

## 31 treasures

Nick Hornby was born in 1957 and is the author of *Fever Pitch*, *High Fidelity*, *About a Boy*, *How to be Good* and *31 Songs*. He also edited two anthologies, *My favourite year* and *Speaking With the Angel*. He is the pop music critic for the *New Yorker*. In 1999, he was awarded the E.M.Forster Award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives and works in Highbury, North London.

A few years ago I read Nick Hornby's *About a boy*, which was so inspiring to me that I immediately went to see the movie. Of course there's this old saying that you should never read the book first if you want to enjoy the movie, but I was convinced that a book that good could never end up being a bad movie. I was wrong. Not that Hugh Grant made a poor job of it, but Hornby's book turned out to be so brilliant that no actor, nor any director in the world would have been able to translate its words into an equally striking motion picture. The book left a bit of a bitter taste to me when I found out Hornby has an autistic son, but even that knowledge couldn't bring me into thinking that maybe it wasn't all that hilarious as he made it look like.

*High Fidelity*, the second Hornby I read is a masterpiece about loving vinyl more than the people around you and it's extremely funny if you like making up top lists of about everything. One of the main themes of the book is the relationship between music and age, which I also encountered in the book I'm about to review.

I also enjoyed reading Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, and believe me; I don't like football at all.

And oh yes, he does it again. *31 Songs* is a medley of short essays, each and every one of them genuine masterpieces. Every song in the novel has its own story. Or does every story has its own song? Hornby doesn't really try to find the answer; he just gives us his own opinion about his favourite music: little shreds of his life suffused with the songs that are in one way or another connected to them. In short essays on 31 songs and 14 albums, he writes the soundtrack of his life and tries to understand the effects of pop music on our lives in general. What makes a song good or bad, why do we keep playing it on and on or, on the contrary, why do we (think that we) despise it? What's more important: the music or the lyrics? Or does it all depend on ourselves? Even if you're not a music devotee and you don't like Bruce Springsteen, Nelly Furtado, Van Morrison or Led Zeppelin or thousands of others at all, if you have the tiniest little bit of any adoration for any song you can think of, you'll find this book to be just what you were looking for.

Hornby, turning forty-five, is painfully aware of his age and admits that at this stage in his life he prefers Nelly Furtado's *I'm like a bird* rather than the Black Sabbath's or Led Zeppelin's he used to play when he was younger. But the way he describes why he does keep listening to, for example, Led Zeppelin makes me feel a little bit better about growing older. I'm thirty-three myself, there are more than ten years between us, but I do recognize most of the feelings and thoughts he writes about. I'm married to somebody who doesn't really care which CD I'm playing and who probably doesn't know who Jackson Brown or Nelly Furtado are (forgive me if I'm wrong) and we have a little five-year-old that only just starts to develop his own taste of music. I listen to music all the time though, I've done that for the last twenty-five years and I will enjoy it still in another twenty-five years, but Hornby's right: the music I liked a decade ago doesn't really appeal to me anymore. Not that I play Dylan or the Beatles all the time, but apart from Springsteen, there aren't many who stood the test of time for me neither. I can understand Hornby's fear of growing old and the problem with pop music is that it makes you face the facts if you don't watch out.

Unfortunately, most of the people I know who read the book on my recommendation think differently about it. I found a less positive critic on the Internet that says more or less what they mean: "... having just got married and approaching my thirty-sixth birthday, should be throwing out my old Led Zep, Public Enemy and Young Gods CDs and stocking up on Van Morrison's back catalogue. You, dear visitors, have my permission to take me out and shoot me should such a day ever arrive..."<sup>1</sup>.

I certainly don't agree with it. I believe Led Zeppelin and Van Morrison both sound magnificent, even if you play them after each other, and I'm not that old that I can't stand hearing *I'm like a bird* right in between them. Maybe it's my adoration for Nick Hornby, but I like to think that that's the whole idea behind the book. You can listen to about everything, as long as you like it and as long as it's your own choice.

Talking about choosing: these are Nick Hornby's 31 songs:

1. Teenage Fanclub - Your Love is the Place Where I Come From
2. Bruce Springsteen - Thunder Road
3. Nelly Furtado - I'm Like a Bird
4. Led Zeppelin - Heartbreaker
5. Rufus Wainwright - One Man Guy
6. Santana - Samba Pa Ti
7. Rod Stewart - Mama You Been on My Mind
8. Bob Dylan - Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?
9. The Beatles - Rain
10. Ani DiFranco - You Had Time
11. Aimee Mann - I've Had It
12. Paul Westerberg - Born For Me
13. Suicide - Frankie Teardrop
14. Teenage Fanclub - Ain't That Enough
15. J. Geils Band - First I Look at the Purse
16. Ben Folds Five - Smoke
17. Badly Drawn Boy - A Minor Incident
18. The Bible - Glorybound
19. Van Morrison - Caravan
20. Butch Hancock & Marce LaCouture - So I'll Run
21. Gregory Isaacs - Puff the Magic Dragon
22. Ian Dury & the Blockheads - Reasons to be Cheerful, Part 3
23. Richard and Linda Thompson - The Calvary Cross
24. Jackson Browne - Late For the Sky
25. Mark Mulcahy - Hey Self Defeater
26. The Velvelettes - Needle in a Haystack
27. O.V. Wright - Let's Straighten it Out
28. Röyksopp - Röyksopp's Night Out
29. The Avalanches - Frontier Psychiatrist
30. Soulwax - No Fun/Push It
31. Patti Smith Group - Pissing in a River

What strikes me most in this list is the diversity of it all, and that's also a reason to disagree with the negative criticism above. I admit my list would be slightly different from his, but,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.noise-online.com/hornbybook.html>

again, that's what the book's about: everybody has his own diverse life and his own songs to go with it. I don't read the New Yorker, so I can't really speak for all his critics on music, but I'm convinced that if you buy what this man praises, it won't be a pig in a poke.

Although some of the songs he comments on were new to me, I managed to listen to all of them in order to be able to write this piece. This way I discovered some great music and for that I'm very grateful to Hornby. I wasn't able yet to find all his recent favourites that he lists at the end of the book, but I certainly will try to get a hold on them as soon as possible. I'm always into new things, no matter whether they're old or recent, and I'm always in for one of his books.

The only things I have a problem with are the Dutch translations of his novels. I read all his books in English first and then I started reading them in Dutch. I got off with *Een jongen* (*About a boy*) and got half way through *31 songs*, but then I gave up. I don't know what's missing exactly, but they can't really reach me the way the original versions do. Furthermore I don't understand why they left out the 14 album reviews in the Dutch translation of *31 songs*, nor why you can't buy the CD that goes with the English version. By the way, it's a pity that only 11 songs appear on it, they should have recorded them all. But nevertheless, I can hardly wait to read the next Hornby.

Meanwhile I'll buy some new CDs and listen to them over and over and over again. Maybe it'll help me to understand Hornby's next book even better. One final suggestion for people who don't like reading: if you don't want to read *31 songs*, at least listen to its music. And if some of the songs don't make you all that excited, don't hesitate to make your own *31 songs*. It's fun, it makes you happy, and it makes you think about your life and the fact that without music there would be no life to think about. And, according to my own humble opinion, that's exactly what the author means.

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