



Life, laughs

THEY call them "vanity" books. And the sound they make when they land on the journalist's desk in search of a review in the local paper, is a particularly dull thud. Each is a reminder that the world is full of folk who believe they have just produced a gripping novel or best-selling autobiography...

The only stumbling block being that every publisher in the land shares the opposite view to the point where, after the millionth letter of rejection, our would-be James Joyce realises that paying for publication is the only option. Occasionally, though, there lands a gem. Welcome to the life and times of Eddie Davies, an ordinary Lancashire lad who set out to leave a log of his life to his grandchildren, and found it turning into 320-odd pages of the "Ramblings of a Rolling Stone."

Rambling it is not. Funny, open and honest it most certainly is, as you will gather from the first few lines of Chapter One which are reproduced here because, frankly, as a means of getting the reader hooked while explaining how he came to start writing in the first place, need no outside assistance:

When made redundant towards the end of my working life coincided with medical advice that if I wished to reap the munificent benefits awaiting to be bestowed by a grateful nation, then I must give up drinking and smoking...

"And to further twist the knife, my opportunist wife thought this an ideal time to announce I had given up sex, which came as a complete surprise to me.

"She explained that it would preserve my ailing health and guarantee a longer, albeit more miserable future and then, with a huge sigh of relief, abandoned the marital bed forever.

"I carried on abusing the remaining two-thirds of life's pleasures - the smoking and drinking bit - until I could find a hobby to divert my mind from them, and in desperation, took out a library book. It was awful... I reckoned I could write a better one myself.

The bare bones of Ramblings of a Rolling Stone are these: Boy is born into working class poverty in 1920s Preston, gets a succession of dead-end jobs; survives a ferocious world war then heads off to work on the railways in Rhodesia.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Eddie's Italian lover Maria Schillani; Eddie with station master Murray Thompson and son Brian at Bwana M'Kubwa whose white population totalled 10 adults and five children; Eddie at the railway station at Lusaka, capital of Northern Rhodesia; a brew on returning to harbour after a skirmish with the German Army in 1945

and Lanky-panky

PETER RICHARDSON meets an 82-year-old first-time author who has documented his often-hilarious experiences as a working-class boy who survived a world war, lived in Rhodesia, then returned to his red rose roots

As an autobiography, it really does have the ingredients to make it disappear off the bookshelves, in this part of Lancashire at least. Not just because of his hair-raising wartime adventures, nor indeed for the sex, of which there is more than a smattering.

But mainly because of the humour, lashings of it, all bound up in the sort of prose you'd perhaps not expect from a man whose formal education finished at 14 when he left Frenchwood School and got a job, first mending tarpaulin sheets and then shovelling coal for the Co-Op: "To be honest the best thing that happened to me was the War," says Eddie, 83 in March.

"It took me out of Preston and gave me freedom from those dead end jobs. If it hadn't been for the War I'd have been swinging a shovel all my life.

"I wasn't good for much at school except for art and English. If I heard new words and didn't know what they meant, I'd look them up in the dictionary. But families were so poor in those days, there was no alternative but to start earn-

ing as soon as you could."

For further enlightenment about what it was like living in a street - Nelson Street - which is nowadays part of a modern university campus, how about this for a description:

In those days the area was a huddled mass of back to back terraced houses which housed cotton operatives adjacent to the mills, and it was all 'eeh bah gum', Gracie Fields and trotters for tea.

"A stranger entering the street would send net curtains twitching a Mexican wave of warning and housewives of all ages would appear on doorsteps with arms folded and lips forming silent words of enquiry to each other. They were mee-mowing, a form of lip-reading born in the deafening roar of the weaving sheds..."

Later, Eddie Davies would go courting with Irene, the first girl with whom he'd been besotted. One night, on the prickly horse-hair sofa at her home, he felt the passion rising:

I let my hand fall to her knee and, as if motivated to operate independently, it slid up her skirt until, beyond the stocking top, Irene lowered the boom. Her hand clamped down on mine with the grip of a vice.

"No!" she said, in silent weaving-shed speak.

"Why not?" I demanded, just as silently.

"Mother's at the bottom of the stairs, listening to us..."

That, actually, is but the beginning of some amorous adventures at home and abroad, one or two of which you imagine would not only raise an eyebrow or two among his five grandchildren, but might not find favour with Dot, his wife of 55 years. There's even a signed photo on the cover from one of his former lovers.

Eddie seems unfazed: "We're an open family," he smiles. Besides which, Dot could never accuse him of not being keen to get hitched, even though their wedding was several years down the line from their first meeting at a NAAFI dance in Pirbright, Surrey: Eddie had called at the pub across the road from the church where the landlord had told him "leg it now, while you've got the chance." He takes up the story:

As the discussion ebbed and flowed along with the whisky, I suddenly looked across the road and saw people filing into the church. "I ran over to join the tail end of

guests and hurried down the aisle, looking neither left or right, where the vicar and two men with carnations in their lapels, stood in conversation.

"Can we help you?" one of them finally inquired. "Bewildered, I looked wildly around and saw rows of strange faces staring back at me. I'd blundered into someone else's wedding.

Half an hour later, having sat through the ceremony, he found the right bride and headed down the aisle a second time: "Welcome back," said the vicar.

The sadness is that after a lifetime in strapping health, Eddie, a talented artist who designed a set of commemorative coins for the 1972 Preston Guild, has lately been floored by a hernia operation which followed swiftly on the heels of a double heart bypass. That's mainly why "Ramblings of a Rolling Stone" has taken him several years to complete.

The news prompts me to wish him well for a good few years yet, to which he laughs and replies: "Don't worry, the bad 'uns always last the longest."

The book, published by Trans-verity at £9.99, will be available soon in Waterstones. Meanwhile, if you want a copy, phone Eddie on (01772) 311368 or email his son-in-law Terry, whose input included designing the cover, at terryblacow@blueyonder.co.uk