

tragedy. Labelle existed outside the historical neurosis that produced tragic stars like Billie Holiday, Esther Phillips, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin and, most recently, the Chicago singer, Chaka Khan.

With Billie Holiday and Esther Phillips dead through drug addiction, and Aretha Franklin increasingly troubled by agoraphobia, the potential for public disintegration lies with Chaka Khan, a woman who is often dismissed in the press as 'difficult', but who stands out as the most articulate and politically engaging star of modern music. She is wilfully controversial, recently ignoring the wishes of her record company and appearing on the same political platform as the infamous black nationalist leader Louis Farrakhan. Chaka Khan sometimes seems to be reworking the myth of Billie Holiday, stringing out her nerves on a set of dependencies that unite around drugs and singing. She says herself: 'There's a thin line between genius and insanity. I hate to think I'm a tragic singer but I have to admit that I do my best shows when something tragic is happening in my life. I'm always motivated by tragedy. A few songs I've recorded like *Twisted* and *My Destiny* are psychoanalytical, a very private process that I have to make public. I have no pride in that respect, I'm honest about my problems.'

She describes her career as a journey to 'hell and back in a limousine'. 'The limousine' she says, 'is a synopsis of how I view the business I'm in. It's very hard work and the journey to hell and back in a limo is my way of describing the facade, the cover, the glamour that disguises the reality. The car attracts all kinds of hangers on, people whose motives are selfish. I feel that music is always compromised by economics and the limousine is the reward you get for compromising. Every time I think the music business is compromising me I plan my revenge. You can do a lot of damage to a limousine.' ●

Stuart Cosgrove

The Mop vs The Pen

Pat Barker describes herself as coming from a long line of cleaners. In which case all third generation cleaners should swap their mop for a pen and follow in her footsteps.

Born in Teesside in 1943 she has to date produced three novels; *Union Street* (1982), *Blow Your House Down* (1984) and *The Century's Daughter* published last month by Virago. When I visited her in her semi-detached, generously-gardened private house on the outskirts of Durham it struck me how very different her present surroundings must be to the streets of her childhood which provide the backdrop to her books.

It took ten years for Pat Barker to get her first novel past the publishers and onto the bookshelves. Prompted by repeated rejections to assert her Northern working class background, she describes writing *Union Street* as 'like a lid blowing off a pressure cooker'. Which was how it felt to read it. As though somewhere inside my head something was exploding at the injustice of it all.

Using her unique realist style she weaves the threads of shared experiences, which unite working class women in their powerlessness, through the pages of *Union Street*. At the same time she is critical of a feminism which sentimentalises such female support networks, often quickly withdrawn if an attempt to break out and escape is made. 'You have to be a member of the club, and the membership card is a man' she says, describing how women who try to assert their independence risk ending up isolated and alone.

The need to belong to, and form communities, Pat Barker sees as common to us all, but best achieved by women, particularly mothers, whose survival often depends on their mutual support. It was motherhood which shocked

her into becoming a feminist through the 'total exclusion from the mainstream of life'. That was when she started to write, perhaps explaining the centrality of motherhood to her writing.

The other pivotal theme in Barker's literary world is sex, which she rarely portrays as an act of pleasure for women, but as a source of oppression and degradation. Her explanation that fear of unwanted pregnancies combined with financial hardship must 'blight one's sexuality and lead to prudishness' can only be partial. It is perhaps women's needs to redefine the sex act itself which continues to make us suspicious and wary, even in these days of birth control. Whatever the explanation her rejection of romanticism is refreshingly honest.

The fact that she is no longer part of a working class community is a problem for Pat Barker not only as a working class woman but also as a writer. She avoids the voyeuristic dangers of writing about a part of the world she no longer belongs to, for people who never did, by writing not for an audience but for the characters themselves and for the women she's known.

The dialogue she creates as a result is the most exciting thing about her work, relying as it does on the rich language of working class communities where the oral mode is primary. And when the oral mode is skillfully used the result is not only powerful and arresting but also open and accessible, transforming the middle class novel into something which comes from, and is accessible to, the people about whom it is written.

The Century's Daughter marks a clear development from Pat Barker's previous two novels. This time she manages to avoid enshrouding the reader in a blanket of despair. Through two world wars and the depression, up to the present day, she traces the life of Lisa Jarret, brilliantly exposing the conflicts of class and gender and highlighting how they combine to define Lisa's existence. By



Pat Barker: Swapped her mop

introducing Stephen, a young middle class homosexual who befriends Lisa as an old lady, she pays tribute to the diverse range of human experience and gives a moving example of our potential to love.

In her next book Pat Barker intends to extend the use of a male character to explore the male view of masculinity. It is a debate which she believes is sorely needed, and one that she insists will have to be initiated by women. 'Men have always written about women and told us what we feel, what it's like to have a baby's head in your vagina, and all those other things over which they have no authority. I think it's time we took the dissecting knife to men, if we get it wrong perhaps they'll take the knife into their own hands and start to dissect themselves.' A challenging project and one in which I hope she succeeds! ●

Janie Glen



Advice for the raw recruit: 'If it moves salute it; if you can't polish it, paint it white'

Get Fell In

The fact that some two and a quarter million men were drafted into national service between 1945 and 1963 was due to the persistence of Major Clem, who happened to be prime minister and whose idea of socialism derived from boys' clubs and batmen; gristle-brained Old Monty, Chief of the Imperial General Staff; and the bellicose bulldog at the Foreign Office, Ernest Bevin. It lasted until the time Britain secured its nuclear V-bomber force, garrisoning strategic imperial strongholds in a period of decolonisation and policing a divided, broken Europe.

The Imperial War Museum has devised an exhibition to commemorate this now largely for-

gotten history, optimistically called *The Best Years of Their Lives*. It accords with current 50s nostalgia. The first exhibit shows a distinctly odd, uneasy dummy boasting teddy boy haircut and orange drape; the next has this imaginary teenager spick and span, head shaved – the action-man dummy clearly more habituated to demonstrating proper military bearing.

It is a most peculiar exhibition, not at all clear who it is aimed at. There is the usual memorabilia: old snapshots and call-up papers; letters home and knick-knacks from faraway imperial lands; photos of Bobby Charlton, John Biffen and Bruce Kent as lads; the manuscript of David Lodge's first novel, drafted between clerking duties.

The exhibition does little to con-

vey the collective experiences of this extraordinary postwar history. It tells us nothing of the politics, nothing of the unremitting tedium, the tight little worlds of intensely brutalised masculinity. For that we need to go to Arnold Wesker or John McGrath. Or to Jeff Nuttall who, on being demobbed, was the recipient of ten quids' worth of paints from his sergeant's mess: 'There they were, the drunken brutalised old fascists, and there I was, more deeply moved than ever before in my life'. Perhaps, today, this exhibition speaks more to our current young Tebbits than anyone else. ●

Bill Schwartz

The Best Years of Their Lives runs at the Imperial War Museum, London, until May 1987.

Style Age Mags

In the art-school-rocking late 70s the detailed, analytical *NME* was the read. In the 80s its successor is the glossy, gossip-on-acid of *Smash Hits*.

The magazines which have reached the status of 'bibles' this decade – *The Face* and *i-D* – have done so because of their style. Both publications have presented a style for every facet of 80s living – decor, footwear, record sleeves, sculpture, skirts, videos – all of which are to be kept up with.

Into this market comes the pilot issue of *FSM (Fairly Serious Monthly)* – leftish, multi-interest and written for 16 to 25 year olds by 16 to 25 years olds – time-tabled for a spring 1987 nationwide launch.

With its second issue out now is *Well Red*, the pop and politics magazine from Red Wedge. *Scope* is aimed at the young black adult. All three magazines can make an important contribution to the coverage available to young people. But this is hampered by their choice of predictable articles: drugs, Greenham Common, YTS, legal rights, and the Red Wedge concerts. An article on young SDP candidate Danny Finkelstein stands out in *FSM* because it is less 'expected'. It highlights the problems that that absent 'gamble' element can cause.

Red Wedge's Well Red is in the difficult position of having to present itself to 'the adult world' as a credible and informed political force, whilst attracting a generation excluded from and disinterested in political involvement. The writing in *Scope* appears sadly flat, *FSM* is more alluring but with awkward rough edges. *Well Red's* style is professional and readable, however the highly-politicised editorial team have covered issues at a level of complexity which will alienate their target readership before they start to read.

The 'communique' section of *FSM*, with its short pieces, is punchy and attractive. With columns and pictures set at angles across the page, its layout contributes to its success.

There is no room now for nostalgic stylistic references to the photocopied fanzines of the punk era. Magazines like *FSM*, *Scope* and *Well Red* will have to compete on the news-stands with *Vogue*, *Elle*, *The Face* and *Smash Hits*. It is desperately important they do so ●
Debbie Hyde