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## **THE WINSHAW LEGACY: or, What a Carve Up!**

By Jonathan Coe

Alfred A Knopf. 512 pp.

The Winshaws in Jonathan Coe's hilarious fourth novel may be the most influential family in England. They are certainly the most detestable.

Ever since their family fortune was founded in the 17th century by cornering a portion of the slave trade, the Winshaws have increased it by "the shameless exploitation of persons weaker than themselves."

We first glimpse them in 1942 when one of the family's few decent members, Godfrey, on a top-secret military mission, is killed by anti-aircraft fire over Berlin. His institutionalized sister Tabitha, another kindly soul, suspects Godfrey's death resulted from a tip passed to the Nazis by their own brother, Lawrence. However, since even her most sympathetic acquaintances consider Tabitha "one or two fly-leaves short of a folio," her suspicions are ignored.

A half-century later, a vanity press asks depressive recluse Michael Owen, a novelist of minor note, to write a biography of the now-deceased Lawrence and the surviving Winshaw generation. As his research progresses, Michael observes, "The more I saw of these wretched, lying, thieving, self-advancing Winshaws, the less I liked them."

Who could blame him?

There's Lawrence's daughter, Dorothy, who has married George Brunwin, "one of the country's most successful and well-liked farmers." Since Dorothy's sexual passion never rises more than a few degrees above absolute zero, poor ardent George is left to seek consolation in the embrace of farm animals. Dorothy, meanwhile, bribes Britain's agriculture ministers and turns the farm to mass production of chemically tainted livestock, then foists this foul fare upon an unsuspecting public.

Thomas Winshaw, a banker wildly rich from insider trading, pours a fortune into the burgeoning video industry, even the unprofitable video laser disc. Peeping Thomas is "enraptured with the sharp picture quality and perfect still frames" which recalled "the heady, exhilarating days when he used to hang around the film studios and collect discarded footage of beautiful young actresses in various stages of *déshabillé*. His goal is to turn Britain "into a nation of voyeurs" like himself.

Since there is little call these days for rape and pillage, Henry Winshaw chooses a political career. At Oxford he'd fallen in love with "an absolute pip," a "girl from Somerville called Margaret Roberts" with "an utterly gorgeous head of nut-brown hair." He falls even deeper in love with her years later, when he sits in Parliament and

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Margaret, now Margaret Thatcher, fosters a governing climate in which Henry can advance his favorite cause: gutting the National Health Service.

Mark Winshaw spends the mid- and late-eighties selling guns and lethal gasses to Saddam Hussein. Sitting in the study of a senior German industrialist, under a large, gold-framed portrait of Hitler, Mark basks in the man's conversation: "Saddam Hussein is a good man. He makes me feel young again. It's an honor to help him."

Youngest of the hideous clan are Roddy and Hilary. Roddy is an art dealer whose taste may be incapable of transcending Elvis on black velvet but whose influence is enormous. He uses it to lure comely artists to lecherous weekends at Winshaw Towers. There, he's likely to run into Hilary and one of her studs *du jour*. Hilary, perhaps the most personally abhorrent of the lot, is a tabloid columnist who eagerly personifies all that is wrong with contemporary journalism.

Linking Coe's vibrant sketches of the Winshaws is the continuing saga of their biographer. Michael, when we meet him, languishes in solitude. He has had almost no conversation in two years. He sits each night before the telly, haunted by the image of a movie he'd seen on his ninth birthday: *What a Carve Up!* starring his notion of absolute beauty, Shirley Eaton, best known to American audiences as the poolside nymph asphyxiated by a coat of gold paint for helping James Bond in *Goldfinger*.

After an unhappy early marriage and years of chastity, Michael finds himself brought slowly back to life by a nurturing neighbor, Fiona, who will have a heartbreaking encounter with the National Health Service Henry Winshaw has crippled. Michael will also find his pulse quickened by a lovely young painter, Phoebe Barton, whose upward nubility had made her prey to Roddy Winshaw, and who bears a stunning resemblance to Shirley Eaton.

Using a montage of styles and a score of masterfully crafted tongue-in-groove literary joints to interconnect his characters, Coe sets a series of sleuthing speed bumps on Michael's path to the truth. He's not even quite sure why he'd been chosen as biographer by this "inscrutable" publishing house whose other titles include *Dropping in on Jerry: A Light-Hearted Account of the Dresden Bombings* and *A Lutheran Approach to the Films of Martin and Lewis*.

But he will receive crucial help from an assortment of quirky characters, including Fiona; Phoebe; the lame Winshaw butler, Pyles; and especially from Findlay Onyx, a keen-eyed elderly detective who could be even more helpful if he weren't frequently incarcerated for soliciting young men in restrooms. All, however, will unfold in a riotous night of multiple murders at Winshaw Towers, a protracted and delightful lampoon of the Agatha Christie murder genre.

Beyond his zestfully wry and ginger tone that incorporates every shade of humor from DeVries Light to DeLillo Dark, Coe scores palpable hits satirizing an array of politico-historical targets: the West's avaricious arming of Saddam, the eroding of public

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health care, big business agriculture, even the corruptive inflation of prices and reputations in metropolitan art circles.

Penned with an enchanting brio, *The Winshaw Legacy* proves a comic/gothic delight. It has the air of an idea conceived by the Brontë sisters, reworked by Dickens and played by Monty Python and the old Wilfred Hyde-White/Lionel Jeffries crowd. The only mystery readers will be left with is why this gem is the first of its 34 year-old author's novels to be printed in America. How could we have missed the boat on his first three?