

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Made In Brighton

Julie Burchill and Daniel Raven

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## About the Book

### **What does it mean to be British in the twenty-first century?**

Brighton has long been perceived as being at the vanguard of English taste - in its attitudes towards homosexuality, the rise of the chav and binge drinking, as well as its music and drug cultures.

*Made in Brighton* takes a critical look at the changing state of Britain, using the seaside vista of Brighton as a focal point. Julie Burchill and Daniel Raven, who have lived in Brighton for many years, interweave personal stories and experiences of Brighton with larger themes of sex, politics and class to explore the changes to British culture in the last twenty years.

From punk to dance, dope to coke, the labour party to hen parties, straight to gay to bi and everything in between, *Made in Brighton* holds up a mirror to the dazed face of Britain and gives it a good hard slap.

## About the Authors

Julie Burchill has written for the *Guardian* and *The Times* and is the author of a number of novels and non-fiction books including *Sugar Rush*, the Emmy-winning TV series. Daniel Raven has worked as a filing clerk, postman and TV production runner. This is his first published work.

# MADE IN BRIGHTON

From the Grand to the Gutter:  
Modern Britain as seen from  
beside the sea

Julie Burchill and Daniel Raven



*For Susan Raven*

## PREFACE BY JULIE BURCHILL

People in Brighton are the most positive and feel the luckiest of any town or city in the UK, according to a survey by the National Lottery.

The city topped the poll, with 93% of residents asked considering themselves lucky.

'We were not surprised. Anyone going to Brighton cannot ignore the buzz,' said psychologist Linda Papodopoulos. 'It is no surprise residents are in such a positive frame of mind.'

August 2006, BBC News

Like Las Vegas, Brighton seems to be in, but not of, the country where it physically resides; a domestic, kiss-me-quick mirage, almost, conjured up when people need a place to go to do things they think they shouldn't. And as Vegas seems physically improbable - a metropolis built on the junction of three deserts - so Brighton in its genteel, miniature manner seems to be hidden from the censorious gaze of 'real life', though only fifty minutes from the capital. To ride on the express from Victoria is to experience this; the shabby streets and then the suburbs fall away and all seems green and pleasant until - WHOOSH! - you go through a tunnel and come out the other side, pulling into Sodom-on-Sea.

*What happens in Brighton stays in Brighton.* Except it doesn't. Brighton has become a model village version of Britain, with all of its virtues - good humour, creativity, drunkenness - and its vices - snobbishness, smugness, drunkenness - writ large. It stands alone both of all this

island's coastal resorts, and of its Home Counties' retreats, as a place where people go not to escape the excesses of our landlocked cities but to drown in them. Whether through the historic pursuit of extracurricular sex, of the drugs which make it the most likely place to die of an overdose (more so even than London or Glasgow!), or of the cult of youth, which makes Brighton statistically the most stressful place for women to live (while yet strangely the *Grazia* body map survey of Britain found Brighton women happiest with their bodies; 43 per cent totally happy with their weight, while 6 out of 10 will willingly eat a whole packet of biscuits in one go), this is a city by the sea where the picture-postcard prettiness hides a teeming sewer of splendid sleaze and savage amusement.

A word about a word; when I say 'Brighton' I am actually referring, technically, to the City of Brighton and Hove, as it has been since April Fools' Day 1997, when the two towns became one - not so much in the style of devoted Siamese Twins, though, but more as a particularly obdurate Pushme-Pullyu. I was going to say that the merger was 'resented', but really this only cut one way in that it was resented by Hovians; it's fair to say that Brightonians didn't pay it an awful lot of mind - their collective thoughts were probably on more pressing matters, such as what a perfectly *vile* hangover they had, or that *divine* little number they had a hot date with. This is admittedly a typical Hovian view of Brightonians, but there is a basis in truth there; it's as if the suburb which The Monkees sang about in 'Pleasant Valley Sunday' had been slapped down right bang next to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Brighton is a big brassy broad of a town - the sort of broad who wears so much slap that people start to wonder if she's actually a tranny - even with the endless attempts of the lame-brain council to rebrand it as a fully fledged if far-flung branch of deadly dull, good-taste, Euro-portion

café society. And as they say, nothing grows in the shade. Anything that Brighton touches comes away smelling of it, and thus not only Hove but also the even more westerly hoods of Southwick, Portslade and Shoreham (where Norman Cook, so totally identified as a Brightonian, actually lives) have been swallowed up by the magnificent beast; you could be forgiven for thinking that Brighton stretches all the way to Worthing these days. This has led Hove in particular to glory in a sort of negative identity vis-à-vis Brighton: Brighton young/Hove old, Brighton gay/Hove straight, Brighton hell-raising/Hove basket-hanging. Buildings in particular have become a battlefield, with Brighton's colourful jumble of Regency beauties and modernistic tower blocks seen by Hovians as a sure sign of anarchic tendencies. In response the more uptight citizens of Hove are fanatically engaged in opposing the demolition of the most ordinary or even unsightly houses - 'family houses', as they are invariably called by their fetishistic protectors, in order, one presumes, to differentiate them from the gay flats and bestiality-bound bedsits which seek to usurp them.

This stick-in-the-mud tendency has the unfortunate effect of making Hove Fundamentalists seem anti-fun in all its forms, and the deeper you go into Hove the worse it gets. One sweltering Sunday afternoon in the summer of 2006, my husband and I set out on a walk along the seafront - but rather than turning left at the Peace Statue and strolling into Brighton, we turned right and walked for half an hour along Hove seafront - past the lawns, past the bathing huts - and, it seemed, right back into the past. When we turned up one of the streets that led off the seafront, it was like walking into another world, or, rather, into an old pop song or sci-fi novel, and not an altogether pleasant one at that. While just up the road Brighton was doing a pretty good imitation of Rio during the Carnival if some mad scientist had seen fit to drop a ton of ground-down Pro Plus into the

water supply, here the silent, empty streets had a distinct feel of 'Everyone's Gone To The Moon' or *The Day of the Triffids*. Sure there was no rubbish and no raised voices, no public drunkenness or public displays - but neither were there any people, any taxis or any sign of life. In fact it looked *exactly* like the sort of depressed suburb that people run away to Brighton to escape from. Well, they don't have far to go!

Don't get me wrong, I like a bit of quiet - but this was *beyond*. This was the call of the coffin, the tranquillity of the tomb - and it made me totally understand a bit of strange legalese in the contract for a gorgeous flat on Hove seafront which I had recently nixed at the last moment; the mysterious 'Clause Of Quiet Enjoyment'. I mean, fair play - but I've never enjoyed myself quietly in my life, and I don't intend to start now. As we limped footsore towards the sounds, smells and good old life-affirming seediness of Brighton, I couldn't help but think of the excellent Terry Garaghan's *Brighton: The Musical* - specifically his cheeky little number 'Hovogue', performed to the tune of Madonna's 'Vogue':

All around everywhere you go it's quiet  
And everybody is old  
The streets are full of pussycats  
And everybody is DEAD FUCKING OLD

Hove - old biddies wearing bri nylon blouses!  
Hove! - yes, HOVE, dear!  
Everybody's kicking the bucket!

They're stuck up  
They're well bred  
They've got orthopaedic beds!

But back to basics: Brighton by any other name. Growing up, and all through my salad days in fact, I was never what you could call an Outdoor Girl. As an adolescent, even the popular makeup range of that name had me shuddering with Draculesque distaste and slouching towards the sludgy salvation of the Biba counter. Born jagged with sophistication and paler than putty, you could pick any summer out of my first sixteen and you'd have found me shut away for the full six weeks of school holiday in my Bristol back bedroom with the curtains firmly closed. Occasionally I'd take my nose out of a thoroughly unsuitable and eye-wateringly pretentious turn-of-the-century novel - in translation, *naturellement* - to poke it through said drapes and press it against the sizzling window pane to stare at the sun. 'Make it go away!' I'd whine pitifully before returning to the gripping gripes of some French fag with an interesting disease.

In the hottest summer of the century, that of 1976, I took myself off to London in search of fame, fortune and a whole new city-full of buildings in which to sulk, lurk and sneer through safely sealed windows at people enjoying the sunshine. 'I hate humans,' I would mutter under my breath before going back to ogle the glorious view in my mirror - a regular fun-packet, I was!

I carried on like this for nearly another twenty years - and then, in 1995, I moved to Brighton. And my life as a sun-worshipper, beach-bum and water-baby began in earnest. I've often been asked if I have any regrets about things I've done in my long and louche life; just one, and that's *wasting so much time stuck indoors when it's lovely out there!* For once, my mother had been right.

But it took a seaside town to change my mind. If I'd stayed in London, I'd still be sulking, lurking and sneering behind closed doors because when the temperature rises in the concrete canyons, it's more than ever a jungle. Italian and Spanish cities handle the heat by taking a siesta; all

the Parisians who can afford to simply abandon the city wholesale. (In July and August there are more Frenchies between the ages of 16 and 21 in Brighton than there are in Paris. They tell their parents it's the lure of the language schools; they tell us it's the sex, drugs and clubbing.) But Londoners hang on in there, neither napping nor fleeing, and they get *mad as hell*. You're well better off behind closed doors.

Brighton, of course, comes into its own in the sunshine. It's still beautiful when windswept in the rain, when walking on the esplanade feels like being in a Smiths video and connects one thrillingly with the drenched but undefeated island spirit of our damp, dazzling people. But when the sun comes out, it truly is 'that paradise of brightness' that A.E. Coppard eulogised, and which S.P.B. Mais was thinking of when he stated that: 'Anyone who does not live in Brighton is mad and should be locked up.'

When the sun shines and the temperature rises in Britain, the other Two Nations schism - alongside rich and poor, North and South, town and country - becomes illuminated. The landlocked Britain closes in on its captives; the coastal Britain opens up, up, up, giving the experience of living physically *on the edge* of one's country an almost vertiginous dazzle and shimmer. It's like we're so . . . *out there* . . . that *anything* could happen. And most Brighton stories, which can variously end up in rooms rented by the hour, painting oneself as a zebra (and meaning it sincerely), or waking up dressed in the garb of the opposite sex on a ferry to Rotterdam, start on the beach.

Strictly speaking, the beach of the City of Brighton & Hove stretches almost three miles from Shoreham to Rottingdean, but the spirit of Brighton Beach resides between the Peace Statue in the west to the Palace Pier in the east. Massive investment has transformed this central

mile of beachfront over the past decade; Charlotte Raven, who grew up in Brighton, says:

When I was a teenager there was nothing on the seafront except places where you could get chips and tea out of polystyrene cups. There was one café under the arches where you could go and shelter from the weather. We mods used to sit there and argue about whose turn it was to go and get more lighter fuel. It was all very seamy and much more atmospheric whereas it feels so much more like London now - same people, same bloody cappuccinos!

Charlotte also called the old neglected seafront 'a wonderful prompt for human narratives' - and looking at the pristine Artists Quarter, Fishing Museum and Volleyball Court, where one's responses are all cued up and ready to go, you could argue that prosperity has been paid for with sheer seedy character. And that this could be a chic, bustling promenade anywhere from Positano to San Francisco, as the beautiful people linger over a latte and plan a hard day's antique shopping.

But I'm nit-picking. When it still feels like an honour to live somewhere after eleven years, how bad can it be? *And it's still so not London!* Beyond the Palace Pier going east towards the Marina, the chill, slick hand of the style police has not yet crushed Brighton's grand tradition of agreeable, ramshackle blowsiness, and you can still ride the quaint Volks Railway past the abandoned Peter Pan's Playground and the desperately dated, utterly adorable 'nudist beach'. Here Little Englander Modernists like me can find the rusty radiance of the resistance to the global village and the Euro-portion which is summed up in the county motto of Sussex: We Won't Be Druv.

The revamps, the facelifts and the attempts by a clumsy council to write the indigenous Brighton working class out

of the upwardly mobile picture are real enough. But on the beach, you get the distinct feeling that Brighton will never completely pull its socks up. Already the white-flight London breeders who came here to create a vast Nappy Valley - a kind of Clapham-on-Sea - are appalled by our unparalleled drug-taking (see above OD stat) and assorted high jinks. Even between the piers, where the gentrification is most obvious and where every citizen should in theory be shopping for hand-painted *objets*, the vast dope cloud still rises, like a phoenix in reverse, silently and smilingly refusing to be born-again as an on-message, user-friendly unit of the ongoing British economic miracle which has seen us over the past decade come to work the longest hours in Europe - and along the way become one of its most miserable nations. But time passes so quickly in the blameless, shameless sun, on the eternal beach, where the going out and coming in of the ocean makes the only real sense. A working day can be lost forever in the blink of an eye, in forty winks, in a couple of cans of Stella and a cheeky spliff. And a good thing too.

Living on the edge, *coasting*, can give one a great deal of perspective - dangerous, healthy perspective - in a culture where workers may be underpaid and harassed and discarded in a manner that trade union strength would not have allowed a few decades back. It makes you aware that, when you finally lie dying, you'll never regret your day in the sun. You won't remember your time on the beach as time wasted; instead, you'll look back bitterly at all that time behind sealed windows, pushing paper and kissing butt, when the sun was - finally! - shining as the precious days you frittered away. And if I ever fret momentarily as I tug at my Miraclesuit and turn on my front to even up my tan, and ask myself if I really shouldn't go inside and start working now, the breezy, easy brother of Jiminy Cricket, who sits on the shoulder of every warm-blooded Brightonian, leans close and whispers, 'It'll keep . . .'

If you still show an unhealthy desire to put nose to grindstone, shoulder to wheel, or to indulge in any other such self-loathing and anatomically outlandish stunts, he will most likely see fit to remind you that when you were a child, at the end of a day by the seaside, when your parents dragged you back to real, landlocked, boring life, you could barely get your head around the fact that *some people didn't have to leave - because they lived there, all the time!*

Now I am one of those maddeningly jammy dodgers. I've been here in Brighton for twelve years, and the weird thing is that in the best possible way it still doesn't feel like home. Instead it feels like I somehow got out of going home - time and time and time again - and that I escaped from the life that had been mapped out for me in the landlocked limbo of London; the slo-mo, stressed-out, wound-down fatalism of growing up and growing old. Now *that's* lucky, if you like.

January 2007

## PREFACE BY DANIEL RAVEN

At eight years old I too dreamed of escaping from London. I hated school, where I had hardly any friends on account of sounding 'posh', I wasn't allowed out on my own in case I got kidnapped by prostitutes (at least that's what I assumed the threat was - and why else would anyone spend half an hour walking around our block, visibly trying not to look suspicious?) and there was nowhere to buy American comics, or indeed anything else of interest, because this was Streatham. It probably wasn't any grimmer than anywhere else in outer London at the dawn of the 1980s, but all my memories of the place are underscored by a low hum of constant background mankiness: peeling flyposters on every wall, National Front graffiti on every lamppost, 'I Don't Like Mondays' on every bleeding radio . . .

I knew I didn't want to be there, but typically assumed everywhere else would be just the same, if not a good deal worse; my school in Streatham was depressing, certainly, but to switch to a new one would surely be to invite *Grange Hill*-style swimming pool tragedies. I sobbed and sulked all the way down the M23 until finally we arrived in Brighton - and, actually, it was fine. Our new house was just around the corner from Preston Park, which was as beautiful then as it is now, and my new school was manageably sized and friendly, with the expected jibes about my accent never materialising (it seemed I'd never really been posh at all - just *desperately* middle class, darling!). Perhaps best of all, there was a science fiction bookshop on the other side of the park - Vortex Books - which sold *all* the American

comics *at least two months in advance of their cover dates*, and although the bearded man who ran it clearly disliked children, he'd still let you buy stuff!! It was almost more than my tiny heart could stand.

That said, central Brighton in 1981 bore little resemblance to the squeaky-clean, kooky stationery lovers' Mecca we know today - here too was mankiness. The conference trade was booming and the town was already attracting upwards of 35,000 language students a year, but revenue from your actual holidaymakers had dropped sharply and evidence of the recession was everywhere (except Preston Park). The lower esplanade of the seafront, now teeming with cafés, bars and galleries, was then an eerie strip of near-Eastbourneian emptiness, punctuated only by a dingy arcade, a handful of boarded-up rock shops and the occasional notorious toilet. Churchill Square was not the sterile, identikit indoor mall we presently plod through but a grimy, baffling<sup>1</sup> outdoor one bristling with empty units. The Marina - whose attractions now include a huge hotel, an equally vast supermarket, a casino, a multiplex cinema, a string of bars, restaurants and even places to *live* - was just a Marina. A half-empty Marina.

But! We had the North Laines. If Brighton were a pair of jeans (with leather chaps, natch), the North Laines would be the condom pocket - indisputably central yet curiously easy to disregard, with a tendency to secrete forgotten treasures. Cradled in the right angle of London Road and North Street and adjoining the train station to the west, they nonetheless remain hidden from the casual shopper (who in any case may only be seeking big name high street action) or tourist (unlikely to wander east from the station when the sea can clearly be seen to the south). Their uniquely indeterminate situation gave - and, to some extent, still gives - them a uniquely unruly atmosphere; in those days, the whole area looked like the outer fringes of a music festival that had gone on so long all the traders had

managed to build houses around their stalls without once letting the bongs go out. I was about fourteen when I first started hanging around there, and just naïve enough to think I'd stumbled upon the 'real' Brighton.

Delights abounded: second-hand record shops run by bearded men who clearly disliked teenagers (generally a bit fatter than the bloke from Vortex, though, and with dazed-looking, dreadlocked lieutenants), second-hand bookshops (principally David's Book Exchange, whose proprietor<sup>2</sup> had the avuncular-if-grasping air of a mildly offensive Jewish stereotype from an early 70s sitcom and was rumoured to have a bath full of urine upstairs), second-hand clothes shops (like Uncle Sam's Vintage American, where Jean-Yves the camp Frenchman used to work before he started stoogeing for Jim Davidson on TV's *The Generation Game*), Vegetarian Shoes (Vegetarian Shoes!) and the Jubilee Shopping Hall, a flea market that looked like it thought it was a department store (the entire first floor was empty apart from one small poster shop - *unthinkable* on Gardner Street today). I'd never seen places or people like this before but they all seemed to make perfect sense, inasmuch as you knew they would have made no sense at all anywhere else. Dog-eared pubs like the Prince George and the Green Dragon would nightly be stormed by a hundred and one varieties of fruitcake, all with their own confusingly original theories about politics, history and/or the creative talents with which they would shortly stun the world; goths, punks, hippies, mods and teds - yes, teds! - would laugh, argue, or try to start bands with them. Fittingly, the only street sign<sup>3</sup> to formally identify this strange land had been misspelled, 'Welcome to the North Laine Conversation Area'. And if you didn't like conversation, there was always the Dorset Arms.

The Dorset was a classic old man's pub - peeling plaster, broken jukebox, cloudy horse brasses - but they seemed to be running a little short on old men. It was profoundly

empty almost every night and the stench of defeat hung heavily in the air, just under the banner proclaiming, 'The Party's Here!' that no one had ever had the energy to remove. Sometimes there'd be a DJ, which is to say an elderly, bespectacled record collector with a box of Gene Vincent 7"s and a Dansette who closed his every engagement with Ivor Biggun's 'I'm a Wanker', but for the most part it was all about staring at walls in total silence.

Me and my friends ended up spending a lot of time there, because you could always get a seat and the bar staff always looked pleased to see you; we may even have experienced misplaced feelings of ownership towards it. When it closed down and reopened as 'The Dorset Street Bar', flogging fancy bottled lagers, sun-blushed tomato ciabattas and fucking *coffee* of all things, it seemed to us hilariously inappropriate - 'the Dorset *what* bar?' 'The Dorset Street *what?* - but, in hindsight, we sniggered too soon. Big changes were afoot in Brighton, changes that would threaten to make old men of us all - and in my case, if we're honest, succeed.

Apparently London was starting to look a bit small, or at least all the nice bits of it were, and a whole generation of wealthy young professionals and dropouts was finding itself distinctly underwhelmed by the prospect of forking out silly zlotys just to get a big, boring house in Hampstead like its parents'. These people were keen to strike out, to make a statement, to be individuals, separately but at the same time - and what better place to do all that than Brighton, celebrated home of the 'alternative lifestyle'? Many were also spawning, and anxious to remove their young from the pernicious influence of the big, bad city that had made them rich; they liked Brighton because it was safer than London while also being more like London than anywhere else that was that close to London.

They all loved their new seaside homes and showed off about them to their friends, who duly began to wonder if

there might be a pebble-shaped hole in their own lives. (So what if they had to be in town most of the week? There was nothing to stop them getting a little place for weekends, and it'd be a great investment too!) The result was that, from 1999 onwards, property prices in Brighton skyrocketed. Landlords all over town drastically increased their rents or sold up completely; dozens of office buildings were converted into posh apartment blocks. Suddenly, people who had always belonged to Brighton could no longer afford to live there: not just the North Laines fruitcakes but teachers, firemen, nurses. Web designers poured in to replace them - and if there's one thing web designers like, it's coffee.

As a nation we are often encouraged to laugh at, or be shamed by, the absurdity of working-class English holidaymakers who go to Spain and insist on eating pie and chips every day, yet when these incoming Londoners (most of whom wouldn't dream of going on that sort of holiday) began to remake Brighton in Islington's image, no one in authority seemed anything but grateful. Today, the North Laines area is a shiny shadow of its former self. Some of the old shops and people are still there, but they're increasingly crowded out by smug coffee chains and ponceoid boutiques. The Prince George now refers to itself as 'George' and the Green Dragon has become - wait for it - 'Office'.

Don't get me wrong: I actually quite like fancy bottled lagers and ciabatta, even warm goats' cheese salad. And I've nothing against places that look clean and smart: leather sofas, spider plants, bit of chrome on the tables, bit of art on the walls . . . But when everywhere you go has all of these things and not much else, it's amazing how quickly you can start to yearn for sticky carpets and soggy beer mats, even Ivor Biggun.

Of course, this is a pretty petty gripe next to those of the outgoing teachers, firemen and nurses; for anyone who can

still afford to live in Brighton or Hove,<sup>4</sup> they're still very nice places to live. And maybe, if we apply even more perspective, it isn't actually worth making such a fuss about. That old chestnut the Shock of the New has, after all, had more than its share of previous in this vicinity, and, generally speaking, things have always turned out for the best. When Dr Richard Russell published his *Glandular Diseases, or a Dissertation on the Use of Sea Water in Affections of the Glands* in 1750, a poverty-stricken fishing village of less than 500 households called Brighthelmston was besieged by rich and fashionable visitors seeking a dunk in its healing waters. The level of culture shock experienced by its indigenous workers must have been staggering but they adapted, offering boat rides and rooms for lodging, taking jobs in the new hotels and on the seafront as 'dippers' (literally, the ones who did the dunking), or plying any or all of a whole host of less reputable trades. They adapted so well, in fact, that 46 years later Brighton's dolphin emblem was described in a London newspaper as 'a shark that lives on gold'.

When the train station opened in 1841 the invasion was stepped up a gear: 75,000 trippers arrived every week in the summer of 1850, compared to 25,000 *a year* in the days before the railway. The town's more prosperous residents and visitors were naturally aghast at the heightened level of working-class shoulder-rubbing this entailed, and formed conservation groups to oppose anything that threatened to attract any more of the bothersome oiks – the West Pier, for instance. They too were forced to adapt (mainly, one suspects, by moving to Hove), and a little over a hundred years later the descendants of those same groups were campaigning for the pier's preservation.

That's what I'll do, then: I'll adapt. Hey, I'm trying!<sup>5</sup> I certainly don't mind being part of the shark that lives on gold, if indeed that is what we're doing this time. The truth is there is not, nor has there ever been, a 'real' Brighton to