Carry On Confluence

*Code: Damp, An Esoteric Guide to British Sitcoms*, Sophie Sleigh-Johnson
(£10.99, Repeater Books)

Expect the expected: Mark Fisher reference? tick. William Burroughs quote? tick. A mention of Nigel Kneale? tick. An Alan Garner aside? tick. But also lots of unexpectedness: The Chuckle Brothers, Mark E. Smith, *Time Team* and a prologue devoted to Frankie Howerd. Annoying errors, too: David Peace's *1974* is part of the Red Riding Quartet, not a trilogy; there were four not five students in the rented house in *The Young Ones*; and probably other things that I've missed.

This is a book that seeps into you, a weird attempt to map comedy through memory and misremembering, psychogeography, social culture and adoptive mythologising. An attempt to remember, subvert and decode bygone times through sitcom scripts and theoretical static. Let bygones be bygones? Never! *Rising Damp* is reinterpreted as a cosmic guide to secret England, then after a commercial break, Sleigh-Johnson does the same again for *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*.

Here is a book awash with ideas, connections that flood these pages with comic associations and half-truth, hints, puns and innuendos. Sleigh-Johnson is a marsh dweller from Southend-on-Sea (though the town is actually situated on the estuary of the River Thames) who wades through the Essex esoteric underworld to catch what she can, to try and pan for gold in the bogs and streams of local newspapers, rumours and random thought.

If Sleigh-Johnson does the footwork, it is Leonard Rossiter as Rigsby, the landlord in *Rising Damp*, who leads her on and guides her. She channels his characters' confusion and presumptions, broadcast to the nation through the flickering screens in the corners of our rooms back then, noting how he self-deflates as each opinion and new strategy comes to naught. Rigsby will never get the upper hand over his tenants, never consummate his lust for Miss Jones, never change his tune, and never learn.

Rigsby was out of time when first broadcast, even more so now as episodes of *Rising Damp* repeat endlessly on high-number Freeview channels. Is it back then we want to see again, or the programme? It's hard to tell, none of us seem very good at moving on and to anyone vaguely liberal or leaning to the left, racism, sexism and financial misdemeanour appear to be on the rise. As the band Furniture asked in their song 'She Gets Out the Scrapbook', Did we really live like this? Did we really really live like this?' Yes we did, in fact my daughters' student houses may not have a resident landlord but they are just as cold and damp and dingy.

Reginald Perrin is a different person for Rossiter to inhabit, one prone to delusion and daydream, ambition and avoidance. He sidesteps reality by disappearing and then becoming someone else. Identity is fluid, the past can be rearranged and resurrection and reinvention can happen. Meanwhile capitalism's magic is embraced, discarded and abused. Anyone can sell anything if you do it right; Perrin's business venture, a shop, is called Grot. Elsewhere this stock might be called archaeological evidence by Tony Robinson, or sold to the highest bidder on the current crop of tea time television programmes about 'antiques' and/or what's hidden in the loft.

It is magic and mysticism, this dipping in and out of time, just like the way Frankie Howerd is able to step back from his role in *Up Pompeii!* and break the fourth wall, how Perrin rebounds and reinvents himself, the way Sleigh-Johnson constructs tangles of meaning in her cat's cradle of correspondences and coincidences, her imposition of decadent and opinionated interpretations on the tired clichés of popular culture.

On a rational level, *Code: Damp* makes no sense whatsoever, it simply sweeps up any willing reader along through the meanders of irrational thought, dropping them over strange weirs onto the flood plains of muddy logic and overflowing dreams However, on an irrational level, it is a delirious reinvention and deliberate misreading of small screen apocrypha, a bedevilled grimoire of wilful deconstruction and both drastic and thought-provoking recontextualisation.

Rupert Loydell. (680 words)