

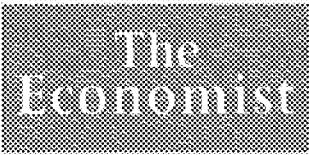
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Julian Assange

Leaker's leak

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**Julian Assange: The Unauthorised
Autobiography.** Canongate; 339 pages;
£20. Buy from Amazon.co.uk

IF JULIAN ASSANGE had had his way, this book would not exist. "All memoir is prostitution," the founder of WikiLeaks said after reading the first draft, penned by Andrew O'Hagan, a ghost writer, based on 50 hours of interviews. But Mr Assange had already spent his advance to settle his legal bills fighting his extradition to Sweden, where prosecutors want to question him about sex-offence allegations. So the publisher decided to print the manuscript anyway, creating a curious new genre: an "unauthorised autobiography".

The result is a strangely unbalanced book. The second half indeed did not merit printing. It does not add much to what has been revealed in the other half-dozen books that have appeared about WikiLeaks, a non-profit organisation devoted to making leaked information public. At times it is little more than a self-serving diatribe. The alleged sex offences: "I may be a chauvinist pig of some sort but I am no rapist, and only a distorted version of sexual politics could attempt to turn me into one." His serial falling-outs with collaborators, notably Daniel Domscheit-Berg, once WikiLeaks's spokesperson: "We couldn't have guessed then how ambitious or how reckless he would become." Journalists he has worked with: "Vanity in a newspaper man is like perfume on a whore: they use it to fend off a dark whiff of themselves."

Yet the book's first half offers an intriguing self-portrait. Anybody with such a "peripatetic existence", as Mr Assange calls it, would wind up a restless soul. His mother and stepfather, hippies and political activists, travel through Queensland, Australia, in a small fold-up theatre. When he is nine years old, they split up and his mother falls in love with a member of a sect, who keeps stalking them after that relationship also ends. To get



A restless soul

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to pay a hefty fine for his hacking activities).

Describing all this, Mr Assange reveals a lot about himself (assuming that the ghost writer has not taken too many literary liberties with the raw material). Having attended more than 30 schools, he writes: "I was often the new boy in school...And I'd make my mark with these acts of defiance." Later, when he finally meets his biological father, he gets angry because on the shelves he finds the same books he himself has bought and read: "I never had a mentor...I was forced to make myself up as I went along."

Mr Assange's time as a hacker, and later as a student of physics at Melbourne University, seems to have imbued him with a rather mechanistic view of the world, which led to the creation of WikiLeaks. "I began to think of information as matter, and started to examine how it flows through people and through society, and how the availability of new information brings about change," he writes. "Let us imagine there is a pipeline that allows a flow of material towards what provides for a state of justice."

It is such passages that make the book well worth reading. They are also a reminder that, although Mr Assange makes an easy target, he has interesting things to say, however controversial. And the world does sometimes need such annoying, single-minded people to move forward. Mr Assange and his creation, WikiLeaks, have made it a more open and transparent place, and hence a bit more just.

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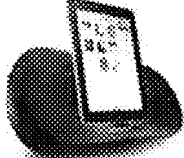

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