Hinterland

Alan Johnson

writer & former politician

What's the last book you read? Would you recommend it?
I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith. Highly recommended.

Which book, film, album, painting or other cultural work should everyone experience at least once?
The CMAT album *Crazymad, for Me*. Particularly her duet with John Grant.

Do you cry in movies? If so, what was the last movie that made you cry?
I last blubbed away watching the Beatles film *Get Back*.

What's television's funniest moment?
The rogue zoo elephant in the *Blue Peter* studio.

What series are you watching at the moment?
The Night Manager.

Which authors whom you discovered as a young man are still with you?
George Orwell, PG Wodehouse, Dickens and Hardy.

Do you regret taking a wrong turn into politics when you could have been a pop star?
There's still time.

Who was your idol growing up?
Paul McCartney.

Who's your cultural hero?
I have two cultural idols, McCartney and Thomas Hardy.

I'm thinking of writing a book about them provisionally titled "Hey Jude the Obscure".

Do you follow any sports?
Football in general, QPR in particular.

You have a long association with Hull, the city of poetry. Tell us about you and Philip Larkin.
Many of Larkin's poems are set in what was my Hull constituency (eg "The Large Cool Store", "Friday Night at the Royal Station Hotel", "Broadcast"). We never met, and I suspect we wouldn't have got on, but his poetry has been a constant source of delight ever since I read "I Remember, I Remember" in my twenties.

What cultural work or artist is overrated?
The Rolling Stones.

What cultural work or artist is underrated?
The Canadian singer Ron Sexsmith.

What's your favourite room in any gallery or museum?
The coffee shop.

What would you like to get into if you had the time?
Galleries and museums.

What's the first gig you ever went to? And the most recent?
I saw Lonnie Donegan at the Chiswick Empire in 1958. Looking forward to seeing Elvis Costello in Newcastle.

If you could steal any artwork and get away with it, what would it be?
Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881). I wish it were small enough to slip into an overcoat pocket.

What art form passes you by?
Ballet.

Who is the greatest artistic genius of all time?
The Beatles.

Suggest an alternative national anthem.
Anything would be better than the current dirge. I'd plump for "Jerusalem", but would be equally happy with "Yellow Submarine". ♦

Alan Johnson's *"Harold Wilson: Twentieth Century Man" (Swift Press) is out now in paperback*

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL REA