

# TLS

Biography | Book Review

## Ultra Violet might

Collected obituaries of mavericks and marginal figures

By Henry Hitchings



Isabelle Collin Dufresne, 1968 | © Tim Boxer/Getty Images

**D**o you remember Winthrop Kellogg Edey, clock fancier and purveyor of *recherché* prose, who woke each day at five in the afternoon and was friends with Andy Warhol? How about the raconteur and bouncer Michael Morra, otherwise known as Rockets Redglare, who dealt morphine to the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious and appeared in small roles in more than thirty films? Or Terry Sellers, a dominatrix who brought a rare brand of chic menace to Manhattan's more dangerous nightspots and published a volume first issued in Germany under the title *Der korrekte Sadismus*? Or Felicia Gizycka Magruder, the author of two Jazz Age novels, who as a child was kidnapped by her father and became the focus of an international custody battle that led President-elect William Howard Taft to seek the help of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia?

These are among the seventy-four mavericks and marginal figures portrayed in *Doomed and Famous*, Adrian Dannatt's selection of the obituaries he has written for newspapers, magazines and websites. A seventy-fifth item is a droll self-portrait, which reveals that this sixty-ish English poet and curator, who in the 1970s played the title role in the ITV adaptation of Richmal Crompton's *Just William*, has spent most of his adult life in "that ever pleasing triangle of New York, Paris and London". When not amassing a swanky wardrobe ("including over two hundred shirts of the most fabled provenance"), he has been a hoarder of news cuttings and graveyard inscriptions, as well as a collector of the living - drawn to the reckless and the degenerate, to glamorous failures and exotically named oddballs, often "hunting them down ... in distant bedsits or forgotten Georgian mansions". Desktop research is not his style, and he proudly declares that "Nothing in this book is derived from the use of Google or Wikipedia".

Quite a few of Dannatt's subjects sound as if they're figments of his imagination, though only one is: the poet Zogdan Palashi, whom he puckishly identifies as a fugitive member of the Auden- Britten set and the

inspiration for Auden's (nonexistent) line "Balkan keeper of the silent bolts secure these too". Palashi is alleged to have died after his rowing boat was cut in half by a cargo ship registered in Split, yet sounds no more outlandish than Dannatt's cast of real people: the pioneering graffiti gallerist who kept his cork-tipped cigarettes in the fridge, the "antique dealer and occasional hamburger cook" who resembled Anthony Powell's X Trapnel, the photographer who once umpired a pissing contest between Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn, and "a book collector who actually read the works he bought".

Dannatt was for many years a New York correspondent for *The Art Newspaper*, and a large proportion of the characters in *Doomed and Famous* come from the art world or its penumbra. One of the most memorable is Isabelle Collin Dufresne, who when barely into her teens tried to get expelled from her French convent - either by playing jazz during Mass on a radio hidden beneath her robes or by smoking cigars, which she lit with a blazing hundred-franc note. Later, having adopted the name Ultra Violet, she would colour her cheeks with beetroot juice and become a legend of the American underground, a scene from which she'd emerge to dine with Maria Callas or accost Howard Hughes at his Beverly Hills bungalow.

The obituary form requires its practitioners to condense information elegantly, use anecdote to illustrate personality, and affirm a life's charms and achievements without lapsing into hagiography. Dannatt, a vigorous writer with a keen eye for amusing detail, can do the first two, and is certainly alive to his subjects' failings, yet can sometimes seem a bit too enamoured of anything or anyone "precocious", "mysterious" or "infamous", of the "impeccably dressed" and the "impossibly sophisticated". He has a weakness, too, for epideictic openings that say less than he imagines: "'Gucci Socialist' would not have been the term for Alfred Mitchell Bingham"; "Those who despise the establishment need not be surprised to later find themselves unestablished"; "Those who live by conspiracy theories die by them also"; "Those who live by obscurity die by it also".

Such tics make this biographical Wunderkammer better suited to browsing than sustained attention. But it's an enjoyable celebration of eccentricity, frequently tinged with melancholy - never more so than in the case of Dorothea Tanning, who died in 2012 at the age of 101 and, despite a richly productive artistic career and the reputation of being the last living surrealist, was "long assumed to be already dead and often confused with someone else".