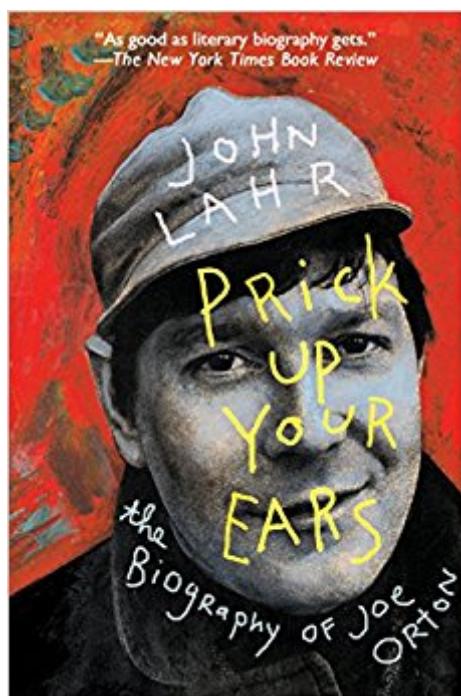


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Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography Of Joe Orton



Synopsis

John Lahr (b. 1941) is an acclaimed author. He was the senior drama critic at the *New Yorker* for twenty years. He has twice received the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism and was the first critic to win a Tony Award, for coauthoring *Elaine Stritch at Liberty*. The author of eighteen books, ranging from fiction to biography, Lahr is best known for *Notes on a Cowardly Lion: The Biography of Bert Lahr* (1969) and *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (1978), which was made into a film. He lives in London.

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I have an unwritten rule which compels me to finish every book I open. LiveJournal readers know of two of my book reviews, pertaining to an alive Elvis and lesbian masochists, which were chores to get through. However, regardless of a book's length, how boring it is or how far it is from my first impression of what it might be like, I trudge through it, dreading every minute. I always give these books the chance that they might have some redeeming quality which makes the first couple hundred pages worthwhile to stick it out. In John Lahr's *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, there was no such redemption. After rubbing the shell of this nut for 361 pages I thought I would be treated to a hidden pecan, but the shell was empty. I started this book on 17 August; that's over three weeks ago--and this book is only 361 pages. This book was the most boring read of nonfiction I have encountered in twenty years. Barring three exceptions, I fell asleep every time I sat down to read it. If I didn't believe in my own immortality, I would be worried about wasting my limited life time reading this junk. I am a big Beatles fan, and I came across the name Joe Orton when I learned that he was approached to write the screenplay for the Beatles' third movie (after "A Hard Day's Night" and "Help!"). This never came to pass. When his script for "Up Against It" was returned, Orton wrote: "No explanation why. No criticism of the script. And apparently, Brian Epstein has no comment to make either. F*** them." Lahr had unrestricted access to Orton's diaries and quotes from them at length. In the Beatles passages, being allowed into the Fab Four's "inner circle" is quite a hoot to read. When Orton meets Brian Epstein and Paul McCartney for the first time, he writes: "'The only thing I get from the theatre,' Paul M. said, 'is a sore arse.' He said "Loot" [an Orton play] was the only play he hadn't wanted to leave before the end. ... We talked of tattoos. And after one or two veiled references, marijuana." Shortly after his Beatles script was rejected, Orton was killed by his common-law husband in the summer of 1967 in a murder-suicide. Lahr talks about this tragedy at the beginning of the book, and goes to great lengths to analyze the psyche of Orton's partner and what drove him to commit murder and suicide. The psychoanalysis is brought up again at the end of the book. Excluding the psych-talk and Beatles anecdotes, the bulk of what fills these two covers is a boring critique of each of Orton's plays. If one hasn't seen these works on stage, one is left in the dark. I couldn't follow the plotlines; the exhaustive dialogue seemed more out of context than having any pertinence to points Lahr intended to make about the playwright; and the general flow was at a snail's pace. The critiques go on and on... I could only get through ten pages in an hour. So much was quoted from Orton's plays and his own diaries, and since all the cited sections were reproduced in a minuscule font, it made poor eyes like mine very tired. I really dreaded seeing more lines of dialogue reproduced as evidence of Orton's personality or reflections

of what he was going through domestically. Orton's diaries were more interesting, especially his tales of trolling for anonymous sex in the public toilets of London and around the world. Orton held back nothing in his own diaries, and he probably would have loved knowing that people are now reading about his sexual escapades. I make this remark because Orton loved to talk loudly about lascivious topics in very public places. He would write about how he and friends would sit in an upscale restaurant and during a crowded lunchtime they would all talk oblivious to everyone around them about a (fictional) gay orgy. He and his friends got their kicks out of other people's shocked reactions. He was just like a little boy in his enthusiastic retelling of how people shuddered in horror at the tales he would tell. This carried over into his plays, as his subject matter often found him in hot water with censors as well as his paying audience.

Prick Up Your Ears is a biography of Joe Orton, who achieved a measure of fame in Britain and the US for his plays such as "What the Butler Saw." Orton, who was gay, got much of his literary education from his lover. The lover, who went from being the dominant person in the relationship to the lesser when Orton became famous, eventually developed such a rage against Orton that he murdered him and then killed himself. Orton's plays are often funny, but not deep. They depend on the breaking of social and sexual conventions. Now that those conventions have largely been broken anyhow, Orton's plays seem less shocking than they were at the time. Orton liked to be thought of as another Harold Pinter, but somewhat to his horror he found that his admirers included conventional middlebrow playwrights of the day. In fact, Orton's plays do have more in common with the works of these more conventional writer than with Pinter. Perhaps Orton's greatest comic invention were his letters to the editor of various British publications, always written under a false name and always espousing an absurdly conservative point of view. Orton, whether he admitted it or not, needed these conservatives for his plays to work. Lahr's biography is well researched, and is likely to remain the definitive biography of Orton. Lahr himself has a fluid writing style, and the intelligence to know what to put in and what to leave out. Thus, he avoids swamping the reader with meaningless details as do many American biographers.

Don't get me wrong - this biography is very meticulous in its exploration of Orton and his works. Very meticulous indeed. So meticulous in fact that it takes up about two thirds of the book. The other third covers Orton's and Halliwell's relationship revealing little that isn't in the public domain already or on the internet. If you are serious about Orton's works rather than Orton himself buy this book - if you want an in depth biography you may need to buy something else. Try Simon

Shepherd's book 'Because We're Queers' written from a gay man's perspective. Quite academic and goes into detail on the cultural and political climate of the 50s and 60s putting Orton's work in a different light and a healthy balance to this one.

I love a good biography, and this one is GREAT! John Lahr writes brisk, delightfully breezy, and information-saturated biographies. He has another great one of his Father - Bert Lahr - the cowardly lion in Wizard of Oz. "Prick up your Ears"...is a page turner that kept me riveted as I came to an appreciation of the latter 60's London gay scene, and the Svengali/Frankenstein-like relationship between Orton and his 16-year lover, Ken Halliwell. Halliwell brutally murdered Orton in a frenzy of jealousy and sheer madness in 1967, at Orton's peak of fame. I knew nothing of Joe Orton or his plays until I caught the last hour of the movie by the same title on BBC America last month, which starred Gary Oldman. The book is much better than the movie, in that it gives you all the "behind-the-scenes" information the movie does not have time to elaborate upon. Lahr treats Orton's horrible sex-addiction sensitively, and illustrates the magnitude of his genius and vision in a very articulate manner. Though Halliwell's murder/suicide was tragic for both men, Lahr helps the reader understand the reasons which lead to his fatal mistake, without excusing it by tapping the support of many of their old friends, living family, and acquaintances. Who knows, if only Orton had acknowledged Halliwell's contributions to his work, perhaps they'd both be with us today...

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