

BOOKS

Philip Watson explores the dark imagination of novelist Sam North

SOME IDEAS AND experiences are so overwhelmingly important to Sam North that ordinary spellings simply won't do. First letters are capitalised, nouns are made proper; the words becoming at once more immediate and imposing.

North's Somerset Maugham award-winning first novel, *The Automatic Man* (Secker & Warburg, £12.95), is peppered with examples. The nightmarish diary of a man straitjacketed by the fear and paranoia sparked by a vicious

of almost academic seriousness.

"*Chapel Street* is about the notion of time as *the* spiritual element," says North. "Now that they've proved matter doesn't exist, the study of time and space has reached a level of religious significance – that's why all these science books have become so popular. Time fulfils all the criteria that people need from a god; it's such a weird, ghostly phenomenon."

It is this awareness of time's spirituality, and of the need not to waste time that, North

believes, can help people find a sense of purpose – another important theme in *Chapel Street*. "Religion used to hand you a purpose on a plate – that of earning your way into the next world," he says. "It's not that easy nowadays."

This sense of searching is very much a direct reflection of the experiences of North's twenties – a restless, exhausting kaleidoscope of odd jobs, study and acting. Leaving school at sixteen having

taken his A-levels early, North moved to London from the small Exmoor hill farm on which he was brought up.

Periods followed when he worked as a panel beater, waiter, labourer, van driver, motorcycle messenger, groom, and, through

his knowledge of judo, a stager of fight sequences in pop videos, broken only by a spell teaching English in Colombia.

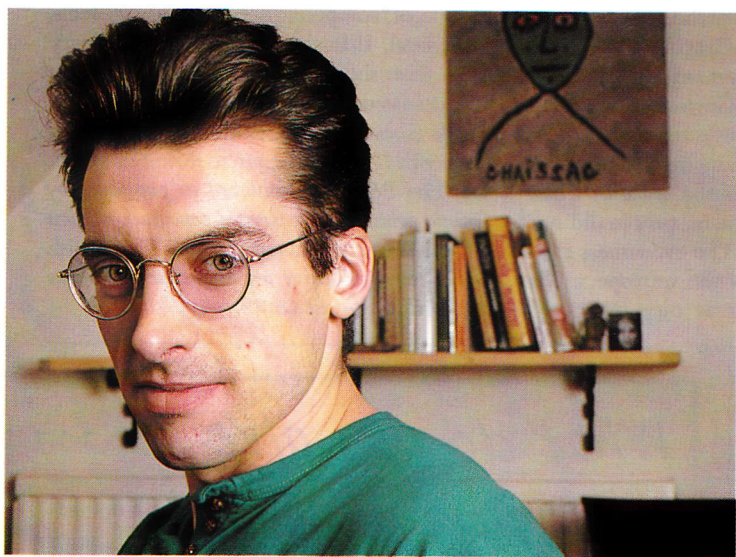
Acting experience while he was studying at Middlesex Polytechnic led to parts on the London fringe and the role of a "spiky-haired NME punk journalist" in *Sid and Nancy*. In 1987, North completed a one-year course at Bournemouth Film School during which he co-wrote *Queen Sacrifice*, a 30-minute film that has been shown on BBC2 and has won several awards on the European film circuit.

These days he is a full-time writer working on film scripts for a Soho production company, and on his third novel, provisionally titled *The Gifting Programme*.

And while he admits his purpose came to him rather late in life, North claims emphatically to have found the right job.

Both his first and second novels are very accomplished, his style tense and controlled, and the prose laced with an uncompromising realism and intelligent slanginess that has earned him comparisons with James Kelman and Martin Amis. North creates a spiralling, claustrophobic intensity in which the tower block in *The Automatic Man* and the boarding house in *Chapel Street* become as central to the plot as the main characters. Only when the novels become excessively internalised do they keep the reader out. Sometimes there is a sense of dark implosion, of overbearing longueurs unrelieved by either a clear narrative or lively dialogue.

"Yes I know the novels appear bleak and the characters alienated," says North in response to such criticisms, "but it's not a conscious thing, it's just my taste. I guess I'm attracted to a slight darkness of the imagination."



Prose of uncompromising realism has earned North comparisons with Martin Amis.

mugging, the book details the Original Incident when he is robbed, and the Alley where he's sickeningly beaten.

His self-imprisonment leads to an agoraphobic fear of the Opponent who lurks outside his door, and who is dispelled only after he has completed the Test, and proved himself to be once again a man.

His second novel, *Chapel Street* (Secker & Warburg, £13.99), published this month, concentrates on one idea alone: Time. A book which follows the struggles of a group of disaffected lodgers in a central London boarding house, the novel is concerned with time's omnipotence, its omniscience, "its glibbest trick: death", even its religiousness.

As disarming as these theories appear, and as naive and adolescent as his characters occasionally sound, North delivers both with absolute candour and conviction. He is a confident, thoughtful 30-year-old who looks remarkably different to his pin-up boy publicity photographs. His chiselled features are usually hidden behind glasses of the type worn by Joe 90, which give North the look

Essayist Timothy Garton Ash is an historian of remarkable vision. James Wood reports

AS A LITERARY form, the essay began for solid reasons: people needed it to give expression to urgencies and momentous happenings. But in recent years, the essay has fallen out of favour. People don't rely on its tight structure any longer; they don't need its pressurised compartment to keep aloft. Nowadays, daily journalism keeps most of us airborne. Timothy Garton Ash decided to let a little air in, and to roam across Central Europe in pursuit of oppression and revolution. His essays, first collected in *The*

Uses of Adversity, and later in *We The People*, are justly celebrated.

Fluent in Polish, German and Czech, he has been both witness to and participant in many of the political struggles in these three countries over the last ten years. His essays retain a sense of the hustle of the form's origins: his prose is curious, ambulatory, hungry. He is not really a *writer* (certainly not a *polisher* – his pieces lack that sort of finesse), but he is robust and impatient with the world.

After travelling in East Germany in the late