

**THE
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Juliet Jacques

Watching *Being John Smith* (2024), I remembered a book I had as a teenager called *Glorious Canaries*, which provided biographies for every man who played for my favourite football club, Norwich City, between 1902 and 1994. Author Mike Davage couldn't trace all the players from before the club went into liquidation in 1917 and reformed; he especially struggled with one, whom he termed "a researcher's nightmare with regard to finding a birth or death or family." On 6 February 1909, John Smith scored the winning goal for Norwich City, then a non-League side, as the club won 3-2 against Liverpool in the second round of the FA Cup. Davage noted that a newspaper report on the Canaries' shock victory mentioned the *Lusitania*, "which was at the time tied up by the Pier Head" in the nearby docks. "The *Lusitania* was sunk by a German sub' in 1915," wrote Davage, "and it is hoped that John Smith was not on board! But if you the reader knows different?"

This mystery is not cleared up in *Being John Smith*, as the former footballer—who apparently was born in Wednesfield in 1882, and who died "after 1911" when his career seemed to end—is not one of the many John Smiths featured in the new work by British filmmaker John Smith, about the latter's experience of having the most popular name in the English-speaking world. The former Norwich forward does have a Wikipedia entry, but it doesn't appear on the site's lengthy disambiguation page for "the common personal name ... also commonly used as a placeholder name and pseudonym, and sometimes ... as a term for an average person." The present John Smith's does—as "(English filmmaker) (born 1952) avant-garde filmmaker."

The film is Smith's first since having treatment for cancer three years ago. It's a meditation on life, death, legacy, background, identity and self-worth, and told with his typical mordant humour: tapping into a memory from 1994, the filmmaker talks about friends being relieved to see him after reading headlines about another John Smith's death. Smith reflects: "It was a sad day for the Labour Party, but a great one for my self-esteem." The former Labour leader provides just one name amongst the thirty-five million Google results for 'John Smith'; adding 'film' narrows results to six million, with many relating to the English soldier, colonial governor and author portrayed in Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995). Our Smith says that if he'd anticipated the coming of the internet, he might have followed his youthful instinct to change his name to something more distinctive. (Incidentally, if you look up 'John Smith Norwich City', you get news reports from several trips to Huddersfield Town's John Smith's Stadium; a few obituaries for similarly named men in Norfolk; information on the club's famous chairwoman, often known simply as Delia; and the possibility, raised on the aforementioned Wikipedia page, that the Cup hero of 1909 was better known as Jack Smith (thus sharing his name with another great underground filmmaker).

Smith makes great play of the mundanity of his name, with a nice running gag about one of the companies that uses it; perhaps it might be fun for you to think about other John Smiths you have known, and to look out for them amongst the parade of namesakes that runs throughout. As Smith notes, such mundanity fits in with his oeuvre's concern with everyday life. His narrators, however, tend to query the truth of their stories, and to undermine the structural integrity of the films that contain them. Here, Smith speculates on other futures he might have had, had he been given a different

forename (he recounts narrowly escaping sharing a name with one of the United Kingdom's last colonial overlords), contemplating the impact that both his moniker and height had on the nicknames he received at school, and their effect on his grades. Such reflection brings one of the great strengths of Smith's work to the fore: though he made his name (geddit?) through the avant-garde London Film-Makers' Co-operative—whose filmmakers were interested in the material qualities of film and in breaking fourth walls to shatter cinematic illusions—Smith's films are often deeply personal, warm, and humorous, informed as much by Monty Python as by Brecht.

Still, Smith questions himself relentlessly. Why has he been driven further left, politically, over time, in contrast to the dictum (famously misattributed to Churchill, who defected to the Liberals in his mid-thirties), that if you haven't become a conservative by thirty-five, you effectively have no head? (Smith and I campaigned together for Labour in 2019, then led by someone far more radical than his namesake, so I certainly understand). Was he middle-class or working-class, given the English tendency to place oneself higher or lower in the socio-economic hierarchy depending on who one is trying to impress? Is the film too conventional in its form, and how does such a worry relate to his wider anxieties around fitting in versus standing out—stymied as ever by his name? Is the film's conclusion too self-congratulatory, given the narrator's self-doubt in its preceding 25 minutes? Is this ending a cliché? Has it been earned?

All this is recognisably the work of a filmmaker in later life, made nearly fifty years after his breakthrough, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976). Smith talks about making peace with the commonly held idea that an artist's earlier works are usually their best, but for me, *Being John Smith* ranks alongside *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *The Black Tower* (1987) as one of his most enjoyable and effective works. There are so many ideas at play, juxtaposed so effortlessly with family archive photographs and found images, to produce a film that is unmistakably John Smith. You'll marvel at the idea that he could ever have been anyone else.

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