

# Poultry sums

A deft debut novel from the factory of life

"THE STREET LIGHTS WERE dimmed by the threat of dawn." This portentous opening sets the mood. Its sense of foreboding is instant and clear. That dawn should in any respect be a "threat" suggests, surely, that daylight brings with it exposure, revelation, perhaps discovery. But of what? By whom? With what consequences?

"He coughed" – the story pursues its grey scenario – "and it echoed round the pebble-dash of Cadge Road. He picked a bit of chicken feather from his overalls and let it flutter into his slipstream." The "he" is the book's chicken-wrapping hero, Sean O'Grady, who works in a Bernard Matthews-style world of death and flesh.

Already the bleakness, the sense of portend, has shaded towards comedy. But not vanished. The errant feather may signal cowardice (or even pluck), and the name of the road bears a striking hint of what is to come. For, yes, things are cadged, there will be threats, and the thing with feathers – as Emily Dickenson famously uttered – may yet be hope, taking flight or, more likely, moulting.

From the outset, *Fresh* likes to tout itself as a novel with things to conceal and hopes to dash – a slice of roughage, a breath of stale air, with a comic belch or two for relief.

Sean O'Grady is its archetypal trapped man, a Billy Liar or Walter Mitty, who dreams of escape. Like Keith Waterhouse's fantasist – the

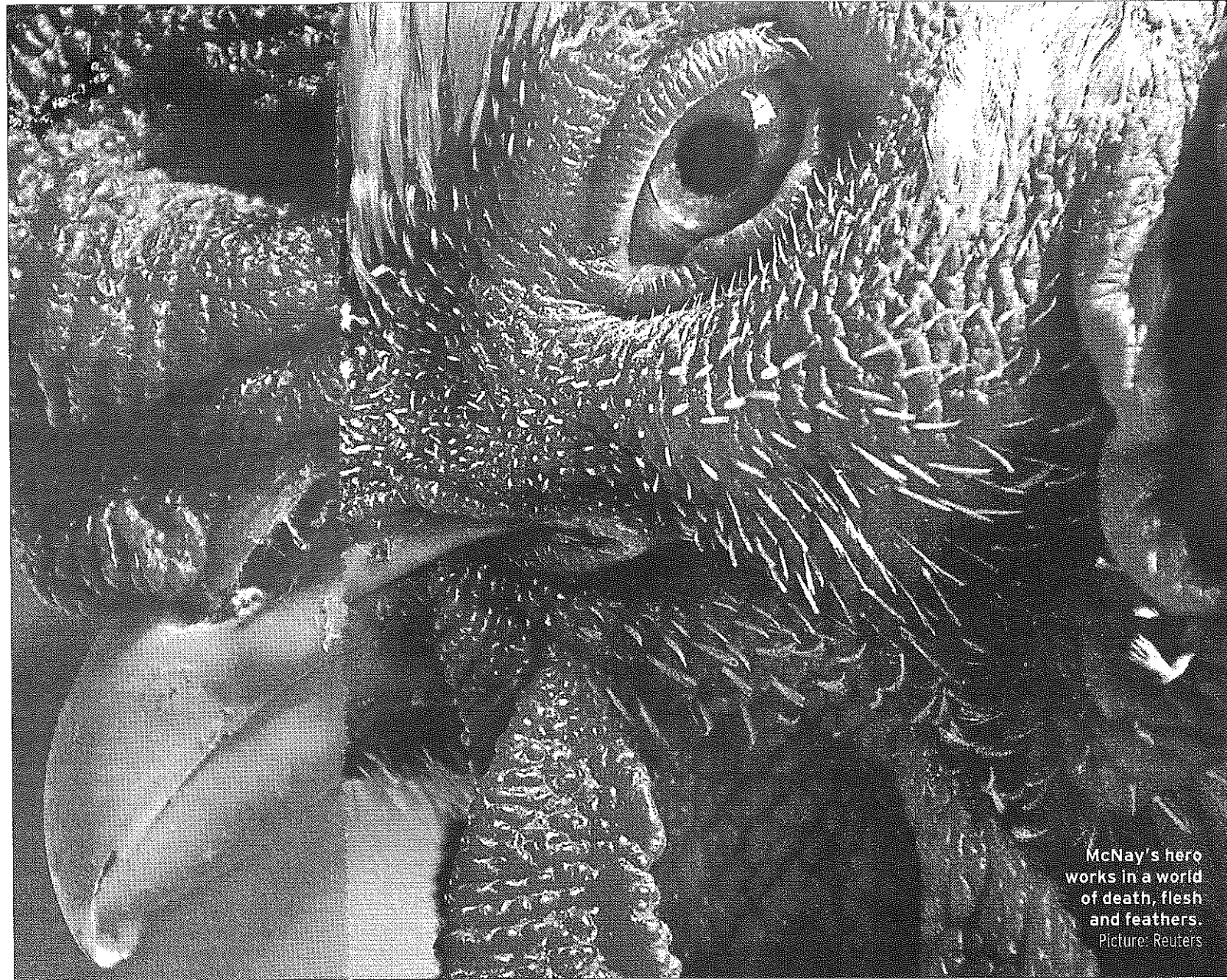


**FRESH**  
BY MARK MCNAY  
Canongate, 278pp, £10.99

Review by TOM ADAIR

would-be scriptwriter Billy – he works with corpses, those passing stiff about which he fantasises, mockingly and daily, at the conveyor belt, a metaphor for the passing of life itself. Like Walter Mitty, but unlike Billy, he sees no prospect of real release. If he could read the chickens' entrails he would know that much worse is to come.

Yet the gloom is ameliorated by blessings. For Sean, the good news is that he's married to pert, pretty Maggie, who has her head screwed on; they adore their only child, Donna. They live for takeaways and sex, for occasional camping trips out of Glasgow, and for a tippie or two at weekends. Sean's work may drag, but his job is secure. And his Uncle Albert, who, along with doughty Auntie Jessie, helped bring him up when his father scarpered long ago, and when his mother fell to bits, is a solid presence, a former hard man with rock-solid decencies to match.



McNay's hero works in a world of death, flesh and feathers.  
Picture: Reuters

If the uncle and aunt are the silver lining, the cloud is Archie, Sean's older brother, banged up for thuggery and drugs offences. Archie is shown as a threat to family stability from the outset, a vicious bully who, sooner or later, seems set to add murder to his rollcall of achievements. Archie is due for release in six months when the novel opens, but, by agreeing to wear a tag, he is paroled with instant effect. Sean is horrified, having blown most of the £700 which Archie had given him to

stash on a school trip for Donna. If he can't raise the readies, he knows that he – or Maggie, or Donna – will pay the price.

The novel's tension derives from Sean's efforts to stave off the horror of such an outcome: can he raise the money on time? Can he stymie Archie's criminal efforts, his certain attempts to enlist Sean's involvement as a courier once he is out? Sean escapes the everyday grimness by over-indulgence in regular fantasies: of personal derring-do in the

face of danger, or by picturing shoppers innocently tucking into roast fowl which he and his mates have disgustingly sabotaged at work.

McNay's portrayal of factory life is richly convincing (up there with *The Bottle Factory Outing* by Beryl Bainbridge or Jeff Torrington's underrated *The Devil's Carousel*). His language – especially the dialogue – is exact, brimming with life and never strained. He inter-cuts the third-person narrative with Sean's interior take on seminal scenes

from his turbulent past. This lends variety, alters the pace, and places Sean front and centre.

The result is a novel whose edgy energy carries you forward. The picture of blight and of deprivation within which choices are made and determined, is shown in the round. McNay neither damns nor exalts the best or the worst of his characters. Even black Archie has shades of grey and moments of pathos in what is a hugely entertaining, sometimes disturbing, fiction debut.