more inclined to press against the boundaries of convention. How Sullivan reconciles his earlier appeals to the conservatives with this final appeasement of the “in your face” brigade, I do not know. Still, it is a suitable conclusion to a book that moves so awkwardly and uneasily between the coolly policy-oriented and the painfully confessional, and in which the author seems never to know whether he is more eager to attack the liberals and the radicals who would carry out the policies he proposes or to mollify the conservatives and the devout who would not.

The jacket of “Virtually Normal” claims that the book will “permanently change the way we think about this issue.” It doesn’t live up to that ambition. Andrew Sullivan is a clever man; his book jacket calls him “brilliant.” But “Virtually Normal” is not brilliant; it is not even clever. Its history, sociology, psychology, and political theory are perfunctory. Its philosophy is thin, and for a man with a first in modern history and modern languages from Oxford and a doctorate in political science from Harvard, Sullivan is oddly naive about the difficulties that stand in the way of the legal and political treatment of homosexuality which he advocates. “Virtually Normal” is full of loose ends and small incoherences. They serve to make Sullivan’s argument more intellectually frustrating but also, ironically, more human and more engaging than a better-organized work would have been.

Andrew Sullivan

Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?
a novel by
Lorrie Moore

BOOKS

REVOLUTIONS PER MINUTE

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CAN a man hope to sustain both a record collection and a relationship? Nick Hornby’s first novel, “High Fidelity” (Riverhead; $21.95), turns on this racking question. The man on the rack is Rob Fleming, ex-c.d.j., college dropout, “Reservoir Dogs” fan, and owner of a failing London record store, who finds himself alone on his thirty-sixth birthday with a “Robocop” video and a phone call from his mom. His girlfriend has gone off with the tenant upstairs, and Rob begins to wonder if his low-fidelity relationship isn’t a casualty of his devotion to high fidelity. “What came first,” he asks, “the music or the misery?”

In the space of two books, Hornby has established himself in England as a maestro of the male confessional. His first, the autobiographical “Fever Pitch,” took readers on an uprooting journey through the mental wastelands of the sports bore. You didn’t need to follow soccer to love Hornby’s expose of the true fan’s life of trivia-sodden mania. “Fever Pitch” achieved cult status, with both the book and a theatrical adaptation becoming national sellouts. On turning to fiction, Hornby has traded obsessions: Rob is dead ignorant about sports but knows a life-threatening amount about records. To save himself from vanishing down the plughole of his own erudition, he transforms his passion into life-buoy lists: “Top Five Records Made by Blind Musicians,” “Best Five Pop Songs About Death,” “Top Five Bands or Musicians Who Will Have to Be Shot Come the Musical Revolution.” The night after his girlfriend leaves, Rob reorganizes his records—a reflex response to stress. His collection was ordered alphabetically, but he yearns for a more heartfelt filing principle, so he rearranges his thousands of singles and albums into the sequence in which he
Men in Hornby’s world are often trying to say things to each other in ways that prevent anything from getting said. There’s a marvellous staging of this emotional obliquity soon after Rob and his ex meet for their first, uneasy heart-to-heart since she gave him the boot. Rob is bent on learning how the sex is going with his substitute—her new man, Ian—and he bullies her into a concession: “We haven’t done it yet.” Rob’s hopes are lifted, but he is troubled by the implications of that final word. He needs to talk to someone; only Barry is at hand. Rob tries to parallel-park his way into the semantics of that tormenting “yet”: “Barry, if I were to say to you that I haven’t seen ‘Reservoir Dogs’ yet, what would that mean?” Barry, not particularly at home in the hypothetical mode, is at a loss. He is a “Reservoir Dogs” fanatic; only a sick man wouldn’t have bothered to see it. Besides, he knows for a fact that Rob has seen it twice. Around and around they go, as Rob’s original objective spins out of sight.

Both of Hornby’s books reveal a fascination with the sheer voodoo of what so often passes for masculinity: the weird ritual facts, the useless objects, the losing clubs and teams. If “Fever Pitch” is anything to judge by, Hornby is himself a recovering obsessive, a natural for this terrain. As obsessions go, however, records are a special case. Rob is not just a music lover but a vinyl fetishist. Records pick up the past in a way that tapes and CDs can’t; they acquire nicks, jumps, scratches, places where the needle carves a groove. There’s nothing like that creaky special tune, that riff, or sometimes just a chord change, to take us all the way back. Emotionally and technologically, Hornby suggests, records are a hedge against too much change too fast. Part of us fears getting left behind by life, but another part loves nothing more than the predictable return—whether to the safe misery of old pains or to a past that once seemed full of future. Our records help us hold our history; and sometimes, even Rob admits, they hold too much.

But that discovery arrives belatedly. For most of “High Fidelity,” Rob is grooved on nostalgia; his fingers itch for replay the way smokers’ itch for cigarettes. It takes an emotional storm at a funeral and a series of madcap encounters with the women who starred in his “Top Five Most Memorable Split-Ups” for him to realize that sometimes the past is pure impediment. Perhaps Rob’s transformation comes a little fast. Let’s just say that the novel’s ending is upbeat and romantic— and cunningly movie-minded. (Disney’s Touchstone Pictures may take the bait: it has purchased the film rights to “High Fidelity,” with Mike Newell to direct.)

As a creation, Rob is a completely realized individual, but there are lots of guys like him around—underqualified, dead-ended in their jobs, attached to women who are smarter, have credentials, and are on the move. In writing about this very contemporary type, Hornby refuses the false choice between male backlash and fiction that is bloodlessly P.C. “High Fidelity” stakes out a territory both more complex and more nearly true to life: Rob is, by turns, warm and brittle, witty and indefensible. It is rare that a book so hilarious is also so sharp about sex and manliness, memory and music. Many men—and, certainly, all addictive personalities—will find in these pages shadows of themselves. And most of us will hear, in Hornby’s acoustic prose, the obsessive chords of the past that more often lock up than liberate our hearts.