

Ezra Slef

The Next
Nobel Laureate
in Literature

Andrew Komarnyckyj

*A sample of the
first few pages*

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Ezra Slef
The Next Nobel Laureate in Literature
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For Martin, Denis and Richard

Introduction

There is a body of opinion that Ezra Slef lacks a sense of humour. Nothing could be further from the truth. He has a well-developed, if somewhat eccentric, comedic sensibility. I remember as if it was yesterday the time he pretended not to be at home when I called at his house. It was only after I had knocked on his front door and rung the bell for fully fifteen minutes, and finally, in desperation, shinned up a drainpipe to gain access to a first-floor bedroom via a window carelessly left open, that he emerged from his hiding place and revealed himself to me. He made a great show of false annoyance at my antics, weighing into me with a series of expletives too extreme to repeat here. He was so giddy he needed a glass of his favourite Scotch whisky to calm down.

Although Slef is a public figure known to all, he has a strong desire to keep his personal life private. When I asked if I could write an authorised biography of him, he refused point-blank to permit it. Faced with his intractable position on the matter, I thought the project doomed until I realised I could use his sense of humour as a means of persuasion. I said, in a jocular manner:

‘I am not leaving until you give me permission to write your biography, Mr Slef.’

On hearing these words he took hold of one of my ears in the same way a schoolmaster might grasp the ear of an errant pupil, marched me good-humouredly to his front door, and ejected me from his house. The alcohol on his breath swirled around me as I stumbled and fell face-down in the snow. His parting shot, delivered with the deadpan humour which I know to be his trademark, was:

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‘You can write what you expletive well like, as long as it doesn’t involve me.’

The door slammed shut behind me as I lay on his path, shivering and nonplussed, wondering what to do next. Then, when I got to my feet, brushing snow from my clothes, the full significance of Slef’s words became clear, and my heart soared.

He had said: ‘You can write what you expletive well like’—i.e., he gave me his full permission to write his biography; and he also said: ‘as long as it doesn’t involve me’—indicating that, as a working novelist, he was far too busy to grant me interviews and give me access to his personal papers. Other than for those two minor impediments, I had the green light to go ahead.

Regrettably, I was unable to interview Slef’s friends to obtain background information about him, because they are writers, critics, journalists, and the like, for whom time is at a premium. I have therefore based my book largely on material in the public domain.

List of Plates

Having devoted many years to collecting photographs of Slef to illustrate this work, I met with a last-minute hitch. The images I had lovingly collated could not be used as they were subject to copyright, and the copyright holders were reluctant to allow publication. The issue would have been easily resolved but for the fact that their lawyers behaved like rabid Pit-Bulls, so we have ended up with a biography lacking any photographs of its subject. In order to remedy this omission, I have included in it a number of detailed pen-portraits of Slef. Even if you have never seen a picture of him, by the time you finish reading the book, you will feel you have looked into his penetrating blue-grey eyes, shaken him firmly by the hand, and perhaps even enjoyed a drink with him in the King's Arms on Holywell Street, in Oxford.

Chapter 1

Origins and Early Life

Ezra Slef was born in 1960, or something like that. To be frank, I am not interested in his date of birth, and nor should you be. Such detail may be important to the small-minded, but is of no consequence to me. My interest lies only in the grand sweep of ideas.

He grew up in Russia, which perhaps accounts for his ability to use expletives in creative ways I had never encountered until I met him.

It is easy to imagine the young ES (as I shall hereinafter refer to him on and off in the interests of brevity) in his hometown of Moscow, a studious child like me, one who was no doubt picked on by his churlish peers. Enduring their mocking laughter every playtime will have been torture for him. It was only to be expected that he would become a bookish type, choosing to spend his days in the school library rather than risk the cruel taunts of his unappreciative peers. Little did they know he was one day to become a celebrated man of letters, standing tall on the world stage of literature.

There was one lad in particular—Brian Jessop—who made my young life a misery. I am sure Slef had more than his own fair share of Brian Jessops. Perhaps he made light of the situation. I doubt it. It is far more likely he developed a festering hatred for such characters, one which would lead to all manner of unpredictable outcomes in later life.¹ But I am getting ahead of myself.

¹ Unknown either to me or Jessop at the time, our paths were to cross long after we left school, with seismic consequences.

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So precocious was the young Slef that before his teens he was reading a vast range of literature from Beckett to Eliot to Pound. This had to be done in secret as he attended the sort of school where academic achievement was frowned upon, and likely to earn the achiever in question a summary beating at the hands of one of the school's many fearsome bullies.

What can it have felt like for the young Slef to be so abused by the thugs who patrolled his alma mater in search of victims to prey upon? Drawing on my personal experience, I am able to paint a vivid picture of what he endured and how it must have felt.

The first of my many encounters with Brian Jessop occurred when I was standing at the far end of the school playground minding my own business. Jessop came running towards me in hot pursuit of a tennis ball. He didn't deviate one iota from his chosen course, and I didn't notice him until his fat form was almost upon me.

The thudding of his feet roused me from a daydream and I stepped to one side just in time to avoid being knocked to the ground, but not quickly enough to prevent a collision with Jessop. One of his flailing arms smacked painfully into my cheek. The pain, however, did not trouble me.

What troubled me was that Jessop appeared to be drawing to a halt. That could only mean one thing: he intended to exact some sort of revenge for the effrontery I'd shown in hitting his hand with my cheekbone. Due to his bulk he was like an oil tanker and couldn't stop quickly. He pulled up yards away, then turned and marched towards me.

I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It didn't help that with my spindly frame and bookish demeanour I looked like one of life's victims.

I began to feel distinctly queasy. Jessop had a reputation for being 'hard', and I—quite rightly—had a reputation for being soft, so fighting him was out of the question, as was running

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away. If I took flight, he was sure to corner me sooner or later, probably in a dark alley, knowing my luck. I decided to reason with him in the hope I might dissuade him from doing anything rash, such as beating me to a pulp. He got to within a yard of me and opened his mouth, revealing a set of perfect yellow teeth.

‘What did you say?’ he asked.

I did not reply on the reasonable assumption that he could not have been talking to me. After all, I hadn’t said anything. I assumed he must have overheard someone behind me.

He thrust his face close up to mine, giving me an unrivalled view of a large red spot on the end of his nose which had a yellow dot in the middle of it.

‘What did you expletive say, Botekin?’ he snarled.

This was lightning from a clear sky. I had no idea how to respond. All I knew was that the situation was fast getting out of control, if, indeed, it had ever been in control.

I tried to take a step back, but someone behind me was blocking my way, probably a bystander anxious to keep me between himself and Jessop. I would have done the same in his position.

‘I didn’t say anything,’ I said, after a pause for reflection. Then I hastily added: ‘sorry.’

‘You expletive what?’

Saying ‘sorry’ had evidently been a mistake. The word seemed to have provoked him.

‘I apologise,’ I added. This was naïve on my part. Specimens like Jessop are seldom, if ever, mollified by words alone. A billy-club wielded with vigour is more likely to mollify his type than an apology, however sincerely it may be given.

Jessop paced up and down in front of me, neck-jutting, his chest stuck out, like one of those hideous pigeons you see scavenging for crumbs in the town square. His face turned a vibrant red, then an unpleasant puce colour.

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‘First you expletive well expletive expletive me,’ he said, ‘and then you expletive well call me an expletive.’

‘I—I—I did not call you anything,’ I replied, with something akin to panic in my voice. ‘Honestly, I did not. You must have mis-heard me.’

Jessop abruptly stopped his pacing and thrust his face close to mine again. It was screwed up with rage. I wondered how he was able to get so angry.

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ he demanded.

‘No,’ I replied, ‘definitely not.’

‘Then I must be telling the truth, mustn’t I?’ he said, with a note of triumph in his voice. ‘And the truth is that you walloped me and called me an expletive and now I have to do something about it. I can’t let pathetic worms like you get away with that sort of thing. It wouldn’t be good for my reputation, would it?’

I did not know how to respond, so remained silent.

‘Would it?’ he repeated.

This left me with little option other than to reply in the affirmative.

‘You are right, it would not be good for your reputation,’ I said, suddenly aware of a small crowd gathering around us.

Jessop raised his fists like an old-time prize-fighter. They resembled wrecking-balls. I dreaded to think what he was planning to do with them. I found out soon enough. One swung through the air to land in the middle of my forehead, snapping my head back on my thin neck. I rubbed the impact point and felt a bump forming beneath my skin. Jessop circled me, fists cocked.

‘Come on, Nancy boy,’ he said. ‘Put ’em up. Show me what you’re made of.’

There was no point in fighting, as I could not possibly win. However, I wanted to go down with dignity. How could I manage that? Struck by what seemed to be divine inspiration, I ran

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my gaze over the small crowd surrounding us, and addressed them in a loud, if somewhat tremulous, voice.

‘I will show my strength by not fighting!’ I declared. This will stop Jessop in his tracks, I thought. He will see that beating up someone who does not even try to fight back won’t do his reputation any good, obliging him to walk away and leave me alone.

Jessop’s next blow landed on the side of my head, making me see stars. Displaying a mastery of street-fighting unusual in one so young, Jessop followed this up with a third punishing blow which knocked me to the ground, where I lay winded, totally devoid of any desire to get back up.

‘You ought to think about showing your strength in some other way, mate,’ he chuckled, walking away.

The crowd of onlookers dispersed and a kindly girl called Mandy Bannister helped me up and handed me a clean white handkerchief to wipe my face with. I gave the handkerchief back to her somewhat soiled, thanking her for her help. She disappeared to join her friends, leaving me alone and dazed.

This was not the end of my relationship with Jessop; it was the beginning, and it continued for some years in much the same vein.²

The damage wreaked by your schooldays has consequences which only become apparent decades later. But that is another story, one we will explore when we discuss Slef’s adult years.

To read more

. . . . <http://tartaruspress.com/komarnyckyj-ezra-slef.html>

² With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that my experiences at the hands of my tormentor were Slefesque (see Glossary).