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Going ape in London

John Kenny

Utterly Monkey

By Nick Laird

Fourth Estate, 344pp. £10.99

Following hot on the well-heeled publicity that surrounded Nick Laird's first volume of poetry, *To a Fault*, published earlier this year, this young author's first novel will, in its timing at least, instantaneously consolidate a closely attended career-launch to such a degree that it may become difficult to see through to the intrinsic. Virginia Woolf once imagined an idealised reviewer who would be permanently sequestered in a basement where the book of the day would be received by means of a tightly controlled chute; free from the shadows cast by the surface world of extrinsic hype and celebrity, the necessary Platonic pronouncements on the forms of the book could thus be easiest made. Besides some basic contextual detail relating to the content of the novel itself, it is best, for the moment, to send *Utterly Monkey* down that chute.

The novel starts well. Ordered out of Northern Ireland after a punishment shooting by a Loyalist gang, Geordie Wilson has taken the ferry for Scotland from where he will travel to London and hole up, unannounced, with an old school friend. We quickly meet this friend, Danny Williams, a successful but encroachingly unhappy litigator with a top law firm whose past in a fictional town called Ballyglass (more or less Laird's native Cookstown, Co Tyrone), returns to haunt him, particularly in the form of a death he may have caused. Geordie has stolen a Loyalist cash stash from his girlfriend's brother. Coincidentally (it being a "small small world. And Ulster but a button on its coat"), Ian, the operative for whom the cash was intended, befriends Geordie on the ferry and, later, violently re-appropriates the loot. Ian has more elaborately violent plans for execution of the Loyalist cause in London, and Geordie and Danny, though they have a brawl in the intervening time, find themselves thwarting these dastardly intentions.

We have fairly promptly found ourselves amid the rudiments of a contemporary 'caper' story, complete with a controlled action period of five days. Outside of the standard capering however, even the culminating man-chase, there is little here to hold stylistic or thematic interest.

As with his poetry, Laird includes the Northern situation in *Utterly Monkey*, though it in no way holds the intrigue of a political novel. Geordie and Ian are reasonably convincing, even sympathetic, characters; yet the intermittent attempt at colloquial commentary on the North through their mindsets never really gets beyond the humdrum ("Geordie thought about Ulster, that little patch of scorched earth. It had stayed loyal to England and now England didn't want it").

Arguably, it is to Laird's credit that he doesn't overplay the Troubles background to the story. The main damage is caused by a chronic over-determination, to the point of cliché, of 'novelistic' material. We are given plot details twice on some occasions; we are beaten over the head with the significance of the novel's title; we hear of what

happens on afternoon television shows. Pointless incidentals are piled on. Instead of Ian simply paying his way into the zoo at one stage we have: “Ian took his wallet out of the top pocket of his denim jacket and extracted a twenty pound note. ‘Thank you.’ There was a click and whirr and a white slip of card appeared from a slit on the metal counter. ‘Your ticket ... and your change sir.’” Thus is little left to the power of suggestion; thus, for the entire novel, is action slowed down by a third-person narrator who too often allows inanity to masquerade as profundity (“Odd how intimate it is to look into someone’s eyes”).

A better narrator might have been the somewhat autobiographically designed and ultimately half-noble Danny. Having just broken up with a girlfriend, flagging in his ability to work sanely with colleagues he despises, he returns to Northern Ireland with the beautiful trainee, Ellen, on what turns out to be his last project: the ethically suspect Ulster Water takeover. Though Danny’s courtship of Ellen, even in its main sex scene, is too slow to narratively excite, Laird is excellent on the slow tortures of the confined workspace, on the email mountain, on the subtexts behind polite professionalism, on the futility of much of the work generated in offices: “‘I wonder,’ Danny began idly, ‘if we fed a bit of that paper into the shredder and turned it on, whether it would keep going by itself, until the roll ran out or the shredder was full?’”

The late-night sequence where Danny casts off the daily grind is worth waiting for, but, overall, the only way to get by the preponderance of typing over writing in *Utterly Monkey* is to intone the customary mantras about kindness towards first novels. There may also be a telling parenthetical moment towards the end as Danny looks around an area evacuated by the bomb-alerted police: “(it had looked to Danny, from the top end of the street, like it had been cleared for shooting a movie”). Hmm.

John Kenny is an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Settlement and Historical Change, NUI Galway.