



Cacknacker's Fury

first novel by Paul Wright – first review



Cacknacker's Fury

Paul Wright

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Reviewer: ALICE THOMPSON

The novel begins with Sol, its hero, doing a newspaper crossword puzzle whose clues seem to be coming to life. "But more than indignation, he felt the unease we all feel when the laws of coincidence are contravened. Why should the laws of a crossword puzzle seem to be resonating with the flow of events in his day-to-day life?" Sol – endearing, intelligent, reasonably hopeless with the opposite sex – becomes embroiled in a series of dreamlike adventures, beginning when he visits the hairdressers. Sol soon discovers that Parlando, his hairdresser, rather like Willy Wonka, has odd machinery and strange workers in his basement. Rather than making chocolate, he seems to be disposing of his clients in gruesome ways and boiling their body parts in large cauldrons, a kind of Deacon Brodie of the coiffure world.

Sol extricates himself from the hairdresser to visit the dentist. As the dentist happens to be blind,

the situation becomes a comedy of manners where Sol is too polite to actually voice his worries at being treated by a man who cannot see and whose drill was "leaping from his hand like an angry serpent" – typical Freudian language which befits the dreamlike status of Sol's life with its "rambling, random associations. Might as well be on a psychiatrist's couch".

Various coincidences lead Sol to a country house where a Murder Mystery Weekend is taking place. Sol is supposed to be 'the murderer' in the game. Sol quickly decides "he would have to operate in a responsive mode, answering questions as he saw fit and letting circumstances dictate his movements, actions and answers". Briefly the perspective shifts to 'the victim' Shad who is the archetypal butt – bullied at school, cursed with low esteem, he carries round diaries of his miserable childhood in his suitcase. Here, in a sleight of language of the sort which runs throughout the novel, emotional baggage becomes literal. The eponymous Cacknacker is the sadistic headmaster – or even the devil himself – who has destroyed Shad's life. Suddenly the murder mystery game takes a sinister turn as the real murder of the hapless Shad is committed by two thugs, Choy and Clowsie.

Cacknacker's Fury is an oddity – a contortionist's act of surreal, assured prose that never strains itself while pulling off its moves. You don't so much read it as fall down its *Alice In Wonderland* rabbit hole of strange encounters. The trick lies in its humour – Sol's strange story is simultaneously deadpan and arch: no mean feat. It is as if the crossword puzzle Sol is working on has taken three-dimensional form in terms of plot and character and then proceeded for the rest of the book to deconstruct itself. Elliptical and anagrammatic, *Cacknacker's Fury* is a story for our times.

Wright's use of language creates a kind of sustained hysteria with its combination of Latinate construction, bathos, (almost) poetic descriptions and deliberate literalness. An intelligent wit hums through the text like electricity through wire. The novel is full of linguistic games. Sometimes the humour is so subliminal it is difficult to define. Parlando says to Sol: "No time like the present, eh?" "Do you find that as well?" asked Sol.

Sol's way with women is bewitchingly hopeless. He first meets the fulsome chambermaid Rosie cooking live eels – an eel adopting a "gentle sinusoidal rhythm as it hung there in her fingers". His attempt to flirt with her is undermined by her phlegmatic nature: the constant refrain of "See you later, I hope" is always met with the reply, "You might".

The existential theme of the novel is sardonically exemplified by the description of the salmon at the grand dinner at the Murder Mystery Hotel. "It lay on the platter, its unseeing eyes and gaping down-turned-mouth creating an impression of unmitigated dismay as if at the moment of death it saw clearly for the first time that life was just one great upstream struggle that ended in being boiled and eaten".

Wright is also funny on the general obstructions of daily life, the wonderful frustrations of communication that make up our quotidian existence. He is especially good on the little battles that build up between the ordinary person and officialdom. Sol endures an ongoing conflict with the manageress of the hotel which reaches a climax one morning as he goes down to reception.

The manageress's head poked out of the office as Sol approached. 'You'll not get any breakfast now,' she snapped. 'Don't want any of your stinking breakfast,' he replied.

Wright wickedly parodies urban versions of rustic life. When Sol visits the local country pub and asks for a lager, the landlord replies, "Ent got none of your fancy city drinks 'ere".

Cacknacker's Fury is an original. It takes risks, plays games with the reader and life. It made me laugh (in spite of everything). As Sol says about whether or not they need a script for the Murder Mystery Weekend after it gets lost in the fax machine, "A little bit of uncertainty and chaos adds a necessary spice to the proceedings. Life can get very dull when you stick to the script all the time – there are no surprises".

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