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**THE STATE-OF-THE-NATION NOVEL AS LIFE WRITING:
JONATHAN COE'S *BOURNVILLE***

Abstract: Jonathan Coe is a renowned English author of fifteen novels, three biographies, two books for children and a regular contributor to various publications. He has been critically acclaimed and awarded particularly for his state-of-the-nation novels, a category currently being closely examined in academia (Borrego, 2021; 2025). *Bournville* (2022) is his last piece in this line to date. The narrative combines the fictional story of Mary Lamb, a character partly modelled on Coe's mother, and her family over seventy years. The main events in British history from 1945 to 2020 are unfolded in seven chapters, including two VE Days, a World Cup Final and four ceremonies in the Royal Family. In portraying such a varied array of factual events and fictional plotlines, the novel works as clear form of Life Writing (Hann, 2014; Kadar, 2014) and of the liminal space it shares with literary biographies as conceptualised by Michael Benton (2011). In this paper, I will explore Jonathan Coe's authorial strategies in building a solid state-of-the-nation novel evincing a post-pandemic zeitgeist of sadness, confusion and frustration, working as a consoling and stimulating book for his contemporary reading audience, and as an informative cultural text for future reference.

Keywords: *Bournville*, Jonathan Coe, Life Writing, State-of-the-nation novel

1. Introduction

Jonathan Coe is a renowned English writer widely acclaimed for his state-of-the-nation novels, a line he adopted with *What a Carve Up!* (1994), a satirical critique on the impact of Thatcherism in Britain. *The Rotter's Club* (2001), *The Closed Circle* (2004) and *Middle England* (2018), his following pieces in the category, exude a milder tone. Working as a trilogy, they are mainly set between his native Birmingham and London, presenting a common set of characters such as Benjamin Trotter, who shares his author's inclination for writing and musical interests: "(a regular concern with Coe) the interpenetration of narrative and music"

(Moseley, 2016, p. 86). His fiction is largely connected to our times and evinces a keen concern for contemporary national and international politics intertwined with individual fictive lives. The zeitgeist he grew up with in the Midlands, being “the site of repeated conflicts between unions and management, probably fuelled his political imagination” (Guignery, 2015, p. 161). Despite being ethically compelled to write about the current status quo in Britain and Europe, Coe avoids portraying tendentious opinions which may be identified as his own. In this sense, he admits a watershed in his career, since “as a writer, I worry about writing partisan books... I’ve done that in the past, particularly with *What A Carve Up!*... I’d much rather readers disliked my books for artistic or aesthetic reasons than political ones” (Duerden, 2022). Precisely to avoid biasing his reading public, he finds that comedy “can be a very welcoming space, a communal space, a place where different classes, different strands of moral and political thought come together and are reconciled” (Guignery, 2016). His style combines acute criticism with a fine sense of humour, and he is considered as a “comic novelist and chronicler of Englishness” (Allardice, 2022). He prefers to create easy-to-read books as well as appealing for clarity in them.

Bournville (2022), his fourteenth novel, is another of his state-of-the-nation pieces. It starts with a prologue at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The diegetic timespan portrays the main episodes of British national history from 1945 to 2020 in seven chapters, including two VE Days, a World Cup Final and four ceremonies in the Royal Family, most of them watched by different gatherings of relatives and friends over the years. A constant attendant to all of them is Mary Lamb, a character partly based on Coe’s mother, Janet. We meet the protagonist at the age of 11 and see her die at 84. The stories of her birth family, her marriage and children coexist with those fictionalised events. Mary, and her three sons —Jack, Martin and Peter— present distinct approaches towards the Crown, the remnants of imperial supremacy, UK and EU relations, particularly with Germany, and the transformation from a predominantly white to an increasingly multiracial and multicultural society. With the recurrent motif *Everything changes, and everything stays the same*, Coe broadly reassesses multiple aspects of national collective memory and cultural imagery. He builds a critical narrative endowed with his sharp eye and fine sense of humour. *Bournville* has received a largely positive reception home and abroad, being translated into Dutch, French, Greek, Italian and Spanish, among others. It is praised for deeply reflecting “on the past (and its role in shaping the present), to rehearse and re-rehearse foundation myths both personal and national” (Preston, 2022). The book bears witness to Coe’s patterns of continuity as a solid novelist: “*Bournville* is written with Coe’s mix of gentle nostalgia and astute social observation, and fans will recognise characters from previous novels (nearly all his characters are connected in some way)” (Allardice, 2022). His blending of the factual, the biographical and the fictitious was not his initial design for the book:

I was planning a more typical state-of-the-nation novel, starting in 1945 and coming up to the present day, when my mum died. It was a very sudden death, and knocked me for six months emotionally and creatively. Then my brother and I began clearing out her house and found boxes full of diaries from the 1940s and 50s – nothing revelatory, but they did bring me into a kind of closeness with her that I didn't have when she was alive, so immediately I wanted to write about her and use this material. The novel became the story of her life and the story of Britain during those 75 years. It is both highly personal and quite political but in a way that I haven't attempted before. (Anderson, 2023)

Coe underscores that this is not an entirely biographical work, and that only certain features of his mother's life modelled Mary Lamb (Coe, 2022, p. 353). We know, for instance, that both were music and PE teachers (Moseley, 2016, p. 2). In alignment with avoiding any prejudiced approach, he concatenated a myriad of plotlines from a sincere and honest stance: "To combine a national story with a family story... The strength of a novel for me, or the kind of novel I want to write is its capacity for polyphony and for combining many different voices, perspectives and attitudes and presenting them to the readers as faithfully, truthfully and generously as you can" (Biles, 2022). Another authorial aim in incorporating this material is to build a narrative which may show future generations the varied historical events engendering the way we think and behave today, in other words, to present his novel as a cultural archive for future reference.

2. *Bournville* as a State-of-the-nation Novel

The state-of-the-nation novel in Britain is rooted in the works of authors such as Dickens, Gaskell, Disraeli and Trollope, which depict the desolate "Condition of England" denounced by Carlyle in "Chartism" (1839). The struggles of the working classes and the devastation of extreme poverty were in a nutshell their main concern and continue being examined today (Borrego, 2021; 2025). This originally industrial essence would pave the way for a new form reflecting a wider diversity of social inequalities and increasingly related to politics. When explaining the national well-known penchant for the state-of-the-nation novel, Coe advocates in it for "something more dynamic than the passive contemplation of a political reality reflected back at the reader, however truthfully", presenting us with a realistic portrayal of the current zeitgeist which "could even make us want to change it" (Coe, 2012).

Alice Borrego regards the entwining of credible fictional stories with actual historical events, recognized by readers, as an authorial strategy particularly relevant in this category: "If the metonymic structure of state-of-the-nation novels shows that the private sphere is a reflection of the public one, authors of the genre have also elected to depict the operation of local and national government so as to reveal the depth of their society's ethical corruption" (2021, p. 30). For her, the subgenre is also

viewed “as the locus of an “overlap” of cultural differences” (p. 34). In explaining their purpose, she defends that “As they rely on the use of metonymy to illustrate “the way we live now,” they aim at debunking the inherited traditions of class division, ethnocentrism and male-dominated narratives” (p. 38). That metonymy is achieved by the inclusion of family ties connecting individuals from divided contexts, or of children of similar bonds: “The happy union or the hopeful child fail to question the status quo that led to the class struggle in the first place. Like nationalism, Condition-of-England novels rely heavily on metonymy: a marriage or a birth within the closed family circle represents the possible, hopeful future of the nation altogether” (Borrego, 2025). These fictional relationships are definitely representing the broad and diverse reality of the country, bearing witness to the fact that antagonisms exist and we need to examine them if we wish things to change. The contrast between the public/private and the collective/individual is “what allows state-of-the-nation novels to diagnose and critique the English nation” (Borrego, 2025).

All of these ingredients concur in *Bournville*, with the mingling of diverse cultural backgrounds emanating from two marriages. One of them is that of Mary and Geoffrey, whose grandfather, Carl Schmidt, had moved to Birmingham from Leipzig in the 1890s (p. 21). Although he eventually became a naturalised English citizen, he would be attacked because of his German origin (pp.56-57). This parentage would trigger various familial confrontations working as a metonymic instance of the controversial recent history of Anglo-German relations. Such is the case when some distant relatives visit the Lambs and Mary’s children confront their cousin Lothar on the grounds that *Cadbury* would be better than *Milka*. Under the guise of this hilarious childlike clash, Jack, Mary’s ardently patriotic son, defends an inherited prejudice: “You Germans are always trying to poison the English” (p. 120). Lothar responds with a persuasive “I’m not a Nazi” (p. 120) evincing Coe’s appeal to clarify any similar misleading interpretation. The adults would likewise face some controversies: “Perhaps the danger of winning a war is that it gives you a sense of triumph and achievement – quite rightly – which makes you think you can afford to take things easy for a while” (p. 115). This remark questions the long prevailing British supremacist mindset, recently at stake over Brexit. However much Geoffrey would avoid a debate with a “Not politics, at the family dinner table” (p. 115), the country has recently been compelled to proceed contrariwise.

Another intercultural couple is that of Martin, Mary’s temperate Europhile child, and Bridget, a Glaswegian congenial woman. A set of ensuing family issues would not be related to her Scottishness, but to her being black. Their diverse reactions when first seeing her in a picture would likewise mirror parallel collective divides:

‘What a pretty girl,’ She said at last. And then, turning to Martin:

‘I thought you said she was from Scotland.’

‘She is. Glasgow.’

Mary passed the picture to Geoffrey ... His face was a mask, unmoving and expressionless.

Doll held the photo up close to her eyes ...

‘Goodness, she’s as black as the ace of spades,’ ...

Do you treat her the same?’ Doll wanted to know. ‘I mean ... do you treat her the same as you would any other girl?’ ...

He was more worried about his father’s response. Geoffrey had still not uttered a word. (pp. 205-206)

Mary supports her son and accepts Bridget, whereas her older mother is naturally astonished and curious. Martin’s father would contrariwise show no sign of welcoming her. Mary had perceived signs of his racism at the early stages of their relationship, but always hoped he would change (p. 75). Geoffrey would even set up a blind date for his son, so that he and his girlfriend would split up (pp. 222-223). Bridget never felt she was fully accepted and speaks up for herself after Mary dies:

Thirty-two years, he and I knew each other. *Thirty-two years*. And in all that time, do you know what? He never once —not *once* — looked me in the eye. He couldn’t do that. He couldn’t bring himself to it [...] but you *knew*. You could see it. *All* of you. And you never did a damn thing about it. Not a damn, fucking thing. You closed ranks. You never said a word to him and do you know what that means? It means you *took* his side. So it’s got nothing to do with whom you voted ... All for the quiet life. All so the sacred family could be preserved, as if there was nothing underneath that stank. Stank to high heaven. (pp. 346-347)

Bridget’s complaint in a private family circle is yet another situation echoing a wider realm. Readers are encouraged to consider the novel as a mirror and as a means of individual and collective self-criticism. The English nation is thus a metonymy representing similar divisions worldwide. Jonathan Coe is not only criticising racism, but remapping British society as increasingly multicultural and struggling to come to terms with that heterogeneous status quo. As an illustrative instance of this transformation, we read him, a white solid male English author, acknowledging in his novel another noted national writer, a black female one: “All she wanted to do was to sit in the sun by herself and read a book for a few hours. Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* was just out in paperback, and having bought a copy (from an enterprising local bookshop which was offering click and collect) she was keen to get started” (p. 318). This revisionary purpose as a means to invite readers to reflect about the changes they may participate in is inherent to the literary category that *Bournville* represents: “State-of-the-nation novels have the particularity of being written during or in the wake of historical events. However, contrary to nationalist discourses, which use the event as a catalyst for unification, this genre allows for a reflection on the actual rifts that exist between the nation and the individual” (Borrego, 2025).

3. *Bournville* as Life Writing

In portraying the social milieu, experiences and feelings of a particular citizenship over a specific period, the state-of-the-nation novel is inherently a form of Life Writing. Its definition has changed over the past decades. Donald

J. Winslow considers it to be synonymous with biography and autobiography, and that simply “Some writers may prefer the Anglo-Saxon rooted phrase, *life-writing*, to those Latin and Greek based words” (1978b, p. 66).

More recently, we bear witness to other detailed and contextualised approaches:

Growing out of several developments in the 1970s and 1980s, Life Writing emerged in the 1990s as a research field that gave a central place to the investigation of personal documents: autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters, travel accounts, and autobiographical novels. Even though Life Writing as a label for a specific research direction was first conceived in the English-speaking academic world, it has since been adopted by scholars worldwide. Those involved in Life Writing research are largely grounded in literary theory, Cultural Studies and research approaches that focus on identity, linguistics and memory, and on groups that have long been neglected by the scholarly canon and can now be examined from the perspectives of gender and postcolonial studies. (Hann, 2014, p. 177)

The category is then intrinsically connected to the novel, inasmuch as it is one of its forms: “Without wanting to deny Literature, Life Writing allows us to see it, too, as only one possible category of special writing” (Kadar, 2014, p. 205). In the same vein, The Oxford Centre for Life Writing openly includes literature as one of its instances:

Life-writing includes every possible way of telling a life-story, from biography and autobiography, through letters and memoir, to bio-fiction, blogs, and social media such as Tweets and Instagram stories. Writers and researchers are increasingly recognizing how much of writing is life-writing, including poetry and fiction. Through life-writing we can find out more about each other and we also understand ourselves better in relation to the past. (OCLW, 2020)

Life Writing and biography are thus intertwined in a liminal space, which is also connected to the novel. Literary theorist Michael Benton remarks that the three categories intersect as they all entail “the temporal meeting point of memory and imagination. Receptivity, and the facility to translate such experiences into scenes and stories, show the narrational process in action, but it is essentially a literary process” (2011, p. 75). He further contends that “whereas the novelist *constructs* a narrative of imagined events, the biographer and historian aim to *reconstruct* a narrative from real-life past events” (2011, p. 69). In *Bournville*, Coe is acting as a biographer/historian in fictionalising/reconstructing recent key episodes in British history together with a few traces of his mother’s life, while obviously presenting fictive stories. In contemplating his novel as a potential informative material of the present era for ensuing generations, he further acts as novelist/biographer fusing another distinction underscored by Benton: “The novelist looks forward and projects us into the future of a fiction that will reveal the past; the biographer looks back and projects us into the past of a history that will unfold to disclose its future” (2011, p. 69). The fictional narrative is indeed interspersed with fragments of real historical and cultural documents such as Winston Churchill’s (pp. 36-38) and King George VI’s (pp. 48-49) speeches over the end of WWII,

the television broadcast of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation ceremony (pp. 83-87), or the words of a British *Daily Mail* journalist on the day of the 1966 World Cup Final between England and West Germany (p. 122). The factual and the fictitious also merge when the Lambs watch together the advert of the new Austin Metro in 1980 (pp. 176-180). Jack is thrilled with the patriotic slogan announcing a British car "TO BEAT THE WORLD", whereas Martin considers it conveys "a weird sort of mentality. Us against them". Interestingly enough, the Lambs' middle child chooses the middle ground approach on a regular basis both professionally, working to defend Cadbury's British interests in an economically hostile Europe, and personally, marrying a Scottish black woman in an escalating multicultural yet questionably tolerant society. The author intentionally endows him with this particular quality: "If Martin had a credo, it was moderation in all things" (p. 172). He acts accordingly when joining the SDP in 1981 as he regards them as the balanced alternative to both Tories and Labour (p. 196). In the same vein, he firmly believes that dialogue and harmony should prevail over Brexit divides: "I voted leave, you all voted to stay. Fine. We can have a civilized disagreement about it... Maybe it'll turn out to be a mistake. That's not the point. The point is that we made a choice. We made a choice and we just have to stick with it and see what happens. And in the meantime we can still be friends" (p. 345). Martin's moderation and dialogical stance are clearly in alignment with the milder line Coe opted for after *What a Carve Up!* in order to avoid politicising his literature and biasing his readership. Curiously enough, there is another character in the novel, David Foley, a childhood friend of the Lamb's boys, defending the same principle: "my credo as a writer has always been to tell the truth as directly as possible" (p. 140). This defence of truth and honesty in writing is likewise reminiscent of Coe's literary art. The author is then openly impregnating some of his protagonists with traits of his own, thus orchestrating his novel as a liminal space between literature and Life Writing.

Jonathan Coe also dotes Mary Lamb with a conciliatory and flexible nature. Despite initially sharing many of her husband's conservative principles, she would willingly accept ensuing changes. We see her at first judging gay men as the "lowest of the low" in front of her children (p. 109). Thirty years later, when her youngest son Peter, a sensitive musician who comes out at a mature age, reminds her of those words, she openly admits that back then "*Ignorant*, is what we were" (p. 271). He is indeed his mother's child, an ideologist who discusses his concerns and claims his rights, even if it is assumed that homosexuality is generally accepted. He is portrayed as a cultivated anti-monarchical individual, isolating himself at the traditional family gatherings to watch royal events by reading and listening to music (p. 198), also rejecting any collective reverence to the Crown (p. 215; p. 224). The different positions of the Lamb brothers with respect to the Royal Family bears witness to Coe's appeal for a non-judgemental fiction. In alignment with this principle, we appreciate Mary's open-mindedness when admiring

Martin's mixed-race children's "lovely colour", genuinely longing for a racial colour-blind milieu as the antidote to racism: "just imagine if everyone in the world was that colour. That would solve all the problems, wouldn't it?" (p. 233). She firmly believes that accepting the new is the only strategy for a successful society to evolve: "*Everybody changes, don't they? Even if it happens slowly. If you don't change I don't see how you can survive*" (p. 226). She articulates the tolerance that Coe obviously defends himself by portraying a happy interracial marriage and celebrating Bernardine Evaristo, the first black British woman ever to be awarded the Booker Prize.

More recent events fictionalised in the novel portray confused characters buying ridiculous amounts of toilet rolls at the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic (p. 6). Exerting his fine sense of humour, Coe quotes several of the arbitrary lockdown rules that British citizens, and millions worldwide, were obliged to follow (pp. 312-317). On a less comic note, Peter announces that his mother died alone during the night, one of the many well-known "cruelties" of the pandemic he further details (pp. 340-41) and that thousands likewise underwent globally. Jonathan Coe describes his own experience in a final authorial comment: "it still saddens and angers me that my mother died alone, without pain relief, and that members of her family were allowed no personal contact with her as it happened. But then, like thousands of families up and down the country – and unlike the occupiers of 10 Downing Street at the time – we were following the rules" (p. 354). *Bournville* stands thus as a consoling life writing piece for the witnesses of recent traumatising worldwide issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, as well as an informative and truth-revealing document for prospective readers. The possibility of considering it as a fictionalised biography of a society is opened since in "a well-written biography, poetic truth and literal truth are interdependent" (Benton, 2011, p. 85). The combination of truth and fiction is certainly not new as "the mixture of fact and fiction is as old in life-writing as it is in history", whether we call it "biographical novel" or "novelized biography" (Winslow, 1978a, pp. 65-66). That balance is clearly present in *Bournville*, as Coe's intended to create a cultural informative text for future generations interested in our current experiences and thoughts, in our contemporary life and zeitgeist. As a matter of fact, some researchers have recently approached life-writing:

from the critical perspective of cultural memory studies. Fictional and factual varieties of "afterlives," such scholarship argues, feed into the same notional archive of collective remembrance on which societies draw when imagining their past and, through it, establish their cultural identity. Biography, autobiography, and biographical fiction can in this sense be seen to perform the same cultural work. (Novak, 2017, p. 11)

In this sense, his novel is experimental inasmuch as it its fusing Jonathan Coe's threefold role as a novelist, a life writer and biographer. Including real events in the novel may problematise its fictionality as well as the reliability of the evoked events and documents. Readers are thus encouraged to develop a particular hermeneutic

agency to appreciate “clear signals” to tell the “factional from the fictional” by means of a “pact” with the author “which determines the reception of a text” (Novak, 2017, p. 13). Nowadays this understanding is settled before the actual reading starts, as average readers carefully select their choices. In the words of Coe “there is an implicit agreement between you and the reader, before she even starts reading, that everything you are about to tell her is a lie – then really, nobody is being dishonest at all, are they?” (Coe, 2017). Whether Coe’s regulars or neophytes in his oeuvre, it is a clearly curious public that will respond to his literary invitation.

4. Conclusion

Bournville is certainly not an entirely biographical novel, as Coe has explicitly remarked. It is partly a revision of British recent collective memory through a display of varied historical and cultural documents. The authorial intention in incorporating this material in his fictionalising of history is partly to provide informed grounds to encourage contemporary readers to question the validity of certain pervading master narratives, in a contemporary context of shared vulnerability and multiple crises. One of them is the British glorious superiority over Germany and, by extension, over Europe. We read how, fortunately, there are signs of change: Jack’s son, Julian, is horrified when seeing how his father had painted Hitler moustaches on photographs of German football players as a child (pp. 134-135), thus showing that younger generations tend to be tolerant and respectful. Likewise, the narrative depicts an increasingly multicultural citizenship struggling to leave behind the image of a predominantly white and male-dominated scenario. This gradual metamorphosis is evinced by Bridget, a black Scottish woman with a legal expertise who considers standing for the European Parliament (p. 288), and her young mixed-race English daughter Lorna, who pursues her music career at the outset of the novel and reads Bernardine Evaristo, a widely acclaimed author in contemporary black British literature. Undeniable signs showing that things have changed, although others remain the same. Coe intertwines both tendencies enticing his readership to carry on transforming their milieu and, in so doing, the world.

The Lambs’ private story told on par with public significant events of British recent history turns *Bournville* into a clear instance of a state-of-the-nation novel and consequently of Life-Writing. Jonathan Coe has managed to create a broad-minded milieu in his fiction by providing a polyphonic array of intergenerational and culturally heterogeneous characters. Regardless of their multifarious views on diverse identity issues, their believable experiences turn them into authentic and attractive protagonists, since what humanises them “is not their possible errors in judgement but their essential—if imperfect—goodness” (Prieto-Arranz, 2025, 20). Coe achieves a degree of complicity between his characters and his readership by interlacing accurate historical texts with traces of his personal family life and the

intimate conflicts of Mary Lamb and her household. He definitely achieves his writing principle: “I’ve tried not to make it a judgemental book ... we are a very various and mysterious body of people in some ways ... I just want to present these various manifestations of human behaviour as faithfully as I can” (Biles, 2022). Just as “good writing – whether it’s a novel or a poem, journalism or science – can transcend time, and gender, and age, and ethnicity, and communicate thoughts and emotions across all of these divides, in a way that almost, when you think about it, seems supernatural” (Coe, 2017), *Bournville* stands as a life-writing manifesto in contemporary literature as well as a cultural archive for future reference.

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