



Thatcher Stole My Trousers

Alexei Sayle

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In 1971, Alexei Sayle, raised by communist parents in 1950s Liverpool, set out to find his fortune in London. It was a city where punk was in its infancy, unemployment was high, the weekly meetings of the Communist Party of Britain took place in the Bellman bookshop, a young Margaret Thatcher was just made Secretary of State for Education, and stand-up comedy was unheard of.

Less than a decade later Alexei was the first MC of London's only comedy club, the Comedy Store, and the landscape of British comedy had transformed. "The only completely new thing that I could bring was an authentic working class voice plus a threat of genuine violence--nobody in Monty Python looked like a hard case who'd kick your head in."

From his years as a Chelsea Art School student, a DHSS office clerk, a textbook illustrator, a dinner lady and a drama teacher, to his early experiences in fringe theater and the discovery that he could make people laugh, *Thatcher Stole My Trousers* chronicles a time when comedy and politics came together in electrifying ways. Recounting the opening season of the Comedy Store, his time at the Alternative Cabaret, the Comic Strip and the Young Ones, and his friendships with the comedians who would soon become household names, this is a unique and beguiling blend of social history and memoir.

Fascinating, funny, angry and entertaining, it is a story of class and comedy, politics and love, Doc Martins and Tiswas.

Thatcher Stole My Trousers Details

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From Reader Review Thatcher Stole My Trousers for online ebook

Steven Pilling says

this is interesting but not involving

sayle writes really well , it covers an interesting time in british history and politically it is in my wheelhouse but

all faults appear to be with everyone else , some sections feel lazy and well it feels disjointed but what he writes well is very good

Moirad says

Not quite as humorous as the earlier volume of his autobiography, and the more successful he becomes, the truer this is. Surprising amount of namedropping, but still some perceptive insights into his own character, an interesting account of the rise of alternative comedy, and a nostalgia fest for me, as I lived in the same area of London at the same time.

David Birchall says

Well written, and with plenty of references to the Liverpool of the 80's that I (partly) recognised. The main passage that stood out for me was Sayle's observation of the differences between working class Liverpoolians in a pub compared to their London counterparts. I think that is still true today. But the book was just not as funny as I'd hoped it would be...

Domhnall says

This is social history as much as autobiography, with an affectionate but unflattering impression of the Seventies in Britain before Thatcher. As such I enjoyed it hugely and I respect the way Sayle has stayed loyal to the Left and been willing to provide a voice of opposition as politics, media and indeed the world of comedy has been colonised by neoliberal ideology.

However, I was not impressed: I felt that too much of the commentary is insufficiently considered and invites critical questions; at times I found his version of events tiresome. What spoiled it most, I suspect, was his insistence on being humorous far more often than appropriate. Although it is on the surface humorous, this is often gallows humour, a tricky and not always helpful way of dealing with nostalgia, disappointment, sadness and the memories of hardship and deprivation. Poverty with its related evils is not heroic but it is not hilarious either – it is plain embarrassing and upsetting. At one point he comments on a visit to Dublin, where he is upset by the street beggars and imagines that England would never allow such displays, only to find that under Thatcher the poor began to gather on the streets of English cities in the same way. Today they are numerous. Such visible poverty is a product of policy, not nature. Its victims are not really ideal material for comedy.

When he refers to the futility of politics on the Left, it is largely the lunatic fringe that he describes, and he points out their disconnection from the practical politics of the unions, local government and public services in which the real British Left was vigorously opposing the pressure of neoliberalism as it emerged before and through Thatcher's time in office.

He bemoans the council landlord willing to repair a toilet damaged by the tenant (himself) without any sanction for misbehaviour, but he does not consider the implication of authorities who decide to make moral judgements as to which tenants deserve a service and which do not – something that has been exposed brutally by the Theresa May government's approach to services. His negative impressions of education also fall short of serious commentary. One lesson he failed to learn from his contact with Marxist analysis should be that common sense is a fking useless basis for political and social analysis.

He bemoans the decline of British industry, notably car making, while observing the impact of Japanese producers, and he does separately remark on the ludicrous cars being produced in Australia at this time. A more considered analysis of the problem would have observed that the Japanese were no less a challenge to similarly complacent car makers in the USA. What was coming under strain here was not the industrial policies of Britain's Labour government in the Seventies, but the Anglo Saxon industrial model which these economies (UK, Australia, US) shared in common. Contrary to popular opinion, Thatcher did not rectify those inherent failings, she intensified them a thousand times.

As for comedy, it would be a mistake to imagine even alternative comedy is the property of the political left. Even that limited space has to be contested and he refers very late in this book to his sudden discovery that his close associates did not in fact share his political values.

In short, his concept of politics and of the Left is rather shaped by his connection with fringe politics and not with practical politics, which apart from the miner's strike he does not appear to have made any connection with in this account, so it is not entirely helpful when describing what it was that Thatcher's government destroyed in British society and not entirely funny in its account of these decades.

Susan says

I got through this at a fast pace. An enjoyable read. A social history in Alexei's comic style.

Chris says

It's okay. Not as good as Stalin Ate My Homework. He recycles many stories from the first book and inflates himself into something of a pompous bastard who holds somewhat deluded notions of his role in British comedy.

Jennifer says

I am glad I had read Stalin Ate My Homework, Alexei Sayle's account of his Liverpool Communist upbringing before coming to his story of adult life and how he arrived at comedic success. This second volume would have lost a lot without a fuller understanding of the foundations.

Sayle's style of comedy is savage and ranting and uncomfortable. The book is not like that - the comedic persona is not him. You could argue that he failed at being Bohemian and not just because, although it isn't quite put like this in the book, he married a childhood sweetheart who seems to be a remarkable and grounding woman. I enjoyed so many details of their lives (slightly uncomfortable about all the references to her cooking alongside his elimination of sexist jokes at the comedy clubs he was involved in... but why don't we get the recipe for Linda's five bean salad?) He seems to feel genuinely at least faintly ashamed of some of his lack of diligence in his early jobs and courses rather than almost boastful "What am I like?" you sometimes get in autobiographies... and I found the enduring ethics and perspectives provided by his upbringing interesting. His mother Molly is a book unto herself.

The early part of the book was funny enough to produce noisy evidence of my appreciation, the final third probably falls away a bit.... still interesting but without the momentum and structure.

Nigeyb says

I've always had a soft spot for Alexei Sayle, and some favourable reviews for this second volume of his memoirs inspired me to read this. And the title too, "Thatcher Stole My Trousers", is great (even better than volume one "Stalin Ate My Homework").

Anyone who lived through, and enjoyed, the emergence of "alternative comedy" in the UK in the late 1970s, should find much to enjoy here. Alexei has a good memory for the details of social history that bring an account like this to life, along with plenty of amusing anecdotes, some famous pals, and - perhaps most significantly - he's a good writer, both clever and funny. The book prompted me to laugh out loud a few times, and smile a lot. It also inspired me to revisit a few of his televisual comedic moments on YouTube, especially his appearances on The Young Ones - which still stand up really well.

The book palled in the final third once Alexei was established. I was more engrossed by his tales of working at the Comedy Store (the first alternative comedy club in Britain - can you imagine?), and what preceded it, his years at art college and in teacher training. Molly, his mother, is possibly worthy of her own book, and makes me want to read the first volume. Whilst this might not auger well for any prospective third volume, for now I confidently recommend "Thatcher Stole My Trousers" if any of the above resonates with you.

3.5 / 5

Kay Smillie says

Wonderfully insane at times. An off kilter look back at the life and times of Alexei Sayle in his teenage years to his break through on the comedy scene. Like his style of humour you cannot fail to understand his politics or his opinions on all and sundry. His mother sounds like an, ahem, unusual person. Wonder who Alexei takes after? Not for those of a right wing persuasion.

Ray Smillie

Ryan Williams says

Alexei Sayle didn't look like a comedian. Big, burly, and with eyes seemingly loaded into his skull ready to fire at something, anything nearby, club regulars would joke that he looked like a bouncer promoted to compère by accident. You doubt they ever said it to his face.

Having face was a job requirement. Although it takes over a hundred pages to get there, the night The Comic Store opened and all that came later is the burden of Sayle's latest volume of memoirs. Although perhaps not up there with the Fall of Carthage or the Siege of Stalingrad, the opening night was undeniably one where history was made. History, Sayle warns us, is a pack of lies told by people who weren't there. He was.

But Sayle rescues history from too-neat conclusions. He captures the messiness of life, the thousand and one forking paths that might have led anywhere. Sayle was, he is quick to remind us, entirely unqualified for his job as the Comedy Store's all-powerful host. All his comrades, unlike him, were experienced performers. Before landing the gig Sayle had been an art student of minimal talent, and taught general studies as a part-time lecturer. Thrust before a poorly lit, smelly room teeming with drunks, it forced him to invent a style, and a mode of behaviour for both on and off the stage. Mixing with the crowd was strictly forbidden: his act depended on authority, which fraternising would have diluted fatally.

It seems a sensible idea. The unfortunately named Meard Street, the narrow alley leading to the club's entrance, was crammed with brothels and ladies offering alternative entertainment to prospective audiences. Evenings frequently degenerated into 'drunken chaos', with over a hundred punters baying for blood. Policemen were called to break up the worst nights – none of which, Sayle notes with pride and no small level of bemusement – while he was on. Bluntness and intimidation were his weapons, and effective ones. The Comedy Store, like the Comic Strip that followed it, was a bear pit, but also a kind of crucible. Heir to the punk revolution, it had a manic, confrontational energy no venue would long contain. Within three years, the store's acts – Sayle, Rik Mayall, Ade Edmundson, French and Saunders, Nigel Planer – would conquer television, changing the face of British comedy forever.

A similar sense of catastrophe seems to have followed them to the television studio. The Young Ones, the flagship show that made them, will never watch the same after Sayle recites the injury roster. Explosions were common; health and safety was not. In the first episode, the brick Vyvan bites into explodes, the audience laughs. What the audience doesn't see is the inside of Ade Edmundson's mouth being cut wide open. When Rick accidentally causes a stove to explode, the scene plays in slow motion. Not for artistic reasons, like the last scene of Blackadder. It's because the team forgot they'd already loaded the stove with explosives before breaking for lunch, and loaded a second round afterwards. The resulting fireball wrecked a camera, the shot, and set Rik Mayall ablaze.

These stories are the meat and drink of the text, and they don't balk at making the chef look bad – rare in comedians' memoirs. There are a few errors of fact. Clive James' TV column was a fixture of The Observer, not The Sunday Times. When Sayle snarls at Kenny Everett's speech at the Tory Party Conference, he seems to have missed that Kenny was joking at his hosts' expense. When he curses his fellow cast members for welcoming Emma Thompson and other members of the Oxbridge set onto the show, he seems to forget that the pins need to be set up before they can be knocked down. A quick look at the script might have told him. Stephen Fry's character was called Lord Snot.

Sayle is more perceptive about politics, or how politics warp human perception. Marxism was a secular theology. Like all theologies, it didn't care for facts that stubbornly refused to fit the theory. You can spot a 'political' audience, he says, by the time lapse between them hearing a joke and mentally vetting it before laughing. You may laugh, but the observation is a telling one: it stays with you once the laughter stops.

The material is uneven and only really starts when the comedy does – and Sayle's bitter streak protrudes perhaps a few times too many. But perhaps that's the price of living through history. At least Alexei Sayle was there. We weren't.

Mick Kelly says

Alexei Sayle and I share a few characteristics. Both of us born to communist parents in Liverpool in the 1950s, we both went to college in London and we were both associated with the far left group CPB(ML) - the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist). But then he became a famous stand-up and I became a computer programmer.

So I found this a fascinating account - especially in the early stages.

The biography starts (roughly) at the beginning of his college years and tracks his early dead-end jobs, his start at the Comedy Store and the subsequent career through 'The Young Ones', 'Comic Strip' and his own TV series and tours. It ends before he started his writing career, so I guess about the 1980s or 1990s.

I read quite a few biographies and this one stands out from the crowd. Alexi is a complicated man who is not always selling himself to the potential ticket-buyers for his next tour. Not all people warm to Alexi, nor would he want them to, I guess, but I do.

His views on art, people, politics and life in general will not be shared by everyone - some of them may be just a joke, intended to provoke a reaction rather than being core beliefs - but he is always engaging. Reading the book is in part biography and in part like talking to an erudite stranger in a pub. Thought provoking or just provoking, it's a great read.

Russell Taylor says

An enjoyable read. It skips from story to story in quite a fast paced fashion, with some of the chapters just being a few pages in length, which I suppose matches his stand-up delivery style. This style did leave me sometimes wanting to know more about particular people or situations. I wouldn't say I roared with laughter at any point, but many of his anecdotes did make me smile. A worthwhile read for anyone who grew up during this period or has an interest in the origins of alternative comedy.

Abigail says

Enjoyed this immensely. If you want to read about Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson or Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders you'll be disappointed. Alexei writes about the comic genius that is Alexei. Set against a backdrop of 70's and 80's London, this is the second part of his memoir that covers meeting Linda his extraordinary wife, a series of unfulfilling jobs (tutor, cleaner, clerk) while trying to make a life in comedy to becoming the compere of The Comedy Club and appearing in The Young Ones.

Most interesting of all was Alexei's relationship with his mother - he refers to her as Molly - who clearly had an undiagnosed serious mental health condition. Molly's communist leanings and frequent and frantic outbursts found their way into Alexei's own in-ye-face and intimidating comedic style.

Geoff Balme says

Each time I finish a book I like to chuck it overhand across the longest aspect of the house (luckily I rarely finish books outside the home) this book sailed impressively across the living room and into the entry hall of my cheap rental townhouse.

I have never seen Alexie Sayle and read his book on a whim. His humor and history are nonetheless intriguing, even when, like myself, you're not acquainted with anything he's been associated with.

I especially liked his devotion to his outrageous bully of a mother and his leftist heart.

Chance rules our lives.

Chris says

It feels weird to say that I bought this memoir of an alternative comedian known as a star of the most punk sitcom ever recorded ... at Harrod's. But it seemed fitting that I should find, among the shelves of books about royals and oligarchs at the world's most pretentious store, a book about a bloke from Liverpool who created some of 20th century Britain's most insane comedy.

I love Alexei Sayle. He is the perfect blend of smart people doing silly comedy that I have admired my whole life. But I found in reading this a deeper appreciation for him as he navigated an uncertain path from being an aimless art student to joining the cast of *The Young Ones*.

For all of his manic and crazy work onstage, he is actually a mild-mannered and reflective writer. And he notes this contradiction in this book. He's a skillful writer, making people laugh at his and other's foibles but also portraying humanity in the people around him. Every paragraph is amazingly self-contained, yet the sum total doesn't feel choppy or staccato.

Fans of *The Young Ones* or alternative comedy or just someone who wants an understanding of what life was like in Liverpool in the '70s or London in the '80s will enjoy this. I can't wait to read more of his work.

Or I could just hear him make some stupid noises.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgO4b...>
