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Foreword Review GENERAL FICTION

Bedlam Burning

Geoff Nicholson
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Michael Smith works at the Kincaid Clinic, a hospital for the mentally ill that provides the setting for much of this novel. One of his patients explains that a riddle drove him insane: “What can go up a chimney down but not down a chimney up?”

“The answer’s an umbrella, incidentally,” another patient remarks. “We wouldn’t want you going the same way.” Smith narrates his story roughly from the present day, but most of the events take place in the 1970s. A directionless young graduate of Cambridge University, Smith is marking time working in a used book store. His best quality, it seems, is that he’s pleasant to look at. “So pretty, and so empty,” says his university professor, a kind of diabolical father figure, who hosts book-burning parties, which undergraduates respond to with varying degrees of irony and outrage.

Gregory Collins, a plebian and plain-looking classmate, distinguishes himself at one such party by tossing his own unpublished manuscript into the flames. He later publishes a novel, and asks Smith to lend him a photograph to substitute for his own on the cover. Collins wants the “reading public to think I’m a decent-looking bloke.” Smith agrees, and before long he has assumed the identity of the other man.

Masquerading as Collins, Smith becomes the “writer in residence” at the Kincaid Clinic, where madness is deemed the result of exposure to too many visual images. The treatment is the elimination of all such images: labels are stripped from cans of food; photos are cut from newspapers. Smith’s job is to help the patients build a “bulwark of language” against the madness of images. It’s not necessarily supposed to make sense. Smith, after all, is a fraud. Are the patients truly mad? Is the director of the clinic a quack? Why is the woman doctor who shares Smith’s bed so verbal in her passion?

Nicholson is the author of thirteen novels, including *Bleeding London*, which was short-listed for the Whitbread Prize. This time he has written a novel both amusing and bemusing, about what might be called the making of a critic.

Wandering the grounds of the clinic, Smith comes across two patients pantomiming a game of tennis, echoing a scene from *Blow-Up*, a 1966 cult film that explored the relationship between reality and photographic images. This novel might be called an exploration of the relationship between reality and words—and the difference between the riddles posed by each.

RICH WERTZ (March / April 2002)

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