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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Hounded by nausea

John Kenny

Animals
By Keith Ridgway
Fourth Estate, 265pp. £10.99

Keith Ridgway is a man of character. Over eight productive years he has followed a first bleak novel, *The Long Falling* (1998), with a second and large and more upbeat novel, *The Parts* (2003), and has published a number of widely admired short stories, most notably in the collection *Standard Time* (2001). Alongside the garnered plaudits and awards, the integral personal and artistic uprightness he has displayed for the duration should be recognised.

Ridgway has, particularly, dealt with homosexuality with a discursive level-headedness and a studiedly organic touch that have never seen stylistic tightness loosened in easy favour of issue-driven content. He has remarked that it is at this stage more delimiting to be labelled an Irish writer than a “queer writer”, and this firm categorical awareness, combined with the seemingly innate self-critical disposition he extends to his creative labours, has ensured a recognition that homosexuality in itself is no more an inherently vital or vitalising concern for a work of fiction than any other natural aspect of human experience. The subject, while a veritable constant in his narratives, never reaches the level of imperious stand-alone theme, and his treatments thus avoid the trap of overweening special pleading that the subject can become for “queer writers” maybe less confident of their broader market appeal or general artistic aptitude.

The restraint that in Ridgway’s case has provided for topical expansiveness is principally regulated by his key talent for building up on the page the idea, and in turn the tangibility, of a personality. He is, above all, a fine character writer, and he concentrates on how the parts that make up a single identity are evolved from volition and chance, from background and environment, from the notions people have of themselves and others, and others (especially lovers, parents and friends) have of them. Their individuality notwithstanding, his best characters could all be emotionally typified: they are the overwhelmed.

While *The Parts* was especially notable for its tracing of character privacies in tandem with a detailed picturing of contemporary Dublin, with *Animals*, set less meticulously in contemporary London, Ridgway moves almost completely into the interior. And it is dark there.

The first of the titled sections of this new novel contains perhaps Ridgway’s most tonally intimate prose to date and sets in motion a first-person story in a style so impressively compressed and rhythmic that the novel thereafter has some difficulty sustaining it. The narrator, whose sex emerges only later on and whose name is protected, is a youngish illustrator with a “smallish life” who recounts the seemingly chaotic events of a week that have led to a crippling case of cartoonist’s block. After an “irreducible” and weirdly affecting encounter with a dead mouse, things have truly fallen apart. The illustrator wanders between his home, shared with his lover (who...
remains an anonymous “K” for the duration), the flats of his friends, and a hotel room
trying manically to cope with the newly affirmed thought that we all know and
understand nothing.

One big and cleverly incorporated theme emerges. Amongst the narrator’s
homosexual and heterosexual artistic or, more appropriately, artsy friends (architects,
would-be novelists, actresses, teachers of gender studies and literature), the potential
falsity and uselessness of the constructs of the imagination is a regular worry. Though
this worry is sometimes feebly expressed (“So David began making things up. Which
is what novelists do, I suppose”), the bizarre world of the creative imagination on
overdrive is thoroughly explored in an extensive series of interludes on one
character’s careful plans for a sci-fi novel.

Nothingness too frequently appears more an easy nod to cosmic aloneness (“And
while we talk the sun goes down and a billion cold stars nail the lie that we tell
ourselves”) than the warrant for genuine existential speculation here. There is
sufficiently deft illustration of the narrator’s mental condition to have precluded such
awkward direct admissions as “I became mad” and “There’s something wrong with
me”. The real character of the narrator is best pinned down in the style, where a
forensic precision of description reflects an unwell mind’s attention to seemingly
unrelated events and thoughts. The almost implosive pace, the plotless dead ends of
the narrative: these are the true figurations of the mania and obsessiveness that afflict
this observer - or inventor - of haunted buildings, collapsing swimming pools,
terrorists and cruel animals. The eponymous symbols, too, are crucial. Nausea grabs
this narrator “around the waist, like the jaws of a rancid predator with all the time in
the world”, and one particular stalking animal induces extreme paranoia: “A huge,
loathsome dog, a deep shadow in the damp sunlight, uncollared, unkept. Dry as a
bone.”

With *Animals* Ridgway has brought to the uneven surface murky emotional
currents that have regularly moved through his narratives. Without his usual ballast of
a solidly portrayed external world of collective experience, the novel underwhelms at
many points and it is his slightest work to date. But lesser Ridgway is still
comparatively interesting. As in the joke about the remonstrating and terror-stricken
alcoholic who is eventually eaten outside by the horrific animals the ejecting barman
warns him to stop imagining, Ridgway’s half-comic surrealism encourages
considerable pause for metaphysical unsettlement. The private mind, when going
public, must be prepared for agreement, must fill the nothingness, must accept the
necessary closures and constructs that make interaction possible in the day-to-day. So
be careful going outside with your imagination wide open, for the animals may get
you.

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