

*The Sound of No Hands Clapping* by Toby Young (Abacus) R130

4 May 2008

Some time ago Howard Jacobson wrote a novel called *Coming From Behind*, based on his unsuccessful attempts to make it in academia. The book was a run-away best-seller, enabling Jacobson to resign his job at the Wolverhampton Polytech and write full-time. The moral of this is that people like to read about other people's failures; there's even a name for this kind of fiction: loser lit.

Toby Young's first book, *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People* was an account of how Young, a British-born journalist, failed to take the New York glossy magazine world by storm. He was fired from *Vanity Fair*, the glossiest of the glossies, for behaviour that admittedly would have had him fired from *Penthouse* (he had previously been fired from most of Britain's leading newspapers.)

Discovering, surprise, surprise, that gloss is but skin-deep and that coke-snorting is not an intellectually enriching activity, Young is redeemed by the Love of a Good Woman and returns to Britain.

*The Sound of No Hands Clapping* repeats this formula. Here the world that Young sets out to conquer is the film industry as manifested in LA. The main plot line involves a screenplay that Young is contracted to write by "Mr Hollywood" (one of the few sharers of Young's space who remain anonymous), apparently a Really Important Person in "the Business", as Young is instructed to call the film industry. The film never gets made, but Young does get to spend a lot of time in LA hobnobbing with the celebrities that he still, in spite of his insight in *How to Lose Friends*, venerates with all the passion of a groupie. He also gives, via his friend Rob Long, some interesting insights into the heartbreaking business of writing screenplays.

Where this book differs from its predecessor is that by now Young has hit the jackpot: *How to Win Friends* has turned out to be a best-seller, and film-makers are vying with each other to turn it into a movie (as has since been done, for release later this year). Since, however, failure is Young's selling point, he gives us plenty of anecdotes illustrating that, even as a success, he's a failure. He is appointed as the *Observer's* drama critic, and misguidedly takes the previous (fired) critic, Sheridan Morley, to lunch. The ensuing embarrassment and subsequent drubbing in *Private Eye* almost make up for the fact that he's being paid £225 per column.

When Young and an actor friend turn *How to Lose Friends* into a play, Young glosses over the fact that the play is in fact moderately successful, and meticulously quotes from all the dreadful reviews the play receives -- the *Guardian*, for instance, noted that Young "comes across as someone with the charm of a lizard and the IQ of a hamster."

As these examples illustrate, Young revels in recounting his misjudgements, insensitivities and just plain stupidities. Since most of these proceed from his tireless attempts at self-promotion, we never pity him, and to give him his due, he doesn't ask us to. He does, though, seem to want us to like him, which is not easy.

Part of the charm offensive is a drawn-out account of Young's marriage and the two children he fathers -- at first reluctantly, and then with all the wide-eyed wonder of all fathers discovering that their child is unique. The Good Woman, Caroline, is portrayed as quite tough enough to deal with Young's fathering style, which can best be described as evasive; indeed, Young seems intent on using his book to make amends to Caroline for being the bum husband he clearly is. As in the first book, Young experiences an

epiphany, this one brought on by the illness and recovery of his new-born son: “This, it turned out, was where true satisfaction lay – not in winning an Oscar or a Pulitzer Prize, but *this*.”

This is of course admirable, but does rather kill the prospect of a sequel: *The Sound of Happy Children Playing* is just not going to make very good copy. But I suspect we can trust Toby Young to stuff this one up, too, and to tell us all about it quite soon.

It is difficult to decide whether Young is basically a nice guy pretending to be a worm or a worm pretending to be a nice guy pretending to be a worm. Normally the writer’s place on the worm-nice guy scale wouldn’t really matter, but since in this case the writer is so insistently present in every paragraph of the book, it does affect the reader’s response to the book. For myself, I preferred the admittedly awful unreformed Young to the dewy-eyed father, who struck me as prone to the kind of sentimentality often underlying professions of hard-bitten cynicism.

Many people have been amused by this book. The London *Sunday Times* called it “very, very funny”; the *Daily Mail* found it “side-splittingly funny”; the *Spectator* pronounced in “unbelievably humorous”. I emerged from reading it with my sides un-split and but moderately convulsed. But clearly this is a book provoking a wide range of responses: buy it (or borrow it) by all means, and judge for yourself. You may end up hating Toby Young, but he’s quite good fun to hate.