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Joseph Heller's new volume of autobiography is engaging and free-ranging but, he readily admits, a little short on fact.

There are interviews, and then there are interviews. Faced with the task of meeting an iconic figure like Joseph Heller focuses the mind more than somewhat because, after all, he is the man who wrote one of the most famous, if not *the* most famous book of this century. People who have never heard of him at least know the title - 'Catch-22' has been part of the world's vocabulary for the last 35 years - and there is little doubt that he'd still be revered today if that was all he'd ever written.

In person, he's as friendly as the best kind of next door neighbour, his sprawling Brooklyn accent thick like cream cheese on a bagel; who knows how many journalists he must've talked to about himself and his work, but he still enthuses, still starts the motor up and enjoys the ride. So, why is the latest work autobiographical, a genre which so often seems to be the full stop signalling the end of a career, and why now?

"It would've been presumptuous to do it any earlier," he says, "and these are the Golden Years of my career...in some ways my book-before-last, *Picture This*, was almost an autobiography - I even used my own name in it - and also, I had no other ideas for a book. To be truthful, without the Coney Island thing, I wouldn't have had much of an idea for this one because I haven't had a particularly exciting life." That would have to depend on your definition of exciting, it really would.

Now and Then is heavily weighted in favour of Heller's Coney Island childhood, which turns out to be a hugely fascinating place to visit with him. "Growing up there was like growing up anywhere else - you know, normal, if that's where you happen to live," he says. "I never realized what an extraordinary place it was until much later and in fact my kids, who had a much more affluent upbringing, also had a much more boring one." Coney Island, for anyone not familiar with its reputation, is, or was, Blackpool on

steroids, an attraction of electro-magnetic power pulling in thousands upon thousands of visitors during the summer to its boardwalk, beach and amusement parks.

“I’m fascinated by the place, in retrospect, and I remain in touch with a lot of friends from back then.” He has, he says, a great affection for them and feels their presence lends an added dimension to the book. “Coney Island was the world to us as children,” continues Heller, “and going to Manhattan was an adventure, a trip to an attractive yet forbidding place.” And one he would later get to know well as a part-time Western Union delivery boy.

That World War II (“my war”) doesn’t feature as strongly as the delights of a seaside youth in Heller’s telling of his life story feels odd at first, but it turns out there was a good reason why this is so. “My involvement wasn’t that deep,” Heller explains, “I was only in it for 10 months and hadn’t that much to say. If there was, it would be about the Holocaust. And I’ve read histories about the war that turn my blood cold...I had it easy. My basic objective [this time] was to write a good book, with integrity, it wasn’t to give a whole history - I wanted to leave people wanting more.”

Heller’s style in *Now and Then* is relaxed and conversational; reading him is like sitting back in a comfortable chair listening to an engaging raconteur, and the book is a free-ranging work of seemingly unchecked memory - if it *feels* right, he appears to be saying, that’s good enough for him. Detail is not his thing, and he freely admits it. “I did look a few things up, talked to friends, my sister,” he says, “but it’s Joe Heller talking, not some English professor talking *about* him - and I also left mistakes or gaps in...I think I said somewhere that Kings Highway, in Brooklyn, and the borough of Queens were probably named after William and Mary, but I read in the paper the other day it was Charles II and Catherine of Braganza!”

Having to follow up *Catch 22* (a book whose title can be found defined in dictionaries, no less) might seem a nightmare undertaking and there was a 12-year gap between it and *Something Happened*. Was Heller scared by the reaction to his debut? “Not at all!” he guffaws. “I was just a slow writer! And after *Catch-22* I didn’t have to work at anything else. In fact success

fortified me and I was never intimidated by *Catch-22*, only careful not to imitate it.”

Heller makes the whole success story sound so easy, his main worry seeming to be who was getting published before him, scattering names like Mailer, Vidal and Capote on to the page, and he thinks it must be much harder to succeed now because there are so many good authors around. Like? “I wouldn’t name one, there are many, too many,” he replies; then, demonstrating he’s lost none of his love of paradox, he goes on to name Pat Barker’s three World War 1 novels as the best fiction on the subject he’s ever read, and also say that he’s always impressed by David Lodge.

Almost from the time it was published, Heller says he knew he’d created something special in *Catch-22*. “In 1962, someone sent me an editorial, from I think it was the *Observer*, headlined ‘*Catch-22*’, and from then till now it’s been used a million times,” he says. “And if you ask me how I feel about that today, I’d say very smug!” And who can blame him?