

Film

TRUE STORIES

Director: David Byrne

The virtues of David Byrne's debut film are very much those that have made Talking Heads' songs what they are: succinct and wry, laconic commentaries on the vagaries, foibles and ironies of our post-nuclear society. The fact that the songs in the film are, if anything, rather atypical Byrne, is just one of the many ironies that run through this movie, with its ingenious juxtapositions of the bizarre and the beautiful, the terminally tacky and immensely moving.

Just how much can "a film about a bunch of people living in Virgil, Texas" reveal of contemporary American society? Is Byrne attempting to achieve such a lofty ideal or are his motives more questionable? Could he simply be invading the privacy and encroaching on the dignity of his rural Texas characters, encouraging them to parade their naivety before the knowing eyes of SoHo sophisticates?

Byrne deflects any such criticisms with his brilliant balancing act between poetry and wit. The poetic element is subtle and achieved mainly through camera-man Ed Lachman's spare yet evocative images. At times, as in the opening and closing shot of a young girl dancing along a deserted road, devised with the collaboration of Meredith Monk, Byrne is

clearly drawing on a very New York sensibility. Elsewhere, as in the shots of the Lazy Woman's mansion, it's pure Lone Star State.

There are many different kinds of humour, too. Sometimes it is presented, with documentary candour, straight-from-life with the pushchair-wheeling mothers and pedal-car-driving patriarchy in a sesquicentennial parade. Elsewhere, Byrne has obviously heightened the strangeness of the original, as when Annie McEnroe comperes a bizarre fashion parade in a mall, warbling 'Dream Operator' through the PA system. It was, after all, the "true stories" of papers like *National Enquirer* and the *Weekly World News* that launched Byrne's whole concept of the film. These introduce the main characters of the film — the big redneck bear of a man who advertises for a wife on television and the woman who is so wealthy that she never has to get out of bed (two brilliant performances by John Goodman and Swoosie Kurtz).

Riding around in an ostentatious 10-gallon hat, passing wry and occasionally cryptic commentary on what is happening around him, Byrne himself seems to exert an almost editorial presence. "Shopping is a feeling," he pronounces in the drollest of deadpan at one point. "You can never explain the feelings or connections to anyone else," he ventures a little later.

None other than the *Guardian's* film critic has hailed *True Stories* as "the finest film ever made by a

rock star" and the movie has certainly sidestepped the pitfalls that caught up the recent *Absolute Beginners*. The numbers don't come across like self-contained high-tech videos, apart from the couple which are intended to be just that. They are integrated into the body of the film and Byrne's control of pace in what could have been an extremely fragmented movie is impressive. John Goodman's "concert version" of 'People Like Us' is pure Nashville and Pop Staples's smooth reading of 'Papa Legba' eerie. Jacques Tournier meets Thornton Wilder perhaps?

THE FLY

Director: David Cronenberg

It has taken David Cronenberg almost two decades to come to grips with the narrative thrust of the horror genre. His earliest films, such as *Stereo* at the end of the 60s, were frankly experimental; over the next decade, through movies like *Rabid* and *Scanners*, he gradually managed to refine his particular vision into a more populist mould, reaching a peak in his 1983 collaboration with Stephen King, *The Dead Zone*.

The opportunity to work on the remake of the classic 50s sci-fi *The Fly* has given him the perfect narrative framework, as well as the challenge of pursuing a more subtle integration of man and insect that the crude head-body grafts in the earlier film. This he achieves brilliantly. Jeff Goldblum, intense and gangling as the obsessive scientist, is slowly transformed until he becomes a grotesquely

twisted insect skeleton — a physical disintegration which is played out against his relationship with sympathetic journalist Geena Davis.

In earlier days Cronenberg films tended to specialise in one particular act of violence (in *Scanners* it was exploding heads) but there is no limit to the inventiveness of the special effects team in *The Fly*. The film takes a wee while to get rolling, but once the first insect bristles shoot out of Goldblum's back, brace yourself ...

William Dart

Off The Record

The Rising Sons of Ranting Verse: Attila the Stockbroker, Seething Wells (Allen & Unwin)

Half this recently-released book is upside down and the other half isn't. Side one is 'Cautionary Tales for Dead Commuters' by Attila the Stockbroker and side two is 'Rants' by Seething Wells. These are two of the funniest poets in Britain. They do to poetry what Alexei Sayle did to Barry Manilow and Billy Joel.

In New Zealand Attila sprang to prominence on student radio with his rapid-fire anthem entitled 'Bollocks to That' (included on various punk compilations) in 1982, and since then hasn't looked back, piling up hundreds of gigs Europe-wide (including just recently East Germany with Billy Bragg). A former stock exchange clerk, his poems are about senile semi-obsolescent high court judges, Nigel the wimpy Simple Minds fan,

holidays in Albania, Russians in McDonalds and the English gutter press.

His socialist skinhead sidekick, Steven "Seething" Wells, aka Susan Williams of the NME, is one of the most feared poets in the UK with his outsize Doc Martens, military-style clothing and Schwarzenegger appearance. He lays the boot into Thatcherite Britain with numbers like 'Penis Warship', 'Blood Spurts', 'Give Peas a Chance', and 'Imagine There's No Lennon'. He is the original Mr Angry and hails from the very ugly, very macho Yorkshire town of Bradford, a fact he has been trying to live down all his life. He pounces on such subjects as the drug squad, whining vegetarians, boring disc jockeys, lip service male feminists and self-indulgent poets, and rips them to shreds.

The two-book collection also contains cartoons and amazing graphics by *Beano*-reader Pory the Poet and Jon (the Three Johns) Langford. On the whole this paperback does the ranting movement proud. Very refreshing and a lot of fun. Don't miss this one.

David Eggleton

Horse's Neck

by Pete Townshend (Faber)

Townshend subtitled his last LP "A Novel," although it stemmed from a short story and contributed to a film. Here he pretty much confines himself to prose: a dozen short pieces totalling less than 100 pages. All are presented as fiction, though (as with most first such works) many have an obvi-

ously autobiographical source. So we find treatments of Townshend's responses to stardom, his urban London origins, his alcoholism, the death of Keith Moon and so on.

As a songwriter and interviewee Townshend has long shown a penchant for wordiness and self-analysis. *Horse's Neck* is no different. The prose is rich and lovingly crafted. However in many places it is also pretentious and self-indulgent, particularly in the pieces that seem less directly based on his own experience. Viewed strictly as literature *Horse's Neck* is of decidedly minor significance. But if read for its insight into one of the greatest individuals in British pop music, the book has several very rewarding passages.

Peter Thomson

Helter Skelter

A nifty collection of visual stimuli from Don Campbell and Bev Greene. Don's stuff consists of cut ups of image and text, reorganised into new conceptual forms. Some of it interesting and some not so hot, but that's the art game for you. Don has this canine fixation, with wolves appearing on the cover and in a lot of the text. The best work is the EC romp of 'A Whizz in the Kitchen,' a morality tale of women's revenge. Good vicious graphics and a healthy attitude to mass murderers. If you're that way inclined write to Helter Skelter Society, 37 Grey Lynn, Auckland; a mere \$2.50.

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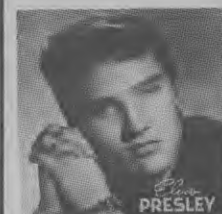
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