



ROZ KAVENEY
meets
**THE UNSINKABLE
APRIL
ASHLEY**

which that strength was largely built and which comes across clearly in the book.

This sense of solidarity has its limits of course: April is less than sisterly in her revelations about Amanda Lear, revelations which are hardly new but come with places and dates attached. Isn't this an invasion of privacy as bad as those which wrecked April's career? Well, perhaps but — with a gunmetal gleam of amused innocence — "I bear Amanda no malice but I got fed up with her hiding behind my skirts; it's time she came clean." Amanda Lear was her protégée; April fought for her, helped her, even found and bribed the unfortunate Mr Lear to get her her passport — and when positions were reversed she got little in the way of gratitude. The autobiography gets much of its sharpness from rough justice and verbal vengeance but there are times when this leaves a less than pleasant taste behind.



April Ashley's Odyssey is essentially a bit of social chit-chat — rags to riches to sadder but wiser — but it is readable and amusing and a superior example of its kind. It does convey a sense of time passing and society changing. It also has the major merit of lack of pretension; it is the life of one transsexual whose life has been interesting for reasons other than simply being a transsexual's life. April is more interested in her status as a socialite than in her sexuality and there are times when this attitude becomes a refreshing corrective to too much earnestness. April Ashley is not a serious person but she has pur-

Sooner or later someone, probably an American, will produce a tome on the occult significance of people's pets; April Ashley's whippet Flora is all nervous beauty and delicate steel muscle, and a tasteful shade of fawn. Chatting to the dog as it moves around the room is a useful way of always keeping her best profile to the camera and it stares back at her with suitably soulful eyes. She saved it when it was going to be put down after all and is entitled to at least a little sycophancy from it. It is after all a very lovely dog, the sort you would expect to find carved at a countess's feet.

April has earned everything she is and has. The grande dame manner — she makes asking you through the front door the spiritual equivalent of a three marchioness reception line — is none the less real for being the teensiest bit Rattigan. The sparsely furnished borrowed room is her space because she has imposed herself on it; the autobiography is her book because her co-author has so totally subdued himself to her in it. And she bats the wrong searching questions aside with an arrogance she has learned with the manners.



Her story has always been one of nervy survival — of learning new areas of toughness by forcing herself over the high jumps that hurtled at her. As a boy she survived sadistic bullying, calcium deficiency, religious faith and the grim slums of Liverpool — "Families like ours stored coal in the bath to stop it being stolen"; coming to terms with her transsexuality was a process which involved several attempts at suicide but she had already learned a selfwill that got her through. "I've always known how to move on.

When it's time to do something it's time; when it's over, it's over. Close the door and get out."

April first asked Duncan Fallowell to help her write her story fourteen years ago; it was only more recently that they actually felt ready to do it. They wanted to give it a sense of time and place, to capture the Paris of the '50s: "it was in Paris — you smelt it in the streets, you saw it in the faces in the cafes ... the feeling that to be anywhere else was to be in Siberia." She hung around cafes and night-clubs and sat goggling at the feet of intellectuals she could not have understood even if she had known their language. Essentially Paris was an apprenticeship for her; working in the Carrousel drag review helped her learn confidence in herself as a woman and watching the famous taught her another kind of confidence. All less than correct no doubt ... but she was clearly healthier and happier being taught to rumba by exiled Latin American dictators than sitting around in Liverpool being depressed.

The actual sex-change in Casablanca cost her a lot of money and pain — the surgeon was skilful but hardly gentle; hardly had she stopped screaming and sweating before she was listening to the surgeon's wife moan about his infidelities and trying to cheer the poor woman up. Perhaps April's happiest time was the few months of her modelling and film career in London, a career nipped in the bud when newspaper stories forced employers to acknowledge what most of them actually already knew. She knew London in the early '60s, the last high point of a certain sort of elegance, "debs and balls and crinolines and things"; she also felt the rush when it changed — "I never really knew what the revolution was all about, but the

vitality was fun." What she remembers best about the Swinging London period was its comic hypocrisies — "All the upperclass men I knew started trying to be cockneys"; one minute people were lounging around in gold-encrusted sandals and the next they were all trying to pass as racing drivers.



There followed a hectic period of small triumphs and major disasters — the marriage to Arthur Corbett and the legal action that ended it, her period as toast of the gold-painted boys of Oxford and AD8, the restaurant on which she built her hopes of long-term security, wrecked her health making a three-ring throbbing circus of, and lost years of money and work when her partners pulled the plug. Heart-attacks followed — "Life begins at 40 and mine almost stopped." She has relaxed for almost seven years in Hay-on-Wye about the longest she has stayed anywhere as a grown-up and it's getting to be time to move on, perhaps a little gingerly now. She would quite like it to be her that takes a test case over the status of Transsexuals in Britain to the European Human Rights Commission: it was her case, she says, that mucked things up and she would like to make amends. But mainly she wants to travel again — she largely missed the New York of the '70s but "I think it's going to be Sydney in the '80s — lovely city, miles from the bombs and all those islands on the Barrier Reef that no one has spoiled yet."

Of course she has regrets — people have died that she might have spent more time with and she feels she was robbed of a career in films. She seriously underestimated the upper class caste loyalty which ensured her

husband's victory in the divorce/annulment and safeguarded the property of that confused and mildly depraved gent at the cost of transsexuals' rights. But she says, bravely tensing her mouth, "Life. Has. Been. Fun".

Life has been made more than simply bearable by friends. Maintaining friendships is for April a way of fighting the passage of years — "You see them again and it's like opening a time capsule. Snap! You're back where you were." Men have proved fickle and untrue, or simply died; April never, it seems, felt sexually drawn to women — but supporting and being supported by close friends, male and female, through ups and downs has been a large part of her life and one which makes her autobiography less self-obsessed than it might have been. True, she has concentrated her friendships among the titled, genteel and rowdy — but, on her own evidence at least, she has been loyal and assiduous in friendship when people who had been kind to her became mad, ill or old and when any mere toady would have slipped off after new prey.



Her book is full of the last years of the marginally famous, we are shown moving pictures of the old age of Gerald Hamilton (Isherwood's Norris) and Viva King, Augustus John's model. April's loyalty is not only to the grand and vaguely grand: the book is dedicated to an old friend from her days at Lyon's Corner House. There are moments when a high and prissy standard might fault April Ashley for lacking the radical consciousness she had little chance of acquiring; to do so is to risk overlooking the inner strength that got her through difficult patches and a capacity for solidarity and sharing on

sued her goals — tawdry as some of them may be — with an energy and determination that put a lot of more worthy people to shame. The account of early struggles to discover her sexuality and of her acceptance and growth into it are excellently and briefly done, without whining. The chunks of exposition of 'expert opinion' are informative and no more irritating or misleading than the actual unpotted opinions of experts — which are pretty irritating actually; April repeats the dubious statement that there are vastly fewer female-to-male transsexuals than male-to-female. She is best talking about things she has actually experienced and at times acknowledges this; she is splendidly mocking of her younger self and her friend Bambi over the priggish status games in which they tried to put down their fellow drag artiste Coccinelle as only an exhibitionist transvestite. Life has taught April some rudiments of wisdom — not least to accept that the sexuality of others is as valid as her own.

How much Duncan Fallowell contributed to the book's structure, how much he improved April Ashley's memory with research is neither here nor there. His achievement in helping her with the book has been largely to disappear from the end product and leave it recognisably hers. The result is as stylish as the pair of them. I asked April whether it was her grim childhood that has made her pursue beauty; "Beauty" she said, "I've never pursued beauty". Then at the next pause in the conversation, correcting me and stroking her dog's ears, "Elegance: I've always been in love with elegance".

• April Ashley's *Odyssey*, by Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley, (Jonathan Cape, £8.50), was reviewed in GN 239.