

Perspective

What *you* say matters

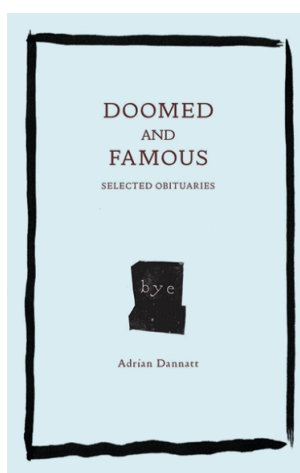
Perspective Recommends

Doomed and Famous

By Adrian Dannatt

Illustrations by Hugo Guinness

(320pp, Sequence Press, £24, hb)



What makes a great obituarist as opposed to a successful biographer? If it is an instinct for obscure but telling detail, a sense of *joie de vivre* against all odds and a propensity for laughter in the dark, then the Nabokovian figure of Adrian Dannatt fits the bill. He has a lepidopterist's eye for flair and aesthetics combined with unfaltering, nineteenth-century levels of stamina for stalking his prey through the cafes and cemeteries of Paris, the nightclubs of London and Manhattan and the mysterious towers of Zemblia. However, instead of killing his victims and mounting them on a wall he immortalises them for ever, beautifully, in print.

Doomed and Famous is a rare pleasure. A collection of obituaries mainly (but not always) of men, whose unusual lives Dannatt documents with a zealous commitment to the brief, the suicidal, the addicted, the long-lived, the extraordinarily rich, the flamboyant, the insouciantly poor, the innately glamorous and the artistic. We may only dimly recognise some of the names included but all of them will have had some sort of indirect influence or impact on our lives.

There is Rockets Redglare, born to a heroin-addicted fifteen-year-old, who supposedly delivered drugs to Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen on the night she died, and also appeared in movies such as *Big*, *After Hours* and *Trees Lounge*. Then there's Stuart Sherman, whose five-minute performance of *Faust* became a legend in avant-garde circles; he locked himself in Carson McCullers' shuttered house in upstate New York and read to her – *Gone with the Wind*, *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *A Handful of Dust* – in the last year of her life. Or what about Alexander Iolas, dancer turned "the most famous art dealer in the world who no one knows," who magically emerged from "a rich Eastern Mediterranean stew of merchants and story-tellers." They all demand our attention.

These lives will amuse and captivate you by turns, long into the dark night. Surprisingly, given that

everybody is journeying in one direction, and, as the late, great Bette Davies said, “growing old ain’t for cissies”, it’s all done with compassion and an enviable zest for life. Charmingly too, the private passions and secret griefs of our author are movingly illuminated in the refractory light of his subjects.

Even Dorothea Tanning’s last, haunting *cris de coeur* to Dannatt – “I’m too old to talk to anyone. I have to die. It’s been going on far too long” – doesn’t put one off. In fact, I briefly pondered taking up Dannatt’s invitation at the end of the book to commission him to write my own zinging obituary, before accepting that while I am doomed, I am not famous and there would be little of interest to say. (Reader, if you are interested:- welcome to the future of your past, and log on to livingobit.com/adrian-dannatt.)

But the greatest happiness of all was to discover my friend Simon Lane in these pages. For a brief, glorious few minutes I once more revelled in his flaring, brilliant company. The dead can live again, and not just in dreams. Surely, a great literary alchemist is at work here? CC

Reviewers: Clare Conville, Belinda Bamber, Peter Phelps, ASH Smyth