount. Some snapshots: Self's mother, "a deeply, deeply neurotic New York Jew", is treated for depression while she is pregnant with him and demands an abortion; brother John Self (coincidentally the fictional name of the debauched and odious protagonist in Martin Amis' *Money*) begins therapy – aged four; Will begins experimenting with soft drugs at twelve, is registered as a heroin addict at seventeen and is busted in his last year at Oxford (where he studied PPE and had a punk band called Will Self and the Abusers); "very paranoid and disturbed", he draws cartoons as answers to several of his philosophy finals; and he gets sacked from his job as a cartoonist for the *New Statesman* because his strip, *Slump*, "about a guy paralysed by torpor and apathy", is considered too depressing.

These days Self may be a relatively clean-living 31-year-old father of two, but he still calls upon these experiences, and his imaginative flair, to conjure up increasingly outré scenarios. He has, for instance, just completed a *roman à clef* called "Scale" which looks at six different meanings of the word in relation to a man who lives by the Beaconsfield model village, and has written another short story in which a couple bring up a model baby only to discover their beloved progeny is a middle-aged banker from Düsseldorf who speaks only business German.

Perhaps most warped and disturbing of all, though, is his new book, *Cock & Bull*. Consisting of "Cock", "a dark, perverse and nasty" novella in which a young wife grows and employs a penis, and its lighter, more farcical counterpoint "Bull" (from which this extract appears), it is a book about gender politics that approaches its subject full-on. "I wrote 'Cock' almost entirely out of anger," he flashes. "Anger at men."

Funny, stimulating, almost excessively *brainy* in conversation, and the owner of a vocabulary that is little short of dazzling, Self likes to have an angle on things.



In a little over an hour, he roams across such subjects as phallogocentricity, drug legalisation, postmodernism, even television's *Doogie Howser MD*, before landing on *The State of the English Novel*. "The English are like a nation standing in the rain at a literary bus stop desperate for a good writer to come along," he pronounces. It is not intended to be self-referential, but it leaves you with one lasting impression: that Will Self is already two stops down the road to being that arrival.

