



Guilty pleasures

Fiona Higgins's cracking debut *The Black Book of Secrets* is full of gothic fun, says Mal Peet

Mal Peet
Saturday February 17, 2007

Guardian

The Black Book of Secrets
by FE Higgins
320pp, Macmillan, £8.99

Fiona Higgins's novel - her first - very elegantly presents itself as a horror yarn. My wife read the first couple of pages before I did, and shuddered so satisfactorily that the marmalade fell off her toast. But then she has a bit of a thing about teeth and pliers. In fact, *The Black Book of Secrets* turns out to be a deliciously rich mix of Gothic nastiness, religious allegory and black humour. It might have been subtitled *The Recording Angel Goes to Royston Vasey*.

In an unspecified historical past, the mysterious Joe Zabbidou appears in the bleak village of Pagus Parvus. All its inhabitants, from butcher to bookseller, are insomniacs, tormented by hideous secrets. Joe sets up shop as a pawnbroker, but the service he offers is not quite the traditional one. Like a mystical psychotherapist, he persuades the villagers to pawn their guilty secrets, which are recorded in a big black book by his apprentice, young Ludlow Fitch. In return for the pledges, his clients receive the gift of peaceful sleep, as well as money. (This is an excellent idea. Confessionals that offer cash-back. It could catch on.) The purpose of Joe's payments is to allow his customers to free themselves from the financial clutches of the blackmailing ogre of the village, Jeremiah Ratchet. In this he succeeds - almost - but then he suffers the usual fate of redeemers: the populace turns against him. He possesses their secrets; worse, he has them in writing. He has the Book.

There are things about the novel that could irritate curmudgeonly old critics such as this one. The foreword claims that the story consists of surviving fragments of Ludlow's journals linked by the author's imagined narrative. In addition, the confessions are included verbatim. Yet Higgins makes scant effort to sustain this conceit. There is little to distinguish these voices one from another. It is not credible that Ludlow, a refugee pickpocket from the city slums, writes like a junior Dickens. Nor that a bent and taciturn old gravedigger would confess that "the moon hid herself behind the clouds, ashamed to witness what I was doing". After a rather wonderful denouement in which Joe takes Ludlow to a vast subterranean library containing an infinity of black books of secrets - nothing less than the complete record of human guilt - the novel concludes with an obvious trailer for volume two. And perhaps three and four.

All that notwithstanding, Higgins's prose has terrific verve, with glittering descriptive flashes. (Lembart Jellico, a stranger to sunlight, has white skin with "a slight shine to it, like wet pastry".) The underlying seriousness of the tale, its Catholic subtext, is offset by Dahl-like humour ("A hanging was as good as a holiday. The crowds enjoyed the spectacle almost as much as the poor fellow on the gibbet detested it." Nice verb, that "detested"). Nor will my quibbles deter Higgins's intended readership (children of 10 or thereabouts). I have no doubt that they will love this book. How could they not? It has got grave-robbing, pies with dead rats in, a murder plot involving a fake burial, a villain whose reek rises from the page, an enigmatic hero and a supporting cast of vivid grotesques, plus a psychic and lethally poisonous frog. I think Higgins might well be on to a winner here. At the very least, it's a bravura debut.

• Mal Peet's *The Penalty* is published by Walker Books
guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008