



Francis Wheen

Bedsit Disco Queen
by Tracey Thorn

Virago £16.99
£14.99 inc p&p
★★★★★

Jane Fox and I have decided to try and form a band,' the 16-year-old Tracey Thorn wrote in her diary in the summer of 1979. Neither of them had any instruments, nor any songs. Still, it seemed an entirely reasonable proposition: 'We liked lots of bands and we had lots of records and went to gigs, so what was to stop us?'

She bought her first electric guitar soon afterwards. A local schoolboy band then asked her to ditch Jane and join them, and she accepted. 'I loved the camaraderie they displayed, the being-in-a-gang aspect of it all, and I knew I wanted some of that for myself.'

One day the singer failed to turn up for rehearsal. 'What about you, Trace?' the boys asked. 'Can you sing?' She had no idea, but guessed that singing on stage required bags of confidence – which she conspicuously lacked.

'Um, I'll have a go,' Thorn replied shyly. 'But I can't do it if you're all looking at me. Can I go inside the wardrobe and sing from there?'

Thus began a career that would eventually take Tracey Thorn to the top of the charts with Everything But The Girl, the duo she formed a couple of years later with her student boyfriend Ben Watt. They released nine albums and sold nine million records.

Ben and Tracey seemed an improbable pair when they met on their first night at Hull University: he a jazz-loving, dope-smoking bohemian, she an innocent middle-class suburbanite from Hertfordshire whose drug experiments had been limited to cough sweets. But she found two of her favourite albums in his record collection, and that was that. 'We were at an age when that seemed to matter more than anything else.'

Gosh, how evocative that is. Do you recall the thrill, as a youngster, of recognising kindred spirits merely because they happened to share one or two of your more recondite tastes? For most of us, the sequel is usually disillusion, as it transpires that a passion for – say – Scritti Politti is all you have in common.

What makes Thorn's story so inspiring, and touching, is that she and Watt are still together more than three decades after that magical evening in Hull when he put John Martyn's Solid Air on the record player.

They have endured many ups and downs – their song Missing became a huge worldwide hit in 1995 just after



UNLIKELY HITMAKERS: Tracey Thorn and Ben Watt have sold nine million records as the pop duo Everything But The Girl

Band that began in a wardrobe...

their record company had sacked them as has-beens – and although Thorn doesn't dwell on the resilience of their love, it is implicit throughout. How many other couples could survive performing and writing songs together while also sleeping together for more than 30 years?

Even Mick Jagger and Keith Richards don't have to share a duvet and haggle over the washing-up.

Like The Smiths, Thorn and Watt had a reputation in the rock press for being miserabilists. Her book should scotch that. There's an hilarious account of their trip to Moscow in 1985 for a 'festival of youth and students': 'In between the

band performances, two men sat on stage and had a debate about "music and the state".'

A few years later, when their commercial fortunes were temporarily on the wane, they were reduced to playing at an arts centre in Bonn, 'where we were supported by a documentary about Mexico', and a cafe in the botanical gardens in Hamburg.

But then, as Thorn says, so many things 'turned out to be a bit Spinal Tap'. Making a video for one of their songs that included the line, 'When all's well, my love is like cathedral bells', a director announced that Tracey must perform inside an enormous cross-section of an

upturned bell while Ben would be down, er, a well.

'If in the finished version we look a little uncertain as to what on earth we're doing,' she writes, 'I ask you to search your conscience and tell me if you could have done any better?'

Witty, warm and utterly without prima donna pretensions, how could anyone not love her? If Alan Bennett had ever become an accidental pop-star, this is the memoir he would have written. For anyone who sat on their bed as a teenager, listening to records and fantasising about being in a band – most of us, then – Bedsit Disco Queen is the book of their dreams.

IF YOU LIKE THIS WHY NOT TRY

No Off Switch, by Andy Kershaw (Virgin Books £8.99 inc p&p)

Beware the office: it's a jungle in there

Why do so many people work at home? Purely to avoid working in an office, I would say. Offices are jungles. They teem with predators, large and small. Traps for the unwary lie everywhere.

I haven't hated a lot of people in my life, but I have never hated anyone as ferociously as a couple of people I worked with in an office about 25 years ago. Just the thought of them makes steam come out of my ears.

This is fertile territory for Oliver James. The psychologist and writer has forged an interesting and valuable career charting Britain's mental health, with books such as Affluenza, about the anxiety generated by our obsessive pursuit of money, and They F*** You Up, possibly the most off-putting title for a book, but essential reading for parents hoping not to do just that to their children.

His books are detailed, intellectually rigorous, and hard to put down. And here's another.

James's thesis is that working in offices is more stressful than ever before. This he ascribes to the rise of what he calls the 'triadic' personality. It's well documented that, to become the CEO of a multinational company, it really does help if you are a clinical psychopath.



Marcus Berkmann

Office Politics
by Oliver James

Vermilion £20 £16.99 inc p&p
★★★★★

'Think Stalin and Gordon Gekko from the film Wall Street,' says James. We are talking about highly impulsive thrill-seekers who lack empathy for others. 'They are four times commoner among senior executives than in the ordinary workforce.'

Then there are the Machiavels, who are cold and manipulative, ruthlessly pursuing their own self-interest. 'Think Henry Kissinger and Peter Mandelson.' Finally there are the narcissists, who are prone to 'grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, a desire for dominance and feelings of superiority. Think Madonna and Maradona.'

People who have one of these traits are likely to have the other two as well. 'This Dark Triad of characteristics is very likely to be present in that person in your office who causes so much trouble.'

The first half of the book examines the triadics in more detail, and it's fascinating. The research is new but the truths it unearths are age-old. I could identify at least one close family member who qualifies, as well as a very old 'friend', whose manipulative nature only emerged over time.

The changing nature of work has, unfortunately, encouraged the triadics. In the old days, when people actually produced things, it was easier to identify who was good at their job and who was not. Now that so many of us work in service industries, actual achievement can be almost impossible to measure. Office politics becomes the main way to get on, outstripping mere talent and hard work.

James worked in television for many years and has a lovely list (not his, he admits) that outlines the six stages of any TV production: 1. Enthusiasm. 2. Disillusion. 3. Panic. 4. Hunt for the guilty. 5. Punishment for the innocent. 6. Reward for those who had nothing to do with it. Does that sound familiar?



HARD STARE: Peter Mandelson is a classic Machiavel, says Oliver James

The second half of the book tells you how to deal with all this. James identifies four components of office political skill: astuteness (the ability to read others), effectiveness (making sure you brown-nose the right people at the right moment), networking ('here's my card') and the appearance of sincerity ('you were great in that meeting: you just nailed it').

He isn't saying we should all behave like psychopaths or Machiavels in order to thrive, but office political skill can be tuned and improved without a loss of integrity. He illustrates his points with some rousing stories of office battles, some of which stretch out into full-blooded office wars. Many of us will recognise the problems his protagonists have encountered.

This is a shorter, denser book than some of James's previous doorstoppers, and is all the better for it. Although his prose can be a little stolid, and he does occasionally stray into the realm of the bleedin' obvious, it's his passion that grabs you; his belief that things can be better. I can't remember the last time I read such a useful and eye-opening book. But be warned: after reading it, you might never want to go to work again.