



The Long Haul

Unknown (pp)

978-1-932360-06-6

A reader's travel alert of recent English turbulence: last year's literary horizon was full of angry young-ish British writers storming the naive underbelly of American culture in a well-publicized twin fusillade of the exuberant mockery of Texas Booker Prize winner D.B.C. Pierre's Vernon God Little, and Martin Amis's shameless Hollywood fox hunting in Yellow Dog. Both were, coincidentally, less critically accepted over here. Political humor doesn't often travel well.

Yet, given the author's resume of 800,000 video copies of his original Wembley Arena sold-out political comedy show, topped by a six-month London run as an opening act to Michigan's favorite liberal son, Michael Moore, this new book promises to be a young gun's second-wave media blitz of English-observed political reportage. But in taking the lofty high road to North America, the author has jettisoned almost all satiric heft for a simple tale of one family's urge to find personal and political salvation. The result is that their journey seems much longer than it is, and in fiction as in comedy, timing is everything.

It's 1999 (a relatively halcyon year of political protest, in grim retrospect), and three related political refugees are unwittingly drawn to re-find each other in Seattle, where the high-profile World Trade Organization meetings and their much-televised rioting demonstrators provide an apocalyptic backdrop. Two Mexican brothers, separately adopted as children and since estranged, have mirrored political motives. Evan Hatch is a thirty-three-year-old London flack who is all too adept at spinning his shadowy corporate clients free from their own well-deserved web of bad publicity, and for his collaboration he will pay, for he's dying of a rare blood disease incubated in their poor Mexican shelter. His long-lost brother, Chano, thriving as an itinerant political activist, is fleeing Mexican police after having rigged a fertilizer bomb to sabotage a northern Mexico industrial plant's pipes (with only one casualty).

Meanwhile, Chano's fourteen-year-old son, Daniel, thinking his father dead and himself an orphan (his mother having died from a random sniper shooting earlier), smuggles himself to London to seek political asylum, where he is befriended by sympathetic women who bring him to Seattle. Somewhere in the fog of tear gas canisters and police batons and barricades, they will find and lose each other again.

The good news is that Newman has landscaped a scrupulously detailed, intelligent, well-researched, and passionately earnest diorama of souls seeking refuge in the New World that deserves a hearing. Its only fault (pace overly-earnest politicians) is that its liberal pieties are mechanically plotted so that the narrative urgency flat-lines before the three go their separate ways, to life and death. Dying's easy, as the actor's adage goes, comedy's hard. (March / April 2004)

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