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CANONGATE BOOKS LIMITED

Novel Frank Egerton My brother the dealer



FRESH
by Mark McNay

MARK McNAY IS A housing worker, who graduated from the University of East Anglia creative writing course with distinction. His first novel, set in Scotland and taking place on a single day in January, is a compelling story about two brothers. It manages not only to be tough-minded and tender-hearted but also drop-dead funny.

Sean O'Grady and his young family live in Royston, a run-down district of Glasgow with a large Irish community.

'A factory
that stinks
of dead
chickens'

Sean, his uncle Albert and cousin Rab work back-break-

ing shifts at a poultry factory that stinks of "the meat and fat of a million dead chickens".

Gradually, from their banter and a series of flashbacks, we learn about Sean's past and his ambivalent relationship with his psychopathic brother Archie. The two were brought up by Albert and his wife after their father abandoned them and their mother died. The brothers' reactions when Albert told them that she was dead define them: Archie ran away for three days and was brought back by the "polis" with a black eye; Sean "just sat there" and finished his Kit Kat.

Sean grew up in awe of Archie. At one point he describes how he felt when a friend told him "Yer brother's mental": "Ah was proud as fuck."

But once he settled down and Archie was jailed for drug-dealing, Sean decided: "Ah couldna live through that madness again."

Archie is due out on early release on the day featured in the novel. What's more, he wants the large amount of money he entrusted to his brother, which Sean has spent on treats for his wife and daughter. The consequences build to a tragic denouement.

McNay's novel is something of a paradox because its

apparently small scale belies its richness of detail. His craftsmanship is not only evident in the dovetailing of scenes and the carefully-constructed suspense but in his evocation of Glasgow dialect (clear enough for a Sassenach reviewer, yet full of tang and colour).

The characters' interaction is always convincing, whether it is the dependency of the two brothers or the abrasive warmth of Sean's relationships with his wife and daughter.

Throughout the novel, a pervasive sense of menace is lightened by comedy. There was a time, Sean tells us, when he needed money and used his car to deliver drugs for Archie. Sean enthuses about how he benefited from the extra cash: "takin' drivin lessons".

A skewed morality is endemic in Sean's world but McNay demonstrates that family and friendship, love and loyalty are its most powerful motivators. McNay recently won an Arts Foundation award to buy him time to work on his next book. Judging from this highly accomplished first novel, it will be money well spent.

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