



A Loyalist on Holiday

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The Rainbow Singer by Simon Kerr.
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 234pp, £8.99 in UK.

It is 1985, and as part of the US Peace Initiative's "Project Ulster", ten Catholic and ten Protestant youths are to be taken on a "Rainbow of Hope" vacation to Milwaukee to promote inter-community relations. Wil Carson, a "fourteen-year-old no-hoper from the back streets of East Belfast" with a scabrous tongue, a penchant for Heavy-Metal lore, and a hatred of all "Taigs", finds himself cajoled by his elders into the trip. Sabotage and wreckage of one kind or another are guaranteed by Wil's paraded ambitions as an "up-and-coming member of the Belvoir Brigade of the Third Battalion, The Ulster Freedom Fighters".

For his first novel, Simon Kerr quickly despatches his crew to America and takes Wil through a fairly standard set of teenage coming-of-age emotions and experiences. Motivated by a clichéd (in fictional terms at least) love-across-the-barricades predicament, Wil is initially made to rethink his inbred sectarian hatred somewhat; when his love for his Catholic co-projector, Teresa, is thwarted however, he lapses briefly into pained torpor before reenergizing himself with extreme violence.

Whether Kerr is inviting readers to take this scenario seriously, or in large part ironically, is not clear. His thirty-six short chapters are narrated in Wil's punchy, street-wise, in-your-face idiom and a comic tone is maintained throughout. Though there is some effective situational humour, the gags are mainly verbal and are laid on with a heavy-handed glee: Wil's UFF leader is called "Rick the Prick", and his American host family have a son named "Derry" (occasion for fulmination against Catholic nomenclature). The worst prose of the novel is dedicated to stretching such obviousness, as with the host-family name, Kuntz: "That killed us. Kuntz was such a stupid name. Imagine having to go through life called Kuntz. Jesus H. Christ. I don't know how long we laughed for but I can tell you it was a long time".

This might all appear like good fun were it not for Kerr's determination to ballast Wil with an intermittent seriousness. At certain points, the depiction of both latent and patent violence is thoroughly convincing, as when ethnic guns meet American gun-toting culture in the form of Derry, a simmering maniac who turns into "the Hulk" and accompanies Wil as they head towards Project Ulster's vicious climax. As the end approaches, Wil increasingly speaks from a point in the present where he is now incarcerated for his deeds; but the retrospective logic he offers ("try not to judge; try to understand"), aided expressively by his reading in his prison library, is difficult to credit. Confessional solemnity sounds hollow in the mouth of a character that has all along seemed more cartoon than flesh and blood.

One simply cannot have one's cake-mix of modes and styles like this and expect readers to quite swallow it. Kerr has a distinct talent for bombastic fun and, by the evidence of *The Rainbow Singer*, has the gusto to develop this to future effect. Partly serious ingredients have proved disabling in a novel that might have covered new fictional ground. When not particularised, any UFF man, whether a clown or devil - as Kerr eventually has Wil become - is interchangeable with an IRA man or with any other paramilitary, and can appear more a topical sales advertisement than the adequate personification of a morality tale.

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