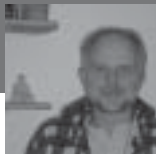


SHelf LIFE

Nick Duffell



The Greeks knew a thing or two: unity works, for one. I last recommended a story with all its action on one day. In Robertson Davies' masterpiece, *The Deptford Trilogy*, a single event on page one binds three characters together over sixty years.

'Boy' Staunton throws a snowball at his pall, Dunstan Ramsey, who ducks. It strikes Mrs Dempster, the parson's wife. But the stone hidden inside knocks her cold, brings on the premature birth of Paul, and seals all their fates.

Deptford is in Western Canada, but its small-town innocence and religious sensibility feels like the Highlands, whence came the Ramseys. 'While our village contained much of what humanity has to show,' narrates Dunstan, in Davies' exquisite prose, 'it did not contain everything, and one of the things it conspicuously lacked was an aesthetic sense. Mrs Dempster was not pretty – we understood prettiness and guardedly admitted it as pleasant, if needless, thing in a woman – but she had a gentleness of expression and a delicacy of colour that was uncommon. My mother, who had strong features and stood for no nonsense from her hair, said that Mrs Dempster had a face like a pan of milk.'

Stricken with guilt for the snowball (and afraid of his mother) Ramsay becomes Mrs Dempster's devoted protector. In 1917 her face appears to him while escaping death in the trenches. Convinced of a miracle, he becomes a biographer of Saints, remaining a bachelor, schoolmaster by trade, observer of life by style. 'Boy', on the other hand, marries Ramsay's girlfriend and becomes a huge success. Rich man, politician, socialite, he creates an empire from sugar beet, but dies mysteriously, leaving his son, David, to have an existential crisis, processed in Zurich through Jungian therapy. Paul flees Deptford as soon as he can, for his mother, having given herself sexually to a tramp by the railway tracks, is now the village madwoman. 'He was very civil. And he wanted it so much.' Escaping with the circus, Paul's suffers neglect and sexual abuse. Consequently he re-invents himself as master conjurer, man of mystery – a true survivor.

In the three sections of this 800-page confession each man reveals his secret inner life: Ramsay to his headmaster on retirement, David to his therapist (and a good one she is, too). Finally, Paul puts the whole jigsaw together, performing to Ramsay, who hopes to finally hear the secret of the father's death, to Liesel, the grotesque lover they both share, and an extraordinary Bergmanesque film crew.

One can enjoy this novel for many reasons: gripping plot, masterful writing, understated humour. Or simply follow its ultimate unity: how we avoid our destiny with ourselves, till it claims us in the end.