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Bernard Manning, who died this week, pre-empted his critics by writing his own obituary. Here, three Telegraph writers take an irreverent leaf out of his book

The last laugh from beyond the grave...

came back from America yesterday to a flurry of Bernard Manning obituaries, and to discover that he had taken the approach - novel here but more common there of trying to write his own. I'd been at an obituaries conference in upstate New York, where the question of what makes a good obit was endlessly dissected. Manning's piece was a nice enough read in its way, but it wasn't what British readers would regard as a proper obituary.

To take one small point, Manning never mentioned the umpteen factual details – his date of birth, his wife, his son - which an obituary, as a matter of record, needs to have. Manning's piece is not entirely without precedent: our obituary of the Soho drinker and writer Jeffrey Bernard was followed by an "add" which he had written himself. It was funny and rather charming. But it would never have done for the main obituary.

The obituaries in *The* Daily Telegraph are not death notices, written by the families, as they often are in America. Nor is the obits beat any longer the stamping ground of the cub reporter. That may be why American obituaries can be terrible, while ours are routinely regarded as among the bestwritten, most entertaining and most popular sections of the newspaper. But they weren't always. The obituaries revolution was begun by this newspaper in 1986 when my predecessor, the saintly

Hugh Massingberd, took over

the page.
Massingberd's genius was to discard the view that obits should be expanded *Who's* Who entries, dry as dust, devoted only to the Great and the Good of the Establishment and, above all, never speaking ill of the dead. Instead, *Telegraph* obits began to cover all sorts of people and began to write about what they ate, their hobbies, anything that seemed to encapsulate an aspect of their life. And death

Other British papers, and the better American ones, followed suit. But many still tend to turn an obituary into a funeral eulogy or a piece of justification for the subject. That is why autobiographical pieces, though they may have their own value, will not do as

became lively

circumstances of a death and the tributes are elsewhere, on the news pages. The qualities for a good obituarist include Olympian detachment and omniscience, coupled with the ability to make a telling judgment: that is one reason why the *Telegraph*'s are unsigned. An obituary should combine ruthless examination of the facts and scrupulous accuracy in reporting, with an eye for the telling detail or the funny story that tells you something about the deceased's character. They're about life, after all, not death.

Andrew McKie Obituaries Editor

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The Telegraph's reader community is a place for you to create your own online newspaper, start a blog, post pictures and join debates. And all for

So flexible is $\ensuremath{\text{\textbf{My.Telegraph}}}$ that it can also serve as a digital resting place for your assessment of your life and how you lived it - your auto-obituary.

So, whatever your age, young or old, follow the easy instructions below to write one. It will survive long after you are no longer around yourself.

If you are already a member of My.Telegraph, just write a blog in the normal way and tag it "Obits".

If you haven't joined the thousands from across the world who've already signed up, here's a step-by-step guide on how to take part:

1. Go to www.my.telegraph.co.uk and click on "Sign Up". 2. Fill in the first page of the registration form and then click on

"I accept. Create my account". 3. Fill in the second page of the form. This will help others find you later. 4. Click on "Write your first post". **5.** Write your obituary – you can do it

in stages if you prefer. **6.** Preview what you've written. If you wish, add an image of yourself. Click on "Tag" and tag your obituary

7. Now click on "Publish". Your obituary will now be live on My.Telegraph. You can edit it as many times as you like. And other members of the community will be able to

comment on what you have written.

If you want to read your friends' auto-obituaries, search for them under "People". Or go to the top right of the My.Telegraph home page and look for "Obits" in the light-blue section under "Today people are writing about"

SAM LEITH 'HE PRETENDED NOT TO HAVE GONE TO ETON'

am Leith, who died aged 33 last month after a short illness, was a journalist and writer who squandered the promise of his early career in a succession of dingy pubs, and his modest literary talents on a toilet book. Six months before his death, he was described by his closest friend as "a complete waste of space".

Leith was born on January 1. 1974 in London, eldest son of the writer Penny Junor and the restaurateur and jigsaw magnate James

Leith. He grew up in Surrey and was a King's Scholar at Eton College, where he developed an interest in suicidal American poets. He was known by his contemporaries as "Gollum" or "Toady", insults he took in good part. He went on to study English at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he pretended as far as possible pretended as far as possible

not to have gone to Eton. He joined Fleet Street from university in 1997, and cut his teeth assisting his great mentor Peter McKay on the Daily Mail's

fledgling Ephraim Hardcastle column. The sobriquet he acquired there, "Sam Sneed", combining as it does "sneer" and "snide" with the suggestion of a Dickensian scrivener's clerk, stuck. It served him well through the five years he was to spend as a gossip columnist. He joined *The Daily Telegraph* in 1999, where he remained for the rest of his professional

He was thought to have been happiest in his early thirties, when he worked as the *Telegraph*'s literary editor.

"When I did diaries," he said, "all the writers I admired told me to **** off. Now they still hate me, but they are

nice to me at parties."
He published his only book, *Dead Pets* (Canongate), in 2005. An anthology of interesting information about animal mortality designed to bit the Christma crift moulest. hit the Christmas gift market, it was a moderate critical success but failed to sell. Retitled in paperback, Daddy, Is Timmy in Heaven Now? (Canongate, 2006) also failed to sell. Leith's pathological hatred of the authors of *Does*



Anything Eat Wasps? (Profile, 2005) began to affect his judgment, and in 2007 he was dismissed from the Telegraph for gross misconduct. In later years, as his fondness for Scotch whisky gave way to a love affair with

Brasso, he cut a somewhat

diminished figure. He communicated with friends only via the internet and seldom left his flat, confining his expeditions to Brixton's Atlantic Road, where he was typically seen "wearing odd slippers and muttering about hammers". He passed his time watching television and submitting unsolicited reviews of imaginary novels to the $London\ Review$ of Books.

Owing perhaps to his increasing eccentricities, Leith never married. He is survived by his cat, Henry.

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CRAIG BROWN 'SPENT MOST OF HIS LIFE IN PYJAMAS'

raig Brown began writing jokes aged nine at his prep school, Farleigh House. It was the perfect environment for a particular form of English humour: the headmaster always wore the school uniform (Start-rite sandals, grey flannel shorts, Aertex shirt) and the music master used to transport his wheelchair-bound girlfriend to school by attaching a rope from her wheelchair to his car.

With his friend Charlie Miller, who later went to work for the BBC, he spent his free time mimicking the more outlandish members of the teaching and cleaning staff into a small portable tape-recorder. He later saw this practice as a more socially acceptable form of voodoo. As luck would have it, his slim parodic skill, generally applied to those who irritated or upset him, was to keep him in good stead for the rest of his days: he once defined writing as "turning your worst enemies into money".

From poking fun at teachers behind their backs, he matured: in his adult

life, he poked fun at the famous behind their backs. He wrote his first parody of the playwright Harold Pinter aged 14, and was still writing parodies of him some 36 years later. His parodies were not always taken in good part. "Is that who I think it is?" Pinter once said to a party hostess, spying him across

a busy room.
"Why? Do you want to punch him?" asked the

hostess "I wouldn't want to dirty my fists," scowled Pinter. Others who voiced their disapproval, sometimes through solicitors, of his efforts on their behalf included Tracey Emin, Mohamed Fayed, Janet Street-Porter, Sir Tim Rice and Major Ronald Ferguson. Following the funeral, a special reception with canned music will be held for these adversaries, affording them the opportunity to dance on his grave.

As a humorist, Craig Brown was soon to discover that the time-wasting pursuits of his childhood obsessive reading of all



the pop music weeklies, an unhealthy interest in the five-times-a-week goingson at ATV's Crossroads Motel, an early stint at autograph hunting (Derek Nimmo, Engelbert Humperdinck, Mick McManus) and so forth could easily be converted into lightweight journalism.

In 1987-88, he held down what was very nearly a proper job, writing the parliamentary sketch for the *Times*, but after 18 months he found the commuting too taxing (he had always lived in the countryside) and threw in the towel. Yet he retained an interest in politicians, though not in politics, and would often put their major speeches to profitable

use, recycling them in parodic form. Early in his career, he discovered that humour

requires minimal research - the less, the better - so Brown was able to trot out five or six articles a week for some decades. Every now and then he would get out his scissors and paste, bundle the least timeworn of these old articles together, dream up a title suggestive of novelty, and have them republished in book form. Alas, the public saw through this deceitful ruse, and consistently refused to buy them.

From time to time, he dabbled in other forms - a novel here, a radio or TV script there – but without any notable success. He was less a long-distance runner than a sprinter, though in real life he was neither, preferring to stay put.

Craig Brown spent most of his life in his pyjamas, either at his desk or in bed, reading. He divided his time between Swindon and Ipswich. He was of an irritable disposition and, like so many humorists, often failed to see the joke.

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HILARY ALEXANDER 'WAS SHE A SECRET WOGAN ''TOG''?'

hey found her slumped over her Apple Mac... a half-smoked Marlboro Light still smouldering in the ashtray beside her. She was wearing her favourite tribal gear of gipsy skirt decorated with bells and beads and a Mongolian jacket, a relic from some long-ago fashion location trip where they had camped in yurts on the shores of Lake Khövsgöl and photographed bridal gowns among reindeers and the reindeer people. Her shoes – Kurt Geiger

patent platform sandals - were kicked off. It was obvious why: a large blister had formed on both heels. Thumper, her adored black and white moggy, snoozed blissfully unaware on the Kazakhstan rug. The lilting tones of Terry Wogan on Radio 2 whispered around the room. Was Alexander, the

fashion director of The Daily Telegraph, a secret "TOG", aka tired old git?

The flickering glow of a Matthew Williamson candle illuminated the prints by the fireplace – a Maori chieftain in feathered cape with facial tattoos, one of the hints to her birth many moons ago in the far reaches of New Zealand They jostled for space on the old brick wall with an Ecuadorian machete (she had been a hippy in South America); an antique Chinese opium pipe (acquired when she had lived in Hong Kong) and what looked like a pair of

nipple tassels... Photographs crammed on top of the piano were evidence of a life in fashion: in the front row at John Galliano's first haute couture show for Christian Dior; with Donatella Versace and Giorgio Armani; dancing with



Karl Lagerfeld wearing his Comme des Garçons suit and a pair of Hunter wellies; with Linda Evangelista, Claudia Schiffer and the Beckhams.

Not that her interests were confined to the catwalk. Underneath her notebook, the *Telegraph* cryptic crossword was almost complete - save for that devilish 28 across - "common mare, cuts transport (9)" - one clue she never got. Her secateurs and garden gloves also lay nearby.

She had been covering a show the night before by a little-known designer, staged in a disused garage somewhere near the Hammersmith flyover. The scorched running order – burns were very "in" that year – lay alongside her laptop. She had scrawled a big "X" alongside several numbers – 3, an octagonal sofa-dress in multifunctional nylon; 12, a pink shagpile coat with five sleeves; and 22, the finale, a bridal dress constructed entirely from recycled semi-skimmed milk containers with matching ankle boots.

She had begun to write her story. "This show, which plumbed both the heights and the depths of pretension, touched a chord..." But did she like it? We may never know. The truth died with her.