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## Hubert Selby Jr: It/II Be Better Tomorrow

**Director:** Michael W. Dean, Kenneth Shiffrin

**Cast:** Hubert Selby Jr, Ellen Burstyn, Lou Reed, Henry Rollins

(Squitten Pix, 2005) Rated: N/A

US DVD release date: 13 March 2007 (Eclectic)

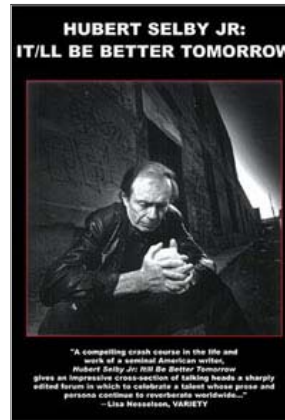
by **John Dover**

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In one of the talking head sections in this excellent documentary Desmond Nakano, who worked with Selby Jr. on the script for the movie adaptation of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, describes his trepidation at meeting the notorious writer fearing that "whoever wrote those books had to be completely out of his mind". Much to his surprise, the man that he met, and the figure that emerges from this film, was anything but. Selby Jr ('Cubby' to his friends) comes across as an extremely dedicated, humble and humane individual whose body of work represents a genuine triumph over severe illness, addiction, and adversity.

Indeed, it's difficult to recall a documentary about any artist or writer where the subject is treated with such unreserved admiration and praise, and on the evidence of interviews with the man himself such admiration seems entirely justified. Taking both a thematic and loosely chronological approach to his life and work and culminating with scenes shot at a remembrance service for his death in 2004 the film is unexpectedly moving and tender. A surprising epitaph for a man whose work dealt so unflinchingly with violence, addiction, poverty, and depravity.

Though there are a large number of luminaries ready to share their anecdotes about him (Henry Rollins, Darren Aronofsky, Lou Reed) the film works because it leaves plenty of room for Selby to explain himself. We hear first-hand his terrible tales of life in the sanatoriums in which he spent his young life as a result of a number of debilitating lung-related illnesses. He recounts an incident that gave him the impetus to write after the death of a young boy in an adjacent bed. An older patient asked him to write a letter of condolence to the boy's parents and Selby grudgingly accepted; though he protested that there must have been others better equipped for the task. He wrote the letter anyway, and after a time received a reply thanking him for taking the trouble and intimating that his words had provided great solace. The effect on Selby was like that of an epiphany as he realised the power of the written word to influence and move others. In the large ward in which he was confined Selby was the only patient who didn't succumb to his illness and he proceeded, upon his release, to grasp his new-found calling with intense energy and dedication.



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Selby states that he thought he could be a writer because he "knew the alphabet" and his greatly enfeebled physical health, coupled with only a rudimentary education, ruled out a large number of other options. His famous method of punctuation, replacing the comma with a slash as in 'It/II be better tomorrow', came about as a result of punching away at a manual typewriter where the shift key had to be held down at the same time as the apostrophe on the opposite side of the keyboard. It was easier to use the slash and his rapid near-'stream of consciousness' prose style would not have to be broken. Lou Reed speaks bitterly of Selby's rejection by a large portion of America's critical fraternity as a result of his idiosyncratic methods.

The documentary also deals with the obscenity trial in England that Calder Books underwent after they published *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. It's fascinating to watch the distinctly upper-class Calder defend the artistic merits of a book so vastly removed from his usual milieu. Though initially banned as obscene, Calder and his legal team appealed the decision and won after a long and costly legal battle. The result practically ensured that no such action would be taken again against a work of literature. There is also detailed look at the two movie versions of Selby's work: Uli Edel's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* both of which had continuous and detailed input from the writer himself. Selby even had a cameo in the later film, hamming it up as a sarcastic prison guard.

The film moves slickly with a soft jazz soundtrack and narration by Robert Downey Jr, himself no stranger to the lure of drugs and alcohol that plagued Selby until he cleaned up at the age of 40. The focus is almost exclusively on the two 'filmed' novels and the rest of his oeuvre is mentioned only in passing. Perhaps the only flaw is the lack of context given to Selby's work in the wider literary scene at the time of his initial publication both in America and abroad; or even a comparison with other 'addict' writers. His take on heroin and addiction is distinct from that of Burroughs' for example whose upbringing was almost aristocratic in comparison with the stark poverty of Selby's.

That said, this is a fine, moving and illuminating account of a writer who used the bleak, harrowing circumstances of his life to forge a unique style that addressed concerns and characters often absent from the literature of his time. He continued to teach creative writing until almost the very end of his life though greatly debilitated by illness. His courage is to be applauded and this documentary is an excellent epitaph. Extras comprised of extensive Audio interviews with Selby, Uli Edel and critic Michael Silverblatt

Hubert Selby Jr: It/II Be Better Tomorrow - trailer

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— 12 July 2007

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