ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

The Dogs...Barking
Jan Notzon
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Three Stars (out of Five)

"You'll be rotten by the sixth grade," Marist Brother Demian tells third-grader Jason Kelly when the child balks at participating in a sexual encounter with his teacher. For Jason, "from that moment onward, he would hear, even in the desperation of the dogs barking, that horrible judgment."

Jan Notzon's *The Dogs…Barking* is an adaptation of his radio play of the same name. It recounts how Jason Kelly of Luz Oscura, Texas, survives the sexual and psychological abuse of his teacher, the harsh criticisms and bullying of his siblings, his fear of failure as a university student, and his frequent rejection as an actor during an eight-year stint in New York City. The young man's emotional anchor is his childhood sweetheart, Katherine, while his psychological demons are Demian's pronouncement and the barking dogs.

Despite Notzon's experience as an actor and scriptwriter, his novel illustrates the pitfalls of adapting a radio play into a novel. *The Dogs…Barking* suffers from flaws that begin with the prologue and carry through to the story's conclusion. Too much of the prose is convoluted and obscure. For example, "The wind dies a halting death; the windows settle into mute stillness, and the silence of the night starved of motion and grace descends in pitiless exigence of air and space. Then slowly, faintly and from such a desperate distance it echoes hollowly in the lugubrious night-cowled viaduct, now abandoned by all save the 'Equis,' the 'Chacon,' and the other darkness-loving youth gangs that haunt it." In addition, alliteration is often forced, and triteness, literary conceits, and pretentious language are commonplace in Notzon's prose.

The most successful aspects of the work are its dialogue, dialects, and appeals to the reader's sense of sound. And when they are good, they are very good. Witness, for example, Jason's encounters with New York pedestrians: "betta' waych ya'self, pal," or "be yer girlfriend." Then there's the give and take of Jason's sessions with his therapist and his debate with a Spaniard about who gave Christopher Columbus his name. And for masterful comedy, there's the College House card game with Jason and three others, one of whom is "plastered

almost to insentience," and another whose wife's constant refrain is, "I want to go home." Notzon's rapid-fire delivery of the excuses given for the rejection of Jason's auditions also enhances the pace of the story.

Readers willing to plod through the ponderous prose of Notzon's novel will discover several scenes that make the effort worthwhile.

Wayne Cunningham