



Falling Towards England

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'When we got off the ship in Southampton in that allegedly mild January of 1962 I had nothing to declare at customs except goose-pimples under my white nylon drip-dry shirt.'

In the first volume of "Unreliable Memoirs," we said farewell to our hero as he set sail from Sydney Harbour, bound for London, fame and fortune. Finding the first of these proved relatively simple; the second two less so. Undaunted, Clive moved into a bed and breakfast in a Swiss Cottage where he practised the Twist, anticipated poetical masterpieces and worried about his wardrobe.

Falling Towards England Details

Date : Published October 24th 1986 by Picador (first published 1985)

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Colin says

Thirty-something years ago I read Clive James' Unreliable Memoirs. It was one of the funniest books I had ever read, and also one of the most truthful about the universal experience of childhood and early adolescence. Quite why it has taken me so long to read the second book in the series is a mystery. Falling Towards England starts with James arriving at Southampton and covers the next couple of years drifting from job to job and room to bedsit to room in London while he waits to take up a place at Cambridge. Like its predecessor, it is very funny (truly laugh out loud in places), witty and self-aware. It's also (of course) beautifully written and constructed. I loved it, and will read the remaining three volumes of unreliable memoirs in much shorter order than I did the first and second.

Ian Russell says

I read this first about twenty years ago, about the time of the paperback release. The reason I've read it now is down to an overnight stay in hospital and, following advice and not wanting to risk any valuables being lost whilst I lay unconscious, I picked this book - yes, a real book - from the very front and middle of the shelf closest to eye-level, and stuffed it in the overnight bag. Of course, this wasn't the only reason for selection: I simply thought it would be something I could dip into at random.

It the event, it didn't quite work that way. In short, it was far, far too good. Luckily, the place where I randomly dipped in at was page 1 and thereafter all dipping randomly was forgotten.

One other thing I had seemingly forgotten is that Clive James is the amongst the best of humorous writers. Every paragraph has a comical gift. He knows precisely when to play a running gag and exactly when a gag is spent. His turns of phrases are a real joy, at times quite literally tears of laughter made it impossible to read on.

It's an autobiography which reads as a flowing narrative, much like a novel. It isn't bogged down by the usual biographical digression, it's one thing following another. Obviously, some is made up, or at least exaggerated, for effect but it's an effect that makes the telling funnier.

Stephen Coates says

James's second autobiography picks up from where "Unreliable Memoirs" ends, starting with his arrival at Southampton (the same port from where my own family sailed from England to Canada) in 1962 for several years that included Cambridge, theatres and a variety of white-collar jobs which wrote were, at the time, there for the asking. While interesting, I found it didn't have the same degree of wit and humorous anecdotes as "Unreliable Memoirs" but was enjoyable nonetheless.

Susan says

Like reading an early day, more erudite if more pompous and alcoholic, David Sedaris. The early 60's are

James post university (Sydney) pre-graduate (Cambridge) years. He spends them in London mostly broke, mostly drunk, and mostly not getting much if looking a lot... Just as I began to tire of the whining a real humanity would shine through. I wanted to shout at him the read some science: geology, biology, engineering anything but this his muddle of music, poetry, art and politicks would have brought him some perspective; after all this is when the DNA molecule was being unravelled right next door, well maybe a few years earlier. But that is not what the sixties were all about. Jame's oblique takes on racism and the gaping wound of 20th century genocide which continue to afflict every bright, bushy tailed artist is cogent.

Robert says

Although not as funny as the first volume, which I read perhaps 20 years ago - though to be fair it never could be as that book covered the period of childhood and puberty with all the attendant opportunities for humour that prices - I nevertheless enjoyed this a great deal. It's written in a very wry style which is frequently laugh out loud funny and presents an altogether different point of view of the so-called swinging London of the 1960s.

Sephie says

I read his hilarious prequel - Unreliable Memoirs, some years ago and loved it (especially the bit about the 'dunny man'). This picks up the story of Clive's emigration to England in search of a literary career, and all the trials and tribulations he encounters with acommodation, interviews and girls - not to mention the 'Singapore Suit'!

Chris Hinchley says

Given to me by a friend this was an unexpected read and absolutely delightful.

Joshua Rhys says

James reflects on his idealistic early twenties, recounting a string of bungled jobs, lofty poetic ambition and encounters with the fairer sex. This is all set against a backdrop of 1960's London - awakening from the post-war gloom and finding itself with renewed cultural vigour.

This hit me far stronger than his first volume of Unreliable Memoirs did. But I read it at the perfect age so I am not particularly surprised. Who better than Clive James to guide me through the pitfalls of my early twenties?

Greg says

Clive James is a joy to read.

Dylan says

Typically and wonderfully Clive..dry, witty, self-deprecating, occasionally absurd and loaded with great one-liners. The late 60s London are wonderfully brought to life, with a dramatis personae of eccentric aristocrats, dream-fuelled Aussies, and clever elusive women who largely escape the James charm. Warm, tender, and funny.

Kay says

I don't think Clive James made as much of a splash in the US as he did in the UK, where he had a show on the BBC and on various radio programs, but he's quite funny. I picked this book up when we lived in Cambridge, England after seeing him on the Beeb. For some reason I've always considered him to be the Australian equivalent of Calvin Trillin -- which is fair to neither Trillin or James, but they're both witty men of a certain age, prone to droll one-liners.

Paul says

This is the first book I've read by Clive James. It was enough for me to decide it's really Clive James you read, not this particular book, and he's brilliant. He's also an awesome example of what brilliant really means: not somehow extremely technically intelligent, the way you might describe an Einstein or a Bohr, but rather dazzlingly clever, sparkling, and bright. His story in Falling Towards England is fun, but any couple of pages could be read on their own with enjoyment, and it's really his wordplay and spontaneous reflection and insights that keep me reading. He also knows just how to describe a mood or a scene so that you recognize and sympathize with it immediately and deeply, usually with a smile.

As just one delightful example which I happened to read right before writing this, towards the end of the book James is describing a holiday he took in Italy. Visiting a girlfriend of his who lived there, they scandalized the neighborhood by staying together in a small rented room and earned a crowd of male followers eager to glare at them disapprovingly:

"Francoise's good looks, however, though sufficiently startling, were not quite enough to explain the element of potential homicide informing that massed masculine gaze. It was my beard that had tipped them over the edge. They probably didn't like my shoes, either - a new ox-blood pair with gold buckles at the sides. The shoes had cost not much more than five pounds, so I don't suppose the buckles were real gold. But they weren't superfluous. They were holding down the straps. It was the straps that were superfluous."

Marianne Broadgate says

Very funny and particularly interesting read about life in London in the sixties.

Terry says

Picking up where the first volume left off, Clive James arrives in England to make his fortune. For the next three years he roasts about (mostly) London, taking a series of odd jobs and generally making a nuisance of himself. Again, we have the exaggerated comic detail, and the reminder that this memoir is unreliable, so not to take any of it too seriously. Likely the series of jobs came and went for the usual mundane reasons, such as being laid off. But mundane is rarely funny in itself, it has to be made funny within the structure of the joke or in the delivery, or both. Clive James knows more about humor than I, he could explain all this much better. The point is that James gives us the essence of his early London experience, but turns the details into a series of comic adventures, Tom Jones style.

James' behavior is as bad as in the first volume. He continuously takes advantage of friends and acquaintances and behaves with utter disregard for others. It is odd that James would portray himself in this manner. But he claims his faults were real and that he gradually overcame them, decades later according to his narration. There is sufficient humor and self-deprecation, and remorse over ill-deeds, that we cannot dislike James, and continue to turn pages to read more of his antics.

Despite his insistence that he did not have many friends, he is never wanting for company in these stories; There is always someone who hands him a job or a place to live. Characters from the first volume reappear in greater or lesser roles. They join others who gain prominence. Part of the fun is trying to guess who these characters are based upon.

James moves from job to job, always screwing up in comic or pathetic fashion. He did have a recommendation from his boss at the Australian newspaper (from volume one) which he attempted to use to gain employment with an English paper. The reply was why should they hire him to do a job that an Englishman could do. The answer is because he has experience, and an excellent recommendation from someone this person has reason to respect and listen to. But James claims he did not have an answer and did not get the job. He tells the reader that at one low point in these early London years, he contemplated suicide, or at least returning to Australia.

Of course overall there is quite a bit of the tall tale in this book. Despite Mr. James' living in near-starvation and near-homelessness for three years, he never suffered either fate, and made several trips to Italy to visit his girlfriend, and made at least the one trip to Paris. He had a second recommendation, this one from a Sydney University Professor to help him apply to enter Cambridge University. He was accepted, and when the required waiting period ended (at the end of the three years covered in the book) Mr. James entered Pembroke College in Cambridge. This next major step in his life is the conclusion of this memoir, and the segue to volume three.

Mark says

A thoroughly entertaining book by someone of whom I haven't the foggiest. Perhaps he's famous, or was, but he's emigrated to England from Oz and spends a great deal of this book acclimatizing himself to Britain- or not. Well written because in nearly every paragraph is some pun, allusion to literature or drama, or the aforementioned cultural differences. Had I more awareness of the astute points of recent British history I might have a better knowledge of Mr James career in the arts, but unfortunately, I don't.

