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Pariah

Dave Zeltserman
Serpent's Tail (October 2009)
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Like the Ripley stories of Patricia Highsmith, some fiction invites us to inhabit the mind of an amoral sociopath. *Pariah*, Dave Zeltzerman's latest crime novel, asks us to make ourselves at home inside the skin of one Kyle Nevin. Not everyone will feel comfortable there. Kyle is an Irish-American gangster from Boston's "Southie." His CV includes bank robbery, vicious beatings, prodigious drinking, a vocabulary limited to four-letter words, and the torture and murder of children—for none of which he feels a shred of guilt. The story is told through his first-person point of view.

We meet Kyle as he returns to Boston after an eight-year prison stretch for bank robbery and learn that he was set up for the fall by Red Mahoney, the erstwhile leader of the gang in which Kyle was an enforcer. Red, it turns out, betrayed his own men to the FBI in return for favors and is now hiding out somewhere in Europe. Kyle has sworn to track down the "rat-bastard" and kill him. The plot is, of course, reminiscent of the career of Whitey Bulger, chief of Boston's notorious Winter Hill Gang. Kyle Nevin himself bears a passing resemblance to Bulger hit man Kevin Weeks.

Kyle easily slips back into his old life—drinking vast quantities of Guinness and Bushmills at his local bar, where he is idolized; shacking up with a slumming nymphomaniac named Nola; and beating people to a pulp for the occasional snide remark. But Kyle needs money to track down Mahoney and so concocts a plan to kidnap the young son of a well-to-do suburban family. For help he enlists his younger brother, Danny, a former thug who is now going straight and liking it. Kyle succeeds in winning Danny reluctantly back into "the game." But the kidnapping goes horribly wrong and it is Danny who suffers the consequences.

At this point the plot takes a bizarre turn. Kyle, having beaten the kidnapping rap, is invited by a New York publisher to write a novel, using a character similar to himself, *as if* he had done the crime. (Are we meant to think of O. J. Simpson's short-lived *If I Did It*?) The rest of the story follows this thread, indulging along the way in every writer's fantasy of being a bestselling novelist with a million-dollar publicity campaign and a spot on Oprah. But, alas, Kyle just can't catch a break and the conclusion is, not surprisingly, a blood-soaked catastrophe.

Zeltserman's style is unadorned but effective. Whether or not one *wants* to spend a couple of days in-side his hero's head, each reader must decide for himself.

BRUCE MACBAIN (August 16, 2009)

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