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Would You Believe It

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“Was I Some Kind of Psycho?”

The Little Hammer

by John Kelly.

Jonathan Cape, 182pp. £10 in UK.

In beautiful Bundoran, on a holiday-making day in July, a palaeontologist is secretly dispatched with a blow from his geological hammer. To carry that secret for twenty-one years is, according to the narrator of John Kelly's first novel, an “awful and destructive thing”. A wielder of little hammers at nine years, this nameless individual sets out to finally confess his crime and to detail his subsequent life, his pious upbringing in Fermanagh, and his present situation in an unnamed institution.

The incarcerated madman is a familiar figure in modern fiction; while he may be liberating for an author in that the demented voice can get away with saying pretty much anything, it can also be difficult to use that voice as a genuine, socially specific vehicle rather than as a mere cipher for the subromantic exploration of extreme humanity. While Kelly's Irish madman is somewhat derivative (Pat McCabe's butchering boy is a tangible presence), his activities are sufficiently bizarre and his voice sufficiently idiomatic to ensure reasonable individuality.

Concerned with “What's real and what's not real”, the story, though no masterpiece of the gothic, has a degree of grotesque unreality that problematises its basically comic mode. The narrator's world is entirely fluid and, ultimately, it is impossible to discover whether any of the events he recounts - even his initial crime - is anything but fantasy. Opening with, and repeating the question “Would you believe me if ...?”, he exorbitantly claims early adeptness at “palaeontology, hagiography, botany, coal-shade lepping, pike-fishing, archery and ball-juggling”. Remembering that his grandmother called him “brainbox” and “Mister Picasso”, he now assumes to be a famous painter of “weirdy pictures” whose chief subject is Action Man figures and whose religious obsessions are such that he is eventually embroiled in stealing the Child of Prague statue.

The narrative breezes along in short, titled chapters and employs a range of set-piece gags that are often deliberately hammy (“I shot her what you might call a venomous look”). Comedic incidents however, take on retrospective significance: Mindful that one of the concluding chapters is titled “Ha! Ha!”, readers will want to immediately return to the beginning in the knowledge that the hammer-man's propensity for larks and frolics, for finding fun in his bleak reality, is a large part of his insanity.

Kelly waits until the very end to establish the poignancy of institutionalisation, and his attribution of peculiar insight to the mad, though standard in this kind of work, is creditable for its lightness of touch: “And what about all these religious people who believe in the invisible? ... And what's the difference, if you don't mind me asking, in talking to Harvey the Rabbit and talking to the Patron Saint of Rabbits when neither of them is actually in the room with you?”

Enjoyable on a simple zany level, this thinly plotted story is not quite so purely recreational as at first seems. Identifying perfectly the weird associational logic, the simultaneity of time and memory in the deranged mind, Kelly provides a vaguely discomfiting illustration of the matter-of-fact lunacy of a catch-phrase: “So here I am talking to the wall ...”.