



Kevin Power's novel 'comes from the gut, it's raw, it's passionate.'

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FICTION: ***Bad Day in Blackrock*** by Kevin Power The Lilliput Press, 235pp, €15.00

THREE PRIVATE-SCHOOL educated, rugby-playing young men attack another young man outside a Dublin nightclub. The victim dies, trials take place, a media circus follows, lives are shattered. That this novel is inspired by real-life events is, of course, a given but it takes a brave writer to explore the subject in fiction. It's to Kevin Power's credit that he does so in his debut novel, a compulsive read which presents an eviscerating portrait of the young men and women who graduate from the supposedly elite schools of southside Dublin.

This is a book that breaks the rules of the conventional crime narrative. Within a few pages, we know who the victim is and who his killers are. We know how the trial ended, what the verdicts were, the sentences. There's no suspense, nor any need for suspense. It's not so much a "whodunit" as a "whydunit". For this is a novel of investigation, where the narrator works his way through the events of the fateful night and the years that led up to it with a clear eye as he tries to understand it for himself.

And it is this narrator - unnamed - who holds the story together from a careful distance and a refusal to judge the actions of his peers. He remains intimately connected with everyone in the story but never appears to play a part in its development. Characters confide in him, tell him the details of their most private moments, and he passes them along to us, his readers. It's an intriguing perspective that works brilliantly. We come to rely on him and to trust him and when he springs a

late surprise on us, it's all the more impressive for being unexpected.

Power's examination of the mores of the rugby-playing schools presents a demi-monde of unpleasantness and vulgarity that is often difficult to stomach. A generation described as having "hatred for each other... and hatred for ourselves," the boys are, without exception, absolutely vile. Sporting prowess and sexual achievement exist for no other reason than to entertain their own audience of lesser mortals. They have no inner life, any of them. The closest they come to self-awareness is the knowledge that the moment school is over, then their fleeting celebrity will give way to the offices of their fathers and a lifetime of disappointment.

The girls are equally horrific. Without a single thought in their heads, their hobbies include flicking their hair and cutting themselves with razor blades while watching *The OC*. They're impossibly shallow and terrified of being exposed as such. And yet... and yet... somehow Power makes us care about them.

How does he do this? Not sure. But in Richard and Laura, the Posh and Becks at the centre of the story, the head says that one should utterly despise them both for their vapidity and selfishness, but somehow the heart feels sympathy. It's not their fault, the reader thinks. Blame the parents. And, judging from the story, that's what Power does, for if you think the kids are bad, wait till you read what the old men are like.

FOR ALL THE STRENGTH OF THE storytelling, however, there are a few contradictions along the way. We're told that Richard is a "fanatical anti-smoker", but only twelve pages later, there he is, smoking away. In fairness, the narrator acknowledges that this is out of character but as there's never any explanation for it, it seems redundant. Similarly, the narrator wonders whether or not two characters have ever had sex, only for him to describe their lovemaking, in flashback, eight pages later. These things are not terrible in themselves but they suggest a lack of editorial concentration at times that needs to be kept in check.

It's an excellent novel, though, there's no two ways about that. It comes from the gut, it's raw, it's passionate and it suggests, like Barry McCrea's *The Third Verse* did a few months ago, that there are a group of young Irish novelists about to be set loose on the world like a pack of hungry wolves. Bring 'em on, I say. I'll read them.

***Bad Day in Blackrock* will be launched in Dublin on Wednesday by Frank McGuinness**

John Boyne's most recent novel is *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Doubleday). A film adaptation of his novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is in cinemas now

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