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McKenzie's Friend

By Philip Davison.
Jonathan Cape.
246pp. £10 in UK.

Harry Fielding, an 'understrapper' or 'bob-a-job man' for MI5 who lives a generally dissolute life and ultimately becomes a killer, was introduced to us in Philip Davison's first novel for Jonathan Cape, *The Crooked Man* (1997). Living in an 'adopted city' at the opening of his new episode in *McKenzie's Friend*, Harry is quickly enticed back to London by his old friend Alfie, a corrupt cop who has landed them a private undercover job to do with the disappearance of the daughter of one Sydney Holland. A rather conventional tale of mystery and intrigue ensues: As the internal investigation of Alfie begins, he decides that someone is trying to kill him, and as Harry's surveillance and house-breaking tasks progress he becomes convinced that he has in actuality been contracted to kill Holland's son-in-law.

Interest is tweaked by some ancillary elements, such as the fallout from Harry's 'brief assignation' with Alfie's wife or the relationship between Harry and his father, the single convincing character interaction in the entire novel. As the story moves towards further disappearances and murder however, no real surprises or substantialities emerge to fill out what is ultimately only a skeletal plot, and there is a heavy reliance on one-liner humour and one-liner profundities to keep things moving. Those familiar with Harry's previous adventures will be particularly dissatisfied since many scenes seem more like out-takes from *The Crooked Man* than significant variations or developments.

Davison is a more inventive writer than either of these two recent books might indicate. Before he became caught up in the currently fashionable preoccupation in literary fiction with the criminal *demi-monde*, Davison produced a quirky atonal novel *The Illustrator* (1988), and two of the most structurally interesting contemporary Irish novels, *The Book-Thief's Heartbeat* and *Twist and Shout* (1981/1983). His jumpy, expressionistic, and episodic style is much better suited to the quick-fire existentialism of these earlier short works than to the detailed plotting required to enliven an obvious subgenre like the crime/detective novel, and it is to be hoped he will return to developing that style now that he has given supererogatory attention to modish work. It is, incidentally, also to be hoped that publishers will soon realise that today's readers will not be patronised by trite, sound-bite blurbs such as "'Philip Davison really is a great writer.' Bob Geldof." If a book is to be taken seriously then the potential book buyer should be taken seriously.

Alice Falling

By William Wall.
Sceptre.
200pp. £14.99 in UK.

Better known as a poet and for the collection *Mathematics and Other Poems* (1997), William Wall has of late increasingly turned to fiction writing. Though he has had some stories published in various newspapers and anthologies however, he has avoided the common stratagem of the launching short-story volume and has gone straight for the long form. And his first novel betrays the poet's hand: Frequently rich

in cadence and image (“Dilatory now when the night is black and wind and rain throb against the window, strange creatures dying in the swirl of the wipers ...”), *Alice Falling* is the story of a group of present-day Irish people, of their university days in Cork, of, primarily, the various disappointments suffered in their subsequent adult lives. The eponymous (anti-)heroine is married to Paddy, computer entrepreneur; both are unhappy, both have lovers, and all quickly become entangled in increasingly perverse interchangeable relationships.

Occasionally too self-conscious in using this scenario as a novel-about-modern-Ireland template (“In the background voices on the radio news were talking about Charlie Haughey’s options”), Wall probes certain Irish attitudes to marriage, to respectability, to money and purchasable culture. Equipped with imperatives like “Look ... you fucked me twice. It doesn’t give you the right to investigate me”, his narrative is particularly good on modern anomie: Almost like an Irish version of Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* (1994), it is very honestly sordid in its dealings with libidinous and emotional varieties of sadism and masochism, with the incommunicativeness that can deflate marriage and extra-marital relationship alike. Even when a suicide occurs fairly early in the story or when it is gradually revealed, in what is the most impactful structuring device of the novel, that Alice has been completely debilitated by the sexual abuse once suffered at the hands of her parish priest, Wall never opts for easy emotionalism, identifying instead the internal coldness necessary for some people’s survival.

As might be allowed for in a first novel, there are some obvious flaws: The early tautness of plot and style slackens in later chapters and a sensational denouement substantially damages what might have otherwise been a significant effort at presenting a slice of a particular kind of Irish middle-class normalcy. This aside, Wall already displays impressive adeptness with dialogue and with multiple points of view, and it may be anticipated that his future career will find poetry losing him entirely to textured prose.

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