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Hubert Selby Jr: It/ll Be Better Tomorrow

(Docu)

By LISA NESSELSON

A Squitten Pix presentation of a Michael W. Dean / Kenneth Shiffrin production.
(International sales: Squitten Pix, Los Angeles.) Produced by Michael W. Dean, Ryan Brown. Executive producers, Suzanne Selby, Kenneth Shiffrin. Directed by Michael W. Dean, Kenneth Shiffrin.

Narrator: Robert Downey Jr.

With: Hubert Selby Jr., Lou Reed, Ellen Burstyn, Jared Leto, Darren Aronofsky, Uli Edel, Nicolas Winding Refn, Henry Rollins, Jerry Stahl, Richard Price, Nick Tosches, Amiri Baraka, Gilbert Sorrentino, John Calder, Anthony Kiedis, James Remar, Michael Silverblatt.

A compelling crash course in the life and work of a seminal American writer, "Hubert Selby Jr: It/ll Be Better Tomorrow" gives an impressive cross-section of talking heads a sharply edited forum in which to celebrate a talent whose prose and persona continue to reverberate worldwide a year after his death. A survivor in every sense of the word, Selby's best-known books -- "Last Exit to Brooklyn," "Requiem For A Dream" -- inspired faithful and worthwhile films. Docu by Michael W. Dean seems destined for a modest theatrical life in Europe, belongs on culture-friendly webs and will be an invaluable tool for lit teachers.

Born in Brooklyn in 1928, Selby Jr. only completed the eighth grade before following in his father's footsteps as a merchant seaman. While he relished the travel and adventure of being a teen sailor in WWII Europe, the ship on which he crossed the ocean was carrying cattle for the troops that turned out to be infected with bovine tuberculosis.

The formerly strapping Selby contracted TB and spent four years in sanatoriums. Doctors gave him two months to live; his mother secured black market antibiotics that helped him be the only patient on his ward to survive. But it also, as he put it, fried his brain.

To extract diseased lungs in that era, doctors removed five or six ribs. Selby didn't have the lung power for conventional labor, but, having cheated death, he was determined to make his mark on the world.

Banging out daily letters to friends, he taught himself to write, dispensing with niceties like textbook punctuation and substituting a slash for an apostrophe because a slash didn't require holding down the CAPS key on a typewriter.

Future poet laureate of New Jersey Amiri Baraka (then known as Le Roi Jones) suggested the fledgling author contact Jack Kerouac's agent. "Last Exit to Brooklyn" was an immediate critical and financial hit.

But from alcohol abuse, Selby slid into five years of heroin addiction, estimating he shot \$60,000 worth of royalties into his arms. Colorful and endlessly evocative comments from Selby's friend Gilbert Sorrentino of Grove Press include a wonderful riff on why junkies are the "most boring" people around.

In 1969 at age 40, Selby got clean and sober and stayed that way. Although plagued by ill-health and fueled by rage, Selby was, by all accounts, a down-to-earth pussycat of a man.

Director Nicolas Winding Refn, who made a film of Selby's "Fear X," suggests Selby was a European writer much as Orson Welles was a European filmmaker. Henry Rollins went on a European spoken word tour with Selby throughout which the wiry oldster was greeted like a rock star wherever they went.

Ellen Burstyn, who played in Darren Aronofsky's "Requiem for a Dream" and describes its rapturous reception at Cannes, is a particularly touching voice in a gallery of mostly male friends, colleagues and fans.

Brooklyn native Aronofsky describes how the novel changed his life and set him "on the road to being a writer and a storyteller." Richard Price pronounces Selby's prose to be "like the marriage of literature and Charlie Parker. He used words like musicians used notes."

Shifting from Brooklynese to posher tones for the 1966 London obscenity trial against "Last Exit" the costly and ultimately triumphant ordeal is recounted with suspense and aplomb by then-beleaguered publisher John Calder.

Almost four decades later, filmed with oxygen tubes up his nose, Selby is calmly irate about the "anti-art" stance of the head of state he calls "baby Bush."

Lou Reed, Rollins and Jerry Stahl are particularly articulate about what made Selby so influential. An excerpt from "The Simpsons" episode "Last Exit to Springfield" rounds out the testimony.

Tech credits are merely adequate, but unfailingly eloquent interviewees come across loud and clear.

Camera (color/B&W, DV), Dean, Ray Michel; editor, Ryan Brown; music, Imperial Crowns, Martyn Lenoble, Steve Munger, Bob Bartosik. Reviewed at Deauville Film Festival (noncompeting), Sept. 3, 2005. Running time: 79 MIN.