

Thatcher as an illicit gay icon: Maggie & Me by Damian Barr

By Olivia Cole 08 April 13

As commentators scramble to tell us what Margaret Thatcher meant to them, there is no better place to start than Damian Barr's Eighties memoir, *Maggie and Me*, in which she is the working class hero's guilty pleasure. Many years in the writing (and due out next month), it announces Thatcher as an illicit gay icon: blonde, sure of her own style even if her style is weird, plucky, self-reliant, bullied and indomitable. Never mind the thin, grey school milk taken off the kids of Barr's generation or the confessional poems he was told not to submit for coursework because they contravened the prevailing fondness for Section 28. Even that chapter of his electric memoir, in which his writing outs him before he'd pluck up the courage to do it himself, is prefaced by a 1987 Thatcherism: "Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay."

The pre-teen, working class, incontrovertibly gay bookish "Gaymian" of the playground is very far from someone who feels he has an "inalienable right" to be anything. (Sometimes even alive.) He prays to a not very helpful god to make him like girls and avoid hell and imagines his primary school fumbles have marked him out for an early death from Aids. Today, he's a writer, the founder of Shoreditch House's literary salon, and quite possibly the secret weapon the Tories never knew they had. The risky strategy of a Thatcherism for every chapter somehow works - sometimes apt, sometimes comically wrong,

or sometimes in the favourite word the teenage geek learns to scribble in a margin, "ironic." Libraries, (or in the case of the tiny Scottish town of Carfin, the Library Bus) and aspirational Conservatism emerge as two of the book's few heroes. Consuming endless Roald Dahl stories, the bookworm "Damy" is fondly known as the "Cuckoo" in the family, long before any other kind of difference is ever discussed.

Half Catholic, half Protestant and only together until he is five, for Barr's family Thatcher is the Wicked Witch of the TV set, unifying them all in their loathing. His dad, for goodness sake, is a steelworker threatened with unemployment and still the young Damian identifies the strength of the strident blonde forever on the TV, as a figure of praise not blame. When she exits the wreckage of the Grand Hotel in Brighton, live on on TV he sees her deliver her most famous lines: "You hear about these atrocities, these bombs, you never expect them to happen to you. But life must go on, as usual." His family curse as if the witch from Oz has survived the tornado. Long before he has the education to come to an appreciation of his unlikely heroine, the bombed out unbowed woman is a talisman to cling to amidst the domestic "atrocities" on his own front. Where his mum's side of the family have saints, he has Maggie.

Though the publicity around the book (justifiably) invokes *Billy Elliot* and *Toast* as moving precursors, "atrocities" is not too strong a word to use and Barr's is a far tougher story than either Lee Hall or Nigel Slater's tales. It's an account of growing up loved but in near neglect, with parents too consumed by ill-health or by their own problems to see what was going on. His violent stepfather exits the story when his mother discovers his thuggishness but until that point, the account of the physical abuse would be harrowing enough in a work of fiction. In a memoir, these incidents are difficult to read about, and like much of what is recounted here, must have been hard to force into vivid, reportable memory. School offers little comfort but it's light farce compared to what's going on at home and Barr treats it as such, not least in a comic set piece in which he's pushed off a cliff in a

wardrobe. Like any child of his generation, he hopes to feel for the pines of Narnia as he hurtles towards certain death.

In an afterword that pays tribute to the difficulties of writing autobiographically, Barr quotes advice from Diana Athill, "There is no point in describing experience unless you try to get it as near to being what it really was as you can make it... Get it right." There's a wrongness, too, to getting it right, when that story involves not just your own life but that of your parents, family and friends. The abused child learns to keep his mouth shut, fantasizes about ringing a number in the phone book and whispering "Help me" and, on one occasion, calls Childline, who struggle with his Scots accent let along the magnitude of his family's alcoholism and poverty. By contrast, the writer, having somehow survived, must break all of those rules and "tell", over and over again. To write honestly is to remember what it would probably be much easier to forget. It can't have been an easy book to write.

For all the pain, *Maggie & Me* is a tremendous, surprising read. While his childhood reads as harrowing, the wry nostalgia for everything my Eighties generation learned to hold dear makes for great kitsch laughs. From Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing* to New Kids on the Block and Kylie, our narrator can't help but be the perfect consumer of all that Eighties tat (if only he were a girl). And while *Maggie & Me* will draw comparisons with the classics of coming of age/out, once he finds his friends, his gayness is frankly the least of his problems. His family always know even when they don't - in a perfect scene, his mother refuses to turn off Daniel Day Lewis in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, because to "switch it over, would be to acknowledge something." Even the most committed Maggie hater, would struggle to ignore the fact that her diktat that school children should be taught to "walk tall" finds an exemplary figure in Barr. Despite the shakiest start in life he's become a writer gifted enough to analyse his own misadventures in a book that's hard to put down, laugh out loud funny and profoundly moving. Rather than the "kindness of strangers" it's the kindness of

teachers that gets him through and lets him escape. It's only apt that this unlikely Thatcherite grew up to be a writer of whom they can all be justifiably proud.

Maggie and Me is Out 9 May (Bloomsbury).