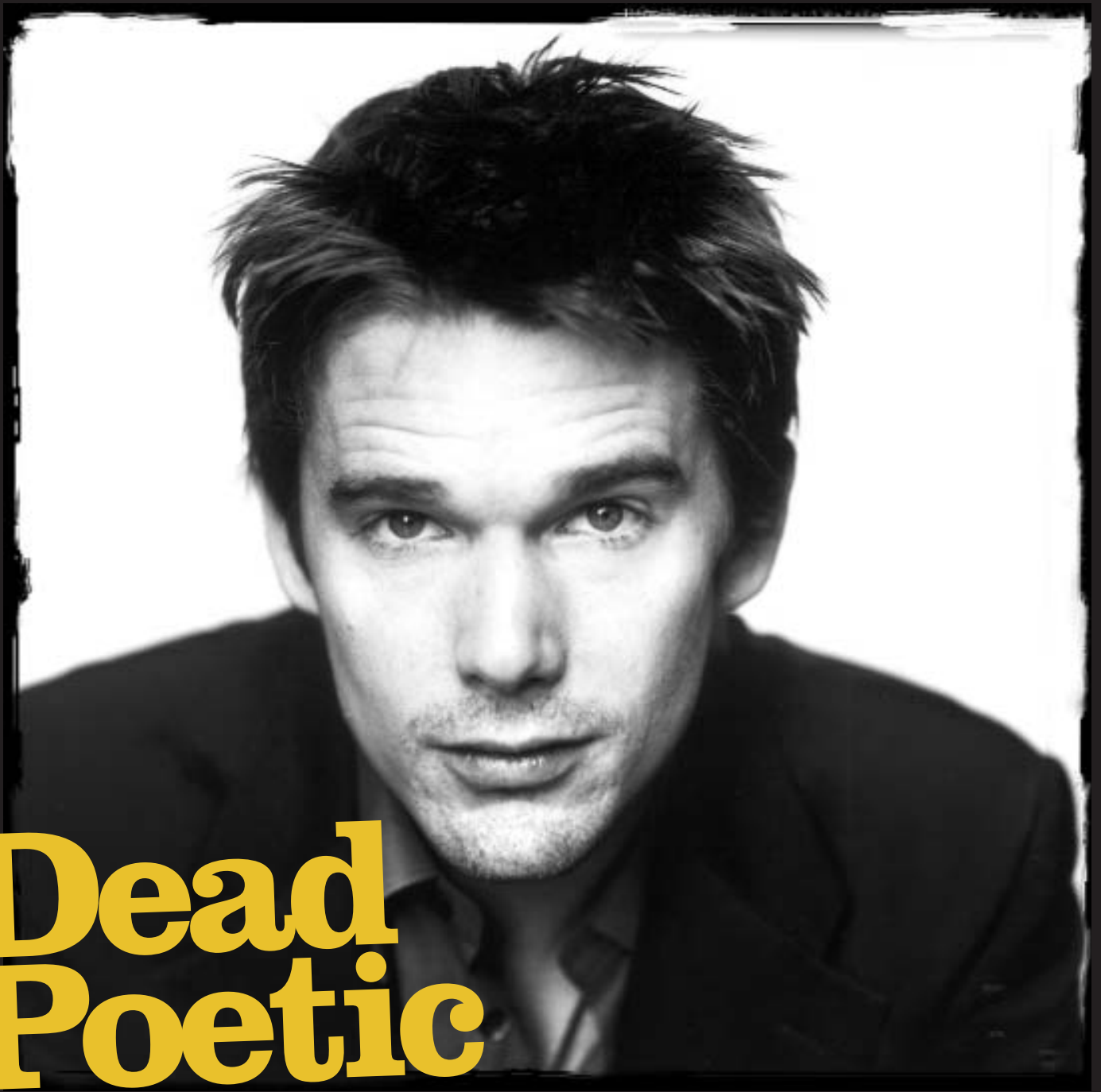


and the rest **etc.**



# Dead Poetic

Actor? Writer? Beatnik?  
**etc.** went to find out who the  
hell Ethan Hawke thinks he is...

**L**et us try to narrow it down: Ethan Hawke is a Renaissance man, more than a one-cell organism. Best known for his acting roles in *Dead Poets' Society*, *Reality Bites*, *Waterland*, *Before Sunrise* and *Training Day*, he is also a film director (*Chelsea Walls*) and a good and popular novelist. He met his wife, the actress Uma Thurman, while they were making the science fiction film, *Gattaca*, in 1996. The couple have two children – a daughter, Maya Ray, aged four, and a son, Roan, born earlier this year. At the age of 31, Hawke has just published his second novel, *Ash Wednesday*, which he has been writing, in idle months between films, over the past five years.

When **etc.** meets him in London, he is holed up in a swankily expensive hotel – a gruesome structure of whitewashed concrete, neo-brutalist flying buttresses, marble foyers and gently glowing neon elevators. It feels, he says with a grimace, 'like being in an African dictator's palace'. Journalists have been tirelessly pursuing Hawke all week, and he looks washed out after an exhausting round of television and press interviews. He would prefer, he says, to talk about almost anything except his new novel, but we agree to engage in a polite conversation about it. Being interviewed for **etc.** magazine is, after all, only another acting job.

Hawke is, or gives the impression of being, a mile away from the standard image of a vain, self-regarding Hollywood leading man. He is reassuringly down to earth about the acting business – it is simply a matter of 'reciting lines,' he says. He is dressed, characteristically, in a black T-shirt, floral cotton shirt, baggy blue trousers and a battered suede jacket. The appearance of a louche, studenty Beat poet is reinforced by a goatee beard. He has removed his shoes, and sits, cross-legged, fiddling with one of his socks. His other hand is employed in chain-smoking Camel Lights. His accent is hard to place: it floats indeterminately between Texas, where he was born, New Jersey, where he grew up after his parents'

divorce, and New York, where he has lived since 1990.

*Ash Wednesday* is a much more complex book than Hawke's heavily autobiographical first novel, *The Hottest State* (1997), a confessional number about a struggling actor in New York. He admits that most of the subject-matter of this first book was drawn from life: 'First love, heartbreak, nervous breakdown: it's the world I lived in at the time I was writing it. *The Hottest State* is a young man's novel, with a twenty-year-old protagonist. The big event is him turning twenty-one.'

His second book is an expansive story of love, separation, drug addiction, accidental pregnancy, rootlessness, basketball and restless drifting around the United States. Alternate chapters are narrated by the two main characters, Jimmy and Christy. Exploiting the distance between the perspectives of his protagonists, Hawke aims in the direction of psychological depth and, on the whole, achieves it. Yet elsewhere, particularly in the frequent and vigorous sex scenes, the writing – embarrassingly, mystifyingly, catastrophically – takes on some of the qualities of a cheap dime-store novelette.

## IS JIMMY HERE?

Reading these passages, it is hard to be sure whether they are simply badly written, or whether Hawke is asking us to laugh at Jimmy, who speaks the lines in question. How far, I wonder, does Hawke identify himself with his fictional hero? 'Jimmy is an adolescent version of myself,' he says. 'There was this alter ego my wife accused me of having, which she called Jimmy. She'd say, "Is Jimmy here today?" whenever I would get on to talking about cars for too long, or trying to force her to listen to me talking about a basketball game.'

The chapters narrated by Christy are, it seems to **etc.**, much better executed. It's hard to think of many comparable young male authors who would be willing to risk taking on the voice of a female narrator, but Hawke is eager to defend his freedom to fictionalise whoever or whatever he

chooses: 'I've tried to be a hermaphrodite with this book. People ask me: "Why did you write from a female perspective?" But that's what I do as an actor. I imagine I'm a cop in Los Angeles. I imagine I'm in World War Two. But you never get a chance to play women, unless it's some kind of weird comedy. I wanted this book to be a meditation on intimacy, on accountability, marriage. I gave myself the challenge of trying to do it with the dual narrative.'

It is also unusual to see Texas – surely, by reputation, the least glamorous of the United States – figuring as one of the locations in an American novel. Hawke says: 'I couldn't write a book about trying to define home without having it centre in some way around a longing for Texas, because it's where I was born and where all my family is from.'

How does Hawke feel that he has changed in the interval between writing his two novels? He says that he is now 'trying to shed an adolescent take on the world,' and that the experiences of marriage and fatherhood have made an important difference to his outlook. 'Personal intimacy is the first step out of being a completely self-concerned individual. To simply love one other person is kind of a religious move. It enters you on a path of compassion. It's the first step for a lot of people, myself included, where you're actually thinking of somebody besides yourself.'

Although he has a long list of film performances to his credit, Hawke's education since leaving high school has been rather haphazard. He has no formal training as an actor, and the pressure of other commitments forced him to drop out of his English degree at City College, New York. Yet he promised his mother, at the point when he jacked in his university course, that he would give himself 'a decent, self-made education' through reading. He has kept his word on this, and he is able to rattle off an impressive booklist – a little anxious, perhaps, to demonstrate his literary credentials in spite of his lack of paper qualifications.

Talking animatedly about the writers he has found influential, he cites the American poet Gregory

and the rest **etc.**

Corso as one of the dominant figures on his landscape: 'Corso was my introduction to the Beats. I came across *The Happy Birthday of Death* when I was sixteen and got really turned on by that. And then, as part of an improvisation on *Reality Bites*, I started riffing this Corso poem, *Marriage*. Ben Stiller [the director] put it in the movie, and Gregory Corso got a cheque for twenty-thousand dollars, because they had to pay for the rights to it. And he sought me out, because he was like piss-poor broke.'

## A BALANCING ACT

He also mentions Jack Kerouac, who is clearly a significant presence behind *Ash Wednesday*: 'I think *On the Road* is a great novel. You've got to give credit to something that is continually, every generation, turning young people on and waking them up. And I give a lot of credit to Jack Kerouac for turning me on to other books.' There is a thoughtful pause, then he adds: 'But I think Kerouac was a great artist who's inspired some of the worst work. The problem is that he was extraordinarily talented, and he had a style that made it seem really easy.'

His other enthusiasms as a reader include John Steinbeck, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin and Somerset Maugham (whose novels he describes as 'beautiful', 'bitter' and 'ice-hot'). He says: 'Maugham was convinced that he wouldn't last. He was terribly successful in his day, and he was dead positive that he wasn't going to last. I think he was wrong about that. *The Razor's Edge* and *Of Human Bondage* are really good books.'

**etc.** wonders how far Hawke shares Maugham's uncertainty about the durability of fame. 'I've had a couple of moments in my life as an actor where things haven't gone well for long enough that I've noticed that fame is not a permanent position. If I didn't act in a movie for seven years, eventually people would lose interest.' So does he see writing as a way of leaving a more permanent mark? He laughs and dodges the question, unwilling to assess his literary reputation: 'I do this [pointing

to a copy of his novel] to get away from the movies.'

Does he see any disadvantages to the public recognition that his film work brings? 'It's a little debilitating. Some people walk around with bodyguards. They don't go to the movies. They don't go shopping. I just do all that stuff. Most of the time people don't recognise you.'

Asked whether he prefers acting or fiction-writing, Hawke tends to play down the importance of his film work: 'Anyone who writes, unless you're a wildly successful author, ends up doing something else to make a living. It's been a balancing act. One of the things I enjoy about writing is that it keeps me from doing a million banal movies. It keeps me at home.' He insists that his imagination is allowed to roam more freely when he is at work on a novel. 'One of the great joys of writing is that you don't need anybody's permission to do it. To act in a movie, somebody has to hire you. But if you get a pen and a piece of paper, you can start writing.'

How does he find the time to write, given that he has so much else going on? 'I don't really find the time: you have to make it. For example, I found out that I'd got this part in *Training Day* in August a couple of years ago, and I knew it didn't start until January.

I was about halfway through the book at that point, and I gave myself the goal of having a rough draft of the book done by the time I started the movie. So for a few months, that's all I did. Then I completely left it, and started the movie. After three or four months, when the movie was finished, I basically took a year off, in which I dedicated myself to getting the thing ready for publication.'

At the moment he is contemplating a third novel, which will deal with the unattractive aspects of being famous. He says: 'I'd be really interested to write something on the nature of celebrity. I feel like I might be qualified to write that book. I would love to take people's tacky, gossipy interest and spin it on its head. The one advantage to being in a movie like *Dead Poets' Society* when you're eighteen is that I'm pretty used to fame. By the time I'm 36, I'll have been famous for as long as I wasn't. And, if you consider that I wasn't really awake until I was twelve, this is my reality. I don't really know anything else.'

Hawke's immediate future is likely to involve a return to acting, but he says that fatherhood has made him cautious when it comes to accepting film work. 'I've got these kids now, so if I'm going to be in a movie which could take me to Belize, New Zealand or Paris, I've got to love it. Otherwise it's just not worth the bomb it sets off in my family life.'

The allotted time for the interview is up. **etc.** shakes hands, and descends back to street-level in the neon elevator. When we catch sight of him again, later that evening at a book-launch party, he appears to be dressed as one of the minor characters from *Ash Wednesday* ('Julian had on a bullshit outfit with embroidered dragons – some kind of pseudo-eastern Buddhist look'). Is this a deliberate, half-joking reference to his own book, or merely a coincidence? Hawke is surrounded by a scrum of journalists and photographers, so **etc.** can't get close enough to ask him. We are left with an unresolved ambiguity, then, but it's one that feels entirely true to the enigmatic, chameleon-like spirit of Hawke's fiction. **etc.**

**i** *Ash Wednesday* is published by Bloomsbury (hardback, £14.99)



"BY THE TIME I'M 36,  
I'LL HAVE BEEN  
FAMOUS FOR AS  
LONG AS I WASN'T"

**etc.**

66  
AUTUMN