

dash for leads. Instead, he was fascinated by the mass media as construct. The fusion of public and private memory. The random flow of the round-the-clock news. He was closer to a sociologist than a journalist, but he wasn't that either. He was a writer. And submerged underneath it all, like in the narrow shafts of Fred and Rosemary West's cellar, was that essential rottenness, 'stinkingness', corruption. People wondered what this gentle, softly-spoken man was doing writing such dark material. 'Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face,' said John Updike. Burn's subjects are horribly disfigured.

Burn died of bowel cancer in 2009. He was 61. His memory has been kept alive by the Gordon Burn Trust, set up by his long-time partner, artist Carol Gorner, and the prize it runs, the Gordon Burn Prize, which since 2012 has awarded £5,000 each year to fiction or non-fiction that best honours 'the spirit and sensibility of Gordon's literary methods'. (Past winners include David Keenan, David Szalay and Dan Davies for his biography of Jimmy Savile.) Now, to mark ten years since his death, Faber & Faber are republishing his most seminal works. These are his freewheeling novels, *Alma Cogan* (1991) and *Born Yesterday* (2008), and his true crime classics *Somebody's Husband, Somebody's Son* (1984), about the Yorkshire Ripper, and *Happy Like Murderers* (1998), about Fred and Rosemary West. His novel *Fullalove* (1995) and fly-on-the-wall snooker chronicle *Pocket Money* (1986) will follow in spring.

The picture that emerges from these books is of a deranged genius with no obvious analogue in English letters. There is J.G. Ballard, with his themes of celebrity obsession and media spectacle, but Burn is less clinical: he wields a notebook, not a scalpel. Iain Sinclair is closer, with his interest in topography and the dusty ephemera of the past; Burn even bears a slight resemblance. But Burn's prose is less ragged, nor does he do the motorway-mystic Blake routine. It is more profitable to look to the US, in particular the New Journalists and their fellow travellers: Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote. He travelled cheaply there in the Sixties, working for *Rolling Stone* and spending a memorable summer on tour with his cousin, Eric Burdon of the Animals.

Burn's true crime works are remarkable, but it is the novels that best distil what Gordon Burn is about. The high-water mark is *Alma Cogan*, his Whitbread Prize-winning debut, as audacious and extraordinary as