A MONTHLY LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

JULY

EXPRESS BOOKS

The Real Dylan

Tracking him down, more or less, in two new books.

BY STEPHEN KESSLER

Biography is gossip—at best meticulously researched, placed in historical context, artfully recounted, and enlightening with regard to important lives, but gossip nonetheless—on a grand scale. Even the least prurient and most scholarly among us relish revelations about the famous, just as we do about our friends and acquaintances, that are really none of our business. But human nature loves a good story, and what could be more interesting than a well-told tale of somebody else's life? Even though the work of any major artist invariably speaks volumes more than what can be exhumed about his background, the circumstances of his origins fascinate; we want to believe they can tell us something about the mystery of creation.

Bob Dylan, among the most slippery and enigmatic of contemporary culture heroes, began his career by inventing incredible stories about himself: he was an orphan, was part American Indian, had lived in New Mexico, worked in carnivals, bummed around the country, played backup piano for Elvis.... When *Newsweek* revealed in 1963 that he was in fact a middle-class Jewish kid from Hibbing High, Dylan became resentful of the press and increasingly protective of his privacy. Immensely ambitious from the beginning, he wanted fame and set out to win it, but failed to take into account the

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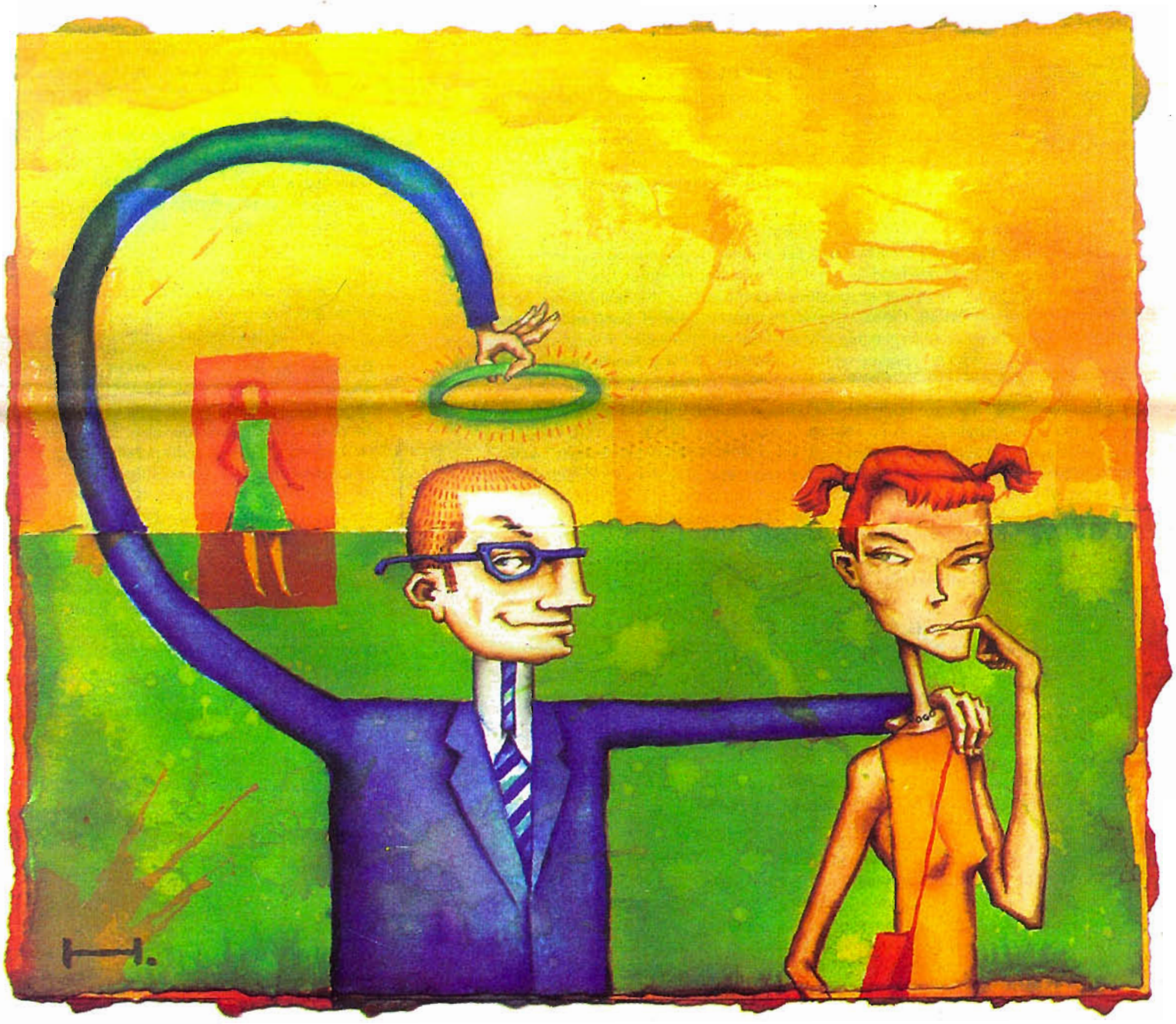

Boyz to Men

Brit Tales of Arrested Development

BY SARAH COLEMAN

Looking at the two main candidates for prime minister in the recent British election, you could be excused for thinking that Britain has become a nation of boy-men. In the red corner was energetic Labour leader Tony Blair, a former rock guitarist with an uncanny ability to tap into pop culture and connect with an audience. In the blue corner was Conservative challenger William Hague, once described by a colleague as "a fetus in a suit"—a boy-wonder who, at sixteen, stood up at a party conference and challenged Margaret Thatcher to do more for youth. With neither man's intelligence in doubt, the

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ILLUSTRATION BY HUGH D'ANDRADE

JULY◊BOOKS

Man and Boy
By Tony Parsons
Sourcebooks (2001), $21

How to Be Good
By Nick Hornby
Riverhead (2001), $24.95

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press picked endlessly at something else: their maturity. What did each stand for? Were their energies tempered by any kind of wisdom? Had either of them truly grown up?

Similar questions can be asked of the male characters created by British novelist Nick Hornby—long considered the leading contemporary chronicler of men's arrested development—and those of his new challenger for the title, Tony Parsons. In Hornby's novels *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*, heroes wiggle every which way rather than face up to their responsibilities, and Hornby fashions an appealing comic pathos from their struggles. His third novel, *How to Be Good*, uses marital fidelity as a lens through which to examine issues of responsibility and maturity. It is his darkest and most rewarding work to date.

Parsons, a youthful-looking former rock critic for the magazine *NME* (New Musical Express), has recently made a career out of baiting left-wing cultural critics on his BBC television show *Late Review* (or *Artswankers*, as a friend of mine prefers to call it). His first novel, *Man and Boy*, a huge hit in Britain last year, tells the story of a boy-man whose sudden stint as a single parent forces him to grow up.

It's easy to see why *Man and Boy* was a success in Britain. In an era in which fathers are being asked to shoulder more parenting responsibilities and the number of single fathers is rapidly rising, the novel analyzes the drive in men to become responsible fathers while simultaneously acknowledging their desire to cut loose and behave badly.

These two impulses are united in the person of Harry Silver, a hapless television producer in London who admits that the best things in his life are his wife Gina and their four-year-old son Pat. Having married and become parents at 25, Harry and Gina have found that "while our friends were dancing the night away in clubs, we were up all hours with our baby's teething problems." This hasn't seemed a problem to Harry until a month before his thirtieth birthday, when he suddenly finds himself drooling in a car showroom over a red sports car that "smelled like somebody else's life. Like freedom." What the reader smells here is trouble—and sure enough, buying the car leads Harry to indulge in "a meaningless, opportunistic coupling" with an assistant at work. But when Gina uncovers the affair, she doesn't find it so meaningless, and takes off for Japan and a career opportunity, leaving Harry to care for their son.

What follows is a learning-to-cope story that borrows many plot elements from *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and unabashedly jerks the same heartstrings. Parsons adds another layer by contrasting Harry's dubious fathering skills with those of Harry's father, a tough-love patriarch who has never felt the need for a red sports car. He also raises the stakes by introducing another female character into Harry's life: Cyd, an American waitress who soon begins to replace Gina in Harry's affections.

Through Harry's direct, honest-bloke narration, Parsons evidently intends to win over even those readers turned off by his hero's initial irresponsibility. And it works, up to a point. After all, who wouldn't sympathize with a father who learns to become a man, paradoxically by losing his job and becoming (for a while at least) a full-time caregiver?

Parsons' humor is amiable, if lightweight. He's good, for example, at describing the irresponsible men—Gina's father and Cyd's ex-husband—for whom Harry has to compensate. Glenn, Gina's father, is an aging rock musician whose "dreams of glory had receded along with his hippy hairline." Her father's numerous infidelities explain why Gina finds Harry's affair so unforgivable.

The infidelity in Nick Hornby's novel is only the beginning of a bizarre journey into the heart of morality.

Ultimately, though, Parsons' writing lacks subtlety, and his agenda is somewhat disingenuous. *Man and Boy* wants to have its cake and eat it too. It tries both to toe the New Age line (the one that says fathering is a sacred occupation, just as valuable as any career) and to reassure men that it is, in fact, possible to have it all (even after you've screwed up). It provides two intelligent, cynical female characters who criticize Harry's romantic idealism, then pulls out an eleventh-hour hearts-and-flowers ending. It should be sold with a special Bill Clinton seal of approval.

Nick Hornby, on the other hand, isn't out to reassure anybody. Though *How to Be Good* also begins with an extramarital affair, there's nothing black and white about this particular dalliance. The sex in the affair isn't very good; the marriage it interrupts may or may not be worth saving; and in a series of unexpected twists, the infidelity is only the beginning of a bizarre journey into the heart of morality.

In *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*, Hornby's male protagonists could barely choose between Coco Pops and Rice Krispies. But Hornby clearly wants to move on. ("It's harder for me to write about pop culture with narrators who are unattached and feckless," he recently told *New York* magazine. "I don't feel unattached and feckless.") Here, in a significant change of pace, he writes from the point of view of a woman, Katie Carr, a middle-aged doctor who has made important and responsible choices, but who feels the urge for something more in her life.

"I'm not a bad person. I'm a doctor," explains Katie at the start of the novel. "You have to be good to look at boils in the rectal area." Mother of two and major breadwinner, Katie is married to David, a professional grouch who uses his weekly newspaper column, "The Angriest Man in Holloway," to pour scorn on theater enthusiasts and seniors who take too long to pay their fare on the bus. After twenty years of living with David's anger, Katie regards her affair as being not only excusable but deserved.

Hornby sets up what looks like a standard emotional triangle comedy/drama, but nothing in this provocative novel is what it seems. The balance is tipped when David visits a healer called DJ GoodNews—an ex-raver who discovered his powers while on Ecstasy—who proceeds to cure not only David's bad back but his bad attitude.

Under DJ GoodNews' guidance, David is soon giving the family's possessions away to the local homeless shelter and persuading neighbors to foster homeless youths. He is also taking Katie to the theater, making love to her tenderly, and playing board games with their children. "I haven't loved you enough, and I'm really sorry," he announces, throwing Katie into a tailspin. If David's anger drove her into the arms of a lover, his serenity is almost as unbearable. Can she stomach living with a "happy-clappy right-on Christian version of Barbie's Ken"?

Hornby gets great comic mileage out of David's sanctimony and New Age earnestness, and the horror it inspires in Katie. But underneath its sitcom elements (and make no mistake—Hornby is laugh-out-loud funny) *How to Be Good* has a core of genuine anguish. What, it asks, are our duties towards our loved ones and wider community? Can self-fulfillment be balanced against the compromises relationships demand? Or can we only truly call ourselves good when we make significant sacrifices?

Hornby is at his most skillful—and hilarious—when analyzing the link between charity and vanity, and the trickle-down effects of sanctimony. It doesn't take long before David and Katie's daughter Molly is turning into a patronizing do-gooder and their son Tom (resentful that his toys are being given away) is stealing from his friends at school. "Here, then, is the complex psychological explanation for his life of crime," Katie remarks of her son. "He gave some stuff away, and then wanted some other stuff to replace it."

Like Hornby's previous characters, Katie comes to realize that compromise is a facet of maturity—but in her case, the knowledge is more bitter than sweet. "While happy moments are possible I have no right to demand anything more for myself, given the havoc that would be wrought," she tells herself. It's hardly a ringing endorsement for the choices she's made.

Novelists' motives may not be as mixed as those of politicians. But, like the mature politician, the mature novelist looks at the world and sees pieces that don't—and never will—fit together neatly. In *Man and Boy*, Tony Parsons shows flashes of inspiration, but ultimately falls back on clichés about love and parenthood. Nick Hornby, however, has never met a cliché that he didn't want to deconstruct. *How to Be Good* shows that he is no one- or two-book wonder. It is a masterful novel and truly a book for grown-ups.