

FRIDAY BOOKS

BOOK OF THE WEEK

ONE LEG TOO FEW: THE ADVENTURES OF PETER COOK & DUDLEY MOORE
By William Cook (Preface £25 + £20)

PETER LEWIS

THIS is a well-written biography by a talented writer but I read it with increasing unhappiness and it is an unhappy review that I'm writing now. For it is a tragic, wasteful story.

My trouble is that I happened to be there at its beginning. I was the first newspaper critic to see *Beyond The Fringe* in 1960. So offhandedly was it presented at the Edinburgh Festival that the others stayed away.

So mine was the first review to appear — a rave quoted here almost in full which ended: 'If the show comes to London I doubt if revue will ever be the same again'.

It did come — and not only revue changed, audiences' expectations changed. You could even say the attitude of the country changed. No more did the political and social status quo go unchallenged: everything about the Establishment could now be pilloried.

The Sixties and its iconoclasm were launched. Of course, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore were only half of the cast. Jonathan Miller and Alan Bennett were doubtfully and temporarily sacrificing careers as a neurologist and an academic. It would be eight years before they could stop performing nightly. Cook and Moore had no such hesitations.

At Edinburgh I got to know them, and the enjoyment of their company and the heady excitement of their breakthrough is with me still.

Afterwards, Cook and Moore stayed together as a double-act, becoming the rain-coated and sublimely ignorant philosophers of the television screen in *Not Only...But Also*. They were hilarious and beloved, especially for committing the sin of ad libbing to try to make one another corpse.

William Cook charts the progress of their unlikely marriage very perceptively — the tensions arising from their great difference in background, between Torquay and Dagenham, public and grammar school, tallness and shortness, social superiority and uneasiness.

Both of them attracted good-looking, with-it girls and each married several of them. Their vices also differed: Peter soon veered towards alcohol while Dudley's trouble, as the author neatly puts it, was his inability to keep his trousers on.

He was a living demonstration of the truth that the quickest way to get women into bed is to make them laugh. Troubles began to nibble at their success. Cook's satirical cabaret club in Soho, *The Establishment*, began as a Mecca for the 'in' crowd but collapsed while he was in America performing.

HE LOST thousands, but emerged with a majority share in *Private Eye*, where he became an active influence. Dudley, who used to play in the club's basement, took his jazz trio elsewhere and made records. They wanted a new challenge, to break into films, and these were far less successful, partly owing to the fact that Cook was no actor. Then Dudley struck lucky in Hollywood, becoming a famous film star with two hits to his credit, *10* and *Arthur*.

The effect on Peter was dramatic. 'It couldn't happen to a nicer guy,' he said, adding with a straight face, 'Perhaps if I had been born with a club



Tall tales: Dudley, left, and Peter

Picture: DAVID STEEN/SCOPE

Why Pete wasn't BIG enough to cope with LITTLE Dud's success

foot and a height problem I might have been as desperate as him to be a star.'

He was desperate. He was left facing a life of early, extreme success which didn't seem to have a second half. He needed Dudley more than Dudley needed him. After the success of *Arthur* they continued to work together but on increasingly bitter terms.

The lovable Pete and Dud morphed into the horrible Derek and Clive whose foul-mouthed exchanges grew steadily unfunnier. And Peter's drunkenness exasperated the conscientious performer in Dudley until he refused to work with him any more.

The break-up, when it came, was

damaging. William Cook throws it into our faces by beginning his book with a blow-by-blow account of their last recording together, accurately entitled *Ad Nauseam*. It makes grim, distasteful reading. Derek and Clive, which began as a prank awash with swear words, had become 'a howl of rage' at which nobody corpse.

By now Cook had produced what were judged 'the worst TV show' and 'the worst film' of a single year — his talk show *Where Shall I Sit?*, which was speedily taken off air, and *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*, a pantomime without laughs.

Suffice it to say that there were times when he managed to give up booze

and made some sober appearances with flashes of the old brilliance. He regularly phoned Dudley in Los Angeles to ask him once more to work together. Dudley refused.

When Cook died of liver damage in 1995, Dudley admitted: 'I felt hollow. I did not know how to respond. I still resent some of the things he said about me'.

In Dudley's last years he returned to the piano, giving classical concerts, even at Carnegie Hall.

But he was showing symptoms of loss of memory and balance and his fingers began to 'feel like strangers'. It was the rare degenerative disease PSP — Progressive Supranuclear Palsy — in

which the mind remains clearly aware of the gradual loss of bodily function. Others take it for drunkenness.

'I want people to know that I'm not intoxicated,' he said in an interview on American TV. 'I'm going through this disease as well as I can.' The unkindest part was that he had to face it without his lifelong escape — the piano.

The last third of this book consists of friends' tributes to both men. Interestingly, two of his wives affirm that the person whom Peter Cook loved most in his life was Dudley Moore.

■ *A ROGUES' Gallery* by Peter Lewis is published by Quartet at £25. To order a copy for £18.99 (including P&P) call 0844 472 4157

... are you reading now?

MAGGOT Moon by Sally Gardner — It's so not a book just for teenagers! This is a book with deep psychological rip-tides...the constant battle between appearance and reality for our 21st-century psyches and the transcendent power of dreams and imagination over drudgery and bigotry.

... would you take to a desert island?

SEVEN Troop by Andy McNab. The story of his time in the SAS's Air Troop really captures his personality. It's warm but unsentimental; functional without being callous; and darkly,

WHATBOOK..?

KEVIN DUTTON Psychologist

Irreverently funny without being disrespectful. And it's even got some survival tips!

... gave you the reading bug?

THE SONGLINES by Bruce Chatwin. Gave me the travel bug, too. Chatwin was still working on it in the days leading up to his untimely death from Aids in 1989 — and it's all the

better for not being finished. A maverick, ragamuffin masterpiece.

... left you cold?

AMERICAN Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis left me cold in a good way. As an expert on psychopaths, the glib narrative juxtaposition of chainsaws, hookers, Huey Lewis, Phil Collins and watermarked business cards rings very true. No one navigates the mental twists between the benign and the brutal like a psychopath.

■ *THE Wisdom Of Psychopaths — Lessons in Life from Saints, Spies and Serial Killers* by Professor Kevin Dutton is published by Arrow Books at £8.99.