

Reviews

HEAD FULL OF TRAFFIC by Brian Ames

Pocol Press, 2004; 184pp; pbk; US\$12.95/Cdn\$18.95; ISBN 1-929763-01-8

Reviewed by Steve Duffy

So, ladies and gentlemen: just what is the difference between ‘literary’ fiction and ‘genre’ fiction? Some say it’s all in the intent: the genre hack simply knocks out the tall tales any old how, plot-plot-plot and to hell with tone and nuance, while the *littérateur* strives to go deeper—to communicate some fundamental perception to do with the way s/he sees the world, maybe; to make the reader sit up with a little shock of recognition and say yes, that’s right, that’s exactly it. It’s a helpful distinction to keep in mind, at least, if you’re one of those nitpicking worrits who *will* keep asking difficult questions of this sort. (No wonder you never get invited to any of the really good parties.)

However, I don’t want to set up a false dichotomy between ‘entertainments’ and ‘serious’ books—a distinction which always struck me as pretty bogus even in the work of the man who gave us the concept, Graham Greene. Yes, a writer may write to entertain (and any writer who doesn’t is probably not worth the reading); but then again, entertainment takes place on many levels. Simply rehashing the conventions of a particular genre may certainly provide us with a modicum of gratification—why, I’ll bet there are at least a couple of books under review elsewhere in this section of *All Hallows* which do just that, and I would cordially urge you to check them out, should your tastes lie that way. But suppose you’re one of those open-minded, discriminating souls who take pleasure under many forms? Suppose, for instance, you revel in a writer’s attempts to do something fresh and vivid with language? Suppose you enjoy the momentary dislocation—the roller-coaster’s first plummet, and we all scream with delight—that accompanies an innovative and unfamiliar literary experience? Suppose, to put it perfectly vulgarly, you want something new for a change?

Well, then, you could do far worse than pick up Brian Ames’s new collection of short stories. I don’t know whether Mr Ames considers himself a writer of big-L literature (I suspect not; the best ones in any genre hardly ever seem to), but I do know that *Head Full of Traffic* gave me as much enjoyment—on every level—as any other single-author collection of supernatural fiction I read over the course of last year; and I read some pretty good ones. Ames comes strongly recommended by a phalanx of editors bearing praise (among them our own Barbara Roden), but he really doesn’t need the protection: his work speaks for itself. Taut, neurotic fables of contemporary life and its underlying nightmares; this is the real right stuff, and no mistake.

The stories encompass a range of styles and settings, all of which Ames seems

pretty much at home in.[†] They begin with the delirious linguistic overload that is ‘Carnival’, a tight little vernacular starburst in which our carny protagonist Weeb meets up with something truly out of the ordinary over at the freak-show. Ever since a certain Pandemonium Shadow Show (proprietors, Messrs Cooger & Dark) first pitched its tents in the consciousness of the reading public, the carnival has ranked high among the classic loci of supernatural fiction; here, Ames both references and expands on that mythology in a memorable tale of the grotesque. By contrast, ‘Feeding Time’ couldn’t take place in more (ostensibly) mundane surroundings—all its action is played out in the bedroom of a married couple, Mary and Magnus. It’s a measure of Ames’s cleverness that before long, this quiet suburban bedroom takes on an aspect every bit as wild and dangerous as the carnival in the preceding story.

Slight and slyly humorous, ‘The Geomancer’ posits a, shall we say, visceral approach to the art of *feng shui*, while the tale of ‘Istvan the Painter’ is charged with a dark, bitter, and ultimately horrific sexuality—definitely not for the faint-hearted. ‘Ice Cream Man’, though not on the face of it supernatural, stalks a similar darkside territory, but what’s interesting is the way Ames modulates the tenor of his storytelling voice accordingly. It shows, I submit, that he’s taking due care over the writing—that he has concerns over and above straightforward plotting and A-to-B progression. Paradoxically, this impression is reinforced by the next story, ‘A Widow’s Tale’, which employs, not without a certain knowingness, the (ostensibly) simple, unembroidered mythic form—the storyteller’s ‘This is what happened. . . .’—to frame his fable. The point is, Ames seems as much at home in this voice as in any other he chooses to employ.

‘Several Appearances of Stuart’ may be familiar to attentive *All Hallows* readers, having first appeared way back in issue #25: in fact, if you’re a keen reader of the small-press magazines, you might well have come across the majority of these tales before. ‘Head Full of Traffic’, for instance, first appeared in *The Harrow*: it’s an ever-so-slightly Stephen King riff on the borderline between delusion and demonism as experienced by a road-ganger with a head full of, yes, you’ve guessed it. Compare and contrast with ‘Maurice the Bastard’, which takes this lurid mode of perception and applies it, with grim ironic effect, to the dog-eat-dog world of corporate politics. On to ‘We’ll Leave the Light On’, the story of a traveller’s overnight stay in a cheap motel room which seems by comparison to be part of some more downbeat, less overtly weird world; and yet before long the bottom drops out of things, and the horror underneath is revealed. ‘Clowns in the Wood’, meanwhile, is . . . just damn strange. Read it, and see what I mean.

No doubt about it, Mr Ames is one smart cookie—this much should be clear by now—but his next offering may be the collection’s one lapse into avoidable preciousness. Calling a story ● (that’s a big grey blob, folks) is just being flash for flash’s sake, surely? Damn it, though—the story’s a good ‘un. Really good, in fact: it’s a clever little fugue of double-crosses and skewed perceptions, all sung to the sound of a fateful gunshot. Okay, I guess he’s earned the right to call a story ● if he wants.

[†] If I did have one slight gripe, it was purely technical, and on a matter some may consider trivial. At one point in the story ‘Several Appearances of Stuart’, Ames has his main character playing football (that’s ‘soccer’, U.S. readers) on a pitch here in the U.K. In such a place, and from such a protagonist, we would not really expect to hear a fellow player described as a ‘fore guard’ . . . but that’s jargon for you. Slippery.

Back with the properly named material, 'Poles Apart' isn't so much a story as a brief existential howl of anguish, while 'Spooky Tree' is absolutely classic in form, as neat a tale of supernatural persistence as you'll come across in a month of reading. 'No Weapon Formed Against Me Shall Prosper' takes a header into the tormented thought-processes of Kirby, a manic street preacher: noteworthy is the way in which Ames finds a dark poetic beauty at the heart of Kirby's chaotic delirium. Next up, 'You Are Not a Fisherman' certainly sticks in the mind—if for no other reason, as one of the very few decent stories written in the second person.

'Lamentations' seeks to partake of the epically mythic, but doesn't quite, for me at least, get there; while 'Tableaux of Murder' swings too far the other way, if anything, descending to the banal, almost, in its tale of a literary recluse and his grisly secret. No worries, though: quality control is triumphantly restored in 'Cumberland Plateau', a stoned hitchhiker's encounter with something wild and wayward and altogether too heavy—something, what's more, with an unexpected power of persistence. Similarly hallucinogenic is 'Grandpa's Orchard', a torture-garden fairytale from God knows what midnight recess of the imagination. It's matched for weirdness only by the story which directly follows it in the collection, 'The Hummock King'. None of this is easy stuff, necessarily; nor is it any too agreeable, come to that. However, its very messiness, its exigency—on occasion, its sheer *disgustingness*—never seem less than essential, and that's the condition which excuses so many transgressions.

Thus too with 'Flexor', a tale of childhood terrors which draws on one of the most primal of fears: the basic vulnerability of the eye. (Don't think about it too long, but really—a little jelly lens, all soft and defenceless in your head there? Eww.) Bringing the collection to a suitably downbeat conclusion is 'The Spokesman', which may make you flinch with more than simple reflex fear-of-the-dark the next time there's a power outage round your way. Even when the lights come back on, the terror lingers . . . exactly as it should.

With the last story comes time for the reckoning-up. Checking back over the foregoing, I find only two or three tales which I've adjudged less than wholly successful, and a whole heap of winners—what more could anyone possibly ask for? Where Ames is at his strongest is in the originality of his conceptions and in the quality of their execution; and if you can say that about a writer, in any genre whatsoever, then you're on to a winner, or so it seems to me.

Head Full of Traffic is a strong, stylish collection I'm more than glad to recommend to readers of *All Hallows*. There's no real reason I can see why Brian Ames shouldn't be picking up armfuls of awards and five-book deals, getting his stuff out where it belongs—lodged firmly in the consciousness of every horror fan who cares about good writing and the inexhaustible riches of the imagination. So help him out, why don't you? Buy his book, and do yourself a favour into the bargain.

THE DEDALUS BOOK OF GREEK FANTASY

edited and translated by David Connolly

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Reviewed by Alexis Lykiard

A splendid collection, beginning with its very cover design, reproduced from *Theseus and the Minotaur* by Nikos Engonopoulos. That notable poet is not actually represented