

Late Show and The South Bank Show. Apart from a single appearance on BBC 2's Bookmark in the mid-'80s, Sinclair rarely appeared on TV. Perhaps his lugubriousness did not play well. Being intelligent and funny wasn't enough.

The 1980s were years of acclaim. Sinclair was on a roll. Then tragedy struck. In the mid-1990s, he lost both parents, his sister-in-law Susan, and his wife, Fran. Clive himself had renal failure, dialysis and a kidney transplant. He described these dark years in a book, *A Soap Opera from Hell*. In the next 20 years he published just four books.

Sinclair was a good novelist and a fine critic. But above all he was one of the best short story writers in post-war Britain. His first book of short stories, *Hearts of Gold*, won the Somerset Maugham Award. His second, *Bedbugs*, was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Award. His third won the PEN Silver Pen and the Jewish Quarterly Award.

Hearts of Gold included a vampire, a private detective (Smolinsky) and a story told from the point of view of a giraffe in an Israeli zoo. In one reference, Hamlet is reimagined as "The Texas Steak-Eating Contest". *Bedbugs* includes the familiar erotic weirdness, a Yiddish-speaking Jewish state in eastern Europe and a lecturer at a Cambridge summer school who renames a poetry course as *Rosenberg's Revenge* for his German students. "Wildly erotic and weirdly plotted," wrote the FT, "it is not for the squeamish or the lazy. His stories work you hard; tease and torment and shock you."

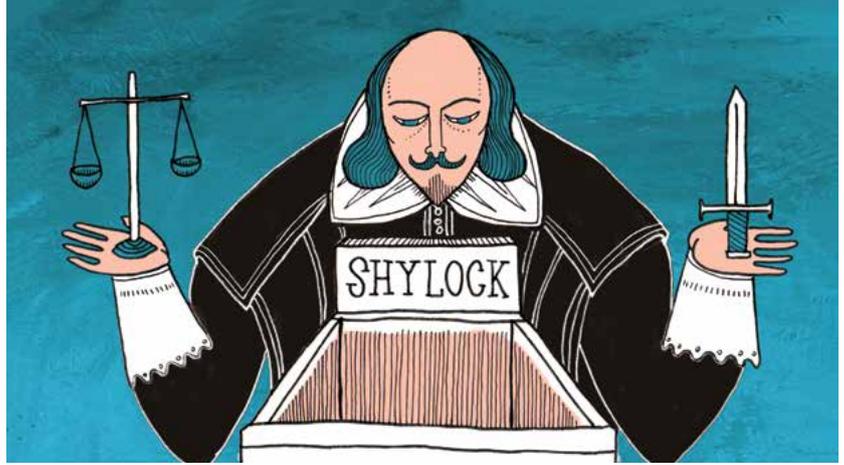
The *Lady with the Laptop* is perhaps the best of all. "Sinclair is great fun," wrote the *Literary Review*, "a canny court jester juggling big issues of life, death and cultural chaos to the tune of a belly laugh."

Death & Texas has more than a hint of the grotesque. One story has a character called Mama Congo, several zombies and some New Orleans prostitutes. The title story has an almost talmudic debate about the links between Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds* and the story of Davy Crockett.

Above all, Clive was a generous and loyal friend, and a loving and devoted father. After Seth and his wife Kate moved to LA, he called them every day.

It is not easy to make sense of these divides. Hendon and eastern Europe, Jews and the Wild West. Stories about vampires and prostitutes, but also those daily phone calls to LA and his devotion to his friends, his wife Fran and his long-time partner, Haidee Becker. So many losses and so much humour. From these divisions he created a distinctive literary voice, one that will be much missed for years to come. ■

Clive Sinclair: born 19 February 1948; died 5 March 2018. **David Herman** writes for the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian* among other publications.



SHYLOCK MUST DIE Clive Sinclair

▷ REVIEWED BY David Brauner

Sinclair's final collection of stories, *Shylock Must Die*, is both playful and death-haunted. It begins with a story, *Yosl Bergner's Last Dreams*, which functions as an obituary of Bergner, an Israeli artist and friend of Sinclair's. It ends with *Shylock's Ghost*, whose last words seem, eerily, to represent the narrator himself as a phantom: "My son is directing the trial scene [from *The Merchant of Venice*]...I cannot resist blowing him a kiss...[but] he looks right through me, as though I were as insubstantial as a kodachrome".

In between, Sinclair invokes a number of other ghosts – literal and metaphorical – from the victims of the Holocaust in *Tears of the Giraffe* and *If You Tickle Us*, to the ghost of the narrator's father in *A Wilderness of Monkeys*, to the famous Shakespearean actor, Charles Macklin, who made his name through a revolutionary interpretation of *Shylock*, in *Shylock's Ghost*.

The presiding spirit of the collection, however, is Shakespeare. All of the stories in *Shylock Must Die* revisit *The Merchant of Venice*, with the exception of *Yosl Bergner's Last Dreams*, which acts as a prologue to the volume and ends with a quotation from *Hamlet* (a production of which also plays an important part in *Tears of the Giraffe*, and from which the epigraph to *Shylock Must Die* is taken).

Sinclair's engagement with *The Merchant of Venice* places him implicitly in dialogue with a number of his Jewish contemporaries: Philip Roth, whose *Operation Shylock* (1993) features a disquisition on the iconic significance of Shakespeare's Jewish villain in the history of antisemitism; Arnold Wesker, whose play *The Merchant* (1977) recasts *Shylock* as an old friend of Antonio; John Gross, whose book *Shylock* (1994) traces the afterlife of a character who, he argues,

is both protean and archetypal; and Howard Jacobson, whose novel *Shylock* is *My Name* (2016) is partly a reworking of Shakespeare's play with *Shylock* as the (anti-)hero.

Poignantly, the collection also plays variations on some of Sinclair's earlier stories. The title story is narrated by Tubal, a minor character from *The Merchant of Venice* who helps *Shylock* raise the 3,000-ducat loan for Antonio and who is sent to try to retrieve *Shylock's* daughter, Jessica, after she elopes with Lorenzo. In this reimagining, Tubal is a private eye and Jessica becomes the femme fatale who seduces him and, in the final words of the story, orders him to kill her father. Tubal's occupation recalls that of Joshua Smolinsky, a figure in Sinclair's first two collections, *Hearts of Gold*

(1979) and *Bedbugs* (1982). Smolinsky is a sort of authorial alter ego – Sinclair's father changed his name from Smolinsky to Sinclair.

The metafictional references to Sinclair's own biography in *Shylock Our Contemporary* and *Shylock's Ghost* echo the self-reflexive games of Sinclair's novel *Blood Libels* (1985); while the mixture of metaphysics and Middle Eastern politics in *If You Tickle Us* and *Ain't That the Truth* (which features a golem turned American president with more than a passing resemblance to Donald Trump) is reminiscent of the story *Ashkenazia* and his most extravagant novel, *Cosmetic Effects* (1989).

The best of these stories have a crystalline wit and lyrical lucidity that matches, if not exceeds, anything that Sinclair has done. It is a fitting final



flourish to a brilliant career. ■

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