

Book Reviews

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Richard Berger

Unhitched: the Trial of Christopher Hitchens. Richard Seymour. London and New York: Verso, 2012. P/bk 134 pp. ISBN 978-1-84467-990-4. Price \$16.95/£9.99.

In *Unhitched: the Trial of Christopher Hitchens*, Richard Seymour puts Hitchens in the dock, where he is accused of having his “noble mind overthrown” (x). Any reader will immediately feel a palpable sense of betrayal in the pages of this short appraisal of what is a huge writing life. In it Seymour casts himself as being of the “true” left, while accusing Hitchens of being some sort of gadfly, thereby chiming with someone else from the “true” left, the British politician George Galloway. Shortly before his death from cancer in 2011, Hitchens was asked how he felt about being called a “self-serving, fat-assed, cynical, chain-smoking, drunken, opportunistic, cynical, contrarian” by former friend Alexander Cockburn. “Well, I don’t see what’s wrong with that”, replied The Hitch, “although he should see my ass now”. In his life he was quite prepared to take the hits, but since he died a host of friends and acquaintances have been quick to protect his legacy. *Unhitched* then has come in for a lot of criticism.

However the central questions still remain: did Hitchens move to the right in his later years, and become an apologist for the “neo-con” architects of the US-led War on Terror? Did his support for “regime change” in Iraq make him an imperialist? Or, did the war offer him a glimpse of what he had always wanted? For Hitchens, allowing women control of their bodies and their reproductive cycle would go a long way in ending poverty in the Third World; it’s there in his attack on Mother Teresa (*The Missionary Position*, 1995). As the Iraq and Iranian dictatorships were bad news for women, couldn’t Hitchens’ “at any cost” support for the war be viewed as expedient, even necessary?

Hitchens had always been in love with the US – he lived in Washington DC for many years, and was married to an American. As he was dying, he would state that one of his regrets was not to see the World Trade Center rebuilt in New York. The difference between right and left in American politics has always been blurred, where even a democrat President can oversee drone attacks and a global spying and intimation complex. Hitchens’s hero, George Orwell, was also someone who was able to describe himself as a socialist, while denouncing “fellow travelers.” So,

can we really criticize Hitchens for doing the same? Well, according to Seymour, yes we can!

Seymour claims that his book is a critical essay, but he has been very selective in his reading. Also, it is fair to say that Hitchens made his name – in the US at least – in the glare of late-night talk shows and public debates, now found scattered throughout YouTube. Surely more people have “seen” Hitchens’s slaying evangelical Christians such as William Lane Craig than have read *God Is Not Great* (2007)? His typical brand of put-down – such as suggesting on the death of Jerry Falwell that his corpse be given an enema, so it could be buried in match-box – was perfectly crafted for the social media age.

Seymour criticizes Hitchens for not taking one of the two “well-trodden routes” out of the left, but surely that’s a good thing? To say that his move to the right concluded with assaults on certain Islamic theocracies is too simplistic. Nor does attacking the anti-war left for being too conservative make him one. The Hitchens which emerges from this book then is a singularly unpleasant one: he sympathizes with the working classes, but had little time for the poor; he was a plagiarist and a racist; he was “poor atheist” (54) and a narcissist.

Contradictions do start to emerge in Seymour’s account however: he describes Hitchens’s sustained attack on Bill Clinton as “highly personalised” (17) – but *Unhitched* seems similarly afflicted. Hitchens is criticized for being unsentimental about the War on Terror (“You’re gonna lose a building”) but also for being far too sentimental regarding Desert Storm. Seymour also castigates him for having “no particular dependency on anyone of the left” (xi) and this, in his eyes at least, is the biggest crime of all. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but this book seems mean-spirited at times, which often drowns out some sharp textual analysis. It is right and proper of course to question the political motives of a writer, but to attack him for his position on the Balkan wars in the early 1990s as if he were a policy-maker, rather than a journalist myopic. Hitchens’s friend Martin Amis once bemoaned the reading public’s interest in a writer rather than the writing. While no biography, *Unhitched* at least does keep to the prodigious output, but its mistake is to view it through the lens of Christopher Hitchens’s last few years.

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Works Cited

- Hitchens, Christopher. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.
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Richard Berger
Bournemouth University, UK

