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Uncle Charlie by Marc Asnin – Review

An unflinching photographic account of a Brooklyn tough guy charts his descent into addiction, alcoholism and ill-health

Sean O'Hagan, January 5, 2013



Uncle Charlie in his living room in Bushwick, Brooklyn, 1996. Photograph: Marc Asnin Marc Asnin/Marc Asnin

Marc Asnin's Uncle Charlie is the photography book as ultra-personal diary, a dark chronicle of misplaced hero worship and almost heroic survival. "I looked for a tough guy to emulate. A

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mentor of the streets," writes Asnin in his brief prologue denoting the beginning of his obsession in 1981. "I found Uncle Charlie, tough and tattooed. He was a real tough guy, he epitomised everything I wanted to be."

So begins a chronicle of innocence turning slowly into disillusionment as Charlie Henschke's life becomes a kind of slow car crash of addiction, alcoholism, sadness and physical ill-health. Imagine a book that merges the visceral rush of Nan Goldin's confessional storytelling style with the sombre, black-and-white documentary approach of W Eugene Smith or Bruce Davidson and you are approaching the territory of this big, sprawling saga of self-destruction. Across its 400-plus pages, Uncle Charlie takes you on a journey that is both epic and intimate, words and pictures combining not just to tell a story, but to give a very real sense of the often conflicting emotions and desires that drive that story.

Asnin's photographic style is determinedly old fashioned, a fly-on-the-wall chronicle of family life in Brooklyn as well as the descent of one man into a prolonged purgatory of his own making. Wisely, he allows Charlie to recount his own tale in a series of remembrances that are often vivid and always revealing. We feel his childhood sense of singularity, a keenly felt otherness that, revealingly, he puts down to his Jewishness. In adolescence, it shades into an outsider's stance, the world held at bay by machismo and menace.

Then, as his addictions take hold, the swagger and the self-confidence drain away and the once cocky life becomes a rollercoaster ride of bad choices, multiple addictions and the inevitable familial fallout of such a messed-up life. Things fall apart, slowly and inexorably, but there is a tenderness to the telling and to the images that speaks ultimately of a well of sadness and regret.

Ultimately, though, this is an unflinchingly honest book. It has a spiralling energy that comes from its merging of photographs, first-person testimony, found images, ephemera and Charlie's curiously poetic, often illuminatingly detailed reflections that unfold in various typefaces across page after page. "No one ever leaves home," he writes towards the end of his testimony, "and no one ever returns home." This is a kind of exile's story, then, and one in which the images add poignancy and power to the words, to the memories, to the arc of an outsider's life.

Uncle Charlie is published by Contrasto

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