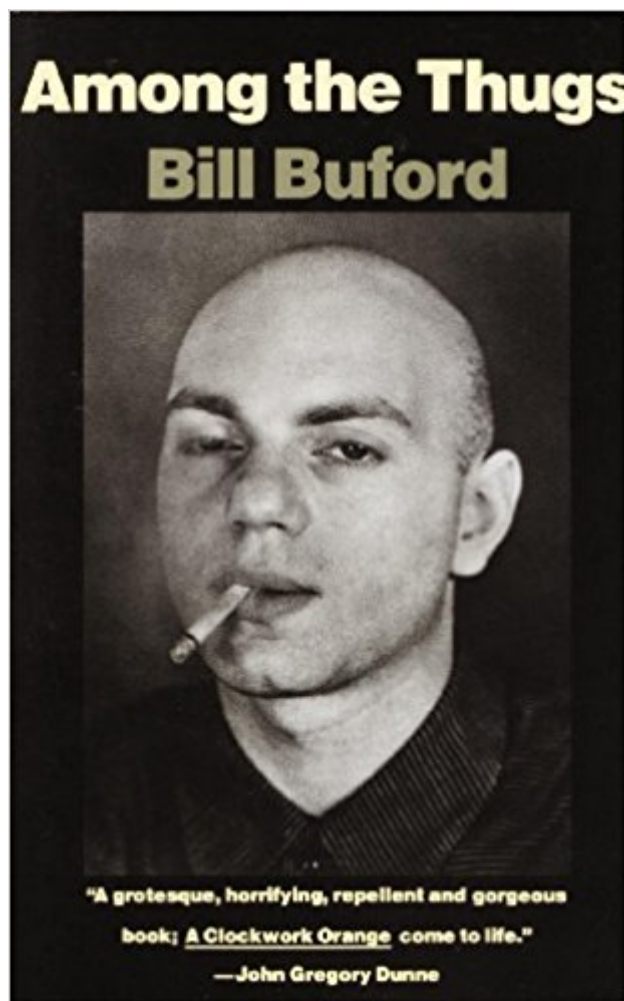


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Among The Thugs (Vintage Departures)



Synopsis

They have names like Barmy Bernie, Daft Donald, and Steamin' Sammy. They like lager (in huge quantities), the Queen, football clubs (especially Manchester United), and themselves. Their dislike encompasses the rest of the known universe, and England's soccer thugs express it in ways that range from mere vandalism to riots that terrorize entire cities. Now Bill Buford, editor of the prestigious journal Granta, enters this alternate society and records both its savageries and its sinister allure with the social imagination of a George Orwell and the raw personal engagement of a Hunter Thompson.

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Customer Reviews

Buford has written a very good book. The description on the back claims that he has done so with "the raw personal engagement of a Hunter S. Thompson" and there are, indeed, sections of the book in which raw personal engagement is the driver of the account. But the comparison with Thompson is unfair to Buford, who uses himself in his narrative in a more restrained and more effective way, i.e., to support his main points rather than to supersede them. If any New Journalism comparison were apt, it would be to Tom Wolfe or Norman Mailer. The book

has a clear arc. At the beginning Buford is an outsider in every sense of the word: he stands on a railroad platform as a train overtaken by "supporters" stops only to kick a few people out. The singing and debauchery are contained within the railroad cars; the scene is as mysterious as it is shocking. Determined to learn more, the reporter goes to his first football match, but finds that, even inside the cages at the Tottenham ground, he is still an outsider. Then he meets Mick, a hard-drinking, brawling Manchester United supporter. The rest of the book follows Buford as he makes his way deeper into the Manchester "firm." He travels with them to Turin, where he is belittled as a fooking journalist and sees (or participates in?) in his first riot. Eventually he is accepted. But by the end of the book Buford has referred to his "fellows" as "a bunch of little s***s" and has broken off from the main group in the middle of a riot. Disgusted at the crowd he was so recently a part of, he is beaten by Italian police. Buford uses his narrative to avoid the greatest weakness of post-modern writing: its nearly religious aversion to the value judgment. There was a moment when I feared for the quality of the book. On page 182 Buford begins a historiography of crowd psychology and physiology. He trots out theories and drops names of Clarendon, Gabriel Tarde, Alexander Hamilton, Hippolyte Taine, Scipio Sighele, Plato, Thomas Carlyle, Gustave LeBon, Gibbon, Hitler, and Freud. He spends several pages on a photograph from Yugoslavia, and waxes poetic about the crowd consciousness, for a moment concluding that its key component is nothingness, simplicity, "nihilistic purity." He lists this together with religious ecstasy, sexual excess, inflicting and feeling pain, and drugs as the best examples of the "incineration of self-consciousness, the transcendence of our sense of the personal." But the last words, which I've already mentioned, are "Nothingness in its beauty, its simplicity, its nihilistic purity." I had to put the book down upon reading and re-reading this section. All of a sudden the well-chosen photograph of the thug on the cover didn't seem so ugly. How could it when compared to the idea that the "incineration of self-consciousness" is so easily associated with "nothingness," with "nihilistic purity"? This assertion of the "transcendence of the personal" actually and very clearly denied the existence of anything but the personal. Had Buford delved more deeply into Plato and less deeply into Freud, he might have been reminded that the transcendence of the personal also takes place in conversation (friendship), politics, and especially philosophy. If he had not skipped from Plato

straight to thoroughly modern examples like Gibbon and Hamilton, he might not have implied that religious ecstasy is nihilistic in nature. And in the end, Buford may well have done these things. In fact, he may have added his own nonviolent, non-sexually excessive, non-drug induced *“incineration of self-consciousness.”* Toward the height of the riot at the end of the book, Buford steps out of the crowd in one direction and observes one who has done the same in the opposite direction. A young Englishman is breaking things. His time not breaking things is spent looking for things to break. Something in Buford snaps. The lad is a little s***, and nothing more. Then he sees an Italian man rushing his family to the relative safety of their home, struggling to get a stroller up the steps and behind the metal screen of his shop. This man, because he is not called one, is not a little s***. After Buford transcends himself and becomes human again, he wants nothing more than to be rid of the crowd. He sprints ahead of them, right into a trap set by Italian police. As the mob retreats, trying to stuff themselves through a tiny gate, Buford sulks behind two cars and assumes a fetal position, bringing up his arms to protect his head. The police will follow the crowd, he reasons. But not all of them do, and our intrepid narrator is beaten very badly by policemen who cannot have been apprised of his sudden change of heart. He was a member of a rioting crowd, and has paid for the *“transcendence”* of his humanity by being treated inhumanely. A fair price, I suppose. The wisest of the thinkers Buford references in the book seem to have been right. The crowd is a wild animal, a pack of wolves, the scum that boils up the surface of the cauldron of a city, even a bunch of little s***s. I don't believe that grammarians have invented a suitable opposite of personification. But that opposite of personification is what a crowd does to itself, and therefore what the great thinkers *and, more immediately, the civil authorities* do to the crowd. To be in a crowd is exhilarating, as Buford learns early on, as the mustachioed man in that picture from Yugoslavia learned in that moment. But there is no good *“transcendence of the personal”* or *“incineration of the self-consciousness”* that happens in a crowd: each of those things is requisite to an abandonment of humanity. Not to pass moral judgment on crowds as such is to remain neutral on the very idea of human exceptionalism. I was very happy that Buford could drum up the courage, finally, to see things as they are.

What kind of crazy bastard deliberately puts himself into the middle of rioting crowds in order to learn about them? Bill Buford does. I am in awe of his bravery and his foolishness. As I write this, weeks of "protests" against police brutality having been going on in nearby cities. They start out as

peaceful marches, and then eventually result in blocked freeways, destroyed property, and looting. The narrative is always that a few bad apples have coopted the protests and used them for cover to commit crimes. But now, having read this book, I wonder, is that really what is happening? Buford discovers something amazing: Being part of a lawless crowd is a high better than most drugs, an intensely euphoric experience. And, beyond that, there really is not much more in the way of meaning or explanation for what a violent crowd does. Buford, in addition to being nuts, is a supremely talented writer. I found myself being entertained and appalled by his descriptions, and I liked how he structured his book. It is a great book, and I don't know that anyone else could or would have written anything like it.

I very pleased that I bought this title after having read it. It's the second Buford book I have ready (the other was Heat), and his writing does an excellent job of capturing the personalities of the people he embeds himself with. His writing places the reader in the scene almost as a participant rather than an observer, in a way that is difficult to describe. This title resembles HST's Hells Angels, but writing is somewhat more accessible (I'm sure others would disagree on Hells Angels). Content-wise, it's an excellent view into England's hooligan culture, as well as English national pride and regional association. There is also some interesting material on the skinhead movement and the National Front.

Over the years, I've read newspaper accounts of violence at English football matches. The reasons for the violence and how it happens were a mysteries. This book explains it. The writer also explains why England is a very dangerous place to live.

A great book about crowd psychology and English football. I don't know exactly what I was expecting from this book but it was an interesting story and although it takes a deep look at the violence of English football fans at the time it does not come across as a glorification of violence.

After being a huge fan of American sports and falling into football in early 2000's this is not to be dismissed. The mob mentality is affront and the fact that the MLS is trying to propagate this between New York teams is frightening and truly without merit. They have no history and as such is truly the meaning of mob mentality.

Growing up I was always fascinated with the violence surrounding soccer. How can a sport called

the beautiful game attract such violence? Reading this book, you get to the heart of the typical English hooligan. What motivates them and fuels their rage. The level of violence described in this book is shocking but more shocking is the way this behavior is justified by supporters. A true view of the hooligan culture of the 80s and 90s.

Decent book but I would have been interested to read about other clubs hooligans besides ManU, Chelsea, etc. More in depth descriptions of the English neighborhoods around the football grounds would have been nice as well.

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