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The Times Literary Supplement (ISSN 0307661, USPS 021-626) is published weekly by The Times Literary Supplement Limited, London UK, and distributed in the USA by OCS America Inc, 49–27 31st Street, Long Island City, NY11101–3113. Periodical postage paid at Long Island City NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: please send address corrections to TLS, PO Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834, USA. USA and Canadian retail newsstand copies distributed by Kable Distribution Services, 14 Wall Street, Suite 4C New York, New York 10005

Funny ha ha

JAYA ANINDA CHATTERJEE

Christopher Buckley

THEY EAT PUPPIES, DON'T THEY?
336pp. Corsair. £11.99.
978 1 78033 672 5

Ben Fountain

BILLY LYNN'S LONG HALFTIME WALK
309pp. Canongate. £16.99.
978 0 85786 438 3

In *The Irresponsible Self: On laughter and the novel*, James Wood dismissed the "ineffability" of literary comedy, arguing that "tragicomic stoicism", or "the comedy of forgiveness . . . of laughing with" and "the comedy of correction . . . a way of laughing at" are salient categories of humour in literary fiction. The antiheroes of the two books under review, Christopher Buckley's *They Eat Puppies, Don't They?* and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, exemplify these types of comedy in their struggles with artifice and duplicity, eliciting readers' mockery and empathy respectively.

A veteran humorist, best known for *Thank You for Smoking* (2006) and *Florence of Arabia* (2004), Buckley has written a wickedly ludic eleventh novel featuring Walter "Bird" McIntyre, a nebbishy Washington defence lobbyist. The contrast between Bird's delusions of grandeur and his professional foibles shapes the novel's humour. Devoting himself to the study of China, Bird seeks an "unnerving specter" to upend America's "coma of complacency". Angel Templeton, a neoconservative sylph, proves to be an able co-conspirator. The title refers to her sheer hatred of China for its Communism and "cozy[ing] up to loathsome regimes like North Korea". Bird persuades her to spread the rumour that the Chinese secret service are planning to put "radioactive pellets in [the] yak butter" of "the Dalai Lama . . . a seventy-five-year-old sweetie pie with glasses, plus the sandals and the saffron robe and the hugging and the mandalas and the peace and harmony". The idea is to incense the American public and help to win Congressional approval for a secret weapons programme.

The black comedy in *They Eat Puppies* is both situational and narrative. In a pastiche of Rabelais, Buckley describes Bird's family and fortunes as "a trophy wife, candelabra-wielding mother, staircase-threatening caregiver, saber-wielding brother, dentally and mentally challenged caretaker, crumbling house, money-sucking mortgage, [and] dwindling bank account". The narration is a kind of sustained persiflage, in which Bird, a modern-day Leopold Bloom, is repeatedly ridiculed for his deranged family and impecunious circumstances. His wife Myndi, an equestrienne, has a mobile phone ringtone like "Valkyrie hooves pound[ing] on his cerebellum". Her pedigreed horses are a drain on his coffers, their bloodlines "hideously expensive genetic tendencies". Bird's only escape is to toil by night at his quartet of unpublished novels. And yet his circumstances, dismal as they seem, are entirely of his own making.

By contrast, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is a comedy of forgiveness. The protagonist, Billy Lynn, is a nineteen-year-old specialist in the US Army's Bravo regiment. Hailing from a dysfunctional family in Stovall, Texas (including an adulterous, disabled father; an overwrought mother; and a critically injured, hyper-sensitive sister), Billy is "too young" and "doesn't know enough" – the epitome of "tragicomic stoicism". When his sister's fiancé jilts her, he takes a crowbar to the fellow's car and, under threat of a felony charge, agrees to join the army. One day, the Bravos come under fire from Iraqi insurgents, and Billy earns decorations for his vain attempt to save a fellow soldier's life. The Bush administration sponsors a "Victory Tour" to recognize the regiment's collective bravery. Photographed and fêted by hawkish Americans, honoured at a Dallas Cowboys football game, the Bravos are encouraged to work with a Hollywood producer on a film featuring Hilary Swank as one of the soldiers. But Billy is an ordinary teenager seeking a girlfriend, camaraderie and safety from the battlefield – elemental, private forms of contentment, rather than the honours of the public stage. He considers the celebrations "sham . . . spin, bullshit . . . duplicity, puff, evasion, cant, and bald-faced lies".

Overtly ambitious in its use of visual "arabesques" (words are scattered across the page in a manner reminiscent of Lewis Carroll) and verbal pyrotechnics (the phonetic spellings include "terrRist", "nina leven", "Eyerack" and "currj"), the novel ultimately deters the reader from feeling compassion towards Billy, whose condescension towards his fellow Americans becomes grating. He "can't help but regard [them] as children . . . bold and proud and certain in the way of clever children blessed with too much self-esteem". The voices of the other characters are poorly distinguished from one another and lack nuance, being given little chance to express their thoughts at length, without Billy's interceding. Hardly a reliable narrator, Billy is racked by post-traumatic stress, alcoholism, lust and woeful inarticulacy (his feelings are "ineffable whatever"). Such mediation, however, in the service of narrative omniscience, is in itself a kind of "duplicity" or "puff", an insincerity rivalling that of the characters whom Billy mocks.

And so these novels, wrought from similar comedic fabric – that of a hapless Everyman facing the gullibility (or duplicity) of the American public – dovetail. But while Buckley's buffoonish Bird retains a measure of hope for his novelistic pursuits and professional well-being, Fountain's Billy remains a tragicomic figure, bound to a second tour of duty in Iraq. His portrait of army life recalls Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse": "you fuck up, they scream at you, you fuck up some more . . . but overlying all the small, petty, stupid, basically foreordained fuckups looms the ever-present prospect of the life-fucking fuckup, a fuckup so profound and all-encompassing as to crush all hope of redemption".