

The
Economist

Christopher Hitchens

The polemicist's tale

England, America and the politics of dissent

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Hitch-22: A Memoir. By Christopher Hitchens. *Twelve*; 435 pages; \$26.99. *Atlantic*; £20. Buy from [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0446540331/theeconomists-20%20) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0446540331/theeconomists-20%20>), [Amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1843549212/economistshop-21%20) (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1843549212/economistshop-21%20>)

DOUBLE book-keeping is the theme of this memoir by Christopher Hitchens, which is at once sinuously written, evocative and frustrating. With a mixture of genuine charm and phoney self-deprecation, he plays both sides: sexually, socially and politically. The result is a racy and Falstaffian read. It tells the reader a lot about Oxford in the days of the student revolts, about raffish London in the 1970s, about the most horrid bits of the late cold-war era and about America's inexorable pull.

In the midst is Hitch: beloved friend of Martin Amis, James Fenton and Ian McEwan, formidable wordsmith, womaniser, drinker and smoker, a man to whom rules do not apply. He wriggles past constraints, starting with his family background, steeped in the austere rigour of the Royal Navy. At Oxford he mixes robust revolutionary socialism with an upmarket social life; his legendary fondness for female companionship (almost always requited) has a homosexual counterpoint. He is on the left, but not of it: too witty, too iconoclastic and too sceptical to fall for the dreary dogmas of mainstream Marxism. Hitch was a Trotskyite, the lushest and most exotic growth in the botanical gardens of British communism—and thus detested by more orthodox comrades. His disillusionment with that self-indulgent creed is the book's central thread.

Among the sharp vignettes is his first eye-opening trip across the Atlantic. Despite his loathing of President Nixon, he finds he cannot demonise America. In Cuba he spots the verbose and oppressive side of the Castro revolution. In Argentina, he dissects and skewers clerical fascism. For the sharp-penned and quick-witted in those days the globe was there for trotting. Mr Hitchens may be criticised for lack of depth; but nobody can fault him for not covering the distance.

The nostalgia is sometimes fetid. On his favourite high horse, Mr Hitchens might dismiss another writer's coy tales of long-ago gay flings at Oxford with future Conservative cabinet ministers as "kiss and hint" writing. The boozy Friday lunches in London with his clever friends, and their shared fondness for puerile, obscene word games, will leave most readers bored and mystified. Mr Hitchens admits that it was funnier at the time (and probably funnier still for those robbed of their critical faculties by copious amounts of alcohol).

But amid the dregs are shards of brilliant, piercing writing. The account of his uncovered Jewish ancestry (concealed by his lively, miserable mother, who killed herself in a hotel room in Athens, with her lover) is more than poignant. His willingness to go to the barricades to defend his friend Salman Rushdie after the *fatwa* in 1989, and his beloved America after September 11th 2001, is unaffected and appealing. Having lambasted bourgeois values such as freedom and tolerance, Hitch now (a bit late in the day, some might think) understands why they matter.

The ardour is not always matched by insight. In particular, the smoke of incinerated straw men obscures any serious discussion of religion (superstition practised by hypocrites, in his view). And for what is meant to be a no-holds-barred memoir, the author goes lightly on some of his failings. Broken ideals get plenty of self-satisfied scrutiny; broken hearts and marriages rate barely a mention. The impression left is of a writer frozen in a precocious teenagery, whose ability to tease



Slouching towards Utopia

and provoke the grown-ups is entertaining but ultimately tiresome. If Mr Hitchens can stay off the booze and do some serious thinking, his real autobiography, in 20 years' time or so, should be a corker.

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